

How to Make Wittgenstein's Concept of Meaning Complete?

Ilya Kasavin, Moscow

A well-known sentence by Wittgenstein says: "The use of the word *in practice* is its meaning"¹. This insight into the problem of meaning faces three challenges, namely, whether this formula is 1) logically clear; 2) empirically probable; and 3) conceptually complete.

1) In order to understand this thesis we need to know the meanings of the words involved and to be able to operate with this sentence in communication. According to Wittgenstein, we cannot know the isolated meanings of the words. So what remains is to learn how to deal with this language construction without knowing initially what "use", "practice" and "meaning" are. It is evident that words are used in speech and in language in general. Is this a practice Wittgenstein had in mind? If yes, why does he underline *the practical use* of the word in particular? What kind of practical use outside language can we imagine? So the expression "use in practice" is basically unclear unless we prescribe a solely emotional content to it, where the word "practice" makes the word "language" sound stronger.

2) We presupposed that use of words is a speech act or any other linguistic *activity*. Wittgenstein's idea of meaning then consists in rejecting meaning as a stable mental state and treating it as a process, a change from one state to another. Either meaning is a *routine*, a *circulating activity* or a *communicative innovation*, a mental or behavioral form of psychophysiological activity, and in any way meaning is an *activity*, and we have to agree with Wittgenstein in this point.

3) So the scheme proposed by Wittgenstein's formula includes a linguistic agent, his activity and a word which thereby receives meaning. Is it an isolated agent or a participant in a collective language game? Is this game determined by some rules? Are these rules arbitrary or not? How do

¹ Wittgenstein 1978a, 39.

people master them? Do they understand rules in the same way? Is there anything outside the language game that influences the meaning? All these questions reveal the necessity to go beyond the initial formula proposed by Wittgenstein and problematize the concepts of mind, spirit, naming, meaning, use, language game, and appealing to other concepts as well. What is the key concept which can make Wittgenstein's theory of meaning complete – this is the major issue of my paper.

I. Can meaning be considered as something mental?

Meaning is apparently not a physical thing which can be perceived though there a number of physical entities that cannot be given in sense perception. Meaning is not physical in a sense that it does not exist outside the world of human beings, the *Lebenswelt*. But what means to be mental? How does Wittgenstein interpret mind and consciousness? Mental processes appear for us still mysterious in spite of all theories of cognitive sciences and artificial intellect, so mind and consciousness remain forever enigmas of philosophical discourse. And Wittgenstein was courageous enough to believe in this in the times of rapid development of experimental psychology. He sharply expressed his opposition to mentalism and his sympathy to behaviorism stating the physical non-existence of psychic phenomena: “A great many philosophical difficulties are connected with the sense of the expressions ‘to wish’, ‘to think’, etc... These can all be summed up in the question: ‘How can one think what is not the case?’”².

The case is, according to Wittgenstein, that speaking about those “intentional expressions” we do not denote objects, we do not give and use names but rather perform a strange and mysterious act of combining the physical and the non-physical. So what is naming? What is the relation between name and the thing named? “This is connected with the conception of naming as, so to speak, an occult process. Naming appears as a queer connexion of the word with an object. – And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by starring at an object in front of him and repeating a

² Wittgenstein 1978a, 30.

name or even the word 'this' innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.”³

This wrong functioning of language is responsible for the appearance of an odd and hardly understandable reality of the spiritual: “Where our language suggests a body and there is none; there, we should like to say, is a spirit.”⁴ In order to make language work, words should be created and used. A creation of a word is naming – an act looking like an unfolding of a myth. An initial event of naming recalls an existential situation, in which a fragment of reality lacking sense and significance for human beings suddenly receives an image of a semiotic object. And it is further history concentrated in etymology that creates the real content of a name. Wittgenstein himself puts it in the following way: “And here we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object.”⁵ The process of naming had initially a deeply sacred character as the name was regarded as an inevitable and essential quality of things, their archetype in a certain sense. Ironically speaking about this “magic of language”, Wittgenstein reveals its roots in the complementarity of language and thought. Speech goes ahead of thought and makes it needless. Thinking in its turn breaks the speech act, for only an immovable word can be an object of thought. Interestingly, simultaneously with Wittgenstein the famous Russian psychologist Leo Vygotsky revealed the same relation of language and thought in the individual psychic development.⁶ This idea was much later picked up by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam in their “causal theory of reference”⁷. The problem of meaning reveals, therefore, a strong connection between the philosophical concept of mind and the religious concept of spirit in Wittgenstein's work. This mysterious attitude towards operating with signs, naming and denoting spreads over the whole understanding of language and meaning.

An individual mental life is also a puzzle to an external observer, and Wittgenstein underlines the contrast between a reflexive report about

³ Wittgenstein 1978b, 38.

⁴ Wittgenstein 1978b, 36.

⁵ Wittgenstein 1978b, 38.

⁶ See: Vygotsky 1983, 262 (in Russian).

⁷ Putnam 1975; Kripke 1980.

the objective results of observation and a spontaneous mental act: “When someone says ‘I hope he’ll come’ – is this a *report* about his state of mind, or a *manifestation* of his hope? – I can for example, say it to myself. And surely I am not giving myself a report. It may be a sigh; but it need not. If I tell someone ‘I can’t keep my mind on my work today; I keep on thinking of his coming’ – *this* will be called a description of my state of mind.”⁸

I would like to draw your attention to the word “someone”. Addressing a speech to someone makes it a report about my mental state and not an expression of it. And it is communication that gives our words an objective content. But it is unnecessary to speak about mental events underlying the words: “When I think in language, there aren’t meanings going through my mind in addition to verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought.”⁹ If we consider a pain-behavior accompanied by the alleged sensation of pain, and a pain-behavior without such a sensation we can hardly draw any difference between them because a mental state is not something stable and definite, and can’t be adequately articulated in words. Thus while contemplating on the sense and meaning of what today are called “intentional terms” allegedly expressing the states of consciousness, inner processes, Wittgenstein is sometimes pretty close to modern eliminativists. We used to accept that human beings have consciousness – something unobservable, a vague and poorly investigated entity, which governs behavior. But if we imagine normal people behaving themselves as usual, rushing to their daily affairs with impassionate faces, fulfilling their social roles, they will hardly differ from automata. If we can say nothing in particular about consciousness, it is equivalent to saying everything you like about it. We overcome this problem, suggests Wittgenstein, “if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts.”¹⁰ So it can be assumed as highly probable that Wittgenstein treats language and its elements like meaning as non-mental social processes.

⁸ Wittgenstein 1978b, 585.

⁹ Wittgenstein 1978b, 329.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein 1978b, 304.

II. Is meaning a kind of activity, its quality or function?

If meaning is the use then we have to analyze our activity to uncover the mystery of meaning. The first step would be to draw the difference between a *routine, circulating activity* and a *communicative innovation*, between mental and behavioral forms of psycho-physiological activity, between collective and individual activity, between action, rule and interpretation. The nature of the speech act is elucidated by Wittgenstein with the help of his idea of “rule-following”. One of the most famous places in “Philosophical Investigations” is devoted to it. “To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions)”¹¹. Rule-following is a paradigm of a standard social action, according to Wittgenstein. And at the same time every action has something in itself, which cannot be reduced to genuine obeying of a rule – rule and action differ from each other. “This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.”¹²

As we see, Wittgenstein intentionally draws a sharp difference between action and rule in order to point out: every rule is a social invention, articulated in form of clear instructions; an action is, on the contrary, a spontaneous and individual expression of a human being determined by a number of factors. Action can obey rules to a certain extent, but there is always a gap, a sphere of human freedom between them. Rule being apparently something concrete is nevertheless an abstract guide to action because it can hardly take into account the whole variety of conditions and prescribe their definite impact. And action which appears seemingly as something definite and descriptive, in fact presupposes a number of versions and consequences, and that is why it can hardly be covered by a rule and even described and identified.

This provides the necessity of further difference, which Wittgenstein makes between action and interpretation. The above mentioned paradox is due to that we propose different interpretations of an action one after

¹¹ Wittgenstein 1978b, 199.

¹² Wittgenstein 1978b, 201.

another. Thereby we are inclined to say: every action in accordance with a rule is solely an interpretation. Can it be shown that grasping a rule is not simply an interpretation but a genuine following or conflict with it in concrete cases? Wittgenstein responds positive, as soon as we are able to draw the difference between collective social actions and individual, private forms of behavior. Social actions corresponding to accepted rules belong to the former; such things as interpretation, thinking, and mental states in general belong to the latter. “And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”¹³

So using language means performing a social action according to some rules though it is not the whole truth. Using language is also a kind of game. And the game becomes for Wittgenstein a basis for the definition of the whole semiotic reality: “I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’.”¹⁴ In most case-studies of games Wittgenstein put an accent on their diachronic, dynamic dimensions, and that is why the concept of language-game provided a strong impact on the formation of the social linguistics and the linguistics of discourse.

“Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life”¹⁵. It is worth to point out that the concept of language-game as a whole unites a number of philosophical, ethnographic and linguistic insights. This is, firstly, an idea of culture as game, as game-training and development of consciousness; secondly, it is an image of discourse as universal form of communication either in behaviorist or hermeneutic interpretation; thirdly, it is a statement about the social nature of language, which determines the frames of the world, represents a form of life and in fact exhausts everything which can be prescribed to the social reality as it is; and finally, philosophical analysis of language is a reduction of complex language-games to the simple ones, and this is a way how to solve the oth-

¹³ Wittgenstein 1978b, 202.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein 1978b, 7.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1978b, 23.

erwise unsolvable problem of meaning. As Wittgenstein puts it, «this general notion of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible. It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words»¹⁶.

So the meaning of a word is a function of one or many language-games where the word is used. Meanings are not constructions of a reflexive mind; rather they are epiphenomena of social activity. This makes them intersubjective; and at the same time meanings are no more self-evident for the knowing mind; their understanding and mastering demand practical training, that is involvement into certain forms of activity and communication. And hence being taught a language is not to understand and accept explanations of a teacher. It is rather a collective and communicative mastering the human world.

III. Is meaning a kind of communication, its quality or function?

“Culture and Value” — a collection of Wittgenstein's aphorisms, — contains the following mysterious expression: “In einer Konversation: Einer wirft einen Ball; der Andre weiß nicht: soll er ihn zurückwerfen, oder einem Dritten zuwerfen oder liegenlassen, oder aufheben und in die Tasche stecken, etc..”¹⁷ This sentence is mysterious because two persons in the majority of normal cases have no problems in interpretation and response to the questions of each other. It might be that Wittgenstein tends to show with the help of this example that people involved in communication often differ in its awareness and try to define at their best what kind of game is being played at the moment, what its rules and purposes, participants and boundaries are.

He clears up on this idea, as it seems to me, in his “Philosophical Investigations”. “We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimless

¹⁶ Wittgenstein 1978b, 5.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein 1980, 74.

into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw”¹⁸. Wittgenstein’s irony serves to underline the following: how the interpretation is performed and the questions and replies are correlated in the game of communication – all this remains mysterious.

If the meaning is a result of an isolated speech act, then it is a part of a private language, which is rejected by Wittgenstein. Therefore the ball-game is evidentially a metaphor of communication where agents exchange speech acts and thereby construct meanings. A speaker addressing a listener provides a *possibility* of meaning, which ought to be justified or negated in a response. It is namely the *exchange, the process of circulation of signs, conversation, dialogue, discourse* that produces the intersubjective content of a word. Perhaps Wittgenstein would agree with the idea that meaning in itself *is* a linguistic exchange?

IV. Is meaning a kind of surrounding, its quality or function?

The notion of social rules presupposes that they are understood and accepted by the participants in a communication. But it is essentially insufficient as soon as the basis of this understanding and acceptance remains behind any questioning. And it is exactly the inclusion of every communicative action into a broader context either real or potential that provides it with meaning and imposes upon the participants a commitment to obey the rules they once set and accept. Thereby we come to the concept of communication as not merely isolated interaction but a communicative situation in terms of its surroundings that is the communication which sets social context and performs itself with the help of it. And here we again appeal to Wittgenstein who says: “Describing my state of mind (of fear, say) is something I do in a particular context.”¹⁹ This context as it may be seen in his various thought experiments in “Philosophical Investigations” consists of the communicative counterparts and their actions. There is also a communicative situation, which takes place in terms of some real or possi-

¹⁸ Wittgenstein 1978b, 83.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein 1978b, 188.

ble event and the whole surrounding as well – this is Wittgenstein's synonym for the social and cultural "context". "An expectation is imbedded in a situation, from which it arises"²⁰, – Wittgenstein points out. And further: "What is happening now has significance – in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance. And the word 'hope' refers to a phenomenon of human life. (A smiling mouth *smiles* only in a human face.)"²¹ And he again and again proposes thought experiments for the understanding of what surroundings are.

Imagine that you are sitting in a room and hoping that NN comes and brings you money. Suppose that a temporal part of this state of mind, say, a minute, can be isolated, cut out of the context. Can it be called "hope"? What are the words you will pronounce within this minute? They will hardly be a part of language. "And in different surroundings the institute of money doesn't exist either"²², – this conclusion is also true for a procedure like the coronation of a king, pulled out the context. Here gold can appeal as useless metal and a crown – a parody of a respectable hat. And so on.

And he further clears up the context of this sentence, formulating something which will be later called the Duhem-Quine thesis: "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique."²³ It is inscribing into the broader context that Wittgenstein defines (here and now) as understanding. And this is a key for interpreting another mysterious phrase of Wittgenstein: "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria."²⁴ It means that mind and consciousness including such phenomenon as meaning show themselves in communication and activity and can be understood only as the products of the latter. Non-mental and even non-linguistic events in a narrow sense explain meaning through its externalization.

All this is highly relevant for the famous discussion of the "private language", which reveals that certain problems remained unsolved by Witt-

²⁰ Wittgenstein 1978b, 581.

²¹ Wittgenstein 1978b, 583.

²² Wittgenstein 1978b, 584.

²³ Wittgenstein 1978b, 199.

²⁴ Wittgenstein 1978b, 580.

genstein. Today we can hardly limit ourselves by the logical approach to language as a system of signs and meanings but consider language genetically and historically, from the point of view of the origin of the whole culture and every particular text. Wittgenstein's arguments against private language are in fact a criticism against the possibility to produce a linguistic phenomenon merely with the help of an individual mind. If language represents a system of signs and rules of operating with them, and every system of rules expresses a certain system of human communication, then every semiotic act loses its meaning outside this system. "To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life"²⁵, – writes Wittgenstein. He demonstrates the role of activity and communication in the making of meanings but it seems so that he limits himself by certain routine situations, where the existing language system is being merely reproduced. Though he mentions occasionally that the rules of every language game may be broken, but this idea receives no consistent elaboration.

Following the rule and not its making – this mostly attracts Wittgenstein's attention. A free play of associations, above all in terms of the formation of general notions, is limited, according to Wittgenstein, by some paradigm of non-linguistic activity, which in its turn is considered as a certain stable wholeness. From the point of this approach to language, the most significant moments of its onto- and phylogenesis remain unexplainable. Among them are: paralinguistic activity invented by a baby and then completely displaced by the generally accepted natural language; lexical and structural neologisms proposed by a poet and then rejected by a mainstream poetry; magical formula, which can be hardly understood, reproduced and used except but by the magician himself; individual systems of signification used at the initial stage of elaboration of a scientific idea and then disappearing in the collective discussions and publications. Of course a number of individual peculiarities in learning foreign languages should be also mentioned as soon as they don't fit Wittgenstein's approach and can be treated only as deviations and anomalies. Taken as a process, meaning appears as a cloud of connotations which are created and chosen by a personality in a concrete speech act. Meaning essentially includes creative

²⁵ Wittgenstein 1978b, 8.

action; creative action is a conflict with rules; hence to understand a meaning means to create a new one.

And finally: meaning needs to be interpreted as essentially determined by the linguistic, situational, social and cultural types of context. This idea serves as a valuable root for the so called "British contextualism" usually considered as a school of thought inspired by B. Malinowski and further as a global interdisciplinary and methodological program. Its demerits are another side of its merits. Meaning needs context and meaning also needs transcending the context through creativity. To make Wittgenstein's concept of meaning complete means to go beyond it.

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