Elisabeth Rigal

CNRS/Collège International de Philosophie

Comment on Utaker's Paper

First of all, I want to express my real agreement with the general orientation of Arild's paper, and particularly with his original attempt to link the with the statements of the Saussurian linguistics. I also want to express my pleasure in listening to his paper, which, by contrast with the dominant trends among Wittgenstein's interpreters, doesn't project any analytical claim on the second philosophy.

More precisely, I agree with the following main presuppositions of his project:

(1) The decision to throw a bridge accross the comparative grammar and the comparative philosophical method Wittgenstein recommended, and the conclusions he draws from it — namely that, according to Wittgenstein and Saussure, the so-called universal language has to be rejected as a mere prejudice. Of course, we have here a fundamental difference between Wittgenstein and analytical philosophers, which is reflected in some respects in the fight between generative and comparative grammar.

(2) The claim that the linguistic form is as an essentially material form, as Saussure suggested it, when he decided to treat the "linguistic sign" as a "two-sided psychical entity", and that we have consequently to contrast a right structuralism (the Saussurian one) with a wrong one, unable to avoid formalistic traps (Jakobson).

(3) The claim that the linguistic expression taken in its Wittgensteinian sense has to be regarded as a kind of technics. That is in fact a central point of Wittgenstein's contribution, in as much it commands not only the decision to treat words as tools, but also the cardinal distinction between the meaning and the bearer of a name.

Obviously, Arild's aim is to show that the Saussurian approach of the linguistic form on one hand and the Wittgensteinian one on the other hand are focusing on the same solution. That's the reason why he stresses the fact that the Wittgensteinian notion of context isn't reducible to the linguistic context (i.e. the place and function the system of language ascribe to the word), but always involves social and cultural use-conditions. We have here a possibility to draw an illuminating parallel between what Saussure presents as the "linguistic value" and what Wittgenstein sometimes call "the 'soul' of the words" (see PI, § 530). And, as far as I can see, there are some more arguments for the Wittgenstein – Saussure marriage Arild has in view, for instance the fact that a close link exists between the Saussurian assertion: "language isn't a mere nomenclature", and the Wittgensteinian conviction according to which the name itself isn't "a label attached to a thing". In my opinion, a lot of convergences could be picked out which would tend to show that Wittgenstein and Saussure, even though they used quite different weapons, were really engaged in one and the same fight, and tried to unravel the naturalistic and psychological traps. As a proof, just compare the Saussurian definition of language as form, which, as Saussure himself emphasized it, implies that language is "not substance", and the way in which Wittgenstein, in The Blue Book, wants us to simply give up seeking for subtance behind the substantive.

Now, although I really agree with Arild's general attempt, I must confess I'm very reluctant to follow him when he asserts that the

Wittgensteinian approach of the linguistic form finally failed, whereas the Saussurian one was a complete success. This assertion makes it appear that in fact Arild wants to force Wittgenstein to marry Saussure — I mean, that he wishes to correct some features of the Wittgensteinian thought by means of Saussurian linguistics. Hence the strategy he adopts: he first concedes that Wittgenstein had foreseen the two different levels of the linguistic form, but then he traces a "systematic ambiguity" in the way Wittgenstein tried to elaborate them. According to Arild, the language-games wouldn't permit to clearly distinguish these levels nor to properly connect them. Arild concludes that, though Wittgenstein was on the verge to discover the material form, he stopped half-way: of course he managed to escape formalism in rejecting the assumption of an universal, purely syntactical, logical form, but he had to pay a lot for this, in as much the use-conditions through which he reached the material form made the form "independant of a specific medium". Thus, in some respects, Wittgenstein's later contexualism is nothing but a reversion of his earlier formalism and it constantly exposes him to the "danger of loosing language".

The main argument Arild invokes, is that Wittgenstein has given priority to the second level (i. e. the socio-cultural use-conditions) of the linguistic form. That's the very point of my reluctance. Of course, I concede that everything is not clear cut in the Wittgensteinian approach of meaning as use. Hasn't Wittgenstein, as late as 1950, himself noticed that what he was trying to say "sounds like pragmatism" (On Certainty, § 422)? So, there is a real difficulty here. But in order to solve it, do we need to assume something like a move from language-games as calculi to language-games as forms of life, as it has often been asserted? Such a claim would mean, in Arild's perspective, that the second Wittgenstein would have simply exchange the immaterial logical form for a pseudo-material form: the

raw socio-cultural contents; in brief, that Wittgenstein has merely given up questionning about the logic of our language. I'm afraid such was not his aim at all. As he has noticed himself in Philosophical Investigations (§ 242), the two kinds of agreement (in definitions and in judgments) he discovered to be the fundamental conditions of the use of language seem "to abolish logic", but that's a mere appearence: "they don't do so", he added.

Therefore, in my opinion, we have to complicate a little bit the achievement of Arild's project...