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Form in Language: Wittgenstein and Structuralism

What kind of object is language? With this question we should aim at an explanation of language — its conditions and causes. This does not mean that the answer has to be naturalistic. In speaking of noises and ink on paper naturalism is as blind as "transcendentalism" to the specificity of language and of linguistic perception. Thus, my aim in this paper is to indicate a way of explaining language by, at the same time, explaining its irreducibility. "Form in language" or "linguistic form" are the terms that — hopefully — will carry my arguments, while my doubts and hopes will be connected to both Wittgenstein and structuralism.

In Wittgenstein's thinking on language there is no concept of linguistic form. Instead we have logical form (and "logical grammar"), language-games and rules. Besides, *Tractatus* introduced the peculiar way of speaking of language as something general (by having a logical syntax independent of specific languages as for instance sanskrit or urdu). This also gave the subsequent alternative of speaking of occurrences of language-use as if there were no different languages involved. Did the shopkeeper understand english or did he only understand german?

Structuralism can develop a concept of linguistic form that is independent of the concept of rules and of codes; that is as a way of thinking of linguistic form as a "gestalt" not reducible to its elements. Second, linguistic form cannot be understood as something independent of linguistic expression and content. I doubt we can find something like this within linguistics. One of the reasons is that form is commonly thought of as a product of a formalization. Another reason is that language — in spite of Saussure — is seen from the point of view of the speaker. The consequence; a concept of form justifying the distinction between invariant and variant. Against this, I will argue that in language there are only variations and relations between variations. Here there is a use for Wittgenstein's concept of "family-resemblances" and for his hint that a grammar is arbitrary. There is no patriarch or code that determines the identity of a member of our family. Or if we think there is, it is a politically determined identity.

In this way I will try to open the field for a concept of linguistic form as something local, historical (subject to change) and linked to the specific materiality of language.

Something between a picture and a ruler. Something that is neither analogical nor digital. Something that has nothing to do with Hjelmslev's notion of a system under a linguistic sequence. It has rather to be understood as the organization of the sequence with respect to its own temporality. As a form — gestalt — this is of course something that is primarily shown, i. e. perceived. What we hear we cannot write about in the same manner as we hear it.

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My wish is that I could have started on a point where I was already understood; that you — my ears — gave the content of my talk. Wishful thinking — especially in philosophy if we regard it as a difficulty or disturbance of understanding; thus, as an absence of the other giving the meaning to our words. But feeling this, we may seek the meaning of words everywhere — in intentions, things, rules, ideas etc. — except in the ear of the other. Was this the fate of Wittgenstein? I do not know. But I will argue that it is the fate of philosophy of language being a symptom of a problem it doesn't understand. This is the problem of the meaning of what we say — do the others understand it? do I understand it myself? And the common solution is to search for what gives meaning to our words, to reassure ourselves about the relationship between language and reality. This is a solution I'm deeply dissatisfied with. On the one hand it offers no reflection on language, on the other there is no reflection on culture or society. In speaking of linguistic meaning — of how words in language get their meaning, both language and culture are presupposed. Culture is presupposed both as the context for language-use and as the content being expressed; what is talked about. Language is presupposed as something linguistic and is as such of no problem for the philosopher. His problem is that of accounting for how a word as a linguistic expression gets its meaning.

Let me put it in a slightly different way. Theories of linguistic meaning confuse two distinct problems. On the one hand the problem of how something can become language — be an expression within a language. On the other the problem of how a culture makes up the content of what we say. This means that a study of language-use may grasp neither the cultural conditions nor the linguistic conditions of what we say. Both the linguistic expression and the facts talked about are considered as something given; the problem is the one of their relationship and not the one of their respective constitution or formation. Therefore words and things are circumscribing each other in a closed circle that assures — for us — their identities. The closing of language is thus reflected and founded in the very discourse on language.

In what follows I shall only be concerned with linguistic conditions for what we say. My question; how is something made into a linguistic expression? And my answer; this is possible in virtue of the form in a given language. Form in language.

Linguistic expression: Wittgenstein once wrote something like this. How can I know what you are thinking when I only have access to the signs in your talk? Here comes the answer put as another question: How can I know what I'm thinking since I too only have access to my signs or words? And in *Zettel*, § 140: "Ever and again comes the thought that what we see of a sign is only the outside of something within, in which the real operations of sense and meaning go on". But there is no outside hiding something. There are no meaningbodies — "Bedeutungskörper" — parallelling our expressions or signs. This means that linguistic meaning is not something distinct from a linguistic expression. I quote from *Philosophical Grammar*: "I say the sentence "I see a black patch there", but the words are after all arbitrary so I will replace them one after the other by the first six

201

letters of the alphabet. Now it goes "a b c d e f." But now it is clear that — as one could like to say — I cannot think the sense of the above sentence straight away in the new expression" (p. 44). So what the sentence says is given in the sentence or in our perception of the sentence. This we feel when we try to replace it in the way Wittgenstein indicates. In one sense there is therefore no other way of answering the question about the meaning of a word than by simply repeating it: "I feel fine sitting just here" — what do you mean? I mean what I'm saying; "I feel fine sitting just here". In other words: In order to be a linguistic expression the expression has to have meaning. If we speak of the expression — the word — on the one hand and on what gives it meaning on the other, this is easily forgotten. Forgetting this, we are led to looking for truth-conditions or use-conditions that are assumed to make the meaning of a sentence. Language and linguistic expressions are thus over-looked and there is created a problem of linguistic meaning that systematically ignores the specificity of linguistic expressions. A discourse is created that cannot be but blind to the materiality of the linguistic expression.

Here we can see that Wittgenstein goes in different directions — reflecting of course that there are different directions to go. Stressing the unity of expression and meaning, the analogy goes to music; he compares the understanding of a sentence with the understanding of a piece of music. This aspect draws upon the perception of a sentence or what we could simply call linguistic perception. Indeed, we may say that it is as perceived that the identity of meaning and expression is obvious. Another way to understand something is to continue for oneself or to be able to use words as others use them. But I will pick up one thought from Wittgenstein as particularly important in this context. A language is a technique. Of course, technique not in an instrumentalistic sense, but in a sense that a

technique makes something possible which without it wouldn't be possible. (Man is thus an animal created by his own techniques). Techniques being more important than what an intrumentalistic point of view can imagine. With respect to linguistic expression, we can then say that they are techniques. Or; the materiality of the linguistic expression is a form of technique. It is not a technique operating on a material, but a material — the meaningful sound — being itself a technique and having as such a grammar. This is not a grammar of a picture or of an object, but a grammar of a process taking its time — something we do when we speak. But here I find a systematic ambiguity in Wittgenstein. "Use" means two different things. The use of a word can mean its use in language. This use is then just what makes it a word. Or it can mean the use within a certain context — linked to certain social use-conditions. Of course both forms of uses are involved, but my argument has been that we have to distinguish clearly between them. Furthermore the concept of language-game seems to give priority to the second sense. From this it is evident that Wittgenstein can sharpen our attention on how we can do things with words. But it is not at the same time evident that he can sharpen our attention on how we can make utterances or discourses by sounds. Let me repeat; something is an expression by being used and perceived. This means both that it must be part of a language and that it is part of a specific context (with specific use-conditions). Even if Wittgenstein is stressing both aspects, the priority seems to go to the second. If this is right, he is — together with philosophy of language — in danger of loosing language.

A sign is the loose sense that the term "language" takes within philosophy of language. Saying that a word gets its meaning from — an so on — there is no indication whether the word is taken to be something oral or something written, or something else. There is furthermore no reflection upon the fact that there are different

languages. The reflection is more guided by a view on concepts that makes the philosopher a member of the conceptual international or the international conceptual. We should ask why? Why is it so difficult to think of language in its specific materiality? — to think of language? Granted that what we then are thinking is just what makes a language a language and not something reducible to something else. Granted that the identity of expression and meaning, as just stated, is a semantical or symbolic presupposition with respect to language.

Well — if we are to answer that question — we must — instead of speaking about something we call language, talk about the ways we are talking about language. What are the grammars of our discourses on language?

Concepts of language: I think that the dominant concept of language both within philosophy of language and linguistics is hidden in the distinctions between linguistic expression and meaning, and between linguistic expression and form. This means that a linguistic expression is either a surface linked to an underlying form (a code or a system) or it is an item linked to a context or an intention giving it its meaning. Saying this, implies that what is currently regarded as the opposite conceptions of language — formalism and contextualism — become only opposite sides of the same coin. Neither of them presuppose the identity of linguistic expression and meaning. In contextualism you get the impression that it is the context that gives meaning to our sounds or marks. In formalism the meaning is something given afterwards; syntax precedes semantics. On the one hand the physical expression, or if you wish the medium, on the other hand the meaning or the message. This means also that speaking of linguistic or logical form, the form is something independent of a specific expression or medium. Stating this independence we get what we could call the metaphysics of modern

linguistics and philosophy of language. My own thesis is this; linguistic form cannot be understood as something independent of linguistic expression and meaning. As I will try to show later on, this follows from my way of thinking of the identity of expression and meaning.

Formalism and contextualism are thus two ways of escaping the linguistic materiality — escaping language — and by that the possibility of understanding form in language. A more interesting concept of language can be found in the grammar that indeed must be seen as the opposite of generative grammar, the comparative grammar of the last century. Here there can be no universal language. There can only be different languages belonging to different families of languages. Languages had to be compared to each other with respect to analogies and differences. The comparative method, therefore, was also a method of discovery. In this context the grammarian could only refer to languages — not to an universal thought as in the preceding general grammar of Port Royal nor to an universal language as in generative grammar. But we could also say that the Indo-European proto-language occupied the place where, under the influence of the new logic, generative grammar was to put an universal language.

Anyway, comparative grammar excluded in advance the concept of language that generative grammar is suffering from. That means that it did open up for a concept of linguistic form that doesn't fall within generative grammar: A concept of linguistic form linked to its comparative method which insists on the horizontal and that which is combined — combinations. We could say that language from now on could be the paradigm of a form — not the organism (as in organic form), not the machine (as in mechanical form), and not mathematics (as in logical form). But what would it be like to think

that? — something that is excluded from the philosophical tradition. Perhaps you would have to be a non-philosopher in order to try to think it, granted that what is new in philosophy emerges outside philosophy. — Who tried? Of course, Ferdinand de Saussure — misunderstood as the founder of modern linguistics. Saussure was a scholar in Indo-European languages and in comparative grammar who tried to make a theory of language on the basis of that grammar. But at the same time this is one of the lines of what was later to become structuralism. Using this term that figures in the title of my paper, I must distinguish between two structuralisms; One starting with Saussure, the other with Roman Jakobson. Saussure is stressing that the sign, the expression, is semantical, while Jakobson — with his point of departure in phonology — makes the sign into a signal — something physical that can be treated by codes. My structuralism, then, is the one of Saussure. But of course this is a Saussure that I hope to marry to Wittgenstein.

Saussure-Wittgenstein: There is at least one evident link between Saussure and Wittgenstein. I have in mind that they both think in a comparative manner. There is in Wittgenstein a comparative philosophy echoing comparative grammar. No transcendental philosophy, but comparative philosophy. Nothing is hidden — we have to compare, not to interpret. They join therefore an "empiricism" that is not speculative; that means neither psychological nor logical. An empiricism that breaks with the classical opposition between the general (abstract) and the individual (concrete). That means not to concentrate on the individual thing or action, but on the individuation of the individual thing in its relationship to other individual things. Not a thing (identity), but relations between things being at the same time the individuation of things. In this way both Saussure and Wittgenstein were preoccupied with the problem of identity. Saussure; the individuation of the linguistic sign as what

gives it its identity. But the differences between them are important. I think Wittgenstein did not succeed in thinking of what he in a broad sense called the grammar of a language, because he did not develop a concept of grammatical or linguistic form. Maybe he remained caught up in logic in a way that made it impossible for him to go from logical form to grammatical form. Even though he remarked; "Mathematical logic has completely deformed the thinking of mathematicians and philosophers" (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* p. 300). Another reason might be that he was too close to his own problems (this being of course also his greatness). But he was so occupied with the use-conditions of language — seeing these both as necessary for thinking and talking and belonging to a culture he detested — that I think he would refuse my academic distinction between linguistic conditions for our talk (linked to our linguistic perception) and its cultural conditions. Or my distinction could have been assumed silently if he could have written poetry or novels. This would of course have given another therapy than the one given by his therapeutical empiricism.

I said that Wittgenstein was perhaps caught up in his concept of logical form. But this does not mean that Wittgenstein follows the presupposition stating the external relation between form and expression. In *Tractatus* the logical form is linked to expressions — signs — in a way that *shows* the logical form; The form is something which shows itself[1]. It is evident, however, that this concept of form is linked to the primacy of the visual. It is a written symbolism that shows the logical form of language.

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[1] Wittgenstein's concept of logical form has not had any impact upon logic and linguistics. Perhaps the reason is that this concept is linked to his thesis that there is no meta-logic, no meta-language. The alternative has been to focus upon rules, rules that can be stated in a meta-language; Rules in language, not form in language.

We find the same concept of form in his later philosophy: "I would like to say "what the picture tells me, is itself". That is, its telling me something consists in its own structures, in its own lines and colours" (*Philosophical Investigations* § 523). This is a visual form that cannot be a point of departure for an understanding of grammatical form. Here, we can see the contribution of Saussure. Agreeing with Wittgenstein that a form is as form linked to a medium or a materiality, he breaks with the presupposition of thinking this as a visual form. Related to language this can only be a form for the specific materiality of language which, as spoken, is an auditive or an acoustic materiality. The importance of Saussure is then to approach language from the perspective of the ear — from the perspective of linguistic perception. Thus breaking with the primacy of the eye and the gaze in the philsophical tradition — a primacy that cannot but overlook the specific materiality of language, a primacy that may make you deaf to what I have said on the linguistic expression and its identity with its meaning.

Linguistic form: If you still follow me, I will try to approach the topic of my paper more directly. But I hope that by now you may feel some of the difficulties and obstacles in doing that: Our dominant way of thinking of language from the standpoint of the visual making thereby our distinctions between expression and meaning, form and expression, seem evident. This makes us further speak for instance on representation — as if a sentence can represent something or as if language is some form of a mirror. And it makes it natural to concentrate on language as an activity belonging to the speaking 1st person — thus forgetting that we are also using language when we are listening. And last but not least writing, with its atomic letters and atomic signs, being visual, is implicitly the paradigm of language. Let me say it like this; the linguistic expression or materiality is no topic in philosophy of language because it thinks of

language on the basis of an implicit theory of this materiality. It cannot think of it because it belongs to its presupposition; seeing it as something visual belonging to the 1st person speaking subject representing something in the world. Maybe this is the reason why both linguistics and philosophy of language is blind to the necessity of making a theory of language explaining why man has to be a talking animal and explaining by that the symbolic or semantical character of language. This is excluded as long as one takes as the point of departure in an implicit theory of language that in my opinion is clearly wrong. But if I'm right, I cannot convince anybody thinking within the framework I'm criticizing. Or maybe I could do that if I continue in a more Wittgensteinian manner — making you hear something with as small examples as possible and doing that without this quasi-orality that is the game of the reading of a paper. But I'm talking a language that is not my own, so I need a paper, something written some days ago. And this also means that I'm not quite sure how I will react to it when reading it. You may object that here I'm only creating problems: Let us discuss and so the truth will be seen, let us discuss so we can decide who is right. This is what we have seminars for. But I have never experienced this and I think it a great illusion. What is more, my demand is more than that; I want to be understood, feeling at the same time the impossibility of just that. By the same token, it will be impossible to solve the problem with an identification with the understanding belonging to the other. Of course this can happen, as in love or in poetry, but philosophy is not communication in this sense nor discussion.

This is no digression. I want to circumscribe a paradox; a philosophy of communication that cannot think the other as the condition for an understanding of what we say. And a philosophy that thinks this other as a condition — the primacy of the second person — for language — a philosophy of the ear — but without being able to make

real that condition even if it can exclude the solution of philosophical communication and discussion as pseudo-solutions.

But let me not dramatize. What is normal is of course what might not be the case in philosophy. The normal case is that the other is a condition for the understanding of your own utterance. Only in this way can a child learn a language. It can say what it hears from the other when the other hear the same thing as the child itself is hearing when saying something (This is the principle of G. H. Mead). A concept of grammatical form should account for just this: the patterns which make us hear something as something, the patterns of a linguistic sequence which make this into a linguistic sequence. One way of stating the question is this; what makes something into the same word? What in a linguistic pattern makes us regocnize the regularity that makes us perceive patterns — and accordingly something as the same word or sign? Note that the problem is not to account for the way we make or do things with words. The problem is more fundamental: how we make signs with sounds in a manner that shows that there is no difference between the sound and the sign.

Just to presuppose a common language, will here amount to no explanation. But this is a common way to go. The argument runs like this: When we speak, our words are occurences of a language we have in common — a system or a code. My words, as something indvidual — as spoken by me, are thereby occurences of something general and common that, compared to my concrete utterances, have the status of constants or invariants. A linguistic form, then, defines a linguistic constant independent of its specific occurences. As an occurence we can only have a variant, a realization coloured by the specific individual and the specific context. We can never meet the constant or the invariant itself, in other words, that which is assumed

to belong to the deep-structure or to the common core of language. So there is in some sense an invisible language that doubles the invisble heaven of concepts in philosophy. In fact the same thought-figure is involved. The concept doubles in a mystical manner an individual thing explaining the individual thing as falling under a general concept. Language doubles in the same manner my words or utterances explaining their identity as being occurences of some general constants or invariants. Indeed, it is a mystical and platonic concept of language where, as in generative grammar, everything is deduced from nothing. What is at stake is the following; a language cannot be accounted for in the perspective of the traditional distinction between the general (common) and the individual. If we do this there is no possibility of grasping form in language. The only thing we can do is to speak of codes or to invent rewriting rules; a method of formalization that has nothing to do with the actual forms in a language.

The alternative in denying this distinction implies that we may see the form in a language as that which makes up the identity of linguistic utterances without its being on a level other than that of the linguistic expressions. Both formalism and contextualism claim that they account for the occurences of linguistic expressions. Formalism by appealing to an underlying system — a system of rules — contextualism by appealing to the context and the speaking subject. Both overlook the grammatical form on the level of the linguistic expression. An example: looking at the screen of my PC, I see something that consists of formed patterns I can read. But inside, I have been told, there are digital codes. They produce what I can see on my screen — but that does not mean that they can explain what I can see or read on that very same screen. I read signs, but my PC "reads" signals. Therfore there is no language in my computer and there is no language behind what I say as comparable to codes in my

brain. But if you accept the distinction between expression and meaning or content, then you are free to call the physical signals in the computer a language. You may by now guess the importance of my concept of linguistic form. And also its difficulty. For this form can be neither a digital form nor an analogue form.[2] The first being one of codes, the second being linked to the visual.

Linguistic form has nothing to do with representation. What is at stake is the specific organization of a linguistic sequence operating upon its auditive materiality. For Saussure, this means something that is determined by the fact that we speak within a temporality which makes our words possible. Linguistic form is the grammar of linguistic temporality, words following each others, rhythms, repetitions, pauses; the gestalt of what we hear displayed through the dimension of time. In short, something comparable to music.

Wittgenstein's notion of language as a technique makes perfect sense in this context. We have a form related to a sign-technique that must be regarded as a process; starting, going on, ending, making discourses or poems. But this is only possible through the ear of the other. This does not only mean that a linguistic occurence is something understood by the other. It also means that it must be related to comparable occurences in such a way that this relationship makes what we call a word something essentially repeated. A linguistic item in a sequence is a linguistic item if it can be repeated in other sequences. This is essentially because the existence of — let us say a word — is a relational existence in the sense that it gets its identity from the web of linguistic sequences and from its repetitions within them. This means that what is repeated is not an indentity — the same word. Every speaker says a word in slightly different ways

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[2] But it might be said to be closer to an analogue form in the sense that we are identifying patterns through it.

212

and this implies that we have only variations and nothing but variation. Therefore, it is the variations that make the identity of a word and not an invariant or constant that the variations are supposed to manifest in the indvidual speech. To use Wittgenstein's term we can say that the variations hold family-resemblances to each other. The links between them are — so to say — horizontal and comparative which means that these links are not explained by an identity on another level. Instead we have relations between variations — lines of variations. And this makes up the form of a language — the form being the systematicity of the variations. If we accept this, there is no essential difference between the individuality of my phrase — the fact that I'm saying it — and the fact that it is understood by the other. For the individuation of what makes the words in what I say is at the same time the relations — the form — that makes us hear it as a linguistic sequence: The individualization of my utterance is at the same time what gives it its linguistic identity. Differences and variations are not parasitic to a language, do not threaten language. On the contrary, it is just what makes language possible. To say the opposite, would presuppose a code or an invariant which can explain variants and so called deviations; a standard or a normal language. But this is a political entity, not a linguistic entity. As Saussure has stressed, a language in this sense is a construction; there are only dialects and variations between dialects.

According to this point of view, a language cannot but change. Change and thereby history is not something external to it. A language cannot but be spoken in different ways and that means that it will also change because here there is no identity that is repeated or presupposed. This means, that with respect to language a form or a system cannot but change. But this change is a change without origin and without finality. The traditional opposition between

system and history can therefore only be dissolved if we give up the metaphysics of history on the one hand and the metaphysics of the system on the other (the system being an universal atemporal order). This means that grammar is arbitrary — a grammar does change, but it does'nt have to change in a definite direction. Chance and order are two sides of the same coin. So the patterns of our language change, otherwise there would have been no language or a created artificial language. And they change because our words are not things and not something that can copy a model of some super-linguistic kind. But the word is not a nothing either; it consists in those auditive differences and variations forming the patterns of our language.

It is essential for such a pattern to be linked to time — time being just what makes a linguistic sequence possible. If you still beleive in a referent making the word what it is, this might be difficult to see. What is, then, the pattern of such a time-sequence? It is not causal in the sense that a word is an effect of the word preceeding it. It is not intentional in being linked to an intention in the speaking subject. It is not logical in the sense of giving the form of an inference. What we have is what I have tried to speak about — difficult as it is — grammatical or linguistic form. But here I cannot give you a clear-cut theory or a method that can formalize what I have called "form in language". Maybe such a form can only be shown in the use of language and that those who try to formalize it are trying to write down what can only be shown in what we say. So let me say the last sentence that I wrote in my abstract: What we hear we cannot write about in the same manner as we hear it.