

# “The meaning of a word lies in its use.”

---

*Ningombam Bupenda Meitei,  
St. Stephen's College,  
Department of Philosophy,  
University of Delhi.*

*Ludwig Wittgenstein* in his later days' *Philosophical Investigations* which has come as a criticism to his own prior work namely *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, discusses about the relevance of the context in which a word has been used in order to understand the meaning of the word rather than going by the notion of an *Ideal Language* in the form of a fixed meaning *picture theory* of a name being labelled against an ostensive body or object in which there is one-to-one correspondence between the simple and the name which is advocated in *Tractatus*. Having been criticized the fixed meaning theory in *Investigations*, Wittgenstein brings the notion of use of a word 'in a context and not outside the context' while trying to understand the meaning of the word because if its meaning is questioned *outside the context*, then it would be meaningless as the meaning of a word becomes only meaningful when the issue of understanding the meaning of the word takes place only *in a context*. To grasp the meaning of a word, it would be meaningful to ask the use of the word instead of asking the essence of the word in a *Platonic* manner.

The aim of the article is to expound on the theory which discusses that the meaning of a word lies in its use, according to *Investigations* and it is to be ended with the criticisms from the author himself. Thus, the proposed thesis is “*The meaning of a word lies in its use*” from the premises of an understanding from *Philosophical Investigations*.

*The meaning of a word lies in its use - Philosophical Investigations :*

The beauty of not relying to a fixed meaning of a word helps in understanding the significance and semantics of a word with the same letters but being understood in different ways because of its use in different contexts as, in an example of a holy water or water in a chemistry laboratory or a drinking water or a drainage water , according to *Tractatus*, all mean the same but in *Investigations*, their different meanings become meaningful when viewed in different time and place and in that particular context in which the word is used. Thus, when a meaning of a word is asked, it would be meaningful to ask for its *family resemblance* instead of asking the *essence* of the word and the *family resemblance* could be known from the *wholeness* of the word which is in use rather than trying to understand the parts of the overall whole of the contextual use of the word and this notion of *wholeness* includes the notion of *in context*, time and place,etc. The example of water being used in different contexts signifies the role of a function of a word in the philosophical concept of the meaning of the word which is expressed as (2) “*That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions*” .

*Tractatus's Ideal language* sends out a notion of a well structured grammar through fixed meaning for the language but the irony is, whether language is prior to its grammar or grammar is prior to its language is a point of contention in which, in *Investigations* , there is an understanding that grammar of a language is nothing but the forms of life which are indeed socially and educationally guided and instead of learning it as an already given one, language itself is learnt and can be learnt only through activities and can never be taught as learning language is an activity like a game instead of being indoctrinated or poured upon one's head by any form of ostensive teaching , thus , it would be more meaningful to accept the

birth of a language through a language game which in turn implants a seed for its grammar instead of the other way round as in the other way round, grammar being set of rules to impregnate in one's mind to make the learner understand and initiate the construction of language would be against the biological justification of language acquisition of a child learning language on its own through practice, activity and observation in contrary to accepting the already set grammar by adults. The point of debate confirms the line (5) "... *the teaching of language is not explanation, but training.*"

The meaning of a word in a language such as *Ganga jol* is different from *holy water* as well as from a mere ordinary drinking water, though to a scientist who does not know about *Hinduism* and *Christianity* and also the contextual usage of the *Ganga jol* and the *holy water*, may claim that the water is the same as its chemical properties remain the same with regard to that water in chemistry laboratory but the problem here, is to know the meaning of *Ganga jol* and *holy water*, one needs to understand the social and religious forms of life in which the meanings of the same object signify. In *Oriental* societies of *Eastern Asia*, instead of asking '*Have you had your lunch?*', it is normally '*Have you had rice?*' but it does not '*mean*' that the people in the region only eat rice for their lunch as it is understood from its social context and upbringing that having rice means having lunch in which not only rice is included but also other ingredients of their lunch and the beauty of such discussion is reflected as (19) "... *to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.*"

To understand the meaning of a word, the use of the word in a particular context needs to be discussed and it could be exemplified from a word '*died*' in a case of '*The Prime Minister of India died*', the dead is not of the Prime Minister of India per se but that to which the title or the name '*The Prime Minister of India*' is meant to, has died and the person may be '*X*' but in the past, some Prime Ministers of India such as *Y, Z* too had died and many more Prime Ministers of India have to

die in future but at a particular point of time,place and context , ‘ the Prime Minister who died’ means the one who is discussed *in context* as of the particular time ,place and the given context and this notion leads to the concept of the relation of ‘*a name*’ and ‘*the one named*’ and the meaning of the word in which the meaning of ‘*died*’ in ‘*who actually died*’ is a product of the relation between a name and the person named by that name *in context* , as given in (37) “ *What is the relation between name and thing named?...*”

The meaning of a word in a language has to be understood inside the world of that language in which it is used and the understanding tool has to be again the language as language can not be understood without language because to describe the meaning of a word, language has to be used in context otherwise, no philosophy could be done, thus to do philosophy , language’s presence is inevitably both essential and sufficient to solve philosophical problems. Hence, the understanding of the meaning of a word in its use has a philosophical significance of doing philosophy which can be called *Nature of Philosophy* in *Wittgenstein’s* style. It could also be found in (38) “... *For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.*” As language goes on holiday, how can one do philosophy without language and how can one learn language without language,thus , it gives a sharp criticism to the need of an *Ideal language*.

Though , *Russell* discusses about the notion of ‘*this*’ and ‘*that*’ being the only two genuine names in the history of *Western Philosophy* but having said it, the examples of proper names or pronoun or a way of ostensively pointing to a thing or an object with a use of ‘*this*’ or ‘*that*’ may mean not necessarily only to that which is wanted by the speaker as supposing,the speaker may talk about ‘*that is called red*’ but the listener may find that ‘*that*’ as to an object through which the speaker is pointing or may be the speaker’s own pointing finger too. Thus , the difficulty in names does arise and its proper meaning is only possible with consideration of the given context,time and place.

The discussion has led to the conclusion in support of *Investigations* saying that the meaning of a word lies not only in a prescribed meaning per se as it is an utter meaningless proposition but to be only understood from the use of the word through the notion of *language game* and its *family resemblance* instead of finding the *essence* of the word or trying to understand the fixed meaning *picture theory* of *Tractatus* , thus , the notion of the *Wittgenstein's* understanding of *Investigations* on the meaning of the word is written as (43) “ ... *the meaning of a word is its use in the language.*”

### *Criticism to the proposition “The meaning of a word lies in its use.”*

The critical remarks against the proposed thesis “*The meaning of a word lies in its use.*” are purely of the author.

#### 1) *Criticism from an exact science :*

The mathematical sciences with regard to the fixed theorem with axioms can not change or mean differently according to different context besides the boundary conditions or the pre given conditions which are given and absorbed in while forming the formulation of the mathematical equations or the theorems. As the mathematical equation of a line signifies the same meaning besides its possible expressions in different ways of writing the formula changing some variables but the entire meaning remains the same irrespective of the user's usage of the formula in any part of universe or at any point of time or context. The meaning of a word or an equation or a mathematical formula or a term ,according to the proposed thesis, should lie in its use which is not taking place in the present case. Chemical symbols if made to represent different meanings in different environments would lead to chaos in the world of chemical sciences and studying chemical reactions would not be possible at present.

#### 2) *Criticism from a perspective of judgement :*

The court when approached both by a husband and his wife in which the wife complains that she has been raped by her husband while the husband says that as per the marriage code of social conduct, he has his matrimonially accepted sex which is allowed by the law of the land too. The question is, what is the meaning of 'rape' and 'sex with consent' and how the two can differ from each other, as even in married couple too, there could be a 'sex without consent' but it is normally blanketed under as 'sex with consent' because of marriage. The issue is complex as it revolves around a married couple but if supposing, the rule book says that 'rape' is a 'sex without a mutual consent' and if wife were not in an agreed mood to have sex with her husband but the husband needs it and he goes forcibly against the will of his wife at that time and context because of which, the charges of the wife are to be heard in the court room. On the other hand, the husband with his family says that the case was not so as stated by his wife, but still, the question remains whether the court should hear or accept the societal *majoritarian* view of the man and its use or the *minority* or the woman's view and its contextual use and whom to declare the victim, whether the man or the woman. To decide for the judgement, though considering the views of the duo with context, the judgement has to be based on whether there was rape or not and the meaning of the 'rape' per se has to be defined in the rule book and it can not change according to different situations. Thus, if accepting the proposed thesis of possible change in understanding the meaning of a word 'rape' here, then, the law of land becomes arbitrary and vague. The proposed thesis could become a source of illegality.

In conclusion of the debate, Wittgenstein's meaning of a word which lies in its use from Philosophical Investigations has been evaluated with critical remarks.

