

## WHAT WE DO WHEN WE SAY ‘MEISJE’

An essay on the relation between word, action and convention

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**Abstract** This paper provides a philosophical reflection on a very common word in the Dutch language. Referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s book *Philosophical Investigations*, this paper explains how the meaning of every word is based on convention. Moreover, by arguing that language is an act, this paper shows how using the word *meisje* in contemporary Dutch perpetuates the convention on which the meaning of that word has been built. From a contemporary perspective, this convention seems sexist. Despite the fact that this paper is written from a philosophical perspective, it does make an argument that is important for other academic fields, such as cultural studies, gender studies, history, and in fact any discipline that makes use of language: that the language one uses is not neutral. Understanding the conventions words are built upon allows one to gain insight into the historically created dynamics which influence societal and interpersonal relations.

## 1 Introduction

Language fulfils a significant role in our lives. We often forget how much we use it on a daily basis. But what if, every time we speak, we perform an act based on rules and conventions? What would the implications of such an act be? And, above all, what are the consequences of maintaining certain conventions regarding societal relations by using specific words or phrases.

This paper discusses the idea that language is an act, as argued in Wittgenstein's book *Philosophical Investigations* (1958). Here, Wittgenstein argues that language is context-dependent (§525). This context can be understood from the perspective of so-called language games (Wittgenstein, 1985, §7). According to Wittgenstein (1958), these language games are based on rules that have been established through certain conventions (§355).

Using Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, this paper uses the idea of language as an act to examine the Dutch word for girl: *meisje*. The paper shows how this word is rooted in the convention of perceiving a young girl as a virgin. Moreover, this paper argues that the use of the word *meisje* activates the continuation of this specific convention of identifying young girls in a sexualized manner.

This paper does not wish to argue that the contemporary Dutch speaker, when addressing a girl as *meisje*, still has the intention of referring to her in a sexualized manner. Nevertheless, by examining the word using Wittgenstein's idea that language is an act whose meaning is rooted in context and convention, this paper demonstrates that the words we use come with a long history. Consequently, this paper demonstrates the importance of remaining critical towards the language we use.

## 2 Language as an act

In 1953, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* was published for the first time. In this work, Wittgenstein explores how one can know the meaning of a word. To answer this question, Wittgenstein uses various explanatory metaphors and comparisons.

First of all, Wittgenstein (1958) claims that words are like labels (§15). They offer a name for an object. However, this name, or label, does not inherently contain its own definition. As a matter of fact, labelling in and of itself is not entirely self-explanatory. For example, what does the name 'seven' mean? To understand the meaning of a word, one must both have prior knowledge of the language and be aware of the context in which the word is being used. For example: when I

go to the farmer's market to buy the ingredients for an apple pie whose recipe requires seven apples, I must have prior experience in order to know how many apples to put in my basket.

For Wittgenstein (1958), the notion that linguistic meaning is constructed through the use of a word is important, since this notion emphasizes the various functions of a word. According to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the insistence on defining words distracts one from realizing that words do not, in fact, have one single, fixed definition. Meaning is context-dependent. This leads Wittgenstein (1958) to introducing his idea of language games (§7).

Nowhere in *Philosophical Investigations* does Wittgenstein specifically define the term *language game*. One can argue that this is done on purpose, as the philosophical point of the book is precisely that names or terms do not have single definitions, but that these instead depend on the rules established by a specific group. However, there must be something that language games have in common with the larger category of games.

This commonality is described by Wittgenstein (1958) in a passage on family resemblance (§67). There is no one single aspect one can identify as the common feature of games. Rather, there is an overlap in particular similarities. The siblings in a family of four children all share various characteristics with each other, which makes them a family. The same goes for language games. There is no fixed set of rules that defines language games; rather, it is the family resemblance of their rule-following character that is distinctive. The rules are often implicit and different for each game. Therefore, it is mainly prior experience and knowledge of a specific language game that allows one to understand labels and their use within that particular language game.

According to Wittgenstein (1958), language games are forms of life (§19). Forms of life are the various ways in which a group of people behave. These rules of behaviour shared by a group of people, such as those for speech, are called a form of life.

Wittgenstein's exploration of meaning illustrates that language, and more specifically the act of writing or speaking, is an act performed in the context of a language game, which is all about rule-following. In other words, every utterance of words is rooted in the historical context of certain conventions. This historical context – of the convention and the specific context of when the utterance of words took place – combine to create the meaning of a word.

Every language game needs to follow the rules of certain conventions in order for communication to function as smoothly as possible and to avoid miscommunication. But what if one actually disagrees with the convention that determines the meaning of a word?

### 3 Introducing the term ‘*meisje*’

In the Dutch language, the word to describe a girl is *meisje*. On first examination, this is a peculiar word. This peculiarity has to do with the fact that the word is in a grammatically diminutive form. The ending *-je* in the Dutch language indicates a diminutive. For example, *tafel* (table) turns into *tafeltje* (little table). The word for boy is *jongen*. The diminutive form of this is *jongetje*.

When a teacher welcomes the children in the classroom by saying ‘Welcome, boys and girls’, the Dutch teacher does so as follows: ‘Welkom, *jongens* en *meisjes*.’ In other words: in Dutch, one can address a girl only by means of a diminutive word. This alone is already remarkable. I assume those who take an emancipatory perspective may wish to comment on the implications of the inability of a language to address girls in any other manner than in the diminutive. However, when one looks at the etymology of the word, an even more astonishing fact arises. That is what I wish to focus on in this essay.

*Meisje* originates in the word *maagd* or *meid*. In an older version of Dutch, these words refer to a virgin (etymologiebank.nl, n.d.). Traditionally, a married woman takes the name of her husband. She then still has a *meisjesnaam*, or maiden name, referring to the time when she was unmarried. As the Christian culture of the Netherlands (when speaking of the time when *Middelnerlands* was used) demanded, the woman would not have sexual intercourse before marriage. The *meisjesnaam* thus refers to the time when the woman was still a virgin.

### 4 What we do when we say ‘*meisje*’

Certainly, very few Dutch speakers, if any at all, have the conscious intention of referring to a virgin when addressing a young girl as *meisje*. Moreover, the effects of using this specific word on whether or not one perceives a young girl as a virgin might only be marginal. Nevertheless, I do argue that by continuing the use of this particular word, one also continues the convention of connecting the term for a young girl to that for being a virgin.

The philosopher Margalit (1966) explains this effect in the following manner when talking about British expressions that refer to the Dutch in identifying something as unpleasant or as a vice. “Such expressions might be activated to influence one’s image of the ‘other’” (p. 167). In this way, the use of the word *meisje* activates the convention of applying the term ‘virgin’ to the term ‘girl’. But how is it possible for the use of a particular word to maintain a convention even when the speaker has no intention of doing so? To answer this question, one

needs to refer back to Wittgenstein's writings on language games.

Wittgenstein (1958) argues that different uses of language can be assigned to different language games (§64). The Dutch language in and of itself is a language game too. As previously explained, a language game can be characterized by its rule-following character. Thus, every language game has conventions that determine the ways in which a word can be used. In every language game, these ways are limited in order to avoid miscommunication.

The word *meisje* is used in the Dutch language game. Therefore, by using the word, one follows the rules of the game. These rules are established by convention, and these conventions are formed over time. Therefore, by using the word *meisje*, one also includes the historical context of the word, which in this particular case brings one back to the Dutch word for virgin. In short, *meisje* has a strongly sexualized connotation.

The critical reader has probably read the previous paragraph with a raised eyebrow. Indeed, the label *meisje* looks the same in both its older form of Dutch and its current one. However, such a reader might claim that one makes a sweeping statement by arguing that the same rules apply to current and past uses of this word. The distance in time between these two uses is too large for them to still be part of the same language game.

With this argument, the critical reader has touched upon an important aspect of language games. The rules are made by convention and, indeed, one can take up a different language game over time. Moreover, the same word can be used differently in multiple games. So how does one then differentiate between different language games? Here, the use theory of meaning comes into play again.

When a word is used similarly – referring to the same concept – it is part of the same language game (Wittgenstein, 1958, §43). With this additional information, the argument of the critical reader can easily be countered. In both *Middelnerlands* and in the current version of the Dutch language, the word *meisje* refers to a young girl. The word is thus part of the same language game, which therefore has to follow the same rules and conventions. Thus, when applying the label *meisje* to a young girl, one still makes the connection between the girl and a virgin – regardless of one's intentions.

Moreover, Wittgenstein (1958) refutes the idea of a private language, as the use of words is defined by their context in a language game (§202). The language game is a result of conventions, and the conventions are shaped by public uses of language. Therefore, despite the fact that one might not intend to refer to a virgin when addressing a young female human, this reference is in fact still being made.

Wittgenstein (1958) demonstrates that the rules of a game are created via conventions (§199). Labels do not have an intrinsic definition. Only within the con-

text of the rules of a language game, and as long as the people using a word intend to use the word's specific meaning as it is within that language game (Wittgenstein, 1958, §200), can one understand what a word means. Therefore, a community can decide to change the language game whenever they please.

The ability to change the language game can easily be demonstrated through a story presented to me by some friends from Brazil. These friends have told me that words related to slavery or racism are consciously excluded from their daily vocabulary. Other words are used instead.

Naturally, people often do not even realise that the words that are being replaced are words whose meaning was related to slavery and/or racism. However, via critical etymological research, it is still possible to make this link. My friends told me that they consider it of utmost importance to identify all the words which originate in racist language in order to not use them anymore. Although I do not have (academic) sources to back up this story, the mere fact that my friends use different words within their own circles in Brazil does show that the rules of the language game can be changed. Furthermore, this also shows that new language games can be created.

Something similar can be done with the word *meisje*. It seems counterintuitive, to say the very least, to address young girls with a word based on a feature they themselves are not aware of. Yet since the use of words depends on the language game one plays, and since the rules of said game are conventions, all Dutch-speaking people can decide to stop using the word *meisje* so as to distance young girls from the label of virginity by which they are being addressed. Therefore, to put a hold on the constant activation of this convention, I suggest that the Dutch language should from now on address girls with the word *kind* (child). This term is gender-neutral, and the Dutch-speaking teacher can welcome their class by saying: 'Welkom, *allemaal* (everyone)'.

## 5 Conclusion

First of all, this paper discussed Wittgenstein's ideas on language and meaning as laid out in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein argued that words are like labels and that labels on their own do not have meaning. Only when it is used in the context of a specific language game can one define a word. Language games come in various forms and formats, but they share the family resemblance of their rule-following character. The rules of the game are established through conventions. Moreover, the idea of a language game excludes that of a private language.

Next, this paper applied Wittgenstein's concept of the use of words as an act in a specific language game to the Dutch word *meisje*. This word is used both in modern Dutch and in an older version of the language in which the word *meisje* is used to identify a virgin. By continuing to use this word, one activates the conventions of this particular language game and thus continues to identify young girls as virgins. In order to address girls in a more equal and less sexualized manner, this paper suggests switching to another language game, and thus calling children *jongeren* (youngsters) or *allemaal* (everyone).

The language we use both shapes and indicates how we see the world. However, due to convention and habit, that same language does perhaps not always represent our values and moral opinions anymore. Therefore, however big or small the group may be, it is of utmost importance for any society or community to remain critical of the words used; to ask what is actually being said with them? After all, the way we speak about people can greatly influence on societal hierarchies, or indicate which historically created power relations are still in place.

## References

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