

Vertical relations of language-games

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to look at Wittgenstein's use of language-games as objects of comparison. I shall use several examples to demonstrate that it is reasonable to understand language-games in the smallest possible units. In particular, I will focus on a language-game of training a rule vertically related to a language-game of applying of this rule. It is important to keep these language-games apart in order to avoid misunderstandings originating from the fact that one and the same sentence may have different meanings in these language-games. Such a sentence may be an admissible "move" in the former language-game whereas it may be an expression of a rule in the latter one.

The analogy between language and game pervades Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The aim of this paper is to look at Wittgenstein's use of language-games as objects of comparison (as opposed to taking language-games for literal parts of our language, e.g. language of religion, science etc.). I shall use several examples to demonstrate that it is reasonable to take language-games in the smallest possible units —in accordance with Wittgenstein's hint: "In order to see more clearly, [...] we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them *from close to*." (PI §51)

Wittgenstein delimits the role of language-games by claiming that they "are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities (PI §130)." Accordingly, language-games are objects which are compared with (some parts of) our language. Language-games are invented or fictional, which means that it is not important whether such an activity actually happens. What kind of objects are they? In most of the examples Wittgenstein gives they are simplified or better schematized descriptions of language use together with relevant extra-linguistic activities. Such schemata are compared with (descriptions of) actual language use.

What language and language-games have in common is that they are rule-guided activities. Provided that we are interested in rules of grammar, then language-games *can* be

individuated by their rules. Here is the idea of how the individuation works: Provided that we are able to split a given description of a linguistic activity into two parts so that (at least partly) different grammatical rules are active in these parts. Then we can take these two parts as different language-games.¹ One can, however, take these two language-games as one game if she has a reason to do so.

Language-games are conceptual tools in philosophical analysis for surmounting philosophical confusions. I would like to focus on one kind of such confusions which is central to Wittgenstein's later writings. A philosophical confusion (but also a simple problem of understanding) may arise if we are not able to assign to a given linguistic expression its appropriate context of use. If the meaning of a word is its use in the language, we have to be able to put this word into place in order to understand the word at all. It is obvious that we do not need to imagine the whole context in all its details; a schematic description of an appropriate language-game is usually enough. A philosophical confusion may arise, now, if we do not provide a language-game or if we provide a wrong one. Wittgenstein labels such a diagnosis as "crossing of different language-games" (PI §191; LWPP I, §148) or "fall between several games" (LWPP I, §761).²

We shall now consider sentences that are prone to such confusion—sentences that may express a genuine proposition in one language-game and a grammatical proposition in another. If language-games were individuated by their rules, such sentences would also fall between within more language-games. The risk of confusion would be bolstered if these two different language-games differed only in this one sentence. We will focus exactly on such sentences and language-games. Suppose the following general setting: One has to teach or learn a certain rule in order to apply it afterwards. We can distinguish two stages of this process: the *language-game of training* and the *language-game of applying* the rule. These language-games are different for what is a rule in the latter one is not a rule in former one. Although it is not necessary to mention the would-be rule explicitly during the process of training, in many cases it is done so. Such a mentioning would have a declarative character

¹ We can individuate language-games by another principle than their rules, e.g. by kinds of extra-linguistic activities in which they are woven.

² This exposition of the concept of language-game draws on (Glock 1994, 193-198).

(using Searle's terminology). Hence, one can easily imagine that one and the same sentence expresses a genuine proposition in the *language-game of training* and a grammatical proposition in the subsequent *language-game of applying a rule*.³ To put it in other words: The form of a sentence is the same, but it expresses an external property in the former language-game and an internal property in the latter one. The language-game of applying a rule logically presupposes the language-game of training. There is, thus, a *vertical relation*⁴ between these two language-games.

Being equipped with this general setting, we can approach its various instances in Wittgenstein's writings. I shall focus on language-games introduced at §§48-50 of the PI.⁵

(1) My first example is a language-game of describing combinations of colored squares (introduced at §§48-49). We have four colors: white, black, red, and green. The syntax of this language-game is very simple. A sentence is only a series of the initial letters of these colors. So for instance sentence "RRG" means that there are two red squares followed by one green square. We may, however, hesitate regarding what a sentence consisting of one single letter, e.g. "R", means. This expression could *describe* a complex consisting of only one square on the one hand, or it could also be a *name* of the very square on the other hand.

Wittgenstein considers, then, the possibility that naming (of a square) is a limiting case of describing (of a complex of squares). This would, in effect, dismiss the difference between describing and naming. To say that there is a complex consisting of one red square would be tantamount to saying that the square is red. This stance could easily lead to confusion. We can use expression "R" or sentence "There is a red square" in the course of ostensive

³ This setting has not escaped the attention of commentators. See, e.g. (Hintikka 1982) or (Baker and Hacker 2005, 62): "The training activity antecedent to the language-game of §2 is itself a language-game." There are even different kinds or stages of training which Wittgenstein subsumes under the family-concept "general training" (BBB 1969, 98). Some of these stages may involve testing applying a rule.

⁴ The expression "vertical relation" is from ter Hark (1990, 34). The failure to consider vertical relations between language-games is called the "ground-floor fallacy", e.g. naming and describing within the same language-game.

⁵ Other numerous examples can be found in Wittgenstein's treatment of the ostensive definition, e.g. sentences "this is red" (BBB 1969, 2) or "this is blue" (PI §37), further word "there" (BBB 1969, 80).

teaching explaining the meaning of “R” or “red”. In short: We could use the sentence “R” either as a genuine proposition or as a rule (i.e. as a grammatical proposition). This situation fits exactly within our general setting.

To avoid misunderstanding we are invited to take naming and describing as different activities. In Wittgenstein’s words: “For naming and describing do not stand on the *same* level: naming is a preparation for description. Naming is so far not a move in the language-game” (PI §49). Naming is not a move in the language-game of describing colored squares. It is, however, a move in the language-game of training. In this preparatory language-game, one has to learn what “R” or rather “This is red” means. It is crucial that in this language-game, the demonstrative “this” refers to the color of the square, not to the square itself. “This is red” actually means “This color is called red”.

After the rule has been mastered we can go over to the language-game of describing colored squares. Red is an internal property of the color shade one was pointing at in the preparatory language-game. “R” or “This is red” now means that there is a complex consisting of one red square. “This” refers now to the complex one is pointing at, and “R” or “This is red” ascribes an external property of containing a red square to this complex.

(2) The second example immediately follows the previous one at §49: “Naming is so far not a move in the language-game—any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess.” Putting the pieces on the board is a preparatory activity. The pieces have to be placed on the board and arranged properly. It may happen that some of these relocations of pieces are the same as correct moves of chess. So, for instance, in the course of setting up the chessboard one might move the white queen from d3 to d1 in order to reach the correct initial formation. This is a legitimate move in this setup. After this is done, another game is going to be played. The same relocation of the white queen from d3 to d1 may be (in certain circumstances) a correct move of this play as well.

This example is intended to shed light on the previous one (and also on the following ones). Nobody would confuse putting pieces on the board with playing chess although they may allow (partly) the same moves. If so instructed, nobody should confuse naming with describing although they might have the same verbal manifestations.

(3) The third example concerns the standard meter. Introducing an analogy to the previous language-games Wittgenstein says: “There is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris.” (PI §50) We can say, of course, of the standard meter that it is one meter long—most likely without any misunderstanding. This is analogous to naming being a limiting case of describing. Sentence “This (rod) is one meter long” can be, however, either a grammatical or a genuine proposition, depending on the context of a language-game.

We can, then, distinguish the preparatory language-game of fixing a unit of measure and the language-game of measurement. In the preparatory language-game not only the unit of measurement but also its standard, and the whole method of measurement have to be fixed. In particular, one has to pick out a particular rod—let us call it the standard meter henceforward—and one of its dimensions. “This rod is one meter long” is to understand as “The length of this rod is stipulated (=named) to be one meter”. Formulations of such a definition can be found in Wittgenstein’s manuscripts from the early thirties.⁶ In the course of this training, we can say only of one thing that it is one meter long, namely of the standard meter.

And again, after the fixing has been done we can proceed to the language-game of measurement. “This is one meter long” now means that the object one is pointing at has the same length as the standard meter or it is *described* as having this length. Being one meter long is an internal property of (the length) the standard meter and a possible external property of all other spatial objects.⁷

If we allowed applying the expression “one meter long” to all objects without exception within this language-game of measurement, we would have to be aware of this expressions’ ambiguity. Applied to the standard meter, “one meter long” expresses an internal property of its length; applied to another object it expresses an external property of this object.

(4) The fourth and last example is the standard sepia. Suppose we have defined this color in the preparatory language-game in a similar way as we did the meter. The standard meter is

⁶ Viz. Wittgenstein’s definition “1m ist die Länge des Pariser Urmeters” (MS 113, 23r).

⁷ Cf. (Jolley 2010, 116).

a rod that is the sample of one meter; the standard sepia is a plate that is the sample of color sepia. Wittgenstein, then, says that “it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not.” (PI §50)

The sample has various external properties, e.g. it has a definite size or weight. Why, then, can we not refer to its color as to an external property in the language-game of measurement? Let us suppose (with Kripke) that we can. To say of an object that it has the external property of having color sepia is tantamount to say that this object has the same color as the standard sepia. Then, to ascribe this external property to the standard sepia would be to say that the standard sepia has the same color as the standard sepia. To say of an object that it has the same color as it has is not to ascribe any property at all. Hence we have failed in ascribing the external property of having a color to the standard sepia. Note that the same point can be made regarding to the standard meter.

The conclusion is that within the language-game of measurement we can use expressions “meter” or “sepia” to ascribe either respective internal properties to their samples or external properties to other objects. On the other side, expressions “meter” or “sepia” express external properties to its samples in their preparatory language-game of fixing the unit.

In this paper I hope to have shown through examples how the concept of language-game can be employed as an object of comparison. In particular, I tried to show how we can master a rule in one language-game and apply this rule in another language-game. These language-games are connected by a vertical relation. They are objects of comparison, not literal parts of our language. Therefore the activity of training and applying a rule (which is continuous indeed) can be artificially split into two parts. It is important to keep these language-games apart in order to avoid misunderstandings originating from the fact that one and the same expression may have different meanings in these language-games.⁸

⁸ Thanks to Deirdre Smith for comments. Supported by the Czech Science Foundation (No P401/11/P174) and by the Research Council of Norway (No 220039).

References

- Baker, Gordon P. and Hacker, Peter M. S. 2005 *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning. Part II: Exegesis §§1-184*, second edition, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Glock, Hans-Johann 1996 *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hintikka, Jaakko 1982 "A Dialogical Model of Teaching", *Synthese* 51(1), 39-59.
- Jolley, Kelly D. 2010 "Measurable Confusion?: Wittgenstein's Meter-Stick and Beyond", *The Pluralist* 5(2), 105-140.
- Ter Hark, Michel 1990 *Beyond the Inner and the Outer*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.