

On Wittgenstein's "One of the Most Fundamental Language Games"

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My interest in this topic springs from the controversy that Wittgenstein's language games have sparked in game-theoretic approaches to logic. Hintikka (1996) has argued that semantic games and language games share a mutual concern on how language and the world are related. Such links are codified in the practices of language games, and are operationalised in semantic games by the mathematical theory of games.

Others have rushed to deny such connection. Hodges (2001, p.19) claims that no one wins or loses Wittgenstein's language games. This is wrong: "It is true in the game there isn't any "true" and "false" but then in arithmetic there isn't any "winning" and "losing" (Wittgenstein 1978, p. 293). To Wittgenstein, competition, cooperation and strategic thinking were familiar elements of language games. He even noted:

Augustine describes, we might say, a system of communication; not everything, however, that we call language is this system. (And this one must say in so many cases when the question arises: "is this an appropriate description or not?". The answer is, "Yes, it is appropriate; but only for this narrowly restricted field, not everything that you professed to describe by it." *Think of the theories of economists.*) It is as though someone explained: "Playing a game consists in moving things about on a surface according to certain rules...", and we answered him: You seem to be thinking of games on a board; but these aren't all the games there are. You can put your description right by confining it explicitly to those games. (*Nachlaß* 226: 2, 1939, emphasis added)

Wittgenstein omitted the reference to economic theories when he made final revisions to *Philosophical Investigations*. I have argued in Pietarinen (2003) that he did this because prospects for the application of the theory of games in economic issues began during the immediate post-*Theory-of-Games-and-Economic-Behavior* era to appear under much more positive light.

The question that arises is what, in fact, are these practices that codify the language-world relationships? Several suggestions have been made. For instance, such practices may refer to the activities of verifying and falsifying a sentence. They may also refer to the activities of seeking and finding the objects that language speaks about (Hintikka, 1973). In both senses, language is seen as a contextual system evaluated and learned against the backdrop of a situation in which it is used, however social, non-social, structural or non-structural such a situation or ethnographic environment may be.

What I would like to argue is that there is a perspective to this questions that deserves mention, not least because it derives from the recently published *Nachlaß*, but also because it appears to be less dependent on the previous controversies concerning the notion of a language game. One consequence that I wish to point out is that notions of showing and saying converge in his late philosophy.

The point of view that I have in mind is the following. In *Nachlaß*, there is a reference that puts more weight on language games as the philosophical basis of semantics.

For over and above the idea that at least some of the games are those of verification and falsification, and that some of these are games of seeking and finding, the activities and purposes of the players can be made clarified in terms of the activities whose nature Wittgenstein was, in so many words, struggling to spell out in his philosophy. They refer to the activities of *showing or telling what one sees*:

"Surely if he knows anything he must know that he sees!" – It is true that the game of "showing or telling what one sees" is one of the most fundamental language games, which means that what we in ordinary life call using language mostly presupposes this game (*Nachlaß* 149: 1, 1935-36).

What this means in the context of semantic games is this. The players try to bring to the fore what they see to be the case in the context of an assertion. They have been prompted to do this by the utterance in question, and they aim at showing or saying what is the case by instantiating elements of the universe of discourse as suitable values for individual, incomplete predicate term expressions. The merit of such activities is assessed by what is understood to be present in the propositional content of assertions. What Wittgenstein can thus be seen to argue for is that to seize linguistic meaning requires a prior grasp of its use-governed machinery.

This explication is so interesting as to warrant a number of explanations and qualifications. First, what does the language game of showing or telling what one sees have to do with the language game of seeking and finding, given that the latter also draws its main motivation from some general notion of language games? There is not much difference as to whether we use one or the other of these two notions of conceptualising the practices implicit in, say, quantificational expressions and predicate terms. Finding something comes very close to seeing that something is the case, and here we must of course recognise that seeing is by no means confined to visual perception, and also refers to all kinds of ways of coming to understand, realise, recognise, and so on. After all, the process of seeing has to begin with something, such as active thinking, and this is what a search tries to encompass. As soon as we think of the process of seeking and finding as a principle of human cognition, then the notion of search seems to be not very different from the processes of seeing that something is the case.

However, to show or to say that something is the case is to carry out something more than just the activation of the search process and the eventual finding of suitable individuals. It is something more than just the discovery or production of some such elements from the universe of discourse in question. What it also means is actively communicating those findings. What are these other activities? In some cases they may consist of the naming of objects, but that would not be the whole story. For, to name something is not yet a very complex or effectual activity. It does not, to follow Wittgenstein's remarks, constitute a genuine move in a language game:

Within naming something we haven't yet made a move in the language game, – any more than you made a move in chess by putting a piece on the board. We may say: by giving a thing a name *nothing* [has] yet been done. It *hasn't* a name, – except in the game. This is what Frege meant by saying that a word has meaning only in [its connection with] the context of a sentence. (*Nachlaß* 226: 36, 1939)

Together with the principle of seeing that something is the case, naming may be useful, however. It often suffices to give something a name, and to rest content with that. This nonetheless does not take us very far in the analysis of quantified statements or other logical expressions. Nor is it something that is endorsed in the foundations of game theory, because players are typically assumed to be able to observe their available actions in an effective way.

What is also worth noting is Wittgenstein's reference to word's meaning "in its connection with" or in "the context of" a sentence. This idea came later to be called the 'Frege Principle'. As Wittgenstein notes, naming is not a move. It becomes one when it is actively communicated to other players or phases of the mind in the context of a play of the game or, analogously, of a sentence of the language.

Therefore, in order to see the true state of affairs in Wittgenstein's "one of the most fundamental language games", we need to absorb the fact that language games consist of the activities of saying or telling what one sees, and of showing what one sees. Both saying and showing are seen to involve some sense of the notion of communication. Here, two rather fundamental concepts that he tried to keep strictly apart in his earlier philosophy, are made different aspects of one and the same conceptual activity.

Why is it not necessary to distinguish these two notions here? Why do the activities of saying and showing both serve as explications of at least one part of one of the most fundamental language games, the game of showing or saying what one sees? Let us look more closely at what quantified statements are. Their meaning is established in two different stages. First, I (or You) have to find an individual from the domain of discourse, and possibly name it if it does not have a name. Second, I have to instantiate the name of the individual to the bound variable in question. It is this latter step that relates to saying and showing. Just seeking and finding an individual does not make information public, but communicating what this individual is constitutes an act of publicising and making it accessible to other parties of the relevant language game. This accessibility is important in order for genuine interaction to emerge.

Yet, it makes no difference, especially from the point of view of the meaning of quantified statements, how the communicative activity is realised in the end. As far as communicative purposes are concerned, it does not seem to matter whether I am able to show that the names of the individuals I have found provide some names to work for indexical expressions of 'this' or 'that', or whether I simply utter 'this and that are the names of the individuals that I have been looking for'. The oft-noted difference between these activities, as referred to in early Wittgenstein and *Tractatus*, is the difference between saying and *zeigen* ('ostension', see Geach 1976). On the whole, however, this untimely contrast is no longer of substantial interest in the context of the most fundamental language games, because both activities are indexical modes of communicational practice.

The notion of communication that holds in the "most fundamental language games" may prompt someone to

argue that, contrary to what Hintikka argued to be the case in the theory of semantic games, here, in fact, is a clear example of activities that have to be extra-linguistic, games that need to relate to socially constrained contexts of language use. For if semantic games presuppose an explicit testimonial to what one sees, they no longer represent private activities confined to tasks of establishing the meaning of expressions within a single person or a self. Wittgenstein's own remarks add preliminary grist to the mill:

"Surely seeing is one thing, & showing that I see is another thing". – This certainly is like saying "skipping is one thing & jumping another". But there is a supplement to this statement "skipping is this (showing it) & jumping this (showing it)". (*Nachlaß* 149: 19, 1935-36)

Such an attempted counterargument rests on a fallacy, however. Utterances, in the same sense as interpretations of the expressions uttered, do not call for social environments in which they may be uttered and are interpreted in order to be understood and effectively employed according to principles of the correct use of language.

There is thus another way of putting a related counterargument. One could try to argue that the notions of saying and showing still differ in late Wittgenstein, because according to him, one cannot describe correct uses of a rule, while it is possible to know with certainty that one acts according to the rule. To what extent does this kind of knowledge, presupposed in any correct use of language, overlap with the kind of showing Wittgenstein argued for earlier, while it does not overlap with saying?

The key lies in the fact that non-verbal knowledge in language games as recognised by Wittgenstein is still a form of communication. The communication of observations about states of affairs, while presupposing rudiments of language that are inevitably present in the common ground of the communicators, does not need to be interpersonal. The epistemic element of certainty connected with rule following pertains to games that do not work by way of appealing to spontaneous or habitual responses to actions. To wit, there are games that cannot be trimmed down to rules, typically symbolic instructions (such as ones that, in computational terms, are found in denotational semantics), and the following of them. The language games of showing what one sees (or what one experiences) are examples, as Wittgenstein emphasised, of the most vital of such irreducible games.

Therefore, showing and saying do not portray any fundamental variation in Wittgenstein's later views on language games. Seeing that something is the case with respect to an assertion is itself an element of an irreducibility claim for their public character.

It is almost as if Wittgenstein was punning his earlier self.

For these reasons, the correct understanding of the principles and precepts of language does not have to be societal or something that is found among the rules that are in some way socially constrained, because language games will continue to function without further ado irrespective of any such assumptions. Even if some sense of understanding was, to some extent, influenced by rules and principles of language use, the social context or environment provided for various expressions would not affect the most important aspect of language, the grasp and observance of the individuals and primitive propositions of what the language speaks about. These individuals and primitive propositions are, of course, what quantifi-

cational expressions and underlying interpreted languages aim at presenting, contexts of use or interpersonal parameters notwithstanding. What an instantiation of individuals from the logical perspective accomplishes is, after the detection and selection of suitable individuals from the domain of discourse, to make the information about these publicly available. This is not the same thing as actively communicating these individuals in a social context, nor does it entail it.

Furthermore, there is always the option of *not* communicating what one sees by not showing it, but this happens in the context of more limited types of games of revealing and hiding (*Nachlaß* 148: 45v, 1934-35).

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