

Wittgenstein's Concept of Language Game: A Critical Discourse

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Abstract

Wittgenstein's language game thesis remains one of the most important and controversial discourses within the philosophy of language. It contends that words should be understood within the context in which it is used in a language (meaning as used). In the *Philosophical Investigations*, He maintains that words have no intrinsic meaning but only within a context or form of life and further states that words have nothing in common, at best what they have is a family resemblance, just like games have nothing in coming but resemblance because each game has its own rules and these rules must be learnt within a form of life. This paper adopts the method of analysis in exploring the idea of the form of life, rule-following, and family resemblance in the Wittgensteinian language game thesis. It argues that the language game remains very significant within the philosophical domain but embodies certain flaws when one critically examines the idea of the form of life, rule-following and family resemblance that seem to form the bedrock of Wittgenstein's language game. The work critically exposes these ideas within the language game thesis and concludes that the whole idea of the language game needs to be revisited to manage these perceived flaws.

Keywords: Language, Language game, form of life, family resemblance, acquaintance, rule-following.

Introduction

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, a 20th-century analytic philosopher, made numerous significant contributions to the philosophy of language. He claims that understanding a sentence entails knowing a language, and knowing a language entails mastering a skill (Wittgenstein, 1958). Then being a master of a method implies that you are aware of the "form of life" that underpins the technique. People who have read Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* believe that he rejected the idea of pure logic underneath language. He devised the concept of "language games," in which certain sentences might be employed in specific contexts based on what he believes are the rules of participation.

The principal concern of the latter Wittgenstein was to figure out what meaning is. He claims that communication occurs when people agree on how to utilize words and sentences. "Meaning" can be defined in the following way: "the meaning of a word is how it is utilized in the language" (Kenny, 1973, p.122). Language games come in a variety of shapes and sizes. It encompasses the entirety of language as well as the physical movements that people perform when using it. Language is sufficient to accommodate a wide range of game kinds.

Technical languages, according to Wittgenstein, can be used to precisely and logically explain a narrow spectrum of reality. When people speak, they utilize games as well. They use set rules, or conventions, as well as words, phrases, and gestures. These conventions and norms establish guidelines for when specific words or word combinations may be used without being considered nonsense. The customs and rules of grammar, as defined by Wittgenstein, weave words, sentences, and linguistic games into the fabric of language. He refers to this as grammar.

In demonstrating that games have rules, Wittgenstein utilized a game example. That is, we act a certain way in games to avoid losing or being kicked out for making other choices. This means that when we use language, we must use specific words only in specific situations, or we will be unable to communicate with one another and will be perceived as simpletons. We learn to follow the rules and customs of language and play the games it has to offer in our interactions with others. As a result, Wittgenstein appears to have provided us with a framework for thinking about language. That words should be used according to context (meaning as used).

Wittgenstein appears to have devised a method for making language more interesting. In this sense, Wittgenstein's concept of a language game can be viewed as a heuristic analogy that aids in the description of some characteristics of the real language (Stern, 2004). Analogically applying his language-game notion, he hopes to uncover certain specific elements of language through descriptive examples. Perhaps the most essential of these elements is the idea that, just as there is nothing common to all games, there is nothing common to all language games, and hence no common essence to all languages (Ozumba, 2004).

This paper, therefore, aims to critically expose Wittgenstein's concept of language game generally with specific attention to its essentials, such as the form of life, rule-following and family resemblance. The method of analysis adopted in this enables us to philosophically appreciate the whole idea of language games according to Wittgenstein. The paper proceeds by looking at the whole idea of the language game and other related issues such as the form of life, rule-following and family resemblance which are critically discussed. These are in attempts to better understand and appreciate Wittgenstein's idea of the language game and his philosophy of language in general.

Elucidation of Basic Concepts

Let us briefly consider the following concepts concerning the issue at hand: Language, language games, forms of life, family resemblances, acquaintance, and rule-following.

Language is defined not as a system of representation but as a system of devices for engaging in various sorts of social activity, hence the meaning of the word is its use in the language. Wittgenstein gave considerable help in understanding what he means by the meaning of the words in their use in the language in the term Language Games (Weerasekara, 2013).

A language game is a difficult nut to crack. It is not easy to have a sufficient understanding of what the language game is. Even Wittgenstein himself is not left out on this. This prompted Ottuh and Idjakpo (2020) to aver that the idea of a language game does not have a clear understanding both from Wittgenstein himself and other scholars. They maintain thus:

It is not, however, an easy task to give an explicit idea of what the language game is. Wittgenstein did not give any clear exposition of it. The numerous examples given by the author do not explicate the concept, and scholars differ in their views. The language game could be seen, as an analogy to describe language. In his attempt to describe a complete language, Wittgenstein describes the circumstance of the use of linguistic expressions. To explain what language is, he brings forth the analogy of a game. The game analogy has become a novel technique of philosophical analysis, especially in linguistic analysis (p. 168).

However, we can see a language game as that which entails the creation of fictitious and rudimentary languages that philosophers can use to investigate many aspects of language, including language and the behaviours that it is woven into (Wittgenstein, 2009). Language games may also be defined functionally as a system of operational rules, which necessarily determines the functions of linguistic signs through the application of the rules (Vinokurov 2018). So it can be said that language games not only function as a time-filling activity but also they can bring some educational values that enable the children to learn the language. McCabe (1992) defines language games as a spoken routine for two or more players, meant to be repeated many times. This implies that such repetition will enable the children to gain acquaintance and to communicate effectively since playing language games will help the children to develop language and thought.

Forms of life (*Lebensform* or *Lebensformen*) means a way of living, a pattern of activities, actions, interactions and feelings which are inextricably interwoven with, and partly constituted by uses of language (Baker and Hacker, 2009). Forms of life from very general pervasive facts of nature include shared natural and linguistic responses, broad agreement in definitions and judgments, and corresponding behaviour. This, therefore, explains the reason behind Wittgenstein's idea that language is part of the form of life. The fact that speaking a language is part of an activity, it is, therefore, part of a form of life. Hence, to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life (Wittgenstein, 2009). The concept of forms of life is prehistoric for Wittgenstein. He explains that what has to be accepted, the given is and as such one could say, forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953).

According to Gert (1995), “family resemblances (*Familienähnlichkeit*) are those salient resemblances which are fairly common to, or distinctive of, the members of a kind, and which we often use to identify members of that kind” (p. 177). But as the highlighted words show, this definition assumes that one has already known

what is salient and distinctive of each kind. Family resemblance explains the fact that things which could be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all of the things (Sluga, 2006). Explaining the concept of family resemblance, the plurality of language uses is compared to the plurality of games. Wittgenstein says that games have common features but no one feature is found in all of them. Hence, words have nothing in common, at best what they have is family resemblance (Griffin, 1974).

According to Bunnin & Yu (2004), acquaintance is how a knowing subject is aware of an object by experiencing it directly and immediately. Acquaintance contrasts with description, where an object is known through an intermediary process of inference. Wittgenstein uses the term to explain a situation through which an individual becomes familiar with a certain form of life through rule forming and thus becomes used or acquainted with such life form or culture. The notion of acquaintance has been used to constrain what can be said to experience. Russell calls the knowledge derived through acquaintance knowledge by acquaintance, which is the direct knowledge of things and is distinguished from knowledge by description, which reaches truth through inference. An individual is said to be acquainted with an object when the object, or an image of it, is part of the individual at the moment (Albert C. & Lewis, 1994).

Rule-following remains an important notion in later Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein does not offer a linguistic definition of what a rule is but illustrates rules through many examples. Following a rule is not a matter of interpretation. The ability to understand existing rules rests upon a brute reaction to training, that is, on repetition. By this view, Wittgenstein is suggesting that the meaning of a term is its use. To mean something is to follow a definite rule, otherwise using words to say something would be to string words together aimlessly. He claims that language comprises language games governed by sets of rules. Though people do not commonly think of rules when talking and cannot usually specify rules governing our usage, rules exist which determine the conditions for the correct application of what we say (Bunnin & Yu, 2004).

The Concept of Language Games

Later Wittgenstein and his new theory of meaning are established on the concept of the language game. The concept of language game, which is a major term in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, could be traced to *The Blue Book* and *the Brown Book* and repeatedly used in his later works, especially *The Philosophical Investigations*. A language game is a term he clarifies as one begins to study his later philosophy and it forms the basis of his later work which challenges both classical and many modern notions about language and philosophy. Many ordinary readers and some scholars misunderstand this term and often presume that language game means word game, that is, in the sense of people playing word tricks on one another. However, one has to study Wittgenstein seriously, we must not fall into the same error (Weerasekara, 2013).

Wittgenstein questions the Augustinian view of language, which sees words as representations of reality. He sees this as a misunderstanding that derives from the fact that words appear to be so similar. As a result, people miss the fact that they are distinct, particularly in the way they utilize them. He backs up his claims with what he refers to as the language games approach. This language game entails the creation of fictitious and rudimentary languages that philosophers can use to investigate many aspects of language, including language and the behaviours that it is woven into (Wittgenstein, 2009). According to Wittgenstein (2009):

The language is intended to help builder A and assistant B communicate. A is constructed with building materials such as blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. B must pass the stones in the order that A requires. They utilize a vocabulary consisting of the words "block," "pillar," "slab," and "beam" for this purpose. A summons them, and B delivers the stone that he has learned to deliver at such and such a time (p.2).

Wittgenstein uses the language game to refute the Augustinian concept of language. Language, according to him, does not represent the world; rather, it is an activity woven into the fabric of daily existence. As a result, imagining a language entails imagining a way of life (Wittgenstein, 2009). He decides to dismantle the concept of ostensive definition. Names, according to the Augustinian notion, can be taught via pointing and naming. Though such a simple thought appears to be logical, direct, or obvious. He adds that it is not so

straightforward, especially when we assume that someone is speaking a foreign language and pointing to an item as follows:

Someone arriving in a distant nation will occasionally learn the locals' language through ostensive definitions; he will frequently have to estimate the meaning of these definitions; and he will guess sometimes correctly, sometimes incorrectly (p.32).

It is presumed that he is naming the object he is pointing to, but he could possibly be saying "see," or your name, or something similar. As a result, the question becomes whether one can truly learn those words by pointing to and naming them. As a result, it becomes evident that some foreknowledge or premonition is required for comprehension to occur. This "foreknowledge" could equally be described as familiarity. As a result, familiarity with the word or object is essential for good comprehension. The meaning of a word, according to Wittgenstein in *uncertainty*, is a type of employment of it, because it is what one learns when the term is merged or assimilated into the human language (Wittgenstein, 1972). In the *Investigations*, he also stated that words get their meaning from their use in language games and that they had no intrinsic value. As a result, a word's meaning is determined by its usage in the language (Wittgenstein, 2009).

Hence, the meaning of a word is no longer determined by its relationship to some anomic reality; rather, the meaning of a word is determined by its application. People utilize language in a variety of ways, such as when discussing science, religion, and art. Later Wittgenstein disagrees with logical positivists that only scientific propositions have meaning; rather, science is just one way of talking about the universe. Language games are a reflection of human activity; they are a way of life. Words' meanings are generated from their roles in language games such as scientific language games, religious language games, aesthetic language games, and so on. A word can be used in a variety of ways. What these various applications have in common is something Wittgenstein refers to as "Family resemblance." Family members have a resemblance to one another, although no two members of the same family are identical (Grayling, 2001). The same can be said about the use of words. For example, the word games are used to refer to board games, card games, Olympic Games, and so on. These games don't have a single thing in common; instead, they're overlapping and criss-crossing in their resemblance. Wittgenstein stated this viewpoint simply in the first section of the *Investigations*, stating it as "a specific picture of the nature of human language." (Barrett, 1991, pp. 51). His main thesis on language is that the principles of common language usage are not right nor wrong, true or incorrect; rather, the language is only useful for the specific applications to which it is applied. Members of any community, such as college students or rap musicians, develop patterns of speaking that fulfil their collective needs, and these are the language games they play.

As a result, the functions of words are various, to the point where even a single word like beauty has a plethora of uses, none of which are preset or fixed. As a result, one should love language's "open texture," which asserts that a word can have an infinite number of meanings and that new and unexpected meanings will emerge as life's settings change (Barrett, 1991).

As a result, the best one can do when answering queries regarding the meaning of a term like "knowledge" is to present examples to transfer words from their metaphysical perspective to their everyday application. To do so is to engage in a language game, and to engage in a language game entails adhering to particular rules based on one's disposition in a certain scenario and setting. More importantly, obeying norms necessitates being aware of one's current state of affairs. Because when we do this, our knowledge and expression of concepts improve. Let us then consider various concepts employed by Wittgenstein in assimilating his language game thesis.

On Forms of Life

Wittgenstein explains that to imagine a language is to imagine or envision a form of existence (Wittgenstein, 2009). He refers to the sociological, historical, linguistic, physiological, and behavioural elements that make up the matrix within which a specific language has meaning as a form of life.

Gestures, rules, and norms are all part of language games. When taken together, they form a convention's framework. The game's goal is always served by such norms. Considering this viewpoint, it follows that the "meaning of words will be defined in many cases by their involvement in a linguistic game" (Wittgenstein,

2009, p43). Wittgenstein, on the other hand, thinks that there are numerous types of language games. Since speaking language is always an element of an activity, many activities can be interpreted as enacting various forms of existence. As a result, several language games depict various aspects of life. If one speaks the same language as others, one is effectively adhering to a shared set of conventions, and adhering to a common set of customs indicates that one shares a common way of life with others. Wittgenstein effectively contends that philosophy is based on forms of life, because they are the foundation upon which human actions are possible and cannot be challenged by philosophy, and this is a fundamental requirement of philosophy (Wittgenstein, 2009). Forms of life are therefore diverse. Flies and dogs, for example, are two species that reflect fundamentally distinct living forms. Such forms are incommensurable in relation to one another, meaning that the behaviour of one species cannot be translated into terms equivalent to the behaviour of another. It is important to note that language cannot be imagined outside the human context since meaning is rooted in the context of human activity and speaking of language is part of human activity (Ottuh and Idjakpo, 2020).

Humans vary from other animals, yet they can also live in worlds that are vastly distinct from one another. Separate cultures, for example, can be thought of as different ways of life with incompatible norms. If someone from one culture is convinced to adopt the "truths" (dominant beliefs) of another culture, it is unlikely that they will do so by accepting the incontrovertible "truth" of the claims that make up this web of beliefs, such as scientifically established beliefs (Wittgenstein, 2009, p244). Such acceptance would simply suggest that this individual had changed their perspective on the world, and as a result, had transformed their knowledge. According to this viewpoint, philosophy becomes unjustified nonsense if it pretends to provide life with an ultimate significance since philosophy's function is to highlight the contrasts that exist between various types of existence by illuminating how misunderstandings can arise. This is because misunderstandings occur when we use the everyday conventions that make up a linguistic game to ask questions that are improper for that game, i.e., questions that are unrelated to the web of everyday actions that make up that game (Wittgenstein, 2009).

On Rule-Following

The *Philosophical Investigations*, which represent Wittgenstein's later philosophy, are primarily concerned with examining the concept of meaning as repeatedly emphasized in this paper. It begins by examining a widely accepted interpretation of meaning, according to which words name things or acts, and sentences have meaning only if their words are put together according to grammatical rules that sufficiently account for this naming (Wittgenstein, 2005). Words, therefore, have meaning and speakers are to use words in accordance with their meanings. Hence, what could give a word its meaning is a rule for its use, and to be a competent speaker is to use words in accordance with these rules.

Following Russell's logical atomism, Wittgenstein contends that there will always be a basic structural identity between reality and the symbol for it in a logically accurate symbology. It is thus the philosopher's responsibility to discover this basic structural identity between a fact and the language that is reality's representation. This work, however, cannot be completed without logically perfect language. As a result, he believes the creation of a logically flawless language capable of adhering to a rule to be the primary work of a philosopher. This means that the term language could signify a variety of things to different people. As a result, different people or groups of people may have different perspectives on language. Thus, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, he claims that many issues in philosophy arise as a result of human language usage and that this has resulted in several defeats in the pursuit of knowledge. Hence, when language takes a vacation, philosophical issues arise. The term "language on vacation" refers to the incorrect application of a language's rules in a specific language game (Wittgenstein, 2009, p.19). One must therefore, for example, understand the role of the table in the linguistic game. As a result, he stated in his *Lectures* that humans occasionally bring a sentence into a language without recognizing that they must demonstrate how to utilize it (Wittgenstein, 1984).

Wittgenstein implies that one should understand the role of sentences or numbers in language, but what is this previous idea? Wittgenstein uses the game of chess to illustrate his point. Telling a chess player that this is the king makes sense only if the player is already familiar with the game's rules. So, if someone doesn't know what a playing piece is, how can we teach them the game? Understanding what the king represents

necessitates a basic understanding of the game of chess. As a result, the game's rules and the meaning of the monarch must coexist because one cannot exist without the other. The rules and the meaning do not come before each other. The rules and the meaning are so intertwined that they are inseparable. This explains why, according to Wittgenstein, pointing and naming cannot be the sole basis for learning language as in the Augustinian tradition (Wittgenstein, 1984).

On the other hand, rules do not carry their interpretation, and going on, in the same way, is settled practically by the context in which rules are followed rather than by the rules themselves. Understanding is reacting correctly, based on training, to the rule-following application of words. Following a rule is analogous to an order. We are trained to do so (Wittgenstein, 1953).

On Family Resemblance

One of the basic aspects of Wittgenstein's theory of language is family resemblance, which together with his idea on grammar, completes his previous ideas. Aside from his early viewpoint, he opposes the generic form of all propositions and language, which seeks to identify a common element that encompasses all linguistic processes (Wittgenstein, 2009). By analogy with card games, Wittgenstein develops the concept of family resemblance and insists that there are parallels and relationships in games, including language games. By this, he indicates that a word can be employed or understood in a variety of ways and that he rejects "fixed interpretations" that place everything on the linguistic schema (Hintikka, 1986).

Instead of matching reality, Wittgenstein argues that "it is enough to be able to convey a rough picture" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p.67). By analogy with member resemblance, Wittgenstein explains the concept of family resemblance is no exact likeness between family members in this respect, yet there are commonalities. This concept briefly elucidates Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. As a result of this Wittgensteinian theory of language, it is thought that language has meaning when understood as a human activity.

Evaluation

Arguing on the form of life, Wittgenstein believes that there are many distinct kinds of language games because speaking a language is always part of an activity. Different activities can be understood as instantiating different forms of existence (Wittgenstein, 2009). As a result, many language games reflect instances of various life types. If one speaks the same language as others, one is effectively adhering to a shared set of conventions, and adhering to a common set of customs which indicates that one shares a common way of life with others. However, this argument appears to be weak because there is no plausible alternative in the *Philosophical Investigations* that would secure the unity and common understanding of what we say to each other. The relations between the different games are too external, according to the thoughts. And it is partially because of this that we cannot figure out why they are called language games in the first place (Rhees, 2006). According to Wittgenstein, "to imagine a language is to envision a form of existence" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p.19). As a result, he appears to be attracted by the idea of language as a series of games with rather rigorous rules, such as chess. To this end, the idea of the form of life appears weak

Furthermore, in considering rule-following one may ask whether children merely play language games when learning a language, especially as a first language. What would kids learn if they played a variety of language games? The most plausible first answer is that they learn to follow rules. Making a correct move in a game, such as putting the right card in a card game, or a game of patience, delivering a correct number in a mathematical series, correctly moving a piece in chess, and so on, would be considered saying something. Understanding what is stated is dependent on one's correct reactions to the movements of the other player, and in games like patience or a series, it is dependent on one's ability to follow a game, forming possible conjectures about forthcoming moves, and so on. However, drawing this parallel seems insufficient.

Saying something is not just about following rules; rules such as syntactical rules (Rhees, 2006), are required for correctly constructing expressions and gaining understanding. And also, simply knowing the rules does not guarantee that one will be able to speak coherently and participate in a conversation. It merely ensures the ability to generate a valid linguistic item and possibly recognize additional correct utterances, but it does not guarantee the ability to follow the discourse or guide a discussion. A machine or a computer can correctly apply rules, but this does not imply that a machine participates meaningfully in a discourse.

Another possibility is that learning a language teaches a child knowledge and a variety of expressions that can be used in conversation, as well as the right context in which they should be used. Various language games contain various types of phrases and cover various lexical rules, and the person who learns a certain amount of expressions is expected to actively participate in a conversation. However, such an answer falls short of its goal because, first, saying something requires more than just selecting words and composing them into larger wholes, and having a repertoire of words is insufficient to participate in a meaningful conversation, and second, understanding sentences is insufficient (Rhees, 2006; Emama, 2018). However, even in regular conversation, we frequently discover that while knowing all of the words in a statement and comprehending the entire sentence, we have no idea what is behind it or what consequences it may have. This, therefore, goes to show that understanding necessitates more than just a knowledge of lexis. Furthermore, in a discussion, one usually does not just use their given set of words and structures but also goes above and beyond to contribute something unique and personal to the conversation. This also contradicts our supposition that learning a language, learning to construct thoughts, or participating in a discussion cannot be reduced to knowing a specific set of language expressions.

Going further, in terms of language and knowledge, the analogy of family resemblance is a good one but seems nonsensical. This is because Wittgenstein deduces from it that games have no commonalities. This implies that he considers the question of whether entities share something in common to be distinct from the question of whether they share resemblances. But clearly, the distinction is a matter of wording. We are entitled to declare, if it pleases us, that things have anything in common if they resemble each other sufficiently for us to find it convenient to apply the same word to them. As a result, claiming that games have no resemblance but a degree of similarity is nonsensical because such similarity necessitates the inference of certain shared qualities. When it comes to analyzing words in jurisprudence, especially when it comes to legal concepts, the similarity between words should be useful (Ayer, 1956).

Despite these flaws, Wittgenstein's language games are relevant to this contemporary time since it opens an alternative avenue for philosophers and language scholars to create and utilize different patterns of learning language as against the usual monotonous process or patterns of learning. It goes on to reveal that communication and understanding of language themes are multi-dimensional. In playing this language (games), they may seem alike but different, and perhaps only have what Wittgenstein calls family resemblance. Hence, this paper remains relevant in the analysis and understanding of various linguistic theories in this contemporary context, to ensure acquaintance and proper understanding of language in various contexts they are used against the regular conventional order.

Conclusions

We can see that language defines our appellation, existence, and being. When we recognize that verbal debate is the laboratory in which we test our ideas, we realize how important language is. However, the use of words can be ambiguous and perplexing at times. The objective of language philosophers is to clarify and make sense of language in the simplest way to aid understanding. Hence, proposing a solution to the ambiguity of words or language, Wittgenstein contends that the meaning of words or language is determined by their usage or context in a statement.

Employing the idea of the form of life Wittgenstein insists that if members of a community comprehend their communication signs and symbols, which may seem ambiguous to others outside the community, their language is said to be coherent. Hence, if one speaks the same language as others, one is effectively adhering to a shared set of conventions, and adhering to a common set of customs indicates that one share a common way or form of life with others. However, we have seen that this argument appears to be weak because there is no plausible alternative in the *Philosophical Investigations* that would secure the unity and common understanding of what we say to each other. The connections between the different games are too external according to the thoughts. And it is partly because of this that we cannot figure out why they are called language games in the first place.

Also, using the idea of rule-following Wittgenstein maintains that words have meaning and speakers are to use words in accordance with their meanings. Hence, what could give a word its meaning is a rule for its use, and to be a competent speaker is to use words in accordance with these rules. However, we have seen that understanding necessitates more than just a knowledge of rules and adhering to such rules.

Family resemblance as analogously adopted by Wittgenstein suggests that there is no exact likeness between family members, yet there are commonalities. Hence, language has meaning when understood as a human activity. Wittgenstein develops the concept of "family resemblance" since there are parallels and relationships in games, including language games. By this, he indicates that a word can be employed or understood in a variety of ways, and thus rejects fixed interpretations or conventions that place everything on the linguistic schema. However, we have been able to understand that claiming that games have no resemblance, but a degree of similarity is illogical because such similarity necessitates the inference of certain shared qualities.

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