

Wittgenstein: Meaning, Use, Ostensive Definition

‘For a *large* class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of the word is its use in the language.

And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer.’ (PI 43)



The Augustinian picture of meaning

- Augustine's view: 'a particular picture of the essence of human language' - 'individual words in language name objects - sentences are combinations of such names.... Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.' (PI 1) word - meaning – object.
- W. thinks Augustine is primarily talking about nouns: "table", "chair" etc... Only secondarily of actions and properties.
- Problem: Augustine does not speak of *differences*.

Augustinian ‘fog’

- Misunderstanding: this picture (Augustine's) ‘surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible.’ (PI 5)
- Philosophical therapy: to study language, firstly, in a ‘primitive’ application - to disperse the ‘fog’. (PI 5)

W: How does one operate with words? Examples.

- Augustine's 'concept of meaning' is part of 'a primitive idea of the way language functions'. (PI 2) It is also the idea of a 'primitive language'. (PI 2)
- ‘It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of words.’ (PI 5) ‘We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal chimera’. (PI 108)
- To explore the Augustinian picture: ‘Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right.’ (PI 2). ‘The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language.’ (PI 2)
- Or, again: I send you shopping with a slip marked “five red apples” – if the Augustine’s picture is right: the shopkeeper opens a drawer marked “apples”, now looks up a colour chart for “red” – says each cardinal number representing an apple up to “five” – ‘for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.’ (PI 1) Does this picture of language in use work?
- Interlocutor voice: “‘But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word ‘red’ and what he is to do with the word ‘five’?’” (PI 1) Something is missing in this picture. Something is assumed.
- This is a ‘system of communication’ - but that’s not everything we call ‘language’! (PI 3) This description of communication is only appropriate for a “narrowly circumscribed region”. E.g. it would be like saying the rules of board games describe all games. But the “city-plan” of language is much more complex and extensive!

Not meaning but use

- How can the primitive language scenario be possible?

- 'Explanations come to an end somewhere'. (PI 1) A person 'acts' in the above scenario - not a question of the meaning of "five"; 'No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used.' (PI 1) The shopkeeper wouldn't ask the question "what do you mean?" – he'd react to words in the appropriate way.

Ostensive teaching as training, not explanation

- How would a child learn a language on the basis of the Augustinian picture? The picture suggests that the child seems to have some innate insight into how names are assigned to things. – it would know how to connect the sound "red" with an inner idea of sensation, plus the concept of "colour" and so on....
- Imagine the language of 2 ("block", "pillar") as the whole language. Imagine children taught to perform an action when they hear a sound "block" (or "red") and a teacher points to an object. This kind of pointing is ostensive *teaching* (not ostensive definition). Ostensive teaching establishes an association between a word and a thing which 'will form an important part of the training' with humans. (PI 6) 'Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training.' (PI 5)
- Partial truth to the Augustinian picture? It's true, we could conceive that 'a picture of the object comes before the child's mind when it hears the word' (PI 6), where '(uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination)'. (PI 6) But is that the 'purpose' of the word? To produce a mental picture? Not in the language of 2, the builders - 'it is *not* the purpose of the words to evoke images'. (PI 6)
- Does ostensive teaching effect an 'understanding of the word'? 'Don't you understand the call "Slab!" if you act upon it in such-and-such a way?' (PI 6) Ostensive teaching brings this about but only with 'particular training'. 'With different training the same ostensive teaching of these words would have effected a quite different understanding.' (PI 6)
- The context gives sense to the expression (e.g. "slab") : "'I set the brake up by connecting up rod and lever.'"—Yes, given the whole of the rest of the mechanism. Only in conjunction with that is it a brake-lever, and separated from its support it is not even a lever; it may be anything, or nothing.' (PI 6)

Language-games

- 'We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games "language-games" and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game.' (PI 7)
- 'Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses.' (PI 7)

Expanding the language of [2] as in the shopkeeper of [1]

- Language game in [2]: Now there is an imagined use of numerals (or letters) - words like "there" and "this" 'used in connection with a pointing gesture' (PI 8) - 'a number of colour samples' (PI 8).
- E.g. A gives an 'order': "d-slab-there" he shows a colour sample says "there" and points to a location. (PI 8) B takes a slab from the stock for each letter up to d, of the same colour sample and brings them to the location. (PI 8)
- How would a child learn this language? Ostensive teaching? E.g. using the words while pointing to 'groups of objects' (not counting) 'taken in at a glance'. (PI 9) That works with the first five or six numerals... But larger numbers?
- Ostensive teaching of "this" and "there"? W. asks us to imagine teaching it: 'One will point to places and things.' (PI 9)
- Are non-linguistic elements part of language-games? Yes! For example, 'pointing' is also part of the language-game. How do we conceive of the business of pointing (particularly in Augustinian terms)? 'The arrow points only in the application that a living being makes of it. This pointing is not a hocus-pocus which can be performed only by the soul.' (PI 454)

Signification in this simple language? (8)

- 'Now what do the words of this language signify?' (PI 10) 'What is supposed to show what they signify, if not the kind of use they have? And we have already described that'. (PI 10)

- We could say that the word "slab" signifies *that object*? However, it would only be *used* in that way to point out a mistake in use: "No not that, *that!!*" Here pointing would be part of the language-game.
- Is it possible to find a theory of meaning here? That there might be common ways of using words (or numbers) that could give a "theory of common use"?
- We could talk about the words in [8] as different 'kinds'. E.g. "slab" and "block" have more similar 'functions' than "slab" and "d". But that kind of grouping would depend on the 'aim of classification', 'our own inclination'. E.g. 'the different points of view from which one can classify tools or chess-men'. (PI 17)
- There may be a 'uniform appearance' of words which might lead us to believe they have the same function/application! [e.g. "the man is good", "the scissors are good" etc.] 'assimilating the descriptions of the uses of words in this way cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another. For, as we see, they are absolutely unlike.' (PI 10)
- 'Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy.' (PI 11)

Language as naming?

- Pursuing the Augustinian picture: words as names? Language as essentially object naming?
- How would such naming-signification occur? "to signify" - its most basic application: 'when the object signified is marked with a sign'. (PI 15) A useful philosophical method is to remember that 'naming something is like attaching a label to it.' (PI 15) E.g. a tool labelled "hammer". Whenever the mark "hammer" is shown the tool is brought forward.
- But, "Every word in language signifies something" - is actually saying 'nothing'!! We need to make distinctions: e.g. that words of language from [8] can be distinguished from nonsense words (e.g. Lewis Carroll's poems). (PI 13)
- What follows from this notion of naming as labelling? 'this is preparatory to the use of a word.' KEY QUESTION: 'what is the preparation for?' (PI 26)
- Interlocutor: "We name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk." (PI 27) But it is what we do next, once we've named something that matters; and is that given in the naming??
- So many cases and types of naming, of talking about things: 'Water! Away! Ow! Help! Fine! No! Are you still inclined to call these "names of objects"?' (PI 27) The Augustinian picture is a 'conception of naming as... an occult process.' (PI 38) 'Naming appears as a queer connexion of a word with an object'. (PI 38) Even queerer when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between 'name and thing'. By staring at it. Repeating the word. 'For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.' (PI 38)
- What we have instead are different linguistic techniques.

Augustine: the meaning of words is given by ostensive definition?

- 'ostensive definition' - 'a language-game on its own'. E.g. 'we are brought up, trained, to ask: "what is that called?" - upon which a name is given.' (PI 27) E.g. from the primitive language-game: Teacher points 'to the objects, direct[s] the child's attention to them, and at the same time utter[s] a word; for instance, the word 'slab' as he points to that shape'. (PI 6)
- What can we ostensively define? 'a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on' (PI 28)
- But the child does not understand what defining a name is, 'cannot as yet ask what a name is'. (PI 6)

Problem of the various interpretations of every ostensive definition

- Ostensive definitions of proper names, of a colour, a material or a numeral *can* be done. But, 'an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case.' (PI 28)
- Wittgenstein's nuts: 'The definition of the number two, "That is called 'two'" – pointing to two nuts – is perfectly exact. - But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn't know what one wants to call "two"; he will suppose that "two" is the name given to *this* group

of nuts! – He may suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake; when I want to assign a name to *this* group of nuts, he *might* understand it is a numeral. He might equally well take the name of a person, of which I gave an ostensive definition, as that of a colour, of a race, or even other points of the compass.’ (PI 28)

- ‘The act of pointing and saying a word leaves the technique of using the word open.’ (MG 62) How do we know if an ostensive definition has succeeded? It depends on the circumstances and use: ‘And how he ‘takes’ the definition is seen in the use that he makes of the word defined.’ (PI 29)
- ‘So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use— the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition “That is called ‘sepia’ ” will help me to understand the word.— And you can say this, so long as you do not forget that all sorts of problems attach to the words “to know” or “to be clear”.

One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name. But what does one have to know?’ (PI 30)

- Chess example: “This is the king” – being shown also depends on mastery of the rules of the game. They also have to know what a game is from seeing a game. ‘only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name.’ (PI 31)
- Augustine’s child language learner is like a person who has already mastered linguistic techniques – ‘as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again, as if the child could already *think* only not yet speak. And think would mean something like “talk to itself”. (PI 32)
- Problems with pointing: ‘And what does “pointing to the shape”, “pointing to the colour” consist in? Point to a piece of paper. – And now point to its shape – now its colour – now its number (that sounds queer). - How did you do it?’ (PI 33) We assume an inner process: ‘You will say that you ‘meant’ a different thing each time you pointed. And if I ask you how that is done, you will say that you concentrated your attention on the colour, the shape, etc. But I ask again: how is *that* done?’ (PI 33)
- Example: imagine a ‘foreigner’ who took the sound “Bring me a slab” for one word? Would they be wrong? Is there also ‘something different going on in him when he pronounces it?’ (PI 20) – an internal, mental *something* that is single-word-ly? Similarly, ‘what goes on in you when you give such an order?’ (ibid) Are you conscious of its four-wordliness? ‘But doesn’t the fact that sentences have the same sense consist in their having the same use?’ (PI 20)
- ‘And we do here what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify any *one* bodily action which we call pointing to the shape (as opposed, for example, to the colour), we say that a *spiritual* (mental, intellectual) activity corresponds to these words.

Where our language suggests a body and there is none, we should like to say, is a *spirit*.’ (PI 36)

‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’. (PI 19)

- We mustn’t think of language as an abstract system of signs. Language is embedded in ‘significant, non-linguistic behaviour’.
- Form of life: ‘applies... to historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices. These practice are grounded in biological needs and capacities, but insofar as these are mediated and transformed by a set of intricate, historically-specific language-games, our human form of life is fundamentally cultural (rather than biological).’ (MG 50)
- “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.’ (PI 241)

‘Let the use teach you the meaning.’ (PI p.212)