Wittgenstein, Metalogic and Meaning

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Abstract: In this paper, I want to explore what it means for meaning not to be a metalogical concept. The concept of metalogic caught Wittgenstein’s attention in the early ‘30s. What he meant was prima facie unclear, as the concept risks being confused with what we are used to call metalogic nowadays. Despite the obvious affinities, the two are quite separate notions. I will then first explore what is for Wittgenstein metalogic, and why more generally we need to refuse it in our investigations of the grammar of language. I will argue that the refutation of metalogic in the early ‘30s is related to Wittgenstein’s new methodology and is part of his general move to get out of the Tractatus’s muddles. Second, I will try to highlight what it means for meaning to be a non-metalogical concept. I can already anticipate that it is a matter of conceiving its unity as a family of cases rather than through a univocal definition, as when we say that meaning is a normative notion. Finally, I will argue that a correct understanding of meaning as a non-metalogical concept can bring about troubles to those interpretations, such as Baker and Hacker’s, which surprisingly overlook such an important detail in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. As a result, we should rather conceive meaning, what we mean when we use the word meaning, beyond the boundaries of any normative conception that consider meanings only as equivalent to the correct use of our words.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Metalogic, Meaning, Philosophical Investigations, Onomatopoeias, Sound, Rules, Hacker
Introduction

In the writings of the early ’30s we find Wittgenstein repeatedly engaging with the concept of *metalogic*. There are in total 34 entries of the term in the *Nachlass*, the most included in the typescripts constituting the collections *Philosophical Grammar* and *Big Typescript*. The concept figures as well in the students’ notes of Wittgenstein’s lectures lately edited and published. Finally, it is worth mentioning also the transcriptions of the conversations with Waismann, edited by Gordon Baker and published in 2003 as *The Voices of Wittgenstein* (from now on, VoW). Despite its controversial nature, as we cannot really know how much of Wittgenstein is contained in these notes without the distorting lens of Waismann own philosophical agenda, yet the text contains the most explicit references to metalogic we can appeal to. Relevantly, both lectures materials and Nachlass entries were mostly written between 1930 and 1933, and apart from the important exception of *Z* 284 (that anyway is a restatement of an older remark), there is no trace of the term in later writings.

Now, to give a quick overview, Wittgenstein mainly uses the term *metalogic* to talk about depiction (MWL, pp. 141-142, BT 64), rules and games (PG 72, MS 153), the word fundamental (BT 63, BT 88), agreement with reality (BT 46), generality (LWL p. 84, PG 72) meaning (as Bedeutung), proposition and world (MWL pp. 316, 318, AWL 27, p.31), calculus (PG 72, LWL p. 92), meaning (as Meinung), understanding (BT 1, BT 4, Z 284, PG 8, MS 114), sense and nonsense (AWL, p. 21). All these concepts are resolutely said to be non-metalogical. Hilmy (1987) argued that Wittgenstein’s rejection of metalogic is relative only to psychological concepts, such as meaning and understanding, but this clearly does not seem to exhaust all the recurrence of the term in the *Nachlass*. Apart from psychological concepts,

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18 Hans Johann Glock, for instance, pointed out the same in his *Dictionary* (Glock 1997, p. 245), as well as Kuusela (Kuusela 2008, p. 334).
we find linguistic notions (proposition), traditional philosophical formulas (agreement with reality, fundamental), Tractarian concepts (depiction, world) and, crucially, the very words that seem to constitute the foundations of Wittgenstein’s conception of language in the Investigations, such as calculus, game and rules. The rejection of metalogic seems then to be general and involves a number of different concepts that prima facie does not seem to have something in common that would allow us to understand what Wittgenstein is after while rejecting their metalogical status.

The aim of this paper is thus twofold. On one hand, I shall illustrate what does really mean to reject metalogical concepts and adhere to a philosophical project that does not rely on any metalogic, as Wittgenstein wants to assume. On the other hand, consistently with the idea of philosophy and logic emerged in the first part of the paper, I will show what it means for linguistic meaning to be not metalogical, an aspect surprisingly overlooked in the literature, as in the case of Baker and Hacker’s notorious interpretation.

1. Rejecting Metalogic

It is far way easier to understand what metalogic is not in Wittgenstein. Nowadays, metalogic is a well-established branch of contemporary logic. It can be viewed as a ‘second-order’ reflection about any system of logical rules, aiming to prove some general logical properties of such systems, such as completeness or consistency (See Hunter 1971). Historically, metalogic has to be traced back into Hilbert’s formalist approach to mathematics, as well as into the works of Warsaw logicians on metalanguage and truth, and both these traditions are cited by Rudolf Carnap in his Logical Syntax of Language, where they contribute to his attempt to develop a fully operative metalanguage (what Carnap calls indeed syntax of language) for the language of science (Carnap 1937). If we take Wittgenstein to reject metalogic understood in
this sense, it is tempting to conclude that Wittgenstein was simply wrong, as nothing is to be rejected in contemporary metalogic as long as metalogic is a perfectly legitimate branch of modern logic as a well-established discipline. It is then crucial to stress that the word has an idiosyncratic meaning in Wittgenstein’s writings, rather distant from its contemporary sense. To prove this point, it is almost sufficient to say that these remarks are contemporary, and in some cases precede, Tarski’s work on metalanguage and Carnap’s Syntax\textsuperscript{19}. Nevertheless, it is far from clear what this sense might be, and what role it plays overall in the development of Wittgenstein’s thought. I will argue that it ultimately consists in a form of anti-essentialism whose nature is strictly intertwined with Wittgenstein’s anti-dogmatism and his abandonment of logical hierarchies and metaphilosophy.

1.1 Essence

In a not precisely dated\textsuperscript{20} entry in the 1930 lectures’ notes edited by John King and Desmond Lee - arguably one of the very first passages on metalogic – Wittgenstein defines metalogic through the notion of generality:

What we investigate is one particular game or another, not games in general or something metalogical. We need not recapitulate the rule as we play – we use words without looking them up. If you give the rule you are doing all you can (LWL, p. 84, my italics).

This remark is pivotal, insofar as metalogic is both defined through generality and is introduced to highlight an essential

\textsuperscript{19} It is reasonable to argue that this interest in metalogic grew in the context of the conversations Wittgenstein had within the Vienna Circle in the early ’30. As a proof, the word appears several times in VoW. It is nevertheless hard to tell whether Wittgenstein’s rejection of metalogic is directly related in any way with Carnap’s struggle to design the rules of the logical syntax of language.

\textsuperscript{20} The notes report a vague ‘academic year 1931 – 1932’.
feature of Wittgenstein’s methodology: his philosophy does not start from the general, rather it looks for concrete examples of our concepts; it starts from there to investigate language. We do not need a general concept of what is a game to describe chess or football: we simply describe them, and we are legitimated to do it. This discussion, arguably, already anticipates Wittgenstein’s introduction of family resemblance concepts in the Investigations, as long as the notion of game is involved.

We can also say that in this passage the rejection of metalogic is shaped as a rejection of what in the Blue Book is called ‘our craving for generality’ (BB p. 17): we can get by without it, generality is not a necessary requirement or goal for logical investigation. We should be cautious though to interpret the rejection of metalogic so defined as an invitation to completely abandon every kind of generalization while doing logical investigations. This is hard to accept, for the obvious fact that any description requires a good amount of generalization and there is nothing inherently problematic about that. If I need to describe a concrete example of a game - chess, for instance - I can well say it is a board game, and being a board game is obviously a general description supposedly valid for more than a single game. Furthermore, the very concept of game is general, for it can be obviously predicated of many different activities. Rather, the metalogical Wittgenstein is inviting us to dismiss is not generality tout court, but a peculiar kind of generality. Arguably, the generality we look for is the one family resemblance concepts like game or language do not have: the one that is captured by a definition capable of grasping a fixed commonality among the things falling under the same concept. This definition requires to be exceptionless, as there cannot be any case falling outside the requirements it sets up that is nonetheless recognizable as a legitimate instance of the concept in question. The rejection of metalogic is thus to be understood as the abandonment of the logical need to start
philosophical investigations from general hidden definitions supposedly unveiling the essence of our concepts.

In fact, the kind of generality that metalogic ultimately comes to be is paired up with the metaphysical concept of essence. After all, what is essential is exactly what is in common among different instances falling under the same category. An exceptionless definition is such only if it is able to capture this commonality. According to Gordon Baker’s insightful analysis of Wittgenstein’s use of the term metaphysics, metaphysics in Wittgenstein still has to be regarded as the science of essences of things and of necessary truths (Baker, 2004, p. 97). This claim is confirmed also explicitly by Wittgenstein himself, as in the conversations with Waismann we find metaphysics defined as ‘the science of pseudo-beings, ethereal essences’ (VoW, p. 485). The notion of essence helps us also understand Wittgenstein’s swift remark in The Big Typescript, where he claims that ‘as there is no metaphysics there is no metalogic’ (BT 1, p. 3), so relating the two notions: a philosophy fighting against the bewitchments of metaphysics is a philosophy not grounded onto a quest for exceptionless definitions of concepts like language, sense, proposition or game, a quest for the common features warranting the unity of such concepts, in this sense for their essence. It is a philosophy that does not start from laying down definitions able to survey any possible case under examination, rather, it articulates a case to case investigation of single instances of concepts whose generality is understood through the lens of family resemblance, acquiring the status of an alternative model for conceptual unity to essences.

1.2 Dogmatism

The second aspect of metalogic that figures in Wittgenstein’s text is linked to dogmatism. In an entry dated April 27, 1931, George Edward Moore writes in his notes of Wittgenstein’s lectures
an important remark that helps us see clearly the relationship between metalogic and dogmatism:

Suppose we say: ‘A proposition is a picture’. What sort of statement is this?

Is it metalogical?
No. What’s the good of making it?
We’re saying: the word ‘picture’ follows similar rules with word ‘proposition’.
I’d much rather say that “A proposition is a picture” is misleading.

It just stresses a certain aspect of grammar of word “proposition”. (MWL, P. 141-142, my italics)

This point is addressed in the Big Typescript as well, when Wittgenstein claims that the concept of depiction is not metalogical (BT 64, p. 223). The explicit target of this passage is the Tractatus and its claim that ‘proposition is a picture of reality’ (TLP 4.01). Such a claim is not metalogical, Wittgenstein is reported to state, and its non-metalogical nature is qualified through its usefulness to highlight a certain aspect of the grammar of the word proposition, an aspect shared by both pictures and propositions that are said to be logically similar, though not identical. Arguably, what in the Tractatus worked as a pivotal thesis about the essence of the proposition, now, according to Wittgenstein’s intentions, it seems to work more as a tool through which a particular comparison between propositions and pictures is set up. No metaphysical truth is asserted, no reductionist thesis of some kind about propositions as constituting a logical subset of the concept of picture is elaborated. Rather, we compare propositions and pictures and see whether such a comparison is fruitful to clarify some aspects of the use of the word, without the need to reach any hasty conclusions about the nature – or essence – of the concepts involved.

I argue that this passage clearly links the rejection of metalogic to dogmatism because it fits surprisingly well how
dogmatism is conceived in the *Investigations*. Indeed, dogmatism in the *Investigations* is defined as the tendency to misconceive a mere object of comparison as ‘a preconception to which reality must correspond’ (PI 131). This is what we do (and the *Tractatus* did) when we legitimately say that propositions are pictures, but then we move on and demand that every proposition, as such, must be a picture. When we misconceive an object of comparison as a preconception, as dogmatists are used to do, we then go astray metalogically, that is, we confuse a suggestion for a comparison highlighting some aspects of the logic of concepts with a claim unveiling some universal truths on language. Arguably, the possibility of making a comparison is understood by Wittgenstein as logically prior to the metalogical claim, as the latter stems out only as a misunderstanding of the nature of the former. The metaphysician catches the similarity between the terms of the things he compares and is misleadingly led to think that such a similarity constitutes the essence of the term compared, so that every other use of the term in question must share the common element so discovered. All in all, we can see how the notions of essence, dogmatism and modality (the logical must of our preconceptions) are strictly intertwined to shape the same attitude and method toward logical investigations, whose core is the very notion of metalogic.

It is important to notice that the rejection of metalogic and dogmatism does not necessarily involve a radical reshape of what we say, that is, it is not supposed to be an abandonment of a system of inadequate – maybe false - propositions in favour of a new more suitable one. Rather, it is all a matter of how we look at their employment, how we use such propositions in the wide context of logical clarification. What is at stake is the same string of signs, that Wittgenstein is inviting us to see differently, or as he states, ‘in the proper spirit’ (BT 88 p. 204). In this case, quite obviously, we should not take the Tractarian propositions as true
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### 1.3 Logical Hierarchies

While addressing metalogic in relation to generality and essence, we incidentally already came across the idea that philosophy should not start from the definitions of important words, such as proposition, to build up logic from those. Now, the idea that words like *proposition* or *world* – in the *Tractatus* manner - need to be defined *first* so that *then* we can start describing the logic of language is grounded on the simple idea that, for some reasons, such words are more important, logically or philosophically. In the early ’30, Wittgenstein repeatedly investigates this assumption. This remark from Lee’s notes is helpful to understand which concepts are involved in the discussion and Wittgenstein’s general attitude towards them:

> Are words like grammar, language, proposition, rule, calculus, mathematics, logic and so on on a *different level* from others? We discuss these in philosophy, but not words like table, chair and so on. Are the second type on a *different level*? No! (LWL p. 92, my italics).

According to this passage, there are no different levels in language between concepts. The words Wittgenstein mentions
are those he mainly uses in his later writings to clarify language, words then that can be seen as more important, on a different level as long as Wittgenstein relies massively on them in his investigations. Metalogic is then connected with the attitude to consider certain concepts more valuable and important than others, different from other apparently innocuous and irrelevant every-day concepts like table and chairs. To say it with Kuusela (2008), I will call this rejection of levels among concepts and within language a dismissal of logical hierarchies.

It is not immediately clear why certain concepts should be more important so that they stand out among all the others. Most likely, it is so in virtue of their supposed clarificatory power. A clue to this conclusion is given in Ambrose’s notes, where we read that it was Frege the one considering some words as unique, such as word or proposition, an attitude that Wittgenstein himself attributes to his past self (AWL, p. 13). In both cases, we find a model of philosophy that relies heavily on particular concepts that are supposed to play a foundational role in logic once they are correctly understood and their definition spelled out. This is self-evident in the Tractatus, as there we find a set of claims asserting some metalogical definitions of concepts like proposition, picture, thought, language and so forth. These definitions are supposed to play as conceptual kingpins in a unified and systematic account of the logic of language, on the basis of which any clarification can be pursued. The relevance of such concepts is thus justified by their foundational potential, they are fundamental in the specific sense of being those concepts that constitute the grounds we need to lay down in advance in order to understand language.

21 It is not entirely clear whether Wittgenstein is doing justice to Frege’s thought. Nevertheless, we can see a certain predominance of some concepts in Fregean logic, such as Bedeutung, Sinn and Gedanke, and it is true that they play a sort of foundational role in Frege’s logic, insofar as they are used to describe every possible well-formed sentence.
Now, this fundamentality is abandoned by the later Wittgenstein. It is true that some concepts are more present while doing logic – concepts methodologically relevant like game, proposition and so forth – but just because we are mainly dealing with language and problems arising from its misunderstanding, Wittgenstein says, and not because they play any special role (LWL, p. 31). It is just, so to speak, a matter of quantity – we happen to use such concepts more often - not of quality.

However, it can be objected that a certain hierarchy is inevitable as long as we have to start from some grounds to clarify language, as long as we use some concepts, such as games, calculus or rules, as models to describe specific language uses, and so forth. Wittgenstein’s remarks can be said to be hierarchical in this obvious sense. A solution might be to say, as in the case of metalogical generality, that Wittgenstein is rejecting not hierarchies tout court, but a certain conception of them, that is, the one assuming that we need to find out the essence of pivotal concepts by spelling out definitions and on the basis of which developing our description of logic. In the Big Typescript we find a quick discussion of the term fundamental that seems to suggest such a conclusion. There, Wittgenstein claims that the very word fundamental needs to be understood not metalogically (BT 88 p. 305). We should not reject then the word fundamental as intrinsically problematic, but only understand it non-metalogically as well, that is, without reducing its use to a univocal conception that distorts our quest for clarification. In other words, what counts as fundamental, as it is not a metalogical concept either, cannot be fixed in advance, and thus varies according to different language uses and needs. As hierarchies are tied up to what is fundamental, they inevitably vary according to what counts as such, case by case.

Once this is clear, metalogic then is not only a particular way to conceive the generality of concepts through the notion
of *essence*, or the tendency to go astray dogmatically in logical investigations. It is also (and crucially) a conception of language that assumes a fixed and univocal *hierarchical order* among concepts. The hierarchies we should avoid are the ones that are *fixed* and assumed *in advance*, before our investigation of language begins. It is important to notice that hierarchies and conceptual unity based on essences are two sides of the same coin: as long as there is no common feature shared by *all* possible languages, there is no point in fixing some universal principles that are supposed to be valid for every language and from which overlooking every possible case of language use. As such, this is what it means that there is also no *metaphilosophy*:

If a man [...] sets out (tabulates) rules according to which certain words are used, he hasn’t committed himself to giving an explanation (definition) of the word ‘rule’, ‘proposition’, ‘word’, etc. I am allowed to use the word ‘rule’ without first tabulating the rules for the use of the word. And those rules are not super-rules. Philosophy is concerned with calculi in the same sense as it is concerned with thoughts, sentences and languages. But if it was really concerned with the concept of calculus, and thus with the concept of the calculus of all calculi, there would be such a thing as metaphilosophy. (But there is not. We might so present all that we have to say that this would appear as a leading principle).

(MS 114, p. 104/PG, p. 115-16/BT p. 54)

Here, metaphilosophy is introduced and defined as that part of philosophy addressing the general nature of those concepts philosophy employs in its activity of clarification, such as *rules* or *calculi*. Naturally, there is no metaphilosophy as long as there is no metalogic, that is, as long as we dismiss the drive to look for essences and formulate exceptionless definitions for *every* concept, included the ones we employ in philosophical clarification. As such, we do not need to discover or construct a general definition of such terms in order to be allowed to employ
them in our understanding of language. We use them, as long as they are effective in clarification, and that’s it. This obviously does not mean that there is no metaphilosophy in the sense that we cannot develop a reflexive investigation on philosophy and its concepts if we need to clarify them. We can clarify them if there is a need to do it, but the result so achieved by clarification does not need to be put as a foundation of our method, it is not preliminary to the investigation. The rules for the use of such rules are not in this sense, as Wittgenstein says, ‘super-rules’, hierarchically laid in advance and orienting by principle our investigation. The dismissal of such a foundationalist attitude is ultimately called by Wittgenstein, with a certain irony, his leading principle. The only principle left is that there are no principles on the basis of which solving every possible problem in philosophy.

To conclude, the rejection of metalogic is automatically a rejection of metaphilosophy, and a philosophy freed from metaphilosophy is an activity that, as a consequence, describes language without the need to lay down in advance general definitions always valid for every case under investigation. The conceptual tools philosophy employs can be subjected to investigation in the very same way as any other ordinary concept. As long as there are no fixed hierarchies, we are not forced to clarify first the concepts we use in clarification, insofar as they are useful to bring about an understanding of the works of language and dissolve philosophical problems.

1.4 Metalogic and the Tractatus

The rejection of metalogic seems to be linked with Wittgenstein’s rejection of his early work, so playing a notable part in that process of revision that pushed him towards his new philosophical method in the Investigations. As such, the Tractatus is a perfect example to highlight all the features of a purely metalogical thought we are invited to abandon.
When it comes to logical essences, the *Tractatus*’s main goal was to find the *essence of proposition*, shared by *all* possible propositions to be such. We find it explicitly stated in the notebooks: ‘The whole task’, Wittgenstein writes, ‘consists in explaining the nature of the proposition’ (NB, p. 39). In the *Tractatus*, the quest for the essence is achieved by formulating the *general form* of the proposition. Accordingly, it is supposed to be formulated *on one occasion beforehand* (TLP 5.47), as it is indeed its *essence* (TLP 5.471), so that a universal framework for logic can be set up. Not coincidentally, Wittgenstein repeatedly addresses the concept of *proposition* in his lectures. There, *proposition* too is defined as a ‘family of cases’ concept, explainable through examples rather than definitions (AWL, pp. 67-68), and it said to be wrong to start from a definition and to ‘build up logic from that’ (AWL, p. 13), as the *Tractatus* did. Logical generality itself is understood in the *Tractatus* only modally, through the notion of what is *essential* in the proposition (TLP 3.341-3.342).

As the form of the proposition is by itself formulable on one occasion beforehand, we can see how much this task is also metaphilosophical in the sense clarified above. In the *Tractatus*, the very activity of clarification of philosophical problems is dependent on the propositional form. Once it is discovered, together with the picture theory, we can then proceed to reduce every meaningful proposition to it. In other words, there is no philosophical activity without the preliminary set up of metalogical definitions and theses the *Tractatus* elaborates. In this regard, the *Tractatus* works as a fully *foundational* work that clarifies once and for all those concepts that shape our investigation of language. Finally, dogmatism comes as a natural consequence. The *Tractatus* theses, once formulated, demand to be valid and true for *every* case under scrutiny. In this way, a mere term of comparison, as in the case of pictures, is sublimed into a metalogical thesis on the essence of the proposition.
2. Meaning and Metalogic

In this second part of the paper, I shall now consider which consequences the rejection of metalogic might have for the concept of linguistic meaning. Moore and Ambrose’s notes, in Moore and Ambrose notes, meaning is said not to be a ‘central question’ for philosophy, and for this reason, not a metalogical concept (AWL, p. 31, MWL, pp. 316-318). As such, several expectations come from this: first, there is no need to lay down in advance a definition of what meaning ultimately is, on the basis of which solving every philosophical problem; second, there are no theses about the essence of meaning in the Investigations; third, as soon as the concept is not reducible to a single definition, we might expect there are different conceptions of meaning active in Wittgenstein’s writings.

PI 43, the notorious paragraph on meaning, almost quoted as the slogan of Wittgenstein’s later thought, fits perfectly well these desiderata:

For a large class of cases of the employment of the word ‘meaning’ – though not for all – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in language. (PI 43)

The remark introduces a definition, the meaning of a word is its use in language. However, as in the case of defining propositions as pictures, we should not assume that it captures the essence of the concept in question, quite the contrary: the extension of the definition is carefully limited, meaning that there might be cases of the use of the word meaning that are not entirely reducible to use alone.

The profound non-metalogical character of PI 43 is somehow lost in those mainstream interpretations that conceive Wittgenstein as a kind of normativist when it comes to meaning. A notorious example is Baker and Hacker’s commentary, according to which Wittgenstein’s appeal to use should be interpreted as an appeal to rule governed use (see Baker Hacker 2005a). Rules become
pivotal in their interpretation, insofar as they bound sense to the presence of a formulable set of rules governing our words in advance and metaphysical and conceive nonsense as violations of such rules. We can thus already spot the deeply metalogical flavour of this interpretative strategy: the concept of rule becomes the conceptual kingpin from which overlooking language, there is no meaning without rule and PI 43, interpreted normatively, becomes a meta-philosophical principle that we need clearly to formulate in advance if we want to understand effectively why some combinations of words do not make sense.

In the fourth volume of the commentary, while discussing the status of Wittgenstein’s notion of nonsense, Hacker makes evident how much is interpretation is still metalogical. Correctly, he points out that ‘there is no general account of nonsense, for what makes sense and what does not make sense varies from case to case’ (Hacker 1996, p. 240), and he calls the opposite attitude to give a universal account of meaningfulness and senselessness metalogical. Nevertheless, his account is still metalogical in a deeper sense. In fact, he concludes his argument by saying that ‘there can be no fruitful, illuminating, general description of breaking rules in game’ and that ‘we can traverse the bounds of sense in indefinitely many ways, as each language game involves different rules’ (Hacker 1996, p. 240). This means that Hacker, despite his convictions that we cannot draw in advance a general description of what counts as sense and nonsense, is still fully committed to understand the notion of sense in the light of the concept of rule. According to him, we cannot know in advance how the violation of rules might be shaped for every possible language, but we can certainly know in advance that, whenever there is nonsense, there a violation of linguistic rules must be into place. Needless to say, this requirement is metalogical as much as it is meta-philosophical, as the notion of rule is still considered as a hierarchical principle governing our expectations on how
meaning, language, sense and nonsense must ultimately be, and this attitude is exactly what Wittgenstein is striving to reject in the later phase of his thought.

This being said, what is left to do is to give some substance to a non-metalogical account of meaning. At first, we can already say that the concept of rule, yet very helpful to clarify a lot of different language uses, does not tell the whole story when it comes to meaning and language. Other conceptions of meaning are then available, but which else? There may be some languages that are fully rule governed – as in the case of maths and logic – and language games that are not bound only and exclusively to rules, as when we write or read a poem. In those cases, material aspects of language, such as the tone and sound of the words, the expressions and gestures accompanying them, are important as much as the rules and conventions governing its normal use. A rather obvious example – frequently employed, not coincidentally, in poetry – where sound can be said to constitute the meaning of the word is the one of onomatopoeias, that is, words imitating a specific sound, as in the case of animal noises (oink, woof). As Kuusela 2008 notices, in the Nachlass, Wittgenstein claims that in onomatopoeias ‘the sound is also a symbol’ (MS 109), meaning that the material component of the symbol, the mere sign is an active component of the word understood as a symbol, that is, a sa word with a meaning that can be understood. This differentiates onomatopoeias from the other words, insofar as in their case the sign is not arbitrary, is not replaceable by another synonym without compromising the nature of the symbol as an onomatopoeias. It is true that onomatopoeias can be institutionalized and learnt through rules and conventions – we can explain what to splash mean after all – however, they can be understood on the basis of their sound alone, meaning that rules do not necessarily intervene here to make understanding possible.

As we thus cannot capture fully the logic of onomatopoeias
normatively, we can well admit that sound, together with rules, make up our concept of meaning understood not metalogically. This should not be taken though as a thesis according to which in every possible language game sound plays always a symbolic role, so that we should swop rules with sound and other material aspects of language (letters in the case of writing). If we do so, we would still be fully entangled in a metalogical perspective. Rather, we should merely recognize that we call language a variety of different but similar things involving signs and their use that cannot be captured exhaustively by normativity alone. Sometimes, other logical components, like sound, indeed, might be required. It can be demonstrated that such a pluralistic perspective is fully displayed in the Investigations too, but this is the material for another paper.

References:


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normatively, we can well admit that sound, together with rules, make up our concept of meaning understood not metalogically. This should not be taken though as a thesis according to which in every possible language game sound plays always a symbolic role, so that we should swap rules with sound and other material aspects of language (letters in the case of writing). If we do so, we would still be fully entangled in a metalogical perspective. Rather, we should merely recognize that we call language a variety of different but similar things involving signs and their use that cannot be captured exhaustively by normativity alone. Sometimes, other logical components, like sound, indeed, might be required. It can be demonstrated that such a pluralistic perspective is fully displayed in the Investigations too, but this is the material for another paper.

References:


