

The Last Language-game

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Abstract: *I propose to conceive of a peculiar type of Wittgensteinian, who embraces language-games talk and takes ambiguity to be a methodological norm, governing meaning-related problems. Then I attempt to draw the implausible implications of such methodological position and present an alternative dubbed “the last language-game”. At the end of the paper I construct three objections against playing the last language-game and attempt to respond to these objections.*

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I. A Thought-experimental Wittgensteinian

First, let us do an exercise in metaphysics: consider a Wittgensteinian with a specific theoretical disposition (disclaimer: I am not saying that such Wittgensteinians actually exist, nor I deny it; I am merely offering to partake in a thought experiment). Let’s name our Wittgensteinian “Flavia”. Flavia has read *Philosophical Investigations* on multiple occasions and was impressed by

“[...] The meaning of a word is its use in language.” (*PI* 43)

Then, in a number of *PI* fragments, Flavia discovered that uses vary across language-games (*PI* 65, for instance). She concluded that, since a word only has a language-game-specific use, a word only has a meaning **for a** language-game and not across language-

games. Thus meanings turned out to be language-game specific as well, or to use a more popular expression – meanings turned out to be *domain-specific*. Her conclusion was confirmed by Wittgenstein’s own confession that words across language games do not have identical meanings but can only be characterized via “family resemblances” (PI 67).

Flavia then came to understand that an expression is not merely an expression but multiple expressions at the same time, each of them initializing due to a speaker’s actions in a particular language-game (much like a linguistic correlate to quantum superposition). Being an ancient mythology enthusiast, and a philosopher of science, she then came to apply the Wittgensteinian methodological approach to language in these domains. Thus,

“Trojan horse” means a mythical wooden horse in the language-game of historians;

“Trojan horse” means a specific type of malware in the language-game of cybersecurity experts;

“Trojan horse” means a covert right-wing conservative in the language-game of an antifa group.

So, when asked “What is a Trojan Horse?” Flavia would reply: “There is not one Trojan horse, but many!”. Analogously, it turns out that there would be, of course, many “sciences”:

“Science” means a tool for establishing asymmetry in political power in the language-game of postmodernists;

“Science” means the best academic and epistemic practices in the language-game of scientists;

“Science” means a set of charlatan practices in the language game of Soviet academics.

(etc.)

These insights allowed Flavia to get out of difficult theoretical situations by stating that she was playing a different language-game all along. So, for instance, when she stated that science was a tool for establishing asymmetry in political power and she was

confronted by scientists stating that science constitutes the best academic and epistemic practices, she merely pointed out that they used the word “science” in a different language-game, yet implicitly generalizing this language-game as a universal one.

Flavia also gained the amazing meta-insights that:

a) “Trojan horse” means a family of language-games in the language-game of certain Wittgensteinians;

b) “Science” means a family of language-games in the language-game of certain Wittgensteinians.

She ultimately generalized to:

“x” means a family of language-games in the language-game of certain Wittgensteinians.

This generalization enabled Flavia to make an academic career out of sharing her insight that all words had the same type of meaning: they all mean a family of language-games in the language game of certain Wittgensteinians. It turned out that taking meaning as use and language-games to be facts about language is an original and highly successful move.

II. The problems of language-games talk

Next, let’s call Flavia’s approach “language-games talk”. I will argue that Flavia’s methodological approach to language, namely language-games talk, is flawed because (1) it conforms to ambiguity. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that according to Flavia ambiguity is a methodological norm when analysing language. Additionally, her approach is flawed because (2) it allows a speaker to always “have something different in mind”, changing the subject matter of a discussion at will.

Let us elaborate and consider further implications of the problems stated in (1) and (2) to motivate ourselves to seek an alternative.

If *Philosophical Investigations* was considered to be an exposition of a theory, it would be a theory built upon ambiguity

as a robust, inescapable fact about language. This fact has to be taken into account when building a theory of language so the theory would inevitably conform to ambiguity. Thus, identical graphic and phonetic entities (“words”) would have different meanings according to contexts (“language-games”), and, vice versa, different graphic and phonetic entities would have identical meanings according to contexts. Additionally, since everyday language is to be considered as the maximal language (and not simply an exception to what a language is), this theory would have to be a general language theory, overthrowing “exception” theories (or theories identifying language with a primitive language), such as the one exposed in the *Tractatus* (compare *PI* 23).

However, stating that language in general is necessarily ambiguous and behaving as if it were so, i.e., ascribing meanings according to contexts to account for the ambiguity premise, is simply not a proper way to treat language and language-related problems. It could be argued that language-games talk is descriptively adequate as in a large number of cases everyday language *is* ambiguous. This attempt to mitigate the situation is rendered worthless by the very taking of ambiguity as a fact. For since it is *a fact*, albeit descriptively justified, ambiguity has to be treated much like a norm: it is necessary to take it into account when theorising upon language and when considering the analysis of linguistic components. This point is succinctly expressed by stating that at least in some cases factive descriptions behave methodologically just as norms would.

But why would one, and especially a philosopher, take ambiguity as normative? Taking language to be necessarily ambiguous would further lead to:

1A) ...violating the law of non-contradiction (and the law of identity) in a number of cases (and consequently diminishing the quantity of information transmitted via a verbal action).

1B) ...rejection of the possibility of definitions (and,

consequently, rendering philosophical analysis worthless and philosophical problems unsolvable).

1C) ...the need to constantly refer to the uninformative and arbitrary notion of a language-game or context in order to explain how a word was used. The constant appeal to different contexts as “backgrounds” which alter the meaning of a word/expression is a proper case of *context ex machina*, to use my Serbian colleague Milan Yovanovich’s ingenious new expression.

1D) ...philosophical works in disciplines different from the philosophy of language being reduced to discussing purely linguistic problems of use (philosopher A uses “qualia” in language-game X, but philosopher B simply uses it in language-game Z and that’s the final word on the matter).

Surely, we could do better.

Then, to address (2) from above, language-games talk would further allow a speaker (and, by extension, a theoretician) to change what they have said in a both *ad hoc* and *post hoc* manner. Consider Flavia’s favourite sentences from section I above. For instance, talking about Trojan horse would allow her to talk about right-wing conservatives and/or malware in a variety of situations. Any objections to such contamination can easily be met by Flavia simply saying: “But I was not playing *this* language-game! I was playing the *other* language-game!”. This problem of language-games talk would further lead to...

2A) ...speakers changing their meanings at will by stating that a word/expression was used not in *this way* but in *that way*, leading to manipulative verbal action and unproductive discussions. Again, this is a case of *context ex machina*.

2B) ...linguistic outsiders would have hard time learning a language in which meanings change according to potentially an unlimited set of use variations.

2C) ...speakers using unequivocal language or attempting to construct such a language could have their efforts neglected/

obstructed by Wittgensteinians of the Flavian type.

Again, we could surely do better. We could even do better without completely discarding the term “language-games” and without accepting a radically different theory of meaning.

III. A non-radical alternative: the last language-game

The use theory of meaning has been “upgraded” since Wittgenstein’s late opus classicus, and has adopted a truly robust outlook (i.e., Horwich 2004). There are other alternatives, such as modern versions of referentialism, etc. However, the alternative I am about to suggest is at least partly within the limits of Wittgenstein’s use theory (even though calling it a “theory” goes a bit too far). I’d like to propose a language-game which would solve all the problems related to language-games talk. I call this alternative “the last language-game”.

Suppose one is able to introduce language games (in collaboration with others, of course). Arguably, such cases have been recorded: M. Heidegger introduced the language-game of utter incomprehensibility, G. Lucas introduced the language-game of Star Wars fans, etc. I’d like to do something similar.

The language-game I am proposing is quite simple. Let us return for a moment to our thought experiment involving Flavia the Wittgensteinian. When Flavia needs to demonstrate her use of the expression “Trojan horse”, instead of stating sentences in which the expression is used in different and incompatible ways, she could adopt the following alternative:

“w1” means a mythical wooden horse in the language-game of historians.

“w2” means a specific type of malware in the language-game of cybersecurity experts.

“w3” means a covert right-wing conservative in the language-game of an antifa group.

Thus each time Flavia is confronted with ambiguity, she

could resolve it by replacing the identically vocalized/written expression with a unique expression (e.g., “w1, w2, [...] wn”). The effect would be complete disambiguation.

Should she take this alternative, however, there would be no longer any need to further speak of language-games. To elaborate, a word/expression would simply mean what it means in a single language-game (or a single context, praise be to the heavens). As far as language-games are concerned, the outcome would be tantamount to a “game over”. Then, when confronted with the need to demonstrate the meaning of a word/expression, a speaker could resort to a definition in the form “x is y \equiv x is z”, or any other technically valid alternative, completely ignoring the need to consider other cases of use (for such cases would no longer be available anyway). Instead of specifying that “w1” would mean “a mythical wooden horse” in case type 1 and “a right-wing conservative” in case type 2, one would simply say what “w1” means in the only type of case in which “w1” is used. This would in turn render worries considering the possibility of definitions obsolete as definitions would most certainly be possible, keep laws of classic logic intact, prevent Flavians from changing their “intended” meaning at will, allow linguistic outsiders to learn a much easier language, and keep philosophy engaged with problems which are not simply problems of how a word is used.

IV. Objection 1: “Flavia is not a true Wittgensteinian!”

One could argue that reading the *Investigations* as Flavia does is simply erroneous. A true scholar of Wittgenstein would never succumb to her mistakes.

Response: Granted. But mistakes can be made and methodological problems can be created even by false Wittgensteinians (no matter who the “true” Wittgensteinians are). I wholeheartedly admit that my attempt at critique keeps the true Wittgensteinians intact.

V. **Objection 2: “Wait, is this not the ideal language project? Didn’t it fail?”**

G. Frege and R. Carnap (compare Kluge 1980: 140, and Carnap 1932: 67), among others, had suggestions regarding language similar to the last language-game. These suggestions remained as specialized theories and blossomed beyond philosophy. They were found unsuitable for practising philosophy for a variety of reasons, and the ideal language project was abandoned in favour to an explicit return to the standard, ordinary language-derived way of doing philosophy (due to considerations elaborated in Malcolm 1942, for instance). Piecemeal formalized solutions of centuries-old problems, such as B. Russell’s brilliant resolution of the “how to properly deny existence” problem, never found application in everyday language and were treated accordingly in philosophy (see Chakrabarti 1997 for a fitting example of a Flavian-like solution to the “denying existence” problem). Everyday language philosophy flourished instead, contributing to today’s abundance philosophical works. In the domain of philosophy, at least, the ideal language project seems to indeed have failed (at least based on the fact that it was never fully adopted). It is worthy to clarify though: generally speaking, the ideal language project did not fail. Arguably, it contributed (albeit phylogenetically) to the construction of more than 200 programming languages which are nowadays used to communicate with another type of intelligent beings – computers, illustrating the efficiency of non-ambiguous languages.

On the other hand, should Flavian Wittgensteinism (if it exists) be taken as an alternative to the ideal language, we face all of the problems from section II above. A last line of defence against such objections would be for the Flavians to bite the bullet and admit – “Sad but true! This is the nature of everyday language.” However, there is no reason to take uncritically this alternative as correctly describing everyday practices. Wittgenstein’s description of how

language works in the *Investigations* is as empirically compelling as Wittgenstein's description of how language works in the *Tractatus*. One simply has no other tool than their own arbitrary intuitions to evaluate which of the two descriptions better fits actual linguistic practice. Indeed, even without proper empirical research we are surely entitled to stating that contextual meaning and ambiguity are facts about everyday language, but technically this would be but a hypothesis. Thus, it would seem that Flavian Wittgensteinians simply prefer lower methodological standards when theorizing on language.

Additionally, the proposal to play the last language game does not amount to an appeal for adopting a full-blooded ideal language, nor to a denial of contemporary philosophical method (never mind how exactly would the latter be construed). It is simply a way to demonstrate that taking language-game talk as the descriptive alpha and omega regarding language leads to completely avoidable, arbitrary, and unacceptable (due to efficiency considerations) implicit norms. These norms force methodologically unchallenged ambiguity and theoretical pessimism on everyday language and ultimately lead, in the case with Flavian Wittgensteinians, to a distorted view on how to conduct any kind of research which involves language.

VI. Objection 3: “Take a look at important philosophical works. They would be rendered impossible if we played the last language game!”

This objection could go in a variety of ways, for instance: the initial discussion based on the Gettier problem would be rendered void if we tried to play the last language-game. It would seem that at least part of the difficulty with the analysis of knowledge stems from ambiguity: in some language-games “knowledge” cannot be played in the place of “justified true belief” but, on the other hand, in other language-games, let's call them non-Gettier language-

games, “knowledge” and “justified true belief” can be played interchangeably. If we played the last language-game though and allowed for knowledge to be “w1” and “justified true belief” to be “w2” it would become clear that in no cases “w1” is to be taken as a synonym of “w2”, destroying the initial philosophical drama with Gettier’s counter-examples. In other words, a non-ambiguous language would not allow for a faulty definition of “knowledge” in the first place. However, this would decrease the overall amount of philosophical work and deprive the world of important intellectual insights. What good can come out of that?

To respond: philosophy as a serious, scientific endeavor, would benefit from cropping problems related to contextual use of relevant terms. Most epistemologists, for instance, are hardly interested in such problems anyway, and do not gain anything from a methodological perspective by struggling to disentangle the peculiarities of ordinary language. It is clear from many of the responses to the Gettier problem, such as the ones offered by R. Nozick and A. Goldman, that epistemologists do attempt to play the last language-game, i.e., they treat “knowledge” as an non-contextual term which has to (and can be) be given correct definition notwithstanding language-games and forms of life. Philosophical method, with some woesome exceptions represented by various forms of contextualism, conforms, more or less efficiently, to playing the last language-game. The latter statement is really a triviality; philosophers do not have the option not to attempt playing the last language-game as Flavian Wittgensteinism would bring about a number of methodological absurdities if used systematically for the aims of philosophical research.

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