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READING THREE

Wittgenstein and Austin

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Ludwig Wittgenstein

Soon after I started my undergraduate psychology degree I overheard one of the lecturers telling his colleague that if you spent a week reading Wittgenstein it would change not only your view of psychology but also your whole understanding of the world. The bookshop quickly provided his scarily titled *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and I spent a week trying to persuade myself that my ideas and life were changing. What I had not realized at the time was that Ludwig Wittgenstein had written not one, but two of the great works of twentieth century philosophy. The *Tractatus* was a spare, technical, work starting with the claim that 'the world is all that is the case' and ending with the teasing 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'; in between lay 73 pages of arguments developed with extraordinary technicality in a range of logical symbols. When he handed it in as his PhD thesis, Wittgenstein was supposed to have told his supervisor, Bertrand Russell: 'Here it is, you will never understand it'. It was written during World War I while Wittgenstein was near, and sometimes on, the frontline fighting for the Austrian army, and, apparently, hoping to die. He volunteered for the most dangerous positions, such as night duty at an observation post; 'Only then,' he wrote, 'will the war really begin for me and - maybe - even life. Perhaps the nearness of death will bring me the light of life' (Monk, 1990). It may be relevant here to note that two of his brothers had already committed suicide, along with an influential teacher and muchadmired author. He certainly craved austerity: he inherited one of the largest fortunes in Europe and then, to the horror of his relatives, gave it all away.

The work that is most relevant to discourse analysis comes from Wittgenstein's later philosophy, published in 1953 as *the Philosophical Investigations*, two years after his death in Cambridge at the age of 61. The *Investigations* is rich and elusive; it is written in short numbered paragraphs, but these often contain more questions than assertions, and sometimes seem to be having arguments with themselves. It is definitely a book to change views and lives. Wittgenstein writes in the preface to this book that he should not like his writing 'to spare other people the trouble of thinking' (1953: viii). If any other of his ambitions is in doubt, this one is richly fulfilled. There is an industry of Wittgenstein scholarship across philosophy, sociology, and psychology; and the allusive nature of his writing has meant that it is all too easy to reconstruct assorted contemporary concerns as if they had their origins in his philosophical work. As I make connections between themes in his work and themes in discourse analysis I do not want this to indicate a plain linear influence. It is just as much that our concerns and arguments within discourse analysis provide new ways of understanding Wittgenstein's work.

PART ONE READING THREE

To try and simplify things, I will focus on a number of the most relevant concerns, and in particular on the following: his general picture of language; his notion of language games; his discussion of descriptions and reference; his ideas about mentalistic language and the nature of mind; and his discussion of the (lack of) foundations for understanding.

Language as a toolkit

Wittgenstein's claims about language have a range of rhetorical targets, but most often it is his own early philosophy and similar technical, logical treatments of language as an abstract system of concepts whose principal role was to refer to objects in the world. Language was treated as a medium for abstract reasoning; a bit like mathematics but without the precision. Part of the role of the philosopher was to improve on this vagueness and thereby to be better able to tackle major philosophical problems.

Wittgenstein's aim was to counterpoise this 'picture' of language as a set of names for objects with a picture that emphasized both its practicality and its heterogeneity. Language is not one unified system, but a whole set of different parts with different roles. He proposed an alternative picture of **language as a toolkit**:

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 [...]

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!

(Wittgenstein, 1953, para.11)

From our present intellectual position it is perhaps hard for us to see how radical this view of language is. But when Wittgenstein was writing, philosophical approaches to language had overwhelmingly considered issues of reference and logical connections. For Wittgenstein this was not merely a failure to capture the complexity of language but, more importantly, a major source of confusion in philosophy.

Famously he saw philosophical problems arising 'when language *goes on holiday*' (1953: #38). That is, they are pseudoproblems that are a consequence of abstracting words like 'belief', 'certainty', 'knowledge' and so on from their natural contexts of use. Instead, philosophers should start with a consideration of meaning that comes from inspecting actual uses of language: '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 a word is its use in the language' (1953: #43).

Language games and discourses

One of the strongest metaphors that Wittgenstein develops to capture this fragmented view of language is that of the '**language game**'. The picture is of language being composed of multitudes of different 'games' each with their own aims and rules - some big, some small. The user of language is thereby playing a role in these different games. Wittgenstein lists things such as giving orders and obeying them; describing the appearance of an object; reporting an event; speculating about an event; making up a story and guessing riddles (1953: #23). His list makes a deliberate rhetorical contrast to the kinds of language use that characterized philosophical discussion at that time. In particular, it mixes uses such as reporting on the nature of objects, which had occasioned much philosophical analysis, with uses such as giving orders that had occasioned almost none. He challenged traditional philosophers (who had tried to reconstruct language as a set of names) as to whether they would be inclined to see exclamations such as 'Help!' and 'No!' as the 'names of objects' (1953: #27).

This metaphor can be used to support the widespread discourse analytic assumption that people's practices are organized around the use of particular discourses or interpretative repertoires. It cautions against the goal of providing an overall coherent account of language as an abstract system and focuses instead on specific practices tied to occasions and settings. When ethnomethodologists, for example, have drawn on Wittgenstein, they have often drawn on this practical, local, specific approach to language (Lynch, 1993).

Reference and description

Wittgenstein did much work in the areas of reference and description, which have become important topics in

discourse analytic work. In particular, he stressed two things. First, reference is always various or open-ended. He noted that when trying to give an 'ostensive definition' of a person by pointing, the recipient may take it as the definition of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say: an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every case*' (1953: #28). Second, Wittgenstein stressed that descriptions are not repetitions of words abstracted from practice; rather, descriptions are themselves practices that are used to perform a range of activities. They are instruments with particular uses, just as a machine may use a machine drawing, a cross-section or an elevation with measurements in different ways:

Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like.
(These pictures are as it were idle.) (1953: #291)

These arguments about the practical and open-ended nature of descriptions are very much alive in current discourse analysis. For example, they are picked up in studies of the way descriptions in institutional and everyday settings are used to perform activities (Potter, 1996). They are also live in debates over the nature of context and its role in explaining talk which have been a fundamental issue in discourse analysis (e.g. see Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998).

Mental language and discursive psychology

The nature of psychology is a major theme in Wittgenstein's work. It has this pre-eminent position because so much philosophy had assumed various mentalistic terms (knowing, seeing, understanding, rstanding, etc.) as parts of arguments in epistemology. So psychology had to be sorted out as a step toward sorting out philosophy. Using a metaphor from psychology, Wittgenstein saw his work as a kind of 'therapy' for philosophy, dissolving many of its central problems by showing them to be based on a mistaken appreciation of the role of language and particularly the role of mental terms. Although philosophy was the primary target, he was particularly unimpressed by the empirical psychology of his time, which he saw as combining 'experimental methods and *conceptual confusion*' (1953, Part 2: #xiv).

Wittgenstein was especially critical of what we would now call a cognitivist interpretation of mental words; that is, an interpretation that treats them as a description of inner phenomena such as meanings or feelings. His general emphasis on language as a set of language games which are bound up with particular activities led him to reject the idea that there are 'meanings' passing through the mind as a ghostly correlation to the stream of speech; instead 'language is itself the vehicle of thought' (1953: #329).

A centrepiece of Wittgenstein's discussion of mind was his attack on the possibility of a private language. He developed a number of lines of critique against meaning originating and residing in a private psychological space that has the name 'mind'. He compared this to someone's right hand giving their left hand money - they could place it in the hand, and even write a receipt for it, but no practical consequences would follow (1953: #268). He instead emphasized the public, conventional nature of language use. In one form or another, such a perspective is followed in a wide range of discourse analytic work, including discursive psychology, rhetoric, ethnomethodology, and much of conversation analysis (Edwards, 1997).

Knowledge and foundations

It would be misleading to tie Wittgenstein directly into contemporary debates in the discourse field over realism, relativism, and the status of knowledge. Notwithstanding this, social analysts have sometimes picked out an anti foundationalism strand in his work. At various places in the ^{investigation} he spends time pouring cold water on the possibility of philosophers getting beyond language games to some more fundamental truth:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.
For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.
(1953: #124).

Social scientists have drawn on Wittgenstein's somewhat unexplicated notion of 'form of life' to suggest that he is offering some kind of cultural relativity. The idea is that knowledge is grounded in a set of cultural practices (the form of life) and there is no position outside these practices from which to judge them. Some critics take Wittgenstein to be thereby promoting cultural conservatism that offers no space for grand social critique.

It is no doubt misguided, if not downright cheeky, to speculate about what Wittgenstein would have done with a

Minidisc™ recorder and access to the kind of corpus of conversation that contemporary discourse analysts work with. Of course, Wittgenstein's arguments were with philosophy as it was done in his lifetime. And he was famous for developing a form of conceptual analysis that involved imaginary scenarios, thought experiments, and exploring word usage to see what seemed to make sense and what seemed odd. Yet we can find intriguing hints to something that might go a bit beyond the office-bound rigour of conceptual analysis:

One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at its* use and learn from that. But the difficulty *is* to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not *a stupid* prejudice.
(1953: #340)

This incipient tension between abstract philosophical argument and the empirical study of discourse is something that also arises when we consider the work of Austin.

John Austin

While Wittgenstein was troubled to the point that his writing sometimes takes on an almost psychotic quality, with its weave of internal voices and obsessional self-questioning, Austin was urbane and ironic. He was not without auto-critique, but he was resolutely light and playful; he loved understatement and the promiscuous breeding of neologisms. As people, Wittgenstein and Austin could hardly have been more different. Wittgenstein's intensely serious and often pessimistic approach to both life and philosophy contrasted sharply with Austin's pervasive gaiety. Austin developed his ideas in Oxford, frequently over lively unstructured discussions with his students that took place each Saturday morning. They would often search the *Oxford English Dictionary* for interesting verbs and consider their uses. Like Wittgenstein, his most important work was published after his death; in Austin's case this was a lecture series delivered at Harvard in 1955 and later published as *How to Do Things With Words* (1962).

As with Wittgenstein, Austin was fundamentally concerned with the flaws in philosophical conceptions of language and in particular with its treatment of language as an abstract referential system. Both emphasized the practical, active uses of language, but the most striking difference between them is in their overall conception of language. Whereas Wittgenstein has language fragmented into a huge number of diverse language games that are likely to defy a precise overall characterization, Austin's aim was specifically to give an overall, systematic account of this active language. I do not believe they met.

Austin's students claim that his ideas were well established before they had access to Wittgenstein's work, although they discussed the *Investigations* intensively in some of the Saturday-morning sessions prior to the delivery of his Harvard lectures. George Pitcher describes an occasion where he suggested to Austin that words were tools. And he quotes Austin as saying, 'Let's see what Wittgenstein has to say about that.' On reading the list of suggestions in paragraph 23, such as giving orders, making up a story, guessing riddles, (quoted above) Austin wondered if these things could be lumped together and suggested that 'utensils' might be a better word than 'tools'. Characteristically, his approach was to look through the dictionary for lists of candidates such as 'appliance', 'implement' and even 'gewgaw' (Pitcher, 1973: 24). Austin does not explicitly refer to Wittgenstein (or anyone else) in *How to Do Things With Words*. However, at the end of the book he glosses his aim as 'sorting out a bit the way things have already begun to go and are going with increasing momentum in some parts of philosophy', so we might speculate that Austin viewed his work (in part) as both developing and sorting out Wittgenstein's work. Whatever its debt to Wittgenstein, if anything, Austin's direct influence on discourse analysis has been the greater of the two.

Descriptions and actions

Austin starts out in *How to Do Things With Words* by developing a distinction between two classes of utterance: descriptive statements and utterances that perform actions (characteristically he made up the labels **constatives** and **performatives** for them). Again, we have to put some effort into remembering just how subversive this move was within the philosophy of the time. Philosophers had struggled throughout the century with problems of sense and reference; how words mean things and how they refer to things. Descriptive statements had become so much the

accepted currency of such discussion that other forms of language use were simply ignored. Austin's apparently simple starting point was to observe that in addition to utterances that state things about the world there are utterances that perform actions. For example, 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' is not reporting on the truth or falsity of something, it is making something the case; it is an *act* of ship naming.

Austin put considerable effort into explicating the nature of performative utterances. He noted that they could often be paraphrased into a particular grammatical form (first person, present, indicative): 'I hereby name this ship ...'. But more importantly he considered the way that performatives could *misfire*. Unlike descriptive statements they could not be straightforwardly true or false (the classical philosophical concern), but they could be *infelicitous* for some other reason. Indeed, he offers six rules (**felicity conditions**) that an utterance such as 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' must satisfy:

- (A.i) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, and further,
 - (A.ii) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure. (B) The procedure must be executed by all participants both (i) correctly and (ii) completely.
 - (C) Often (i) the persons must have certain thoughts, intentions, etc. which are specified in the procedure, (ii) the procedure specifies certain conduct which must be adhered to.
- (slightly modified from Austin, 1962: 14-15)

The act of ship naming could misfire if the wrong person broke the champagne, say, or hit the wrong ship. A child cannot smash a bottle of fizzy drink against an ocean liner and thereby change its name in a consequential way for captain and passengers.

One of the striking things about felicity conditions from a discourse analytic point of view is that they lock utterances directly into psychological and sociological concerns. The utterances only work with the right beliefs, conventions and so on. This is not only quite different from much of the philosophy he was criticizing, it is markedly in contrast to the dominant views of language in linguistics and psychology. It both socializes and psychologizes language in a way that current discourse analytic work is still building on.

The general theory of speech acts

Having seemingly established the existence of a class of utterances that do things rather than state things, and provided some observations about how such utterances might misfire, Austin tightened his rhetorical noose by unravelling his own distinction. He noted that the sort of criteria that had initially marked performatives from constatives could in fact be applied to both. Thus, although performatives are not simply true or false, *some things* must be true or false for them to work; 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' is a problematic speech act if there is no ship. Likewise, descriptive statements can go wrong in ways that do not just reflect their truth or falsity; 'That dog is called Beethoven, but I don't believe it' seems to be troublesome, not because of truth of the claim about the dog, but because it seems to violate the felicity condition that uttering a descriptive statement required an appropriate belief. Indeed, a descriptive statement can be easily re-phrased into a first person, present indicative form characteristic of performatives: 'I hereby state that this dog is called Beethoven.'

What had started out as an uncontroversial observation about some features of language that had been overlooked in traditional philosophy thus turned into a radical reconsideration of the nature of descriptive language. Most importantly from the point of view of discourse analysis, what Austin did was emphasize that statements should not be accorded a special status: 'Stating, describing, Ac., are just two names among a very great many others for [speech] acts; they have no unique position' (Austin, 1962: 148-9).

They are acts like any other, and are therefore parts of practices, locked into psychology and sociology by a matrix of felicity conditions.

From the carefully arranged ruins of the performative/constative distinction, Austin went on to build what he called (with a connotative nod to Einstein) his *general theory* of **speech acts**. The centrepiece of this general

theory is the notion of *force* (or **illocutionary force** as he named it!). The point is that, when they are used in utterances, particular words can be used with different forces. For example, 'Can you phone Elaine' could be used with the force of a request, a question, or some other force according to the precise circumstances. Whatever the sense and reference of the words in the utterance, it is the force that makes it a particular act. Broadly speaking, *the force* of an utterance is dependent on *felicity conditions*, while the *truth* of an utterance is dependent on issues of *sense and reference*. Where traditional philosophers had almost exclusively emphasized the truth/sense and reference pair; Austin argued for the equal importance of the force/felicity conditions pair. By doing this he transformed the study of language from an abstract logical enterprise, to one that would have to engage with language in situations, bound up with psychology, and part of social institutions.

Speech acts and discourse analysis

Austin's work has been massively influential for discourse analysis, particularly via its further development and systematization in his PhD student John Searle's book *Speech Acts* (1969). One of the best overviews of this work, and some of its linguistic problems, is still Levinson (1983). He presses some troubling questions:

how far can force and sense be kept separate? How can indirect speech acts ('can you pass the salt') be understood? Does speech-act theory exaggerate the social homogeneity of language? The philosopher Jacques Derrida engaged with speech-act theory to argue that it over-emphasized the intentional, sincere, literal uses of language while systematically downplaying ironic, playful, inauthentic uses; his debate with Searle is one of the most extraordinarily rich and entertaining discussions of speech acts in the last 20 years (Derrida, 1977a, 1977b; Searle, 1977).

From a quite different perspective, speech act theory has been criticized by conversation analysts. Their focus is on the troubled role of the 'uptake' of speech acts (which Austin called the *perlocutionary act*). Although Austin accepted that uptake is vitally important, it never received sustained attention. From a conversation analytic perspective, the distinction between the speech act and the uptake is at least partly an arbitrary cutting into a sequence of speaker turns (see Schegloff, 1988). And it is notable that speech-act theorists have had more success with made-up talk than in applying the ideas to actual speech. For this we should not blame Austin; he died at the age of 49, effectively in midcareer. And there is no doubt that the theory would have been further developed and refined. In *How to Do Things With Words* he was keen to emphasize that his ideas were preliminary and that full analysis would in the end involve elucidating 'the total speech act in the total speech situation' (1962: 148). His arguments have a powerful elegance when directed at philosophical views of language but I believe that he too would have thought that a full study of talk and text as social practices - that is, a full study of *discourse* - would have meant going beyond the, Saturday morning sessions with the dictionary.

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