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Meaning as use and the philosophy of language. A guided tour of problems and responses

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Abstract In this article I discuss Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use and the associated notion of explanation of meaning in relation certain assumptions, problems, and positions in the philosophy of language. The issues addressed include the notion of linguistic sign and language learning, syntax, truth-conditions and verification, and the possibility of truth-conditional semantics. I also discuss the nature of names, the relationship between meaning and reference, and Kripke's distinction between determining meaning and fixing reference. I conclude my discussion by addressing the question, whether philosophy of language can be used to establish a basis for metaphysics, as Kripke has aspired to do. The unifying theme in my tour of this wide-ranging set of issues is how Wittgenstein's notion of meaning as use can help to address problems in the philosophy of language, and what a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language might consequently look like.

Keywords: linguistic sign, meaning, reference, name, use

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0. Introduction

In this article I discuss Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use and the associated notion of explanation of meaning in relation certain assumptions, problems, and positions in the philosophy of language. The issues addressed include the notion of linguistic sign and language learning, syntax, truth-conditions and verification, and the possibility of truth-conditional semantics. I also discuss the nature of names, the relationship between meaning and reference, and Kripke's distinction between determining meaning and fixing reference. I conclude my discussion by addressing the question, whether philosophy of language can be used to establish a basis for metaphysics, as Kripke has aspired to do. The unifying theme in my tour of this wide-ranging set of issues is how Wittgenstein's notion of meaning as use can help to address problems in the philosophy of language, and what a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language might consequently look like.

1. The notion of a linguistic sign: meaning, interpretation, and language learning

A point, recently made by James Conant with reference to Wittgenstein, that cuts deep in the assumptions of contemporary philosophy of language, concerns the notion of linguistic sign (Conant 2020). The core issue is this. Linguistic signs spoken in different

dialects or accents, or written in different fonts, alphabets or personal handwritings exhibit significant variety. As language users well know, one and the same word can sound and look very different when spoken in different dialects or accents or written in different ways, up to the point of being unrecognizable to those unfamiliar with the dialect, accent or handwriting. Relatedly, to determine what words a person says in challenging communicative situations, for example, when talking in loud and noisy surroundings or when someone speaks with an unfamiliar dialect or a strong foreign accent, language users typically rely on their comprehension of what the other is or might be saying. Likewise with reading a difficult handwriting. As reflection on this variety readily shows, the capacity of language users to identify linguistic signs isn't independent of their knowledge of language and comprehension of linguistic meaning. Indeed, this is directly evidenced by the fact that when exposed to a foreign language one doesn't know, one can only guess what the words are, for example, whether a certain sequence of sounds is one or more words. Knowledge of language, including the comprehension of the meaning of what is said, thus constitutes an essential aspect of language users' ability to identify sounds or ink marks as words. «[W]e apprehend the identity of the signs through recognizing the symbol in them» (*Ivi*: 15)[1].

As the point can be put, meaning isn't something added to dead meaningless signs (PI §432, Conant 2020: 13). Rather, mere signs in the sense of empty, meaningless marks or sounds are a residue from the meaningful uses of language, and recognizable as mere signs only through their contrast with meaningful linguistic signs. Mere signs qua meaningless marks/sounds thus aren't logically the basic case, requiring completion by their recipients who must add a use or meaning-fixing interpretation to them, contrary to what, for example, Donald Davidson and many other philosophers of language have assumed. As Davidson writes: «It is… obvious that the interpreter has nothing to go on but the pattern of sounds that the speaker exhibits in conjunction of further events» (Davidson 1984: 13-14).

> Kurt utters the words "Es regnet" and under the right conditions we know that he said that it is raining. Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant. What could we know that would enable us to do this? (*Ivi*: 125).

For Davidson the answer to this question would be provided by a theoretical description of the capacity of language users to interpret utterances understood as mere sequences of signs, i.e. a theory of interpretation which he describes as follows: «You might think of this system as a machine which, when fed an arbitrary utterance (and certain parameters provided by the circumstances of the utterance), provides an interpretation» (Davidson 1986: 95, cf. Davidson 1984: 142). If Wittgenstein is right, however, the Davidsonian view of language as consisting of signs qua mere marks that are given meanings through interpretations that fix the truth-conditions of its sentences is fundamentally flawed[2].

[1] My formulations are intended to leave space for the possibility that one might be able to identify a word as belonging to a language without knowing its meaning (as when learning a foreign language) or without knowing the meaning in which a speaker is using a word (as in the case of ambiguous words or when the meaning of what the speaker says is otherwise unclear). Such cases can be treated as limiting cases that don't undermine the general point about how language users rely on their knowledge of language and comprehension of what is said in identifying sounds and marks as words and sentences.

[2] It can be debated, how much ought to be read into Davidson's assumption about the interpreter being able to identify an utterance as linguistic. Here he seems to face a dilemma: 1) either the interpreter knows enough of the language (for example, Kurt's language) to be able recognise the sounds uttered as words in which case the theory of interpretation tacitly assumes a crucial aspect of the knowledge of language or 2)

The extent to which the Davidsonian conception is taken for granted is illustrated by William Lycan's well-respected introduction to the philosophy of language which outlines, on its very first page, the agenda for theories of meaning: «A philosophical theory of meaning should explain what it is for a string of marks or noises to be meaningful and, more particularly, what it is in virtue of which the string has the distinctive meaning it does» (Lycan 2008: 1). Amongst such theories Lycan also discusses the «Wittgensteinian use theory» which he takes to propose a particular answer to the what-it-is-in-virtue-of question. According to this, signs come to possess meaning in virtue of having rule-governed uses analogously with chess pieces. Consequently, the question also arises, what distinguishes languages from other games that involve manipulating items according to rules but aren't languages (*Ivi*: 81). But did anyone ever confuse games with languages? Clearly, this problem only arises if one thinks that something must be added to words qua mere sounds/marks to make them meaningful.

Perhaps this conception of language is also encouraged by uncritical sourcing of concepts for the philosophy of language from logic, where the dominating model-theoretical conception of syntax similarly suggests that a language could be understood as an abstract structure of rules that governs the syntactical behaviour of signs qua mere marks. But what may be unproblematic for logicians to assume, given their aims such as designing logical calculi, need not be so in the philosophy of language. Since the task of logic isn't to explain how language functions, logicians are justified in assuming the notion of a linguistic sign as an orthographic unit recognized by its shape. But in the philosophy of language this conception clearly presupposes what ought to be explained.

Here it's then noteworthy that another notion of syntax, originating in Wittgenstein's Tractatus, is available. This seems better suited for the philosophy of language in that, consistently with the point that meaning isn't something added to meaningless marks, Wittgenstein treats syntax as an abstraction from the meaningful uses of language. As he writes, «In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use» (TLP 3.326). «The sign determines a logical form only together with its logical syntactic application» (TLP 3.327). In this view, in order for a sign to possess a logical form and determinate rules of syntax to apply to it, it must have a meaningful use. Wittgenstein's notion of syntax thus avoids the misleading suggestion that languages are systems of meaningless signs governed by the rules of syntax which require a semantical interpretation[3].

Accordingly, by contrast to the view of meaning as something added to empty signs, Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use makes it easy to explain how language learners acquire the capacity to identify linguistic signs as words with specific meanings. In short, they learn to identify linguistic signs, including the different occurrences of the same sign, as part of the process of learning the use of words. We can thus maintain, as Conant suggests, that this process simultaneously involves two interconnected tasks: the learning of what sounds count as words and the learning of how those words are used or what they mean. This process therefore isn't one whereby language learners first acquire the ability to identify mere signs as words and then to assign meanings to them. Rather, they acquire a capacity to identify linguistic signs as words together with learning their uses. There's therefore only one learning process although it involves two interconnected aspects. Accordingly, learning the uses of words shouldn't be understood as narrowing down the possible syntactic and semantic interpretations of signs. The view that possible

the sounds uttered can't be assumed to be identifiable as words for which an interpretation could be given. Thus, the account either assumes what ought to be explained or it won't get off the ground.

[3] Syntax in Wittgenstein's sense isn't derived from what words speak about. Rather, logic is concerned with the use or logical function of relevant words (see Kuusela 2019: 60-61).

interpretations must be narrowed down smuggles in the conception of signs qua mere signs.

Instead of requiring interpretation, language acquisition seems better understood in something like the following terms. When a child learns a language, she's introduced into a form of life that involves various modes of action and behaviour with which the uses of language are interwoven (cf. PI §7). As Wittgenstein remarks: «[…] to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life» (PI §19). Crucially, this involves much more than learning the syntax and the meanings of words. Accordingly, a child's initiation into language starts long before they utter their first words or sentences. For part of the process of acquiring a language is learning to engage in situations in which its uses are embedded and to understand the actions into which they're woven. This is exemplified by a pre-linguistic child's asking for a piece of bread by stretching out her arm, which already involves understanding what it is to ask for things, the comprehension of which can be assumed to underlie, as something learned first, the child's capacity to ask for things by means of language. (The gesture might originate merely as an expression of desire which develops into the linguistic act of asking for something). When the child then eventually utters the word "bread" (or a similar sound) stretching out their arm, this constitutes an extension of something the child can already do, her action now assuming a linguistic form. Subsequently, she also learns to ask for bread without the gesture.

As Wittgenstein relatedly points out, certain types of uses of language can be regarded as building upon and extending the kinds of unlearned, natural modes of behaviour, such as pain behaviour, that human have a capacity for as certain kind of bodily beings. (Similarly, if the child had no desires, she could hardly learn to ask for things). In this view, learning the use of the word "pain" thus presupposes children's innate capacity to express pain by crying, through facial expressions, and other bodily movements. This natural expressive capacity provides the background for the language-game with "pain" whose starting point, according to Wittgenstein, is replacing the natural expressions of pain with its linguistic expressions, whereby they retain the function of the natural expressions as manifestations (rather than descriptions) of pain. Thus, a child learns a new linguistic pain behaviour (PI §244). As this illustrates, human languages are languages of essentially embodied natural historical beings. In the absence of natural expressions of pain, a child couldn't be taught to replace them with linguistic ones. A Cartesian consciousness that has a body only accidentally thus couldn't learn language in this way or share in this form of life.

Importantly, insofar as learning to express pains linguistically constitutes such an extension of non-linguistic behaviour, no space is left for interpretation. Neither is interpretation needed when, having mastered the language-game of expressing her pain, the child starts making further first-person uses of the same words to describe her pains, to talk about past pains, to deceive others about her pain, and to talk about others' pain from a third-person perspective. For here the child extends to new occasions the uses of words that she already uses meaningfully to express/manifest her pains. These developments can thus be seen as adding further layers to the multi-layered language-game whose starting point is the first-person expressions of pain. However, the divisions between such stages aren't clearcut, just like the distinction between descriptive and expressive uses isn't. ("I'm in so much pain!" might be used as an expression or a description. Although such differences don't matter in everyday life, they may be crucial in philosophy[4]). Whilst learning to ask for bread is different, it bears similarities with the

[4] The concept of pain is constituted by the different expressive and descriptive uses of "pain" in the first- and third-person. Philosophical confusions that arise from ignoring such different facets of the use of psychological expressions are exemplified by David Chalmers who, in attempting to articulate the so-called

pain language-game, insofar as the child's stretching out her arm is originally an expression of desire which subsequently develops into the linguistic act of asking for bread.

2. Verification, truth-conditions and reference: theories vs. explanations of meaning

Another notion sourced for the philosophy of language from logic is truth-conditions. Although it may be possible to determine exceptionless truth-conditions for the sentences of a logical calculus governed by precise and definite rules, this doesn't seem to be possible in the case of natural languages. As Wittgenstein points out, it's characteristic of what he calls family-resemblance concepts, many usual common nouns such as «chair», as well as proper names such as «Moses», that their uses aren't governed by definite rules and that the words in question have no fixed meaning in this sense (PI §79). Consequently, the borders of concepts expressed by relevant words are blurred, and in the case of family-resemblance concepts open-ended (PI §§65-67; Kuusela 2022: 63-65). For example, no criteria of use have been determined for the use of the word «chair» in cases such as Wittgenstein's example of a disappearing chair, whereby a chair first disappears, then reappears, and subsequently disappears again without any explanation. Although one might conclude, when the chair first disappears, that the chair was an illusion, and when it reappears that its disappearance was an illusion, this will no longer do when the chair reappears (or seems to do) again (PI §80). Is this object a chair, and what would be the truth-conditions for the Davisonian occasion sentence «This is a chair»? Should its truth-conditions cover such occasions? There seems to be no principled answer to the question of which occasions truth-conditions ought to cover, unless they cover all logically possible ones.

As Waismann explains, the issue with «chair» has to do with the open texture of empirical concepts: the rules for their use don't cover all logically possible occasions. Consequently, sentences with such words have gaps in truth-conditions that make impossible their conclusive verification. For open texture implies that «[…] we cannot foresee completely all the possible circumstances in which the statement is true and in which it is false» (Waismann 1960: 121). According to Waismann, most empirical concepts have an open texture. (This differs from vagueness and is better understood as the possibility of vagueness (*Ivi*: 119-120)). Although the notions of verification and truth-conditions aren't the same, they're connected. Whilst specifying the method of verification explains what it would be to establish truth/falsity of a sentence, truth-conditions specify more abstractly when the proposition would be true/false.

Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein emphasizes, this lack of sharp boundaries in the use of words doesn't make them unusable (PI §§70-71). He responds to his imaginary interlocutor: «"But then the use of the word is unregulated – the 'game' we play with it is unregulated". – It is not everywhere bounded by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one may throw the ball in tennis, or how hard, yet tennis is a game for all that, and has rules too» (PI §68).

The chair example can be helpfully compared with tennis. Just as there's no need to regulate how high one can throw the ball in tennis – tennis players can't throw the ball so high that this could be exploited in the game for an advantage – there's no need to have rules for all imaginable eventualities relating to the use of words, such as the disappearing chair. Chairs rarely disappear/reappear without explanation, just as cats don't quote poems, and people don't shrink and grow randomly. In short, the facts of nature that

hard problem of consciousness, simply ignores the first-person uses. Consequently, he arguably fails to articulate a problem about consciousness (Kuusela 2016).

constitute the context for language use tend to exclude such possibilities, and thus no rules are needed for such cases. Nevertheless, this offers no comfort to the truth-conditional semanticists, since the mentioned kinds of cases are logically possible. Such cases make it impossible to determine when the truth-conditions for a sentence would be complete or satisfactorily articulated – unless we simply stipulate what occasions need to be accounted for.

Following Wittgenstein, Charles Travis has similarly emphasized the impossibility of determining truth-conditions in advance of the uses of language on particular occasions. Travis connects this occasion-sensitivity of language with the variety of interests and purposes that inform language use. For as Wittgenstein notes, «Concepts […] are the expression of our interest and direct our interest» (PI §570, cf. §520). According to Travis, although words possess a relatively fixed conventional «language-contributed semantics», this doesn't suffice to determine what is true to say on particular occasions. Meaning and truth, rather, are «speaking-sensitive» (Travis 2008: 70). For example, conventional meanings don't settle when it would be true to say that there's milk in the fridge, but the truth of so saying also depends on various human interests and concerns, as exemplified by someone asking for milk for coffee. In response, it wouldn't be true to answer "Yes, there's milk in the fridge", when there's only a puddle of expired milk at its bottom. Nevertheless, the same words would say something true as instructions to a cleaner (Travis 1989: 18-19). Or imagine an allergic person asking whether there are nuts in a food. Here it's crucial to understand the question in the right sense whereby traces of nuts count as nuts. Note the connection with what I said earlier about learning to understand situations of language use.

Travis sums up: «[…] the open sentences of language speak of ways for things to be which admit of understandings […]. This blocks truth-conditional semantics» (Travis 2008: 159). The point is that truth-conditions for sentences such as that about milk would have to capture a variety of quite specific occasions. But since such specific occasions are impossible to exhaustively foresee in advance, truth-conditions can't be specified by listing them. It follows that truth-conditions can't be determined at all, since not determining them specifically enough leaves them undetermined. Consequently, it isn't possible to determine the extensions of relevant concepts either, contrary to what traditional philosophical definitions assume, and truth-conditional semantics would need to do. As Travis comments on the property/concept of being green: «[…] it makes no sense to speak of "its extension"» (*Ivi*: 121; for Travis's example of green leaves, see *Ivi*: 111). It makes no sense to speak of the extension of this and similar concepts because, as Waismann observed, the extensions of empirical concepts can't be determined independently of particular occasions of use, but such occasions can't be foreseen.

But although truth-conditional semantics as a general theory thus arguably fails, it doesn't follow that truth-conditions can't be used to clarify the meanings of sentences and relevant words on particular occasions. Likewise with specifying the method of verification. As Wittgenstein notes: «Asking whether and how a sentence can be verified is only a special form of the question "How do you mean?" The answer is a contribution to the grammar of the sentence» (PI §353). The point can be clarified with reference to the assertion "My dog speaks". Naturally, one might feel perplexed upon hearing this claim. However, this can be addressed in terms of explanations of meaning such as the following: "By my dog speaking I mean that it communicates by barking. One bark means that she's thirsty, two barks she's hungry, three barks that she wants to go out, and four barks let's go back home". Such an explanation of how the sentence can be verified, and what it would mean for it to be true, would readily clarify what the speaker meant. (The sentence is verified by observing their dog and is true if the dog acts as described. Or rather, the explanation puts us in a position to discuss whether such actions would count

as speaking and whether the assertion might be true). Specifying the method of verification or truth-conditions for a sentence can therefore evidently clarify its meaning. Equally obviously, however, the possibility of such particular explanations won't help truth-conditional semantics. Neither truth-conditions nor the method of verification can serve as "the central notion" (in Michael Dummett's sense) upon which to build an exceptionless theory of meaning.

This calls attention to Wittgenstein's neglected notion of the explanation of meaning that he uses to demystify the notion of linguistic meaning. He writes in the Investigations: «"The meaning of a word is what an explanation of its meaning explains." That is, if you want to understand the use of the word "meaning", consult what one calls "an explanation of meaning"» (PI §560). In the early 1930s he put the point as follows: «[…] the meaning of a word is what the explanation of its meaning explains. // […] The explanation of the meaning explains the use of the word. // The use of a word in the language is its meaning» (PG: 60).

The advantages of this shift of focus are elaborated in the Blue Book:

> You in a sense bring the question "what is meaning?" down to earth. For, surely, to understand the meaning of "meaning" you ought also to understand the meaning of "explanation of meaning". Roughly: "let's ask what the explanation of meaning is, for whatever that explains will be the meaning". Studying the grammar of the expression "explanation of meaning" will teach you something about the grammar of the word "meaning" and will cure you of the temptation to look about you for some object which you might call "the meaning" (BB: 1).

The important point is that looking into explanations of meaning can teach something about the grammar of "meaning"[5]. For example, this can help to address the confusion underlying referentialist theories of meaning, such as Russell's, according to which the meaningfulness of words depends on their having a reference. For at the root of this view is a confusion between the meaning of a word and its bearer suggested by the possibility of explaining meanings ostensively by pointing at the bearer (PI §38, PG: 56) If nothing was referred to, wouldn't this mean that the word speaks of nothing? Wittgenstein writes:

> Let us first discuss the following point in the argument: that a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it. – It is important to note that it is a solecism to use the word "meaning" to signify the thing that "corresponds" to a word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name. When Mr N.N. dies, one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say this, for if the name ceased to have meaning, it would make no sense to say "Mr N.N. is dead" (PI §41).

Do we need a Russellian analysis of «Mr. N.N. is dead» to explain its meaningfulness? This wouldn't help, since on this analysis the sentence constitutes a false existential claim about N.N., insofar as for a human to exist is for them to be alive. Thus, on a Russellian analysis it can't be truly said that N.N. is dead. Alternatively, if «N.N.» is a Russellian logically genuine name (see below), the sentence is meaningless. However, instead we can simply say that the name has meaning insofar as it has a use. Likewise, it's the relevant theories of combustion that explain the meaning of "phlogiston". That its meaning/fulness has nothing to do with it having a referent is evident in the fact that, unless such theories specified what "phlogiston" means, we couldn't even inquire into its existence. Hence, as Wittgenstein maintains, a word having a meaning depends on its use.

[5] For an exegetical discussion of relevant remarks, see Kuusela 2008: chapter 4.

«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 the language. // And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer» (PI §43). Here the last sentence again cautions against the risk of being misled by the possibility of explaining the meanings of words with reference to their bearer.

As Wittgenstein relatedly points out, far from correctly accounting for names, Russell's account of ordinary names as disguised definite descriptions analysable into logically genuine names that stand for objects of acquaintance merely illustrates a tendency of philosophers/logicians «to sublimate the logic of our language» (PI §38, cf. PI §108). By sublimation he means turning logic into something neat and uniform that would meet the presumed theoretical needs and standards of philosophers (Kuusela 2019: 115-123). This preference of philosophers for their own theoretical constructions, and their resistance to examining actual examples, is exemplified well by Russell's view of «this» and «that» as the only logically genuine names, given that they can't be used without a reference and thus appear to satisfy the referentialist requirements (cf. PI §§37, 41-42, 109, 115-116). Wittgenstein comments: «But why does it occur to one to want to make precisely this word into a name, when it obviously is not a name? – That is just the reason. For one is tempted to make an objection against what is ordinarily called a name. It can be put like this: a name ought really to signify a simple» (PI §39, cf. 45).

Simplicity here means logical simplicity. To ensure meaning it seems that the referents of names mustn't be logically further analysable.

On Russell's account naming consequently acquires the appearance of «a process that is, so to speak, occult», whereby we «imagine naming to be some kind of remarkable mental act, as it were a baptism of an object» (PI §38, cf. PG: 60-61). But postulating such acts, as Russell does in connection with his account of logically genuine names, can't explain meaning. As Wittgenstein also remarks, «Meaning something is not a process which accompanies a word. // For no process could have the consequences of meaning something» (PPF §291/PI II xi, 218). The point is that no such act of baptism could determine the uses of a name or its logical role across its possible contexts of use, including its modal behaviour, without presupposing the existence of language and the practices of language use. To provide, even just for oneself, or to understand an ostensive definition, «one must already understand a great deal of a language» (PG: 61, cf. PI §6). An explanation of meaning, such as an ostensive definition, can only achieve its purpose as part of language.

Naming as a mental act of baptism would thus be nothing less remarkable than if my dog spoke. For just like the dog in my example would be speaking independently and outside of language, similarly nothing short of magic could help baptism to achieve its goals, if it's conceived as something independent of linguistic practices. Wittgenstein's makes this point also in connection with his thought-experiment about the possibility of a logically (not merely contingently) private language. In order not to smuggle in the notions of public language, we must assume that the private linguist is a genius who invents for himself the logical category of names (PI §§256-258). He comments:

> When one says "He gave a name to his sensation", one forgets that much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense. And if we speak of someone's giving a name to a pain, the grammar of the word "pain" is what has been prepared here; it indicates the post where the new word is stationed (PI §257, cf. PG: 60-61).

Baptism in the preceding sense therefore is not how explanations of meaning work[6]. Explanations of meaning are linguistic expressions and part of language. Wittgenstein characterizes such explanations more generally as follows:

> An explanation of meaning can remove every disagreement with regard to a meaning. It can clear up misunderstandings.
> The understanding here spoken of is a correlate of explanation.
> By "explanation of the meaning of a sign" we mean rules for use but above all definitions. The distinction between verbal definitions and ostensive definitions gives a rough division of these types of explanation (PG: 60, cf. BB: 1).

Of course, Russell tacitly assumed all this too when proposing to explain the meaning of «Scott» as «The author of Waverley» (Russell 1905: 51). For in suggesting this explanation of the meaning or reference of «Scott», he was using English and relying on knowledge of relevant cultural and literary history without which he couldn't have referred to Scott or his works. Thus, whilst Russell's account of logically genuine names represents matters as if there were no such thing as language as an established practice and a historical-cultural phenomenon, he was nevertheless presupposing and using the English language and assuming familiarity with its linguistic categories. Hence, even if Russell didn't assign any philosophical importance to such matters, his own words and examples testify to the presence of this essential background. Outside the practice of language, no mental act could have the consequences of Russell's explanation of «Scott».

3. Explanations of meaning and Kripke's account of names

We're now in position to discuss Kripke's criticisms of Frege's and Russell's «description theory of names», and the related cluster theory, represented by Peter Strawson and John Searle. Whilst the description theory holds that the referents of names are identified by means of uniquely identifying descriptions that names abbreviate, the cluster theory maintains that, although a name having a reference requires some such identifying descriptions to be true, speakers need not know which one(s) (Kripke 1972: 27-28, 31-32, 59, 61, 64-66, 71, 74). Against this Kripke then argues that, although reference can sometimes be fixed by such descriptions, the theories are wrong as accounts of the meaning of names (*Ivi*: 32, 55-58, 61). Instead, names are better understood as rigid designators that designate their referents in all possible worlds independently of any descriptions or characteristics that such descriptions attribute to the referents (*Ivi*: 47-48, 77). Although the view of names as rigid designators is largely compatible with what the later Wittgenstein says about names (Kuusela 2022: 58-61), Kripke's distinction between determining meaning and fixing reference, which underlies both his negative and positive arguments, can be challenged. This highlights important differences between Kripke's and Wittgenstein's accounts of language and, if Wittgenstein is right, problematizes the essentialist conclusions Kripke draws from the philosophy of language. To see this, let's ask: if we (re)interpret relevant kinds of descriptions as Wittgensteinian explanations of meaning, what are the consequences for Kripke?

Kripke is right, at least partly (see below), that it's a mistake to treat explanations of meaning, such as «Scott is the author of Waverley» as claims about the essential or necessary features of relevant objects. For it's contingent that Scott wrote Waverley, and he would still have been Scott even if he hadn't. Indeed, contrary to the cluster theory,

[6] A related problem for Russell, brought out by Wittgenstein's private language argument, is there being no criteria of correctness for the use of names of objects of acquaintance. Since a randomly used word isn't a name, i.e. criteria of correctness are essential for names, Russellian logically genuine names aren't names.

«Scott» would refer to Scott even if everything we thought we knew of him were false (Kripke 1972: 48-49, 83-85, 88-89; I've changed the example). Kripke is therefore right that «Scott» isn't synonymous with any such descriptions, and that names generally aren't synonymous with descriptions used to identify their bearers. Consequently, insofar as explanations of meaning must be synonymous with the names to be explained, such descriptions can't explain their meanings (*Ivi*: 32, 59-60).

But is it correct that an explanation of meaning ought to be synonymous with the meaning of the word explained? Kripke provides no argument for this dogma, and insofar as it entails that determinations of meaning are always analytic truths, it seems a mere leftover from logical positivism (*Ivi*: 39, 122 note 63). If Wittgenstein is right about explanations of meaning, the synonymy-requirement is wrong. Although definitions may be synonymous with the defined words, as illustrated by the definition of grandmothers as female grandparents, such definitions are only a particular type of explanation of meaning. By contrast, ostensive definitions don't provide anything synonymous with the defined words (as Kripke agrees in the case of his own ostensive definition of "metre"; see Kripke 1972: 56). Neither are explanations of meaning by means of examples, which is the natural way to explain family-resemblance concepts, synonymous with the words to be explained (PI §69). Likewise with Wittgenstein's grammatical rules, as illustrated by his explanation of the word "meaning" in terms of use, even though "use" can sometimes be substituted for "meaning" (cf. Wittgenstein's reservations to the generality of this explanation in PI §43). Since these are all perfectly good ways to explain meaning, it's clearly not a problem they aren't synonymous with their explananda. Rather, Kripke is wrong about explanations of meaning. Instead of providing synonyms, they explain the use of words.

As can then be further argued, fixing the reference/bearer of a name isn't anything distinct from explaining its meaning. Rather, explanations that refer to the bearer constitute a particular way of explaining the meaning/use of names, i.e. of what (type of) object they're used to speak about. Relatedly, as Wittgenstein remarks: «But doesn't "Two names have a single bearer" mean the same as "two names have the same meaning?" // Certainly, instead of "A = B" one can write "the bearer of the name 'A' = the bearer of the name 'B'"» (PG: 64). As this brings out, sometimes names 'A' and 'B' having the same meaning (so that A=B) comes to their having the same bearer. This is exemplified by "Finland = Suomi" and "metre = μέτρο", albeit there are also cases where the use of co-referential names overlaps only partly, as exemplified by "David Bowie = David Jones". Ultimately, without denying the interest of cases that Frege sought to address by distinguishing sense from reference, the bottom line is that, due to their having the same bearer, the uses of "David Bowie" and "David Jones" overlap significantly, unlike "David Bowie" and "Alvin Stardust". This overlap of use justifies saying that "David Bowie" and "David Jones" mean the same, which in this case comes to their having the same bearer. Naturally, someone might know who David Bowie was without knowing he was also called "David Jones". Thus, as Frege observed, finding out that two names share the same bearer can have cognitive significance.

With regard to the dogma that explanations of meaning are synonymous with the names they explain, Searle too makes a relevant point when he says that it's characteristic of names that they can be employed in circumstances of disagreement about the features of the referents (Searle 1958: 170-171). For example, was Jesus of Nazareth the son of God? We don't need to agree on this to discuss the claim about his divine origins. A person who disagrees about the divinity of Jesus with Christians isn't automatically speaking about someone else. Although Kripke doesn't discuss this, it bears directly on his arguments against the description theory. For crucially, the fact that the use of names tolerates disagreements about the features of their bearers implies that the use of names, including communication by their means, doesn't depend on speakers using them

synonymously. Rather, this only requires near enough synonymity or enough overlap in use. What counts as enough, in turn, can't be defined generally or exactly, because this has to do with the blurred borders of concepts (section 2), and it may vary according to context how much overlap is needed. Although ordinary names seem generally tolerant to disagreements in this sense, this isn't true in mathematics, science, or philosophy when exactitude is required. Clearly, the philosophy of language can't limit itself to the latter kinds of uses, however.

Hence, two related problems arise for Kripke. 1) The standards of exactitude he implicitly requires when he rejects explanations of meaning that aren't synonymous with the meanings of names to be explained, are higher than natural languages usually satisfy or need to satisfy. 2) Kripke is wrong about the function of explanations of meaning, including Fregean-Russellian descriptions. Their purpose isn't to provide synonyms, but to help the recipient grasp the use of relevant words and thus their meaning. Indeed, explaining the use of the word is the point of synonym-articulating definitions too. For what is the purpose of the definition of "grandmother", if not to explain what the word is used to speak about?

As these considerations indicate, Kripke's criticism of Russell's account of names misses its target – at least, if Russell is read charitably as concerned with explanations of meaning. Russell's explanation of the meaning of «Scott» in terms of the description of Scott being the author of Waverley is fine for the purpose of explaining its use. Evidently, this could clear up for George IV, whether Scott was the author of Waverley, as per Russell's example (Russell 1905: 52). Pace Kripke, «Scott» not being synonymous with «The author of Waverley» therefore isn't a problem for Russell's explanation of the name's meaning. Moreover, as Kripke admits, fixing the reference of a name ostensively or by means of descriptions is often unproblematic (Kripke 1972: 75-76, 79-80, 95-96, 135, 139). Since fixing reference is a particular way of explaining meaning, however, Kripke's criticisms of the two theories fail. The criticisms only apply if we distinguish between determining meaning and fixing reference, but there's no justification for this distinction.

Consequently, Kripke's speculations about why Russell would have made the obvious mistake of taking «Scott» to be synonymous with «the author of Waverley», thus failing to recognize the rigidity of names, start looking peculiar too. Evidently, the claim is false that Russell «did not consider modal questions» (*Ivi*: 14). More likely, Russell thought, in accordance with his view of "this" and "that" as names, that on particular occasions names are used synonymously with some identifying descriptions. Although this account of names isn't generally correct, names are sometimes used in this way, i.e. when one is concerned with an object in some specific respect like George IV with Scott. Since on Russell's theory the use of names is exhausted by such particular employments, he might well have thought that we always speak of objects in some such specific sense. If so, he might have also held that on such particular occasions some specific features, such as the authorship of Waverley, are essential in contrast to others. This isn't wrong either, but here we come to questions about the notion of essence that go beyond Russell's philosophy[7].

It thus seems possible to read Russell more charitably than Kripke. However, since Russell's account of names fails anyway (section 2), a philosophically more interesting question concerns the correctness of the essentialist conclusions Kripke draws from his

[7] Wittgenstein speaks of the notion of essence in such a context-relative sense in PI §§59-63, when criticizing the *Tractatus'* Russellian conception of logical analysis, and the associated absolute conception of essence. On his later view what counts as essential is dependent on the concerns and interests that inform an inquiry (see Kuusela 2008: 72-74, 206-207). Kripke responds to Quine's similar criticisms of the notion of essence by claiming that the absolute notion is intuitive and common sensical (Kripke 1972: 41-42). Since intuitiveness is merely a psychological notion, I leave this to the side.

account of names and the distinction between explaining the meaning vs. fixing reference. Can the notion of fixing the reference of a name rigidly across possible worlds constitute the basis for essentialism, whereby essences and essential features figure as something absolute and independent of how things are described? Wittgenstein warns against the temptation to draw the kind of distinction Kripke relies on:

> One would like to distinguish between rules of grammar that set up "a connection between language and reality" and those that do not. A rule of the first kind is: "this colour is called 'red'", – a rule of the second kind: "~~p = p". With regard to this distinction there is a common error; language is not something that is first given a structure and then fitted on to reality (PG: 89).

The view Wittgenstein rejects, according to which language or its conceptual determinations and distinctions could fit or fail to fit reality, presumes that language itself, i.e. our concepts, not only the statements made in their terms, could be true/false. Such a view mistakenly conceives the facts pertaining to the objects we speak about as capable of justifying our conceptual determinations. An example is the claim that there really are four primary colours, and that certain colour concepts are therefore metaphysically correct. But as Wittgenstein points out, any such attempt to justify the syntax or grammar of language is circular: the presumed justifying descriptions and observations of relevant facts already presuppose the syntax/grammar to be justified. Syntax or grammar thus can't be justified in this way. Grammar, as Wittgenstein explains, is arbitrary (PG: 184).

> The rules of grammar are arbitrary in the same sense as the choice of a unit of measurement. But that means no more than that the choice is independent of the length of the objects to be measured and that the choice of one unit is not "true" and of another "false" in the way that a statement of length is true or false (PG: 185, cf. PI §§492, 496-497, 520).

Ironically, Kripke refers to directly relevant remarks of Wittgenstein's when introducing his arguably fundamentally confused notion of contingent a priori (Kripke 1972: 54-57)[8]. For Wittgenstein is very clear about the logical difference between the mutually exclusive uses of a sentence to determine a unit of measurement – for example, by pointing at a stick and stating "This is one metre long" – as opposed to making true/false statements about the length of objects – for example, about a stick that "This is one metre long". Whilst the latter statement is a contingent empirical true/false assertion, the former states a grammatical rule that determines how long a metre is to be. In this capacity the grammatical statement counts as preparation for language use, rather than an instance of language use to say something true/false, pace Kripke. As Wittgenstein explains: «[…] naming and describing do not stand on the same level: naming is a preparation for describing. Naming is not yet a move in a language-game – any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess» (PI §49). Although, it's easy enough to miss this difference in the logical role of sentences employed to ostensively define a concept or to make a contingent true/false statement, because one and the same sentence can be used in either logical role, the distinction is crucial. For, definitional statements employed to fix or explain the reference of a name are «part of the symbolism» (PG: 97). Thus, rather than putting one in a position to contemplate the essence of whatever one is

[8] For Kripke's logical mistake, arising from his failure to pay attention to the different uses of relevant sentences, and for a Wittgensteinian account of the logical status of definitions that avoids Kripke's confusion, see Kuusela 2023.

speaking about independently of any linguistic determinations and descriptions, such statements merely articulate conventions for language use.
Hence, as already indicated by the point that fixing the reference is merely a particular way of explaining meaning, there are no conjuring tricks in the philosophy of language that enable one to milk metaphysical conclusions about essences from language (PG: 184, PI §372). In particular, trying to drive a wedge between determining meaning and fixing reference can't provide access to essences comprehended independently of language and its conceptual determinations. By contrast, according to Wittgenstein, statements regarding essences or essential features are grammatical statements, the point being that what is logically necessary or possible is structural to language and thought, rather than an object of true/false statements. It's in this sense that «Essence is expressed by grammar» (PI §371, see Kuusela 2008: chapter 5). Accordingly, grammatical statements can be used to address philosophical problems having to do with necessity and possibility. (For Wittgenstein's method, see Kuusela 2008 and 2019). Contrary to idealism and constructivism, however, the metaphysical nature of reality doesn't depend on language. Reality is independent of humans; language and its concepts merely provide instruments to inquire into it. Neither does reality fix which ways to speak about it are true in a way that could support metaphysical realism. Thus, contrary to Russell and Kripke, neither logic nor the philosophy of language can constitute the foundation for metaphysics.
In conclusion, through this guided tour of issues in the philosophy of language I hope to have conveyed something about the importance of Wittgenstein's notion of meaning as use for the study of language, both with regard to how it can be used to criticize assumptions and positions in the philosophy of language as well as to open up new fruitful perspectives. This includes rejecting the idea of philosophy of language as a starting point for metaphysics, contrary to the current Kripkean orthodoxy.

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