

# Wittgenstein on Concepts

*Andy Blunden 2011*

The study of language and its relation to the study of concepts cannot go past the (later) work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, a renegade from Logical Positivism, who has provided an insider's critique of the analytical approach to thought and language.

Whereas we have said that a word (or expression) is the sign for a concept, the drift of Wittgenstein's work is that it is a mistake to take a word as a sign for *anything* other than itself. Word meaning is just how the word is used. In §66 of the *Investigations* he demonstrates that the wide variety of concepts evoked by the word 'game', have no attribute which is shared in common by them all. That in itself should be no surprise. One would have to be a Logical Positivist to be surprised that word meanings don't work like Set Theory. If a word simply named an attribute, then the concept itself would be empty.

But while a word may be a sign for concept, it would be quite untenable to define a concept as the referent of a word, simply duplicating the world into signs and signifieds. It is clear that a great deal of context, gesture and so on is required for a word to function as a sign for a concept in any locutionary act.

Wittgenstein goes on to suggest that we don't have and don't need *any* kind of definition of a word, beyond clarifying how we are using the word in the given instance. This implies a move away from a taxonomy based on attributes, and towards a typology based on exemplars, and as such has some merit. There is something to be said for the idea that a word gains its meaning from its use and can have no determinate meaning abstracted from the conditions of its use. But what does it mean to 'use' a word and what conditions of use determine meaning?

Wittgenstein also points out that it is empty to characterise an action by setting up a normative rule and taking the action as obedience to the rule. Wittgenstein shows that all this achieves is to set up a metaphysical model which more or less imperfectly reflects what it is supposed to explain. What is fundamental is the action itself, not rules and norms deemed to lie behind activity, and from which norms and rules can be abstracted. People can behave normatively without being able to specify the relevant norm or even being aware that such a norm exists.

But word meanings are motivated or they are not meant at all. An action, such as word meaning, is obedient to its motivation, the end which the action serves, which is always something other than the action itself. And it is this which is of interest to us. Just how speakers convey and evoke their meanings by selective and artful use of words is not of immediate interest to us. Where in Wittgenstein's writings do we learn about how concepts function in mediating interaction?

All the early paragraphs of “Philosophical Investigations” are set in the context of people collaborating in constructing a building, and the interlocutors make sense of each other’s words thanks to the fact that they are engaged in the same activity. In §23 he says:

“the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein 1953 §23).

And this is the point. Is these extra-discursive activities which provide the ends towards which word meanings are oriented. Concepts are located within the shared activities and forms of life, rather than in the transitory uses of words. A million disparate actions are required to build a house, but the meaning of all these actions is house building and derivative concepts. Here is the real problem which Wittgenstein does not address.

Concepts exist prior to any given utterance and have relative stability. Concepts are discursively constructed. We could not suppose that an environment (such as a building site) is sufficient for all the interlocutors to understand the activity they are engaged in, so that they are able to construe appropriate meanings to others’ words. That ‘context’ has to be evoked discursively. But everything about constructing a building: the various building elements, the skills and processes, the division of labour, plans and so on, pre-exist any given utterance or any of the actions which contribute to finally constructing a building.

Wittgenstein does not help us understand those activities and forms of life which create the concepts which allow language to be meaningful. The uttering of a word is a momentary, transient event, and it is surely only the activity and form of life of which it is a part which confers meaning on words, expressions and gestures? The importance of a word is that it confers *unity* on a diversity of actions, whose real unity lies in the activity of which it is a part.

I think Holzman and Newman had it right when they described “Wittgenstein’s work as therapy – for philosophers, whose obsession with philosophical problems is their pathology” (Newman & Holzman, 2006: 177).

In a similar vein, in the context of learning mathematics, Anna Sfard defines a concept, as “a word together with its discursive uses” (2008: 268). When we first learn a concept, then the concept is indeed inseparable from the word by which we first learnt it. But over time, the concept becomes more and more independent of the word. At the same time, one and the same concept can be evoked by different words, differences in nuance and context notwithstanding. So I think it is a mistake to tie a concept to a word in this way. If every word marks a different concept, then we have the dualism of signifier and signified, even if by signified we mean “discursive uses” rather than some noumenon. Sfard is right to say that “one cannot get a sense of a person’s concept of number without considering the totality of this person’s discursive activities in which the

term *number* may occur,” but there is no one-to-one relation between word and concept. And the idea of a word unifying a disparate range of meanings has some merit, but this definition is still very oriented to personal meaning, and lacks normative content.

Wittgenstein argued forcefully that word meaning cannot be rationalised as conformance to a semantic norm, since semantic norms are derivative from discursive use. But by reminding us that language-use is part of an activity, Wittgenstein pointed to the source of semantic normativity. Wittgenstein remained a sceptic on the question of concepts, content with debunking the illusions of Logical Positivism. If we are to make any sense of the idea of ‘mathematical concepts’, we need to know what makes some uses of a word normative and not others. Sford’s answer to this problem is the idea of the ‘endorsed narrative’. I think this idea of ‘endorsement’ is a mistake. An ‘endorsed narrative’ can turn out to be wrong, but if endorsement is the final court of appeal, then there can be no extra-discursive criteria for normativity. This works for the concepts of everyday life, where semantic norms are always in play, but I don’t think it allows us to understand scientific concepts or other concepts belonging to definite forms of social practice.

Like everyone else, Wittgenstein freely uses the word ‘concept’ but never says what he means by it. At one point, he suggests that a concept is an “application of a word” (PI §383), and at another that a concept is “a characteristic of human handwriting,” (PPF i) and that: “Language is an instrument. Its concepts are instruments. ... Concepts lead us to make investigations. They are the expression of our interest and direct our interest” (PI §569-70).

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