

A Critique of the Limiting Logic in Wittgenstein's Game Theory

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ABSTRACT

An investigation of Wittgenstein's game theory of language is the focus of the paper. The purpose of the study is to critique the limiting logic found in the theory. The method adopted for the study is content analysis. It has been shown in the course of the analysis that the new Wittgenstein is a deviation and an outright rejection of his earlier views in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and those of the logical positivists. The new Wittgenstein, as shown in the Philosophical Investigations, is prone to accepting the multiplicity of the use of language as expressed in several language games. But the study identifies a limiting logic in the emphasis on strict adherence to rules in language games. This emphasis limits the creative use of language, especially in contexts like stipulative definitions.

Key Words: Language, Logical Positivism, Games, Society.

Introduction

What is the nature of language, and in what sense could it be understood as a game? What does it take to comprehend a given statement, and what is the principle of verifying a statement as true or false? These questions and more led to logical positivism as a movement. "To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules," says Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980). He held that a word or even a sentence has meaning only as a result of the rule of the game being played (Wittgenstein 1980). Thus, the theory Ludwig Wittgenstein developed the philosophical position known as language games, which is defined as a simple application of language and the actions into which language is constructed. For example, the term "water" could have different meanings depending on the context (or rule) under which it is used. On the one hand, it could mean to give a vivid explanation of an action or event. On the other hand, water could also mean a universal solvent that comes in the form of a solid, liquid, or gas.

The problem that warranted this research stems from the burden that there still exists a language gap, despite philosophers' efforts to give a clear-cut clarification of language from the ancient through the modern and into the postmodern era. There is little or no complete understanding of language in terms of generality. Thus, the work advocates for a better linguistic approach to philosophical explanations for clear

understanding, irrespective of the philosophical position. The aim of this research is to bring out the philosopher's interest in language and how language can be applied to explain things in a way that should guarantee understanding. As a theoretical framework, this work used the philosophical analytic approach. The emphasis will be on language as defined by logical positivism and Wittgenstein.

The Concept of Language in Philosophical History

This section shall examine the origin of language with perspectives based primarily on the ancient and modern periods of philosophical investigation. It shall also look at the possible influences on Wittgenstein's language-game theory. We shall first consider the works of some famous philosophers, starting with the ancient and modern periods, with the early Greek poets like Homer and Hesiod, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and also the logical positivists.

The search for the origin of language, its nature, and its functions drew philosophical attention from antiquity. That is to say, the philosophy of language is as old as philosophy itself. Arguably, Hesiod lived in 700 B.C., probably after Homer (Felgueroso 2022). The duo were attracted to the challenges, regarding the manner and pattern in which names and words represent objects. This problem led to the etymological analysis of the names of gods, heroes, and natural phenomena like rivers, grasses, birds, etc. According to Nwigwe (2003:1), the Pre-Socratic philosophers who attempted to investigate the nature of language were Parmenides and Heraclitus. For Parmenides, every name or language has a strict parallel with or relationship with reality. And for him, the errors and contradictions that often feature in our understanding of reality are primarily due to the wrong application of language. Parmenides, perhaps, may be talking about a contradiction as a product of his ignorance of the rules attached to language in particular circumstances.

Contrary to Parmenides' position, Heraclitus took a different position. His theory that the hidden unity of all opposites is caused by language is meant to mean that there is no relationship between language (name) and the structure of things. In support of Heraclitus, the Sophists and Skeptics also support the idea that language is purely conventional and arbitrarily determined. In other words, according to them, the only meaningful statement is a tautological statement. For Heraclitus, we can only make statements like "Man is Man, God is God." But not statements like "Man is Good," because with this statement, we run into complications. This is the origin of the problem of language. Thus, Nwigwe (2003) writes:

Considerations involving the nature, origin and functions of language have always engaged human attention all through history. In the writings of Homer, Hesiod etc., this led to interest in the phenomenon of etymology.... Beside the poets, the early or pre-Socratic philosophers too made considerable attempt to examine the nature of language-notable among these were Parmenides and Heraclitus. For Parmenides, there

is a strict parallelism in the relation; being-thought-language. This relation forms the methodical basis of his philosophy.... Heraclitus talked about the hidden opposite of all things, which language brings about.... These early discussions led to Plato's work on the dialogue-Cratylus.

The modern era of philosophical inquiry birthed another group of radicals known as the Logical Positivists, who were associated as members of the Vienna Circle, led by Moritz Schlick, Alfred Jules Ayer, Rudolph Carnap, etc. Logical positivism was characterized by empiricists, logicians, mathematicians, and scientists. This group applied further steps known as the Principle of Verification to buttress their view on the status of meaningful language. The verification principle, according to them, holds that a statement is meaningful if it is either empirical or analytic. Although the verification principle was geared toward streamlining the use of language, it ran into its own peculiar challenges. The restrictions placed on the principle would later spell doom for an already existing corpus of meaningful knowledge. Logical positivism assumes the status of a legitimizing myth, tasked with removing metaphysical concepts from the meaningful lexicon. For instance, non-empirical statements, such as statements about God, angels, and spirits, were signaled to be discarded.

The cruel and anti-metaphysical orientation of the logical positivists was predicated on their assumption that the problem of philosophy is the problem of language, and that these problems are caused by metaphysical statements. A. J. Ayer in 2001 titled his work *Language, Truth and Logic* and opened it with the burning desire to give purpose and method to philosophical inquiry. In this book, Ayer differentiated between strong verification and weak verification. He maintained that a strongly verifiable proposition is one that could be conclusively established by sense experience, whereas a weakly verifiable proposition is one that could be made probable by sense experience. He further stated at thus:

A fact is significant to any given person, if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition, which it purports to express - that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the propositions as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or false, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not a tautology a mere pseudo-proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him; but it is not literally significant (2001:35).

The bottom line of Ayer's position is to show the meaninglessness of metaphysical statements with respect to reality beyond human experience. As a result, he saw religious statements as not only meaningless but also an expression of emotions. For

Ayer, a meaningful statement must either be empirically verifiable or be tautological, that is, analytic or true by definition (Sprigge 2006).

A. J. Ayer and other logical positivists took David Hume as their hero and allowed his extreme empiricism to influence their arguments. David Hume had rejected every system, however subtle or ingenious, that was not founded on fact and observation. These systems, rejected by Hume, are expected to have covered a wide range of metaphysical and theological positions, claiming to have discovered principles that guarantee a deeper understanding of facts as well as ultimate reality (Morris & Brown 2019). Hume (1965) stated in his book, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, which havoc must we make if we take in our hand any volume-of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance-let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it to the flame: for it contains nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Despite their diversities in methodology, the meeting point of the logical positivists is their strong belief that language plays an important role in every circle of life and enhances the understanding of philosophy. According to Lawhead (2002:499), their interest is that any ideal language would be able to articulate clearly all scientific and logical truths while having difficulty expressing metaphysical facts. Lawhead (2002) further stated as thus:

Although the analytic philosophers proposed many different theories of language and methods of attacking philosophical problems, they all embraced three fundamental doctrines: 1. Philosophical puzzles, problems and contradictions are not found in the world, but in the things, we say about the world. 2. Philosophical problems can first be clarified and then solved or dissolved by either analyzing or reforming the way that language works and if any problem remains that cannot be resolved in this way, they are pseudo-problems and are not worth worrying about.

The question at this point is: what role did the later Wittgenstein's language philosophy play in strengthening the position of logical positivism? Although the latter attempted to undermine metaphysics or religion as well as religious statements, such as statements about God, later Wittgenstein himself was less dogmatic, pointing to things that, although unswayable, could be shown. Another important question is whether the logical positivists, with all their philosophical output, were able to solve the problem of language. The answer is no. This is because the movement deviated from the core of its discussion to launch an attack on metaphysics, thereby committing a straw-man fallacy. The next section would examine the mild and more accommodating approach of the later Wittgenstein to the problem of language.

The Language - Game Theory of Wittgenstein

The question at this point is: how did Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* complement the position of logical positivism? What was his later discovery about the nature of language that resulted in the paradigm shift from language as a logical expression to language as a game?

Wittgenstein's language philosophy falls under the analytic movement called "The Ordinary Language Philosophers." The ordinary language philosophers are known for their position that the traditional philosophical problems are rooted in a misunderstanding of how words are ordinarily used to convey meaning in non-philosophical contexts. For Wittgenstein, a philosopher is simply an analyst who should be devoted to the clarification of thought. Wittgenstein's philosophical theories are divided into his first and later works.

In his earlier writing, Wittgenstein's work was seen as a precursor to the anti-metaphysics and anti-religious crusade of logical positivism. He averred that the philosopher has no business constructing metaphysics or speculative systems. Wittgenstein arrived at the forgoing conviction, through his picture theory of meaning. In this theory, he maintained that reality must be pictured by propositions in their elementary form. In other words, a proposition must be considered on the basis that it reveals the state of affairs in the external world (Wittgenstein 1953). His dictum, "The limit of my language means the limit of my world," was used to explain his belief that if one cannot describe something in words, then such a thing does not exist.

Wittgenstein's early work sheds light on a generation of the logical positivist movement and the critical analytic philosophers, who took time to refute a set of what they called unverifiable "pseudo statements." With Wittgenstein, they claimed that because one cannot speak, one must remain silent. This ideology tries to debunk metaphysical and theological statements on the basis that they lack correspondence with external realities. By correspondence, the theory states that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined only by its relationship to the world or a given state of affairs (Timerayner 2021).

In his later philosophy, also known as the later Wittgenstein, he claimed to have discovered a new theory to counter or eliminate the inadequacies of the earlier one. He called it *game theory*. In his book, *Philosophical Investigation* (1953), he rejects his initial position on the conceptual confusion surrounding language use as not the root of most philosophical problems. According to Pine (2012:166), Wittgenstein admitted that his *Tractatus* broke its own rules, adding that after climbing it, one had to kick away the ladder that led there. However, he maintained his primary position that the task of the philosopher is to reduce linguistic confusions, thereby dissolving rather than solving many philosophical problems.

Unlike his *Tractatus*, the central argument in the *Philosophical Investigation* is that language does not have a simple function of pointing at or picturing reality. Rather, language is a complicated phenomenon that reveals its nature when we carry out a careful study of our activities and the role language plays in these activities.

The *Language-Game-Theory* was a critique of logical positivism. It is a movement from the primary foundation of logic to the ideal nature of the world. At this point, language grew beyond the natural sciences to depict the natural form of the wider world. At this point, it was pointed out that language has multiple and diverse interpretations; language is used to command, tell jokes, abuse, describe events, ask questions, etc. The game theory is found in one of Wittgenstein's seminar papers, the "Brown Book" of 1934, and elaborated in his later *Philosophical Investigation* published in 1953, ten years after the *Tractatus*. In furtherance of this argument, Wittgenstein reduced language to a game. In the game theory, he likened language to a tool box in a workshop. The furniture box in a workshop contains different tools, and each of the tools has its own specific functions. For instance, the hammers, nails, saw, etc., have their functions, and so too does language. According to him, to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.

Popkin (1999:637) argues that each of the games is said to be fully complete in itself, and each describes a possible situation, such as one in which the builder is speaking to an assistant. Language at this point, is likened to a game, which is played strictly according to rules known by the players of such game. Popkin (1999:637) posits as thus:

Curiously enough, a "language game" is neither simply a game nor simply a use of certain linguistic expressions, though both of these features are frequently present in language games. Rather, a language game is a description (depending on the context) of a slice of everyday human activity, including such practices as affirming, doubting, believing, following rules and interacting with others in multifarious ways. Language games refer not only to individual human activities but to those that are common to the whole community. Their scope thus also comprises such institutions as governments, universities, banks, the military, and so forth.

Pursuant to Popkin's position, Foord (2013) states that the classic example of a language-game is the so-called builder's language introduced in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Foord quoted Wittgenstein to have stated as thus:

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder *A* and an assistant *B*. *A* is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. *B* has to pass the stones, in the order in which *A* needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". *A* calls them out; *B* brings the stone, which he has learnt to bring at such- and-such a call. Conceive this as a complete primitive language (Wittgenstein cited in Foord: 2013).

Later, "this" and "there" are added (with functions analogous to the functions these words have in natural language) and "a, b, c, d" as numerals. An example of its use: builder A says "four slabs there" and points, and builder B counts four slabs, "a, b, c, d," and moves them to the place pointed to by A. The builder's language is an activity into which is woven something we would recognize as language, but in a simpler form. This language game resembles the simple forms of language taught to children, and Wittgenstein asks that we conceive of it as a complete primitive language for a tribe of builders.

These rules, according to Wittgenstein, are dynamic and not numerous. In other words, to understand language, one must strictly study the rules that guide language. These rules contain information and expressions arising from the different sentences (which makes them numerous to study). Like the furniture box, language has a variety of functions and usages and has rules for proper application. With this theory, Wittgenstein seems to have taken a revolutionary step to counter A. J. Ayer, David Hume, and the earlier Logical Positivist movement.

The Limiting Logic in Wittgenstein's Game Theory

The language-game theory is obviously central to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigation. However, it seems more elusive to comprehend than the theory of language espoused in the *Tractatus*. This is due to the fact that language in this scenario is not limited to spoken words, but rather a semiotic practice by concerned members of a specific field to perform concrete actions. Xanthos (2006), in his example of the language game, likened it to a legislature, trying to interpret a law; their interpretations as laws presuppose the concepts of rights, duties, obligation, possibility, responsibilities, action, etc., which compose the grammar of this language game. Further actions, such as giving orders and obeying them, playing, acting, singing, etc., come with rules that must be practiced.

One of game theory's limitations is its conditioning nature. The activities of the game lack randomness but adhere strictly to the rules described in the game. Xanthos (2006) supports this argument thus:

On an infinitely larger scale, the language game gravitates towards a common idea: our ways of interacting with signs are rule-guided and we need to bring this rule to light.... They are agreed upon, in the sense that we cannot disagree with the rules of a language game. That would simply mean that playing that particular game, there is not a choice in the matter and they are not to be discussed in advance.

Man is the measure of all things says Protagoras. To make choice is an essential character of beings. In that regard, it is seemingly impossible to subject man to certain forms of dogma. In the course of playing the game, if one sees an outdated rule, Wittgenstein claims that one cannot change the rule but has to follow it strictly. It makes it easier to believe that the rule of his language game has no room for new inventions,

striping the player (man) of the ability to think outside the box. This brings about the dogmatic nature of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Another challenge in the language games is his analogy of the tool box. He maintained thus:

Think of the tools in a tool box: pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue pot, glue, nails and screws.... The functions of these words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. And in both cases, there are similarities (Wittgenstein 1953:11).

True, each tool in a toolbox has a purpose, as Wittgenstein claimed. Nonetheless, depending on the circumstances surrounding the user, some of the tools serve a variety of purposes. For instance, pliers are known as a mechanical tool used to pick up objects. The same pliers can also be used to hit or bend the nail in the absence of a hammer. According to Hussein (2020:11–12), we should not be misled by the regular appearance of the pliers when finding out the range of functions such a tool can undertake. As Wittgenstein observed, this approach to meaning implies that clear-cut definitions are deceptive.

Wittgenstein applied game theory to religion to explain how believers of the same faith play the same game and understand the context of their game. That is to say, it would be very difficult for an outsider to understand religious language if one is not already a part of the religion. In other words, to claim that God exists is based on the players' convictions in accordance with the rules guiding them. On the other hand, since logical positivists have no understanding of the rules of religious games, it would be wrong for the positivists to debunk religious statements as pseudo-statements. With this, Wittgenstein believes he has countered the members of the Vienna Circle.

Notwithstanding, if the goal of language, as the Ordinary Language Philosophers posit, is to communicate meaning, then even religious language should not be left out. Should Wittgenstein be interpreted as holding that a non-member of a group cannot possibly study and understand another group's language game? For instance, he could mean that no Catholic priest can comfortably take up a marriage class because marriage, on its own, is a context with a language game with rules only understood by married people. Wittgenstein played ignorant to the fact that; the society is made of structures. Each of these structures, as he posits, should have their own language games, understood by them alone. Thus, should every structure try to play their games according to rules and understanding, not minding what happens to those outside the context, it will create rooms for envy and striving. And it will throw the society into confusion resulting from a misunderstanding of language. These and more, are possible logical limits of the game theory of Wittgenstein.

Conclusion

As lofty as Wittgenstein's language game theory may appear, it has its painful limitations. The emphasis on rules deprives users of the instrument of the creative use of the instrument. For instance, the use of language in a stipulative definition would be understood within the context of the new Wittgenstein as an aberration. But that is a legitimate use for the instrument. So, the logic of language proposed in the *Philosophical Investigation* is not only dogmatic but also limiting.

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