

THE LATER WITTGENSTEIN AND INTEGRATIONAL LINGUISTICS

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The later works of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein have inspired and guided the integrationist critique of orthodox linguistics. However, there are important divergences between a Wittgensteinian approach to language and an integrational linguistics.

I should begin with a confession. This paper is not about the later Wittgenstein, but about integrationist interpretation of Wittgenstein. With some condensing for the sake of brevity, three interpretations can be identified: the rhetorical interpretation, the games interpretation, and the normative interpretation.

The rhetorical interpretation emphasises Wittgenstein's questioning of traditional philosophical ways of seeing language. It is illustrated by statements such as the following: 'What is your aim in philosophy? To show the fly the way out of the fly bottle.' (*PI* S. 309) and 'But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? – There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.' (*PI* S. 23). One can see from the former that the rhetorical interpretation can be said to free theorists from the constraints of their academic subject; from the latter, that this may be done by questioning the status of the metalinguistic terminology which the theorist has inherited. The deployment of this questioning strategy in integrational linguistics begins with *The Language Makers* (1980), in which Roy Harris examines the influence of various cultural traditions on the development of the European linguistic tradition. Wittgenstein is an important figure in this exposition as he challenges the surrogationalism of the Western tradition. As Harris says,

It is no accident that Wittgenstein chose precisely the metaphor of games to epitomise his own eventual convictions about language. For on one view the most radical alternative to a surrogational concept of languages is to deny altogether the validity of looking outside the language-using in search of any explanation of its significance. (1980: 58)

Although this quotation clearly relies on a games interpretation of Wittgenstein, what is significant about it is that from the games analogy is derived the rhetorical strength for

questioning one of the most powerful approaches to language within the Western philosophical and grammatical tradition.

This interpretation holds the centre in Talbot Taylor's *Mutual Misunderstanding* (1992). In the concluding chapter Taylor asks,

If, therefore, for one reason or another, we come to want to escape the rhetorical consequences of treating reflexive commonplaces as expressions of belief, and yet we do not want to court the absurdity of denying that we believe them, what can we do? (1992: 244)

He answers this question with a reference to Wittgenstein:

One possible strategy involves comparing the locutions of practical metadiscourse to the elements of other behavioural practices. This strategy is exemplified in the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein... (ibid.)

If the above commonplaces are compared to citing the rules of a game, Taylor holds, they will not be seen to result in empirical hypotheses about language. Not that, according to Taylor, Wittgenstein is to be read as offering games as a definitive conceptual basis for language:

Analogously, it is not Wittgenstein's intention to reveal that the right way of seeing practical metadiscursive locutions – such as “Red means THIS” – is as the rules of a game... (ibid.: 249).

That is to say, Taylor is using Wittgenstein rhetorically, as a means of destabilising the power of orthodox linguistic theorising.

The rhetorical interpretation of the later Wittgenstein leaves open the question of what he takes language to be. One reading of Wittgenstein answers this question by supposing him to be talking about language as normative behaviour. In *Philosophical Investigations* one finds comments such as the following:

F.P. Ramsey once emphasized in conversation with me that logic was a ‘normative science’. I do not know exactly what he had in mind, but it was doubtless closely related to what only dawned on me later: namely, that in philosophy we often *compare* the use of words with games and calculi which have fixed rules, but cannot say that someone who is using language *must* be playing such a game. (PI S. 81)

“Are you not really a behaviourist in disguise? Aren't you at bottom really saying that everything except human behaviour is a fiction?” – If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction. (PI S. 307)

An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess. In so far as I do intend the construction of a sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak the language in question. (PI S. 337)

The point here is not that our sense-impressions can lie, but that we understand their language. (And this language like any other is founded on convention.) (*PIS*. 355)

The phrases 'normative science', 'grammatical fiction of human behaviour', 'situation of human customs and institutions', and 'founded on convention' all point to a conception of language as a set of social norms, with an existence in the behaviour of a community. This normative interpretation plays a role in Michael Toolan's *Total Speech* (1996). As he says:

Language is essentially a flexible practice, shaped by profound interacting principles of self-awareness, normativity, other orientedness, and rational risk taking, integral to the larger phenomenon of risk-entailing puzzle working entailed in life itself. (1996: 12-13)

One should point out that Toolan says 'normativity' and not 'norms' here, and that he offers this as only one factor shaping language in the context of puzzle-solving life. However, the importance of normativity is made clear in the following passage:

Individuals are born into highly socialized normative communities, within which they are taught to find their own socialized normative place. As a result, although language is never a code, nevertheless it is quite apparent that individuals and groups – especially subordinated and disempowered ones, although here the issue of what constitutes subordination must not be prejudged – may be habituated to a code-like predictability of usage, forms, and meanings. (*ibid.*: 18)

Normativity for Toolan accounts for the apparently rule-directed and social-institutional character of human language behaviour, but at the same time opens language perception to the political nuances of social context. In formulating this context Toolan makes explicit reference to Wittgenstein:

Signs are interpreted first and foremost on the basis of the relation they seem to maintain with co-occurring signs in the local integrated economy that the language user is actively negotiating. By the local integrated economy I mean here something approximating to what Wittgenstein calls a 'form of life' (or, potentially more misleadingly, 'a language game'), or what Firth called 'restricted languages'...or what Levinson has termed an 'activity type'. (*ibid.*: 162).

Here Toolan has introduced the term 'local integrated economy' as an object of study for integrational linguistics, subsuming the Wittgensteinian terms 'form of life' and 'language game', as well as Firth's 'restricted language' and Levinson's 'activity type'. This suggests a powerful impetus for the normative interpretation of Wittgenstein in integrational linguistics: In order for the integrationist to have something to do, something to look at, he/she must maintain that language is something, and this something must have a locus. This tendency to localise language as normative behaviour in a communicational context appears not only in Toolan's work, but also in Taylor's and Love's. It can be seen to arise from the demands made on integrationists by virtue of their oppositional position in the field or discourse of linguistics. In the face of a well-established and highly formalised (if not well-founded) conception of language in orthodox linguistics, what does integrational linguistics have to offer? Something of this discursive pressure can be seen in Toolan's defence of Baker and Hacker, Itkonen, and Kripke against Pateman's arguments for a realist linguistics:

In elevating the hypothesized mental mechanism – the genetic grammatical mechanism that might underlie all actual languages – as the major focus of linguistics, the exploration of vast areas of language, as a normative set of practices, is deliberately neglected. (ibid.: 314)

Here language as a ‘normative set of practices’ is put forward as the worthy object of study, instead of the ‘hypothesized mental mechanism’ targeted by orthodox linguistic theory. This move answers the demands of the discourse (What are you doing? What are you looking at?), while leaving open the definition of language and its connection with other social interactive behaviour, particularly politics.

The normative interpretation can be seen as translating Wittgenstein’s term ‘language game’ into a social reality, that is, language is like a game in that it is a set of practices, in this case normative. Another possible interpretation of the term ‘language game’ would be to read it as expressing a social reality, that language, in so far as it can be understood, is to be understood as a kind of game. This is the basis of a games interpretation of Wittgenstein, which emphasises statements such as the following:

We can think of the whole process of using words in (2) [the builder’s language] as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games ‘language-games’ and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the process of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’. (PI S.7)

Here 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. (PI S.23)

When one shews someone the king in chess and says: ‘This is the king’, this does not tell him the use of this piece – unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point: the shape of the king. You could imagine his having learnt the rules of the game without ever having been shewn an actual piece. The shape of the chessman corresponds here to the sound or shape of the word. (PI S. 31)

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. [Note in margin: Only it is possible to be interested in a phenomenon in a variety of ways]. But we talk about it as we do about the pieces in chess when we are stating the rules of the game, not describing their physical properties.

The question ‘What is a word really?’ is analogous to ‘What is a piece in chess?’. (PI S. 108)

It is clear from these quotations that for Wittgenstein, language can be seen as a game, or set of related games, that this language-game is itself a form of life, and that the identity of the elements of the language-game depends on the rules which constitute their use. It is this interpretation of Wittgenstein which Roy Harris compares with Saussurean language theory in *Language, Saussure, and Wittgenstein* (1987):

In both Wittgenstein and Saussure discussion of grammar is bound up in various ways with discussion of rules; although more inextricable in Wittgenstein's case than in Saussure's. The concept 'rule' is one of the main links in the analogy between languages and games. Without it the analogy would limp badly, or break down altogether. At the same time, it is a vulnerable link, and one which gives rise to problems for both thinkers. (1987: 69).

In the course of his argument and point-by-point comparison of Saussure and Wittgenstein, Harris questions the basis of the analogy between language and games:

As far as communication is concerned, it is what the builder and his assistant successfully do which defines what is permissible, not vice versa. But it would be exactly the opposite if they were playing chess. (ibid.: 119)

That is to say, if communication is the goal of language, then the relationship between rule and behaviour is reversed. The behaviour of the interactants determines what is possible in communicational terms, whereas in a game, it is the rules which determine what is possible for the players. Harris amplifies the difference as follows, saying of those involved in communication:

There is no prior set of rules they have to conform to, because they are co-operating, not competing. They are free to use verbal signs in any way which will further that co-operation and get the job done. (ibid.: 120)

The purpose of the games interpretation is in a sense to provide a theoretically coherent reading of Wittgenstein and to illustrate both the power and limitation of such an analogy. Integrational linguistics is not about this interpretation:

It suggests, moreover, a preferable point of departure for any general enquiry into language: namely, that linguistic communication is the reaching of agreement by means of verbal signs in particular interactional episodes. Language starts there, and nowhere else: and that is also the point of departure for any sane alternative account to those which Saussure and Wittgenstein give us. (ibid.)

This brings me to the end of my discussion of integrationist interpretations of Wittgenstein. It can be seen from these interpretations that integrational linguistics has certain clear characteristics which relate to Wittgensteinian thought. First, it is critical; it does not accept or assume traditional and orthodox conceptions of language. Second, it is concerned with language as social and cultural behaviour set within particular communicational contexts. Third, it does not accept that this behaviour is rule-governed or norm-governed, but that it is about co-operation and arriving at agreement. That is to say, that language behaviour is political, and integrational linguistics is a political linguistics.

In this last sense, we see that integrational linguistics departs decisively from a Wittgensteinian model. The following quotation gives some sense of this:

Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not. People don't come to blows over it, for example. That is part of

the framework on which the working of our language is based (for example, in giving descriptions). (*PIS*. 240)

From an integrationist perspective, this statement is patently false. If mathematicians are like other academics, these disputes do break out. If academics are like other people, they do come to blows (verbal if not physical). Verbal blows like physical blows cause pain and achieve or fail to achieve ends, as do verbal and physical caresses. As children and as students, as parents and teachers, friends and citizens, we learn to take responsibility for our actions, verbal or otherwise, or we suffer the consequences. This is experiential bedrock, and it is the foundation of integrational linguistics. If we take it to be so, why doesn't Wittgenstein?

There is some evidence that, although Wittgenstein does not argue for a political interpretation of his work in his own academic writing (so far as I have been able to ascertain), he nevertheless held that his work has political relevance. Norman Malcolm relates the following anecdote in his memoir of Wittgenstein:

One time when we were walking along the river we saw a news-vendor's sign which announced that the German government accused the British government of instigating a recent attempt to assassinate Hitler with a bomb. This was in the autumn of 1939. Wittgenstein said of the German claim: 'It would not surprise me at all if it were true.' I retorted that I could not believe that the top people in the British government would do such a thing. I meant that the British were too civilized and decent to attempt anything so underhand; and I added that such an act was incompatible with the British 'national character'. My remark made Wittgenstein extremely angry. He considered it to be a great stupidity and also an indication that I was not learning anything from the philosophical training he was trying to give me. He said these things very vehemently, and when I refused to admit that my remark was stupid he would not talk to me any more, and soon after we parted. (1966: 30)

The key point in this anecdote is that Wittgenstein felt that his philosophical teaching could be brought to bear on the evaluation of a manifestly political circumstance. In 1944 he wrote to Malcolm about this incident:

I then thought: what is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any...journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for their own ends. (*ibid.*: 35)

If we take these words at face value, then at the very least it can be said that Wittgenstein himself saw a political significance in his own philosophy. Also, the quotation points to a possible reason for the absence of politics (majuscule or minuscule) in Wittgenstein's philosophical writing: Philosophy was just not done that way at that time (early to mid 20th century) in that place (Cambridge). Similarly, Wittgenstein's words can serve as a warning to integrationists. Much the same pressure is exerted on us as members of the academy, to leave politics out of our linguistics, to conceal it within ambiguous and concessive terminology such as 'normativity', or to corral it within academically acceptable topoi such as ethnicity, class and gender. If we give in to this pressure, we will find ourselves producing the same old academic products for the same old academic markets whilst leaving the dominant orthodoxy unscathed

and unassailed, within or without the academy. Worse still, we will fail to achieve the first step of the integrational programme or method: an awareness of the integrated character of our acts as linguists and academics, deriving from the political, relational, and agreeable nature of our linguistic experience.

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