

# Mind, Matter, and Language

## Lecture 13: Wittgenstein's Language Games

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# Early Wittgenstein

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# Early Wittgenstein

## Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)

- born to a wealthy industrial family, gave away his fortune in 1913
- become obsessed with the foundations of mathematics while studying aeronautical engineering
- studied with Russell in Cambridge
- retired from philosophy in 1920 after writing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
- returned to philosophy in 1929
- “His whole personality was commanding, even imperial.”



- 1\* Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.
- 1.1 Die Welt ist die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen,  
nicht der Dinge.
- 1.11 Die Welt ist durch die Tatsachen bestimmt und  
dadurch, dass es alle Tatsachen sind.
- 1.12 Denn, die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen bestimmt,  
was der Fall ist und auch, was alles nicht der Fall ist.
- 1.13 Die Tatsachen im logischen Raum sind die Welt.
- 1.2 Die Welt zerfällt in Tatsachen.
- 1.21 Eines kann der Fall sein oder nicht der Fall sein  
und alles übrige gleich bleiben.
- 2 Was der Fall ist, die Tatsache, ist das Bestehen  
von Sachverhalten.
- 2.01 Der Sachverhalt ist eine Verbindung von  
Gegenständen. (Sachen, Dingen.)
- 2.011 Es ist dem Ding wesentlich, der Bestandteil  
eines Sachverhaltes sein zu können.
- 2.012 In der Logik ist nichts zufällig : Wenn das Ding  
im Sachverhalt vorkommen kann, so muss die  
Möglichkeit des Sachverhaltes im Ding bereits  
präjudiziert sein.
- 2.0121 Es erschiene gleichsam als Zufall, wenn dem  
Ding, das allein für sich bestehen könnte, nach-  
träglich eine Sachlage passen würde.  
Wenn die Dinge in Sachverhalten vorkommen  
können, so muss dies schon in ihnen liegen.  
(Etwas Logisches kann nicht nur-möglich sein.  
Die Logik handelt von jeder Möglichkeit und alle  
Möglichkeiten sind ihre Tatsachen.)

## The Tractatus view of language

- Every meaningful sentence can be analysed in terms of atomic sentences.
- Every atomic sentence is a “picture” of an atomic state of affairs.
- Simple names denote simple objects (their meaning).
- An atomic state of affairs is a combination of simple objects.
- Statements of ethics, religion, and most of philosophy do not depict states of affairs. They are meaningless.

- 6.54 *My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.*
- 7 *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*

Wittgenstein, TLP (1921)



# Late Wittgenstein

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In his *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953), Wittgenstein develops a new perspective on language.

- The meaning of a word is not its referent.
- The meaning of a sentence is not a proposition.
- To learn the meaning of a word you have to learn how it is used.
- Words are not used to express ideas or beliefs.
- Uttering a sentence is making a move in a social practice: a **language game**.
- Language is essentially social. (No reduction to private sense-data.)



## Late Wittgenstein

*For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.*



What distinguishes a meaningful expression, like 'Edinburgh' or 'it is raining', from a meaningless string of sounds or scribbles?

- That it has a *reference*?
- That it has a *sense*?
- That it is associated with an *idea*?
- Wittgenstein: That its utterance has an established *use*.

*“When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. [...] Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.” (Augustine, Confessions)*



*These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.*



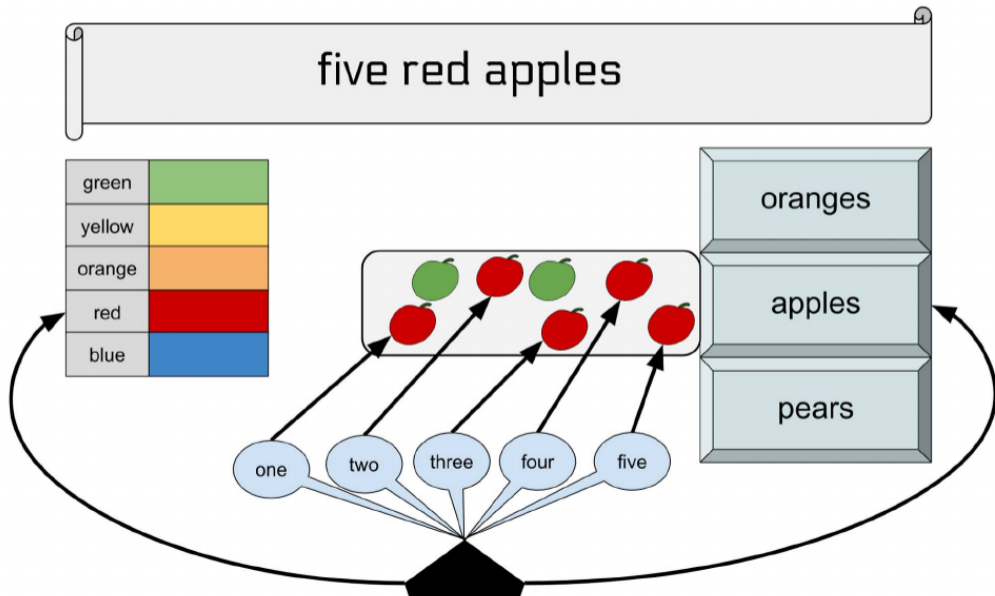
*If you describe the learning of language in this way you are, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like 'table', 'chair', 'bread', and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself.*



*Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked 'five red apples'. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked 'apples'; then he looks up the word 'red' in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers – I assume that he knows them by heart – up to the word 'five' and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. – It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words.*



# Late Wittgenstein



- Language is a social tool.
- By presenting the shopkeeper with the scribbles 'five red apples', you can cause him to perform certain actions.
- To explain what the shopkeeper does, we don't need to talk about reference, sense, or ideas.



*But what is the meaning of the word 'five'? – No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used.*



- To explain the meaning of **certain** words with a **certain** type of use, it can be useful to say that it picks out a certain object (or type of object).
- But this is only an elliptical way of specifying how the word is used.
- A word is not used to *refer* to something; words are used to buy food, give commands, recount past events, etc.
- Learning how words are used involves learning the social rules of society.

*“We name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk.” — [...] As if there were only one thing called “talking about a thing”. Whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences. Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions.*

*Water!*

*Away!*

*Ow!*

*Help!*

*No!*

*Are you inclined still to call these words “names of objects”?*



*Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. [...]*

*Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their application is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!*



*The term 'language-game' is meant to emphasize the fact that speaking a language is part of an activity, or a form of life.*

*Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:*

*Giving orders, and obeying them—*

*Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—*

*Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—*

*Reporting an event—*



*Speculating about an event—  
Forming and testing a hypothesis—  
Presenting the results of an experiment in tables  
and diagrams—  
Making up a story; and reading it—  
Play-acting—  
Singing catches—  
Guessing riddles—  
Making a joke; telling it—  
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—  
Translating from one language into another—  
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.*



## Divide and conquer

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## Divide and conquer

What would a complete description of how language is used in a community look like?

There are infinitely many sentences that can be used to do infinitely many things.

There must be systematic rules that generate this complexity.



One basic use of language is to convey information.

(This figures in many more specific kinds of activities: telling an anecdote, summarising a study, explaining why a request can't be fulfilled, issuing a warning, etc.)

We can systematise a large part of language use by giving a compositional semantics for **which** sentences are conventionally used to convey **which** information.

‘وعث رمل سيار’ —



‘it’s raining’ —



The truth-conditions we associate with sentences are a partial (implicit) specification of their use.

1. Speakers generally try to utter  $S$  only if  $p$ ;
2. Hearers generally assume that  $p$  if someone utters  $S$ .