II. Language

1. Speech as Action

Let us begin with language. At the point we have reached today, we can hardly begin directly with being or knowledge. Methodologically, it is more appropriate first to revisit the external device we use in philosophising about being or knowledge. Given that language is an indispensable device of philosophy, it is nevertheless difficult to describe it. Since we are almost always using language, it is close to us. When we talk about language, it is almost as if we were talking about ourselves. If it is difficult to talk about ourselves in the appropriate manner, it is just as difficult to talk about language in the appropriate manner.

An aphorism of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) tells us: "Words are a kind of mathematics in letters for the natural signs of the concepts which consist in gestures and postures, the cases of nouns are the signs."[1] The natural signs of concepts, then, are not words, but gestures and postures. Words are only abbreviations for these natural signs. Language, in its origin, is not verbal language, but body language. Verbal language also uses parts of the body, the larynx and the mouth. To that extent, it, too, is body language. We do use our larynx and our mouth for speaking, as a result of the development of human beings from other forms of life, that is, as a result of evolution.

Evolution could equally have taken a different course. We could talk with our hands or feet or stomach, although this

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[1] Lichtenberg, Aphorismen, Sudelbücher, Booklet A, § 103. Not found in Hollingdale.

would make communicating complicated facts more difficult. But the fact that speech was originally a behaviour of the body, and verbal language, as it were, only an extension of our behaviour, has an important consequence. Like the movement of our body parts, for example, our hands and feet, the use of our speech organs is an action. Just as we perform body acts when we walk, run, wave, greet, so we perform verbal acts when we speak. Socrates was one of the earliest thinkers to say that "speaking is a kind of action".[2]

This becomes even clearer if we compare language with a game, say, the game of chess. Just as we perform actions when we move the chess pieces, so we also perform actions when we use words. Accordingly, Wittgenstein introduces the concept of linguistic action as follows: "For us language is a calculus; it is characterised by *linguistic activities*."[3] What he means by calculus becomes clear if we think again of a "kind of mathematics of letters" or a game of chess. In chess, we have various pieces, the king, the queen, the rook, etc. These are determined by the rules we follow in playing with them. Likewise, we have a diversity of words in language, which are determined by the rules we follow in using them. Language, then, can be described as calculus in so far as it is a system of linguistic terms and the rules governing the corresponding actions. Wittgenstein calls "the whole of language and all the activities with which it is interwoven the 'language game'."[4] But since language is rooted in speech, it has become customary to refer, not to linguistic activities, but to "speech acts". John Rogers Searle (born in 1932), for example, wrote a book entitled *Speech Acts* (1969). A

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[2] Plato, Crat., 387b. Transl. Ferber.

[3] Wittgenstein, PG, Part 1, Chapter 10, § 140, 193. Transl. Kenny.

[4] Wittgenstein, PI, § 7. Transl. Anscombe.

speech act is the production of a linguistic expression according to specific rules.[5]

Just as we perform body acts in different ways and for different purposes, so, too, speech acts can be of different kinds and serve different purposes. Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, lists the following examples: "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".[6]

2. Three Functions of Linguistic Action

Just as life evolves, time and again new speech functions, that is, new aims of speech, can develop, while others die. Here I would like to highlight only three that occur particularly often: the descriptive, the expressive and the directive.

By the descriptive function of language, we mean the construction of true or false sentences that convey true, false or merely probable information. We find this language function particularly in weather forecasts, stock exchange reports, reports about conditions on the roads, etc.

The expressive function is found in exclamations such as "Ouch", "Oh" or "Hey". But it is also prevalent in poems, as for

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[5] Searle, Speech Acts, Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 4, 16.2.
[6] Wittgenstein, PI, § 23. Transl. Anscombe.

instance in Gottfried Benn's (1886-1956) lines: "Roses, god-knowshow so beautiful, / the city in green skies / in the evening / in the transience of the years!" Here nobody will accuse the poet of false information because he calls the evening sky green. The question of truth or falsehood clearly comes second to the melancholy tinged by hope that overcomes the aging poet at the sight of roses. However, this expressive function is by no means restricted to expressing feelings. It can also arouse feelings, just as the crying of a child, a woman or a man can either express or evoke feelings.

Finally, the directive function: This occurs in commands such as "Look out!" or "Stop!" and in requests such as "Please rise!"

However, these three central language functions rarely appear in their pure form. Very often, poems also convey information, and scientific reports also contain exclamations and value judgments which seem to be phrased objectively, but which are not always objective: "They talk about the matter in hand, but they mean themselves" (Karl Kraus, 1874-1936). The directive language function appears equally rarely in isolation, except perhaps when used in the armed forces or in speaking to children and animals. As a rule, adults cannot simply be given orders. Nor is it enough to send out a cheque bearing the words "For the poor". It is necessary to give further information about the nature of the poverty and the purpose of the gift in order to show that the intention is not merely to exploit the donors' generosity, but also to spend the money sensibly. But even if there can be no doubt that the money will be used for a positive purpose, it is still necessary to awaken good feelings about that purpose. To arouse feelings, then, the expressive language function is also needed. This shows that the three different language functions are by no means separate. An effective communication uses all three functions jointly.

These three language functions seem to correspond to three different grammatical forms. The descriptive function occurs mainly in declarative sentences, the expressive in exclamative sentences and the directive in imperative sentences. It may therefore seem possible to infer the function directly from the grammatical form, but this is not the case. Just as the same smile can be ambiguous and suggest, for instance, affection, irony or *schadenfreude*, so the same speech act can serve a diversity of functions. The declarative sentence, "It was very nice", after a lecture can express the feeling that the lecture was very good. After an enjoyable evening, it can convey the host's invitation to the guests to come again, while – uttered in the right circumstances – it can be a phrase designed to make the guests take their leave. Many poems and prayers are dressed up in declarative sentences, but primarily express a feeling. When the psalmist writes: "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet",[7] he is probably trying to express a sense of security. An order can be clothed in the form of an interrogative or an optative sentence. Instead of "Bring me a coffee!", we may say "Could I have a coffee?" Politeness actually bids us do this. An exclamation such as "It's very nice here!" can have a directive function, for instance, to make a person stay in a given place. All this goes to show that the grammatical form often indicates the function, but that there is no necessary connection between the two.

There is no necessary connection even between content and function. When we talk about the weather, we are not, as a rule, trying to deliver a weather report. Rather, we want to start a conversation or we simply want to say something: "Whenever

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[7] Psalm, XCI 13. Transl. King James Bible.

people talk about the weather I always feel quite certain that they mean something else" (Oscar Wilde, 1854-1900). It is possible to say "yes" and to mean "no", or vice versa. In a letter, we sometimes have to read not only the lines, but also between the lines. When Socrates asks a question about a trifle, he means the most important thing by this trifle. When we speak ironically we mean just the contrary of what we say. It would sometimes seem as if humans have been given language in order to conceal their thoughts. The crux of the matter is that there is no mechanical method allowing us to infer the function of a sentence from its form (or its content). To do so, we must try to interpret the meaning of the individual acts of speech or writing, which can only be learnt through experience and reflection. This interpretation alone will tell us what the speech acts mean.[8]

3. Expression and Meaning

But how do we get from the mere form of an expression to the meaning? The meaning does not appear as something separate from the expression. When we hear a person utter a word or a sentence, we not only hear noises, but are also aware of content. When we read a book title or a headline, we not only make out letters, but also a topic. When we read the word "beware", we do not simply scan the letters b, e, w, etc., but we also hear a warning; and when we unexpectedly come across a placard bearing the notice "Beware of falling rocks", we may experience a small shock. When we are fretting over a delayed train and we suddenly catch a glimpse of a poster bearing the slogan "Let the train take the strain", we may start laughing. In all these cases, we not only see letters or hear sounds, but we also

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[8] I am indebted here to Copi, Introduction to Logic, Chapter 2, 68-71.

recognise content. By a word, we usually mean both the physical event – a bundle of sound waves or scribbles on paper – and the meaning. Likewise, by a sentence we usually mean both the physical event and the meaning.

In any case, that is how we perceive spoken and written language directly. What we perceive directly is also called appearance or phenomenon. "Phenomenon" comes from the Greek *phainómenon*, meaning "that which appears". But in phenomenology, that is, the doctrine of appearances, founded by Husserl and carried further by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), it becomes a technical term for a specific method of considering objects. The decisive factor in this method is that it tries to dispense with all prior knowledge and to see objects as they present themselves in their own essence. Only does an object seen in this light become a phenomenon in the phenomenological sense, in which it is defined by Heidegger as "the entity's showing itself in its self sameness".[9] However, what shows itself through itself is often hidden by our preconceived notions. Therefore, we can call the revelation of what is given to our perception directly the phenomenological description.

The phenomenological description can be resolved into its elements. To resolve something is to analyse it. To analyse comes from the Greek *analýō*, which means "I resolve". When we analyse, or resolve, the phenomenological description into its elements, we have to distinguish between the expression or, rather, the form of expression, and the meaning. The expression is the single occurrence of a word, while the form of expression is the recurrent shape of this word. The expression "Attention" is the single occurrence of that linguistic sign, here and now. The form of expression of the linguistic sign "Attention", on the

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[9] Heidegger, BaT, Chapter 2, § 7, Section A, 31. Transl. Macquarrie and Robinson.

other hand, occurs time and again. We can read it on the road, in the train, at the airport and elsewhere. The expressions "attention", "Achtung" and "attenzione" in English, German and Italian differ in both usage and form, as do the sentences "Attention please", "Achtung bitte" and "Attenzione per favore". Nevertheless, we assume that the meaning is the same, at least in principle if not perhaps in all the nuances and connotations. Therefore, meaning and expression, or form of expression, cannot be the same. Expression, or form of expression, pertains to syntax, meaning to semantics.

Syntax comes from the Greek verb *syntáttō*, which means "I assemble" or "I arrange". In school grammar, syntax means the theory of sentences. In the philosophy of language, according to the terminology introduced by the American philosopher Charles William Morris (1901-1979), it means the theory of "combinations of signs without regard for their specific significations or their relation to the behavior in which they occur".[10]

Semantics comes from the Greek verb *semaínō*, "I give a sign" or "I mark". Semantics is the theory of what these expressions, or forms of expression, indicate. In fact, they indicate meanings. Therefore, again according to the terminology of C. W. Morris, semantics is the theory of the "meaning of signs in all modes of signifying".[11] It is the meanings of the signs that relate the expressions, or forms of expression, to the objects. That is why semantics, like syntax, is not merely the theory of the relations between expressions. Rather, it is also the theory of the relations between the expressions and the objects.

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[10] Morris, Signs, Language, and Behavior, Chapter 8, Section 1, 219.
[11] Morris, ibid.

4. What Is the Meaning of an Expression?

How do we get from syntax to semantics? Syntax alone cannot deliver semantics. It must be joined by something new that endows the syntax, that is, the physical constructs, with the added dimension of meaning. What is this new entity? It is not as tangible as the physical events and forms of events. Nevertheless, it exists, because otherwise the expressions, or forms of expressions, would have no meaning.

The obvious answer is that merely syntactical, or physical, events are transformed into linguistic events by ideas. Ideas are not physical, but psychological, more exactly, psychic events, that is, events in the soul or psyche. Expressions, therefore, obtain their meaning from psychic events. This thesis was already advocated by Aristotle (for "affections in the soul" read "idea"):

> Spoken words are the symbols of affections in the soul and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same.[12]

Written words, then, are symbols of spoken ones. But while writing and speech differ from one person to another, the ideas are identical, and so are the objects of those ideas. This relationship can be visualised in a triangle, known as the "semiotic triangle"[13]:

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[12] Aristotle, De int., Chapter 1, 16a3-8. Transl. Ackrill.

[13] For the original version of the "semiotic triangle", see Ogden/Richards, Meaning of Meaning, Chapter 1, 11.

Idea

Spoken sign ································· Object
Written sign
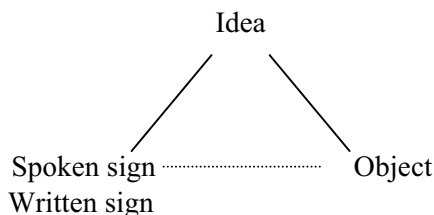
The written signs refer to the spoken signs, the spoken signs to the ideas, and the ideas to the objects. The decisive factor is that the words do not refer to the objects directly, but by way of the idea of the objects.[14] The word "house", for example, does not refer to the object known as a house directly, but only by way of the idea of a house.

Here an objection arises, which was first stated by Frege: "Ideas need an owner. Things of the outer world are on the contrary independent."[15] The owner of an idea is an individual who has an idea. How can ideas have different owners and yet be identical? I have my idea of a house and you have yours. I may be thinking of a tall house and you of Anne Hathaway's cottage. But we cannot compare our own ideas with the ideas of others directly. We cannot slip into the consciousness of other people and check whether their ideas are the same as ours – however much a poet may wish to render his thoughts just as he thinks them. Thus, Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) writes in his "Letter from one poet to another": "If I could delve into my breast, seize my thought and place it without any further ingredients

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[14] Cf. Ogden/Richards, ibid. "Between the symbol and the referent there is no relevant relation other than the indirect one, which consists in its being used by someone to stand for a referent."

[15] Frege, Gedanke, 351.Transl. Geach and Stoothoff, 334.

into yours: then, to tell the truth, the whole inner demand of my soul would be fulfilled."

But let us assume that we can slip into the consciousness of other people. What would then be the criterion that enables us to judge whether their ideas of a house are the same as ours? Each criterion could again only be an idea, which would need another criterion to ascertain whether it is still the same when I have slipped into the consciousness of other people, and so on to infinity.[16] Therefore, the meaning of an expression cannot be an idea. An idea is something subjective or private, but meaning is neither subjective nor private.

To counter the objection that ideas are subjective, Frege thought up the term "sense". He defines "sense" as the "mode of presentation" of an "object", "this word taken in the widest range".[17] Like the object, the sense does not differ from one person to another: It is not subjective, but objective. Therefore, words do not refer to objects directly by way of ideas, but by way of ideas *and* sense. This relationship can be illustrated by the semiotic triangle as follows:
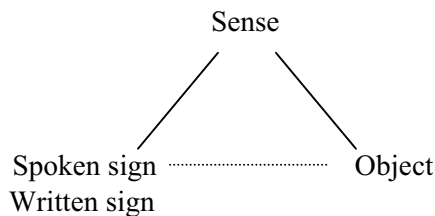

But here again, we can ask the question we have already put to our ideas. After all, to say that ideas are the same for all of us

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[16] Frege, Gedanke, 351-352. Transl. Geach and Stoothoff, 327.
[17] Frege, Sinn and Bedeutung, 144. Transl. Geach and Black, 153.

is a postulate that has not been proven so far and probably cannot be proven at all (cf. p. 46). Likewise, it is only a postulate that the "sense", or "mode of presentation", of an object at any particular time is the same for all. It is a legitimate and quite plausible postulate that basically we mean the same thing when we say "house". Otherwise, we would never be able to come to any agreement about the different houses. But what is the criterion for the identity of the sense? It is supposed to be independent of the behaviour by which we demonstrate that we know what a house is when, in response to the invitation, "Go into a house", we go into a house. The construction of an identical sense seems even more artificial than the assumption of ideas as an explanation of communication through words. That is why many philosophers find the identical sense obscure.

According to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, it is neither the idea nor the sense that provides an expression with a meaning; rather, the meaning of the word "meaning", in many of its occurrences, can be explained as follows: "The meaning of a word is its use in the language."[18] It is the use that turns the physical thing – the bundle of sound waves or the scribbles on paper – into a language sign. This relationship can again be represented in the semiotic triangle as follows:

Use

Spoken sign ·· Object
Written sign

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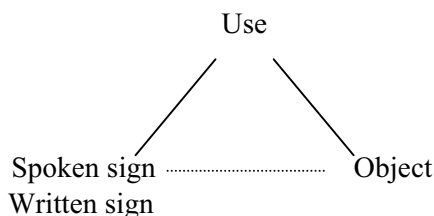
[18] Wittgenstein, PI, § 43. Transl. Anscombe.

This means that it is neither the idea nor the sense that endows an expression with meaning, but that it is use that relates the expression to the object. Use takes its bearings from our habits in using words. But when do we all follow the same habit in using a word?

5. Meaning and Rule

This question concerns a special case of following a rule. When we use an expression to describe an object, we do so in accordance with a rule. When, for example, we use the expression "house", we follow the rule that bids us use a physical form of expression – the spoken or written sign "house" – that corresponds to the object called house. Speaking means performing actions – in this instance, speech acts – according to specific rules. Speech is action guided by rules. Identity of meaning is a way of saying that we follow the same rule. But what does following the same rule mean?

The immediate answer is that we are dealing with a state of consciousness. But this would throw us back to the problem we have already mentioned – which is that states of consciousness are subjective and do not yield the common element that would allow us to follow the same rule. Moreover, a state of consciousness – like a memory – may deceive me about whether or not I follow the same rule. On its own, it does not provide a criterion for deciding whether I really follow the same rule or only believe that I am following it. Wittgenstein puts it like this: "And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a

rule would be the same thing as obeying it."[19] A state of con-
sciousness, then, does not guarantee that I am following the
same rule. A state of consciousness is something within me, or
an "inner process". But: "An 'inner process' stands in need of
outward criteria."[20]

Another possible answer is that it is a disposition that makes
us follow the same rule at any given time. A disposition is an
inclination. But here two more objections arise. We are told
how to use words by the rules of usage. In other words, the
rules of usage are rules for actions and they are normative. In
the English language community, I am expected to use the word
"house", and not some invented word, when I refer to a house. I
can, of course, call a house anything I like, for example,
"louse". But if I want others to understand that my house is
called "louse", but I do not actually live in or with a "louse", I
must bow to the rules of the language community and revert to
the use of "house". An inclination explains why one does some-
thing, but not why one should do something, that is, act accord-
ing to the norms of one's language community. Further, I can
apply the form of expression "house" to any number of houses.
But an inclination at best explains why I am acting that way in a
finite, limited number of cases, not why I act, and should act,
that way in an unlimited, possibly infinite, number of cases. An
inclination tells me as little as a state of consciousness does
about why I should use the same form of expression to name the
same things in, again, possibly an infinite number of cases. An
inclination, like a state of consciousness, does not entitle me to
apply the same form of expression to any number of new things,

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[19] Wittgenstein, PI, § 202. Transl. Anscombe.
[20] Wittgenstein, PI, § 580. Transl. Anscombe.

as the American philosopher Saul Aaron Kripke (born in 1940) explained in succession to Wittgenstein.[21]

This leaves only the possibility that it is the habits of a language community that cause me to use words according to certain rules. We follow the same rule when we succeed in understanding each other. Ultimately, this is trivial. Rather than solving the problem of how to account for all of us following the same rule, it only makes it disappear, as Wittgenstein believes. Therefore, it is not a psychological meaning, or sense, that determines the rule, but the rule that determines the psychological meaning and sense. It is not until I internalise the rule that a meaning emerges as an idea; it is not until I project it into the outside world that a sense emerges as a "mode of presentation".

We are of course free to use expressions very differently, for instance, to call a house a "louse". I can in fact invent a private language that I alone understand. But I would have to define that private language, not only when I revert to a public language, but also for myself, saying, for example, that "louse", for me, means "house". With such a language, I would also exclude myself from communicating with other people. I could, when greeting someone, lower my hand, instead of raising it, or stand on my head, but I would probably be declared a madman: That is how the existing customs of a language community cause me to perform linguistic actions according to the rules of that community. So we follow rules blindly, that is, without any justification by states of consciousness or inclinations. However, we are not wrong if we follow them as a result of social training. Our justification, or reason, for following the same rule, then, lies in the cause of that effect, that is, in the social

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[21] This point is developed in particular in Kripke, Wittgenstein on Rules, Chapter 2, 7-54.

training by a language community to which we have submitted since our childhood. So we copy the words and sentences of our parents and teachers. Our words are the words of others. We speak the language of the language community in which we grew up. We may also say that it is the *institutions* of the usage of a language community that cause us to follow the same rule on each occasion: "A game, a language, a rule is an institution."[22]

These institutions are embedded in the community's forms of life; they can change, albeit slowly. The social forms of life, in turn, are embedded in the biological form of life of the human species, especially the genetic endowments which enable us to speak not only with phonemes, but with words and sentences; this biological form of life can also change, albeit much more slowly, perhaps over millennia. But: "Only in the flux of life do words have their meaning."[23]

If a philosophy can be characterised by the astonishing things it accepts as ultimate ones, from Wittgenstein's perspective, they are the social facts of language usage.[24] They are the "primal or ur-phenomenon" that I have to accept because I cannot resolve it further. Thus, they resemble the "bed rock" by which "my spade is turned".[25] Here any doubt would become pointless, because such facts are the very conditions of doubt.

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[22] Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics, VI, 32.

[23] Wittgenstein, LS, § 913. Cf. Ferber, Lebensform oder Lebensformen, 270-276.

[24] See Bernays, 1959: "Perhaps the different philosophical standpoints can be characterised by the astonishing things they accept as ultimate ones. In Wittgenstein's philosophy, these are sociological facts." 5. Transl. Reck with small modifications by Ferber.

[25] Cf. Wittgenstein, PI §217: "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'." Transl. Anscombe.

Whoever voices a doubt as to whether we actually operate with language habits has to operate with language habits.

That is why such accidental empirical facts are exempt from doubt in practice. They are fundamental in so far as our knowledge, to the extent that we can express it in language, is built on such facts. If we were asked why we follow language habits, we would be able to answer with Wittgenstein that that is just what we do: "We can only *describe* and say human life is like that."[26]

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[26] Wittgenstein, BFBG, 31; "describe" emphasised. Transl. Miles.