Use, Understanding and Explanation of Meaning

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Abstract

P.M.S Hacker summarized characterizations of meaning by later Wittgenstein in three points. According to it, meaning is something "(ⅰ) being, or being determined by, its use; (ⅱ) being what is explained by an explanation of its meaning, which in turn is said to be a rule for its use; and (ⅲ) being what is understood when an expression is understood". I agree with him and accept his summary. In this paper, I try to clarify the relations of these three characterizations and, through it, show the Wittgenstein's conception of meaning. In section 2, I will explain Wittgenstein's conception of use and understanding. According to Wittgenstein, we must see the actual uses, not an object corresponding to an expression or one's internal states when it is understood, if we want to understand the meaning of it. In section 3, I will show that Wittgenstein thinks an expression must have its correctness conditions of uses, by seeing his discussion about rule-following. This raises the question what kind of correctness conditions the word "meaning" has. I section 4, I argue this question by explicating Wittgenstein's conception of explanation of meaning and contend that, according to Wittgenstein, the concept of meaning is something that classifies uses of expressions. Note that the conception of meaning as something that classifies uses of expressions does not in itself give the nature or the essence of meaning or use. An explanation of the meaning of an expression is itself a practice and has its own context. We must see the uses of the explanation in order to understand the meaning and the uses of an expression.

1   Introduction

P.M.S Hacker summarized characterizations of the meaning of an expression by later Wittgenstein in three points: "(ⅰ) being, or being determined by, its use; (ⅱ) being what is explained by an explanation of its meaning, which in turn is said to be a rule for its use; and (ⅲ) being what is understood when an expression is understood" (Hacker, 1996: 125). Hacker contrasted Wittgenstein's view of meaning with a traditional philosophical conception of language, called Augustinian picture. According to Hacker, "[Wittgenstein's philosophy of language] stands in dramatic contrast to philosophical theories of language rooted in Augustinian picture, hence with traditional idealist

conception inspired by Locke, with the realist conception which informed Russell's early philosophy and, in a different way, the *Tractatus*, as well as with Frege's conception of sense and meaning. It is equally opposed to behaviourist conceptions. It reorients reflections upon language away from the model of correlation, prizes it free from the lure of mystical mental processes of imagining or of language-independent activities of thinking. It repudiates conception of language as a calculus of definite rules on the model of the predicate calculus, rejecting the idea that speaking and understanding are activities of operating a calculus of such 'tacitly known' rules" (ibid.: 128). And, "It presents linguistic activities as inextricably interwoven with the tapestry of human life" (ibid.).

I completely agree with Hacker on his general points.[1] I agree with him that Wittgenstein characterized the meaning of an expression in the way Hacker claims. I also agree with him that Wittgenstein offered a use-centered conception of language, which turns our eyes to "the tapestry of human life", as opposed to the "Augustinian picture" of language. My aim here is to clarify the connections between Wittgenstein's three characterizations of meaning that Hacker points out, and to shed further light on Wittgenstein's conception of meaning.

2   Use and understanding

First, let us investigate two of Wittgenstein's characterizations of meaning, that is: characterizations of meaning as "being, or being determined by, its use"; and, "being what is understood when an expression is understood". Wittgenstein's claim that in order to understand the meaning of an expression, you must see its uses is now familiar. For example, consider the linguistic activity involved in the example wherein an individual is sent to a shop with a slip of paper inscribed with the words: "five red apples". This is the example Wittgenstein illustrates in the very beginning of *Philosophical Investigations*:

> 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 hearts—up to the word "five" and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. (PI 1)

To the question "What is the meaning of the word "five"?", Wittgenstein answers, "no such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used" (PI 1). According to Wittgenstein, we must not ask what kind of entity the meaning of an expression is, but, rather, see how it is used.

Wittgenstein criticizes the view according to which the meaning of an expression is an object corresponding to it. For example, if you say to someone, "This is 'red'", pointing to an object, he or she cannot understand what it is that corresponds to the word "red" unless he or she has mastered the use of the word "red" as a colour word (PI 33). Understanding the meaning of an expression

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1   Although I am a little bit skeptical about the correctness of his presentations of philosophers such as Locke, Russell and Frege.

does not consist in the grasping of the correspondence relation that is completely independent of that expression's uses. Such a notion is empty. If we are to understand the meaning of an expression, we must master the uses of it. Note that Wittgenstein does not claim that there is no object corresponding to an expression. Explanations such as "The word 'five' signifies the number five" or "The word 'red' signifies this color" could be useful in allaying some misunderstandings (PI 10). Wittgenstein's claim is that by giving a general explanation like "A word signifies an object" or "The meaning of an expression is the object corresponding to it", we lose sight of the multiplicity of our uses of expressions. The problem is, that by such a general explanation given by a philosopher, we think that we have understood the functions of expressions when, in fact, we have not.

Once we accept Wittgenstein's claim that we must see the actual uses of expressions, instead of giving a general explanation, we can see concepts like "meaning" or "understanding", which seemingly refer to states of mind, in a new light. For example, when we hear "cube", we behave differently from when we hear "triangular prism". We bring a cube, not a triangular prism, when we are asked, "Bring me a cube". We behave differently because we understand the meanings of "cube" and "triangular prism" differently. If there were no differences between our uses of expressions, it would be empty to speak of the differences in the understanding of meanings. Meaning must be manifested in our uses.[2] And, as far as it is manifested in our uses, the meaning of an expression is what is understood when that expression is understood. Wittgenstein claims that one must not think of understanding as one's internal state. If an image of a cube comes to mind upon hearing "cube", the hearers can behave differently; for, we can think of a method of projection according to which an image of a cube does fit a triangular prism. Thus, to have an image in one's mind is not enough: understanding of "cube" must be manifested in, say, one's reaction to the order "Bring me a cube" (PI 139).

Wittgenstein attacks not only a view that the understanding of an expression consists in having a corresponding image, but also the general tendency to consider the understanding of a word as one's internal state. To see the understanding of an expression as having an image; to think of a linguistic expression (PI 152); to have a special experience (PI 155); or, to have an intuition (PI 213); all of these are equally wrong. If you think of the understanding of an expression as any of these internal states, you assume that that understanding is states that are independent of uses. Consequently, you also assume that the relation between understanding and uses is external and accidental. In his argument in regards to "rule-following", Wittgenstein comments on understanding as follows:

> Try not to think of understanding as a 'mental process' at all.—For *that* is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, "Now I know how to go on," when, that is, the formula *has* occurred to me? —
>   In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process. (PI 154)

According to Wittgenstein, to understand an expression is not to have a mental process, or

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2   This point is further developed by Dummett (1976).

to be in any particular state that is independent of its uses, but to master a technique or acquire an ability to use it systematically.[3] That is to say, "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique" (PI 199).

3   Correctness condition of use

To understand the meaning of an expression, you must see its uses. Understanding is not a mental state which is independent of uses, but, rather a mastering of the technique of using an expression. Now, what kind of technique is it? Although an expression can be used in many ways, what is important is that, in order for the expression to be meaningful, there must be a distinction between its correct and incorrect uses.

Wittgenstein employs the following example in his discussion on rule-following:[4] a pupil is told "+2" by a teacher. He or she writes down a number series 2, 4, 6, 8... 996, 998, 1000. He or she then continues, 1004, 1008... Upon this, the teacher stops the pupil and instructs, "Look what you are doing. Do it the same as before!". However, the pupil doesn't understand and says, "But I went on in the same way." In this case, if the pupil is not merely playing a prank, how can the teacher convince him or her that "1002" must be written after "1000"? When the teacher said "+2", he or she was not consciously thinking that "1002" must be written after "1000". And, even if he or she was indeed thinking in such a manner, it would be impossible to think consciously about all of the results of addition, which are, of course, infinite. Furthermore, to understand addition is not to learn all the results by heart but, rather, to ascertain the correct result to any given question by way of calculation. Then, why must "1002" be written after "1000"?

Wittgenstein answers this question by saying that rule-following is a practice. It is useless to talk about either: the state of affair corresponding to the fact that one is following a rule; or the mental state corresponding to the understanding of the given rule. Rule-following consists in our actual uses of expressions within our practice. Wittgenstein says as follows:

> ..."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. (PI 202)

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3   Wittgenstein is also critical of the view of understanding as some sort of material process. In opposition to the claim that there must be a difference in the brain mechanisms of the beginner and a practiced reader when the both are reading, Wittgenstein says that "...these mechanisms are only hypotheses, models designed to explain, to sum up, what you observe." (PI 156) It is true that we use these mechanisms as a model for explanations, and such explanations are convincing, but it is not guaranteed, *a priori*, that this model works (PI 158). If two people in the same brain state use an expression differently, we will think that the both understand it differently. The criterion of understanding is not a brain state but, rather, uses of expressions in our linguistic practice. Our concept of understanding is connected not with a brain state but with uses. See Thornton (1998): Chapter one and two for a criticism of contemporary materialistic theories of mind from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

4   See PI 185ff.

One (not all) of what Wittgenstein argues in this discussion is that if you understand the order "+2", you *must* write down "1002" after "1000". Even if "1004" seems the right result to you; and, even if you believes that you are following a rule "+2" by writing "1004", if you write "1004", you are "wrong" or "following a different rule" or "not following any rule". According to Wittgenstein, a rule must identify its conditions of correctness internally.[5]

Furthermore, a rule identifies "the sameness" by identifying its correctness conditions. To illustrate this, let us look at a lecture that Wittgenstein gave when he was writing *Philosophical Investigations*. In a lecture, he talks about the words like "same", "similar" and "analogous":

> They [words such as "same", "similar" and "analogous"] can be used in this way. I do jerks, and then say "Do the same", "Do the analogous thing"—and he takes hold of my hands, or he is at a loss what he is to do. But in fact this doesn't happen, because we have learnt the technique of using the word "same". (LFM: 58)

Having mastered the technique of judging what is the same as what, we can react correctly to orders such as: "Do the same" or "Do an analogous thing". And, this technique is the basis of rule-following. The place next to the just cited, Wittgenstein says as follows:

> Similarly one can show a child how to multiply 24 by 37, and 52 by 96, and then say to it, "Now multiply 113 by 44 analogously." The child may then do one of many things. If he can't justify his action, we should go thorough it again and again, until we converted him to doing the same as us. The only criterion for his multiplying 113 by 44 in a way analogous to the example is his doing it in the way in which all of us, who have been trained in a certain way, would do it. If we find that he cannot be trained to do it the same as us, then we give him up as hopeless and say he is a lunatic. (LFM: 58)

As we have seen, to understand an expression—hence to understand a rule—is to master a technique according to which, say, one calculates. And, this technique of calculation is the technique of giving an answer analogously to each of the calculations. So, to understand multiplication is to be able to give "888" when you multiply 24 by 37, "4992" when you multiply 52 by 96, and "4972" when you multiple 113 by 44. Similarly, to understand addition is to be able to give "1002" to the question "What is 1000+2?" and "125" to "What is 57+68?" each as the answer to the same operation. In this way, "... the use of word "rule" and the use of the word "same" are interwoven." (PI 225)

Generally speaking, especially in descriptive uses of an expression, the sameness, or the analogousness, must be identified through that expression's uses. The technique of using an expression is the technique of establishing what is the same as what. This applies not only to mathematical expressions such as addition and multiplication but also to every meaningful expression. When you understand the word "book", you master a technique of, say, reacting correctly to orders such as "Bring me a book". From this you learn to distinguish books from other objects. Similarly, when

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5   Cf. Boghossian (1989): 513.

you understand the word "pain", you master a technique of using that word in many different contexts. For example, you will show pity or, alternatively, call for a doctor for someone who is breeding and calling out "I'm in pain!". Or, you might correct the use of a word by a child: "It's not a pain, but it's an itch". With these techniques, you identify and distinguish pain from other sensations.

4   Explanation of meaning

Finally, let us investigate "explanation of meaning". Wittgenstein's dictum, which states that if you want to understand an expression, you must see the uses of it, equally applies to the word "meaning". We must see the uses of the word "meaning" if we want to know the meaning of "meaning". Wittgenstein says that if you want to understand "meaning", you must look first to the "explanation of meaning":

> "The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning." I.e.: if you want to understand the use of the word "meaning", look for what are called "explanations of meaning". (PI 560)

> What is the meaning of a word?
>   Let us attack this question by asking, first, what is an explanation of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look like? (BB: 1)

Wittgenstein says that focusing on explanation of meaning has two advantages:

> Asking first "What's an explanation of meaning?" has two advantages. You in a sense bring the question "What is meaning?" down to earth. For, surely, to understand the meaning of "meaning" you ought also to understand the meaning of "explanation of meaning". Roughly: "let's ask what the explanation of meaning is, for whatever that explains will be the meaning." Studying the grammar of the expression "explanation of meaning" will teach you something about the grammar of the word "meaning" and will cure you of the temptation to look about you for some object which you might call "the meaning". (BB: 1)

That we can understand the concept "meaning" grounding on its use; and, that we can be released from the temptation of searching for some object called "the meaning": these are two advantages. According to Wittgenstein, by turning our eyes to the explanation of meaning, we can "bring the question 'what is meaning?' down to earth", and understand the concept "meaning" keeping a close footing to our uses of words. Through this, we can be liberated from the temptation of searching for some object, as if meaning were a lost wallet.

Wittgenstein contends that we can only answer the question "What is meaning?", which seems to be a deep philosophical question, by seeing how we actually use the word "meaning" in the context of practice. Thus, Wittgenstein tries to understand what meaning is by investigating the

"explanation of meaning".

First, let us ask what we are doing when we give an explanation of the meaning of an expression. Wittgenstein says that explanations are required when there is a possibility of misunderstanding. Consider ostensive explanations. You might proclaim, "This is a 'slab'", pointing to a slab. This explanation is required, say, when the hearer might be thinking that the word "slab" refers to the object which we normally call "block". That is, when someone brings you a block in response to your order "Bring me a slab", you will say "This is a 'slab'", pointing to the slab, and try to remove that person's misunderstanding (PI 10, cf. BB: 1–2). Or, consider the case where you give a verbal explanation of "$x!2$" by saying "I mean not 'x^2' but '$2x$' by '$x!2$'". In this case too, the purpose of the explanation is to remove misunderstanding. An explanation is required because there is more than one interpretation of "$x!2$" (PI 190).[6]

Note that we don't always need an explanation of the meaning of an expression, and that an explanation is enough when it is understood in its context, although there is always a possibility of misunderstanding it. Wittgenstein comments regarding the explanation of the word "Moses" as follows:[7]

> Suppose I give this explanation: "I take 'Moses' to mean the man, if there was such a man, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, whatever he was called then and whatever he may or may not have done besides."—But similar doubts to those about "Moses" are possible about the words of this explanation (what are you calling "Egypt", whom the "Israelites" etc.?). Nor would these questions come to an end when we got down to words like "red", "dark", "sweet".—"But then how does an explanation help me to understand, if after all it is not the final one? In that case the explanation is never completed; so I still don't understand what he means, and never shall!"—As though an explanation as it were hung in the air unless supported by another one. Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another—unless *we* require it to prevent a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding—one, that is, that would occur but for the explanation; not every one that I can imagine. (PI 87)

We do not require an explanation that removes all of the logically possible misunderstandings. Such an explanation is neither possible nor necessary. Above all, requiring it is not *our way* of doing the practice. We are satisfied when the possibility of misunderstanding is sufficiently removed, even though misunderstandings may still be logically possible. On the contrary, if someone asks for an explanation of meaning when there is no room for realistic[8] misunderstanding, we will not understand what kind of language game that person is playing and, consequently, will not be able to understand what the person is saying. An explanation is enough when it helps in normal

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6   There are various ways of explaining meaning such as ostensive explanation, verbal explanation and explanation by examples.

7   See also PI 29.

8   See Diamond (1991) for this kind of the use of the word "realistic".

circumstances.

An explanation of the meaning of an expression has its own context and must be put in some language game in which the explanation is required. The final explanation that is separated from every language game or every context of its uses is empty and not something we want. If you want to know the function of "explanation of meaning", you must see the actual practice in which explanations are given.

Now, what do explanations of meaning explain? According to Wittgenstein, we explain the uses of an expression by giving an explanation of its meaning. When you understand the explanation "This is a 'slab'", you can bring a slab not a block when told to bring a slab. Or, you can say, "Bring me a slab" and communicate your intention when you want to be brought a slab. That is, you become able to use the word "slab" in that way. Or, when you understand the explanation "I mean not 'x^2' but '$2x$' by '$x!2$'", you can give the values of y to the given value of x by doubling it. It is true that sometimes we point to an object in order to explain the meaning of, say, a name; but to understand the explanation you must master the technique of using that name. What is explained in such an explanation is not the reference relation independent of uses, but rather, the uses themselves. As shown above, to understand an expression is not to be in any mental state, but to master a technique for its uses. Hence, what an explanation of the meaning of an expression explains is the uses of that expression.

Now we are in a place to see the role of the concept "meaning" in our practice. As I argued concerning rule-following, an expression has correctness conditions of its uses and, through such, identifies or classifies what is the same as what. So, "meaning" also identifies the sameness. And, given that an explanation of the meaning of an expression explains uses of it, we identify, or classify, its uses by the explanation of its meaning. For example, by giving the explanation "I mean not 'x^2' but '$2x$' by '$x!2$'", we teach how to use the expression "$x!2$" and identify what are analogous uses of it. The concept of meaning is the concept by which we classify uses.

One might find it difficult to understand Wittgenstein's philosophy of language because his conception of "use" seems obscure. The interpreters of Wittgenstein have described "use" in various ways. Some interpret "use" as "proof" or "verification" and ascribe constructivism to Wittgenstein.[9] Others connect "use" with "decision" or "determination" and draw Wittgenstein as a radical conventionalist.[10] Still others hold "use" as our behavioral disposition and see Wittgenstein as a naturalist.[11] When you are told that "meaning is use", you might ask how uses are identified. How is the identity of uses determined?

The answer to that question is that the identity of uses of an expression depends on the context in which an explanation of it is given. According to Wittgenstein, the identity of uses depends on the situation, the purpose and to whom the explanation is given, etc. Independent of context, we cannot establish which uses are essential to the meaning of the expression. For example, consider two orders: (a) "Bring me the broom"; and (b) "Bring me the broomstick and the brush". According to Wittgenstein, in a sense, we can say that these two orders "achieve the same" and "have the

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9   See for example Baker (1974).
10   See Dummett (1959), Wright (1980) and Wrigley (1980).
11   See McGinn (1984). Cf. Horwich (2005).

same meaning" (PI 61). However, that does not mean that we understand of what "have the same meaning" in general consists.

> Suppose for instance that a person who is given the orders in (a) and (b) has to look up a table co-ordinating names and pictures before bringing what is required. Does he do *the same* when he carries out an order in (a) and the corresponding one in (b)?—Yes and No. You may say: "The *point* of the two orders is the same". I should say so too.—But it is not everywhere clear what should be called the 'point' of an order. (Similarly one may say of certain objects that they have this or that purpose. The essential thing is that this is a lamp, that it serves to give light;—that it is an ornament to the room, fills an empty space, etc., is not essential. But there is not always a sharp distinction between essential and inessential.) (PI 62)

We distinguish the uses essential to the meaning of an expression from the uses inessential to it. However, this distinction is not always clear. For example, in many cases, the loudness of the voice is not essential to the meaning of an expression. However, we can imagine a linguistic practice in which the loudness of the voice is essential. Suppose a country where, when you say "beer!" in a loud voice, a waiter brings a mug of beer, and when you say "beer" in a low voice, the waiter brings a beer in a small glass. In this case, the difference in the loudness of voice achieves different goals and is essential to the meanings of the expression "beer". What is essential depends on the language game. Of course, if you want to distinguish bringing beer from bringing wine, the difference is inessential. And, even if the expressions "achieve the same", it does not necessarily mean that they have the same meaning. As Wittgenstein says, we cannot say "Milk me sugar" and "Stare and gape" have the same meaning even though they cause the same effect. For, the former does not accord with the sentence formation rules of English (PI 498).

The distinction between essential uses and inessential uses is not determined before an explanation of the meaning is given. In a chess game with a rule which tells us to use the king for casting lots in deciding which player gets white, is the king used differently from a chess game without such a rule? (PI 563) Or, as another example, are we using "is" differently when we use it as the copula in contrast to when we use "is" as the sign of equality? (PI 561) The answers to these questions are given by explanations of meaning and so depend on the situations and the purposes of the explanations.

When we explain the meaning of an expression, we identify its analogous uses. We can characterize the concept "meaning" as something that classifies the uses. But this characterization does not tell us, in itself, the nature of meaning or use. Explaining meaning is, itself, a practice and has its own context. Hence, we cannot grasp the identity or the nature of meaning or use independent of context.

5   Conclusion

The concept of meaning is something that classifies uses. The dictum of Wittgenstein that "meaning is use" does not confine use to a particular aspect of our linguistic activity, such as verification

or our decision. Of course, in some language games, verification is essential. For example, in mathematics process of validation is essential to the proposition expressing a theorem. We could say that a proposition, i.e. the meaning of a sentence, is something that identifies its proofs. (Although we must not forget that Wittgenstein considers that proofs are not uniform and that mathematics consists of motley of techniques. Important also to note is that he emphasizes the importance of the applications of mathematical propositions to non-mathematical contexts.) However, in some language games, neither verification nor proof is important. For example, in the report of one's own physical sensations (PI 290, p. 222) or in religious practice[12], talk of verification is empty. The importance of uses depends on the explanation of the expression and language game in which it is given.

‹Abbreviations for Wittgenstein's works›

BB: *The Blue and Brown Books*

LFM: *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: Cambridge, 1939*

PI: *Philosophical Investigations*. (Reference to part 1 indicated by section numbers; to part 2 by page numbers.)

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12   See Putnam (1992): Chapter seven.