Coming to Language: Wittgenstein’s ‘Theory’ of Language Acquisition

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Abstract: The two main problems of native language acquisition are: the problem of learning (explaining ourgrasp of the meaning of words); and the problem of productivity (explaining our ability to understand and produce novel, correct sentences, when the linguistic data we encounter is flawed and limited). Fodor’s and Chomsky’s solution to these problems is to posit a mental linguistic structure (universal grammar or language of thought) as the framework that obviates the need for learning and makes an explanation of productivity possible. Ironically, Wittgenstein’s solution is not as far removed from Fodor’s and Chomsky’s as might be supposed. For, he too posits a framework at the basis of our language-games – indeed a partly grammatical framework which includes a universal grammar. But the commonality stops here, for Wittgenstein’s universal grammar is neither innate nor inner; it is rooted in our primitive reactions and transmitted socio-culturally. Wittgenstein’s account of how we come to language can be counted as a social theory of language acquisition: it is in social practices, not in the mind, that we come to language.

Quoted passages (from Wittgenstein, unless otherwise indicated)

But couldn’t we imagine God’s suddenly giving a parrot understanding, and its now saying things to itself? – But here it is an important fact that I imagined a deity in order to imagine this. (PI 346)

Jerome Bruner: ‘There is a long road between following another’s gaze out to an object and being able to comprehend a referring expression like “the cream cheese on the top shelf of the fridge”.’ (1983, 123)

Michael Tomasello: ‘If we want to understand human communication, … we cannot begin with language.’ (2008, 59)

The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or languages. (BLB 17).

The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop.

Language – I want to say – is a refinement. “In the beginning was the deed.” (CE 395; CV p. 31)

The basic form of the game must be one in which we act. (CE 397)

The essence of the language game is a practical method (a way of acting) – not speculation, not chatter. (CE 399)

… it is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists in steady ways of living, regular ways of acting. (CE 397; my emphasis).

In its most primitive form [the language-game] is a reaction to somebody’s cries and gestures, a reaction of sympathy or something of the sort. (CE 414)

Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive kinds of behaviour towards other human beings, and our language is merely an auxiliary to, and further extension of, this relation. Our language-game is an extension of primitive behaviour. (For our language-game is behaviour.) (Instinct), (Z 545)

A child uses … primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training. (PI 5)

I really want to say that scruples in thinking begin with (have their roots in) instinct. Or again: a language-game does not have its origin in reflection. Reflection is part of a language-game. (Z 391)

I am using the word ‘trained’ in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things. It is done by means of example, reward, punishment, and suchlike. (BB 77)

But how is the connexion between the name and the thing set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations? – of the word ‘pain’ for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

“... you are saying that the word ‘pain’ really means crying?” – On the contrary: the verbal expression [Ausdruck] of pain replaces crying and does not describe it (PI 244)

Primitive pain-behaviour is a sensation-behaviour; it gets replaced by a linguistic expression. (RPP I, 313)

Jerome Bruner: ‘Learning a native language is an accomplishment within the grasp of any toddler, yet discovering how children do it has eluded generations of philosophers and linguists.’ (1983, 31)

When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly. (PI 219)

The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief. (OC 160)

A child learns there are reliable and unreliable informants much later than it learns facts which are taught it. (OC 283)

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Alexander Bain: ‘The natural or primitive credulity of the mind’ (1868, 377); ‘We are all faith at the outset; we become sceptics by experience, that is, by encountering checks and exceptions. We begin with unbounded credulity.’ (1868, 382)

The way in which we learn to use the word [pain], and therefore the way in which it is used, is … complicated, difficult to describe. For instance it is first taught under certain circumstances where there is no doubt, i.e. where there is no question of doubt. (LW II 30)

What belongs to grammar are … all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense)’ (PG, p. 88) … it is the system of language that makes the sentence a thought and makes it a thought for us. (PG, p. 153)

I cannot say that I have good grounds for the opinion that cats do not grow on trees or that I had a father and a mother. (OC 282; my emphasis)

We say we know that water boils and does not freeze under such-and-such circumstances. Is it conceivable that we are wrong? Wouldn’t a mistake topple all judgment with it? More: what could stand if that were to fall? Might someone discover something that made us say “It was a mistake”?

1 I have modified the translation of Überlegung here as ‘reflection’, preferring it to the more opaque ‘consideration’.

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Whatever may happen in the future, however water may behave in the future, we know that up to now it has behaved thus in innumerable instances. This fact is fused [eingegossen] into the foundations of our language-game. (OC 558)

Rom Harré & E.H. Madden:
It is contingent that any man is a father, but conceptually necessary that being a father he has (or has had) a child. But that conceptual necessity is a reflection of the natural necessity of the father's role in the reproductive process, a role not known to some Aboriginal tribes even in historical times, for whom the conceptual structure of the concept 'father' was very different from ours. The conceptual necessity has come into being in response to an a posteriori discovery of the natural necessity of the father's role. ... But so deeply has this conceptual necessity become embedded in the language, we forget that it has its source in an a posteriori discovery. "(1975, 48)

... it is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it. (OC 103)

If I say "we assume that the earth has existed for many years past" (or something similar), then of course it sounds strange that we should assume such a thing. But in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations. The assumption, one might say, forms the basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought. (OC 411)

Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary. (PG, p. 194)

an 'agreement in form of life' (PI 241)

I want to say propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language). - This observation is not of the form "I know...", "I know...", states what I know, and that is not of logical interest. (OC 401)

When Moore says he knows such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions. (OC 136)

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i. e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC 204)

"Understanding a word" may mean: knowing how it is used; being able to apply it. (PG, p. 47; my emphases)

"I can use the word 'yellow'" is like "I know how to move the king in chess". (PG, p. 49)

But is it wrong to say: "A child that has mastered a language-game must know certain things"?
If instead of that one said "must be able to do certain things", that would be a pleonasm, yet this is just what I want to counter the first sentence with. (OC 534)

To understand a language means to be master of a technique. (PI 199).

Teaching which is not meant to apply to anything but the examples given is different from that which 'points beyond' them. (PI 208)

Yes, there is the great thing about language – that we can do what we haven't learnt. (LPP 28)

Words have meaning only in the stream of life. (LW I, 913).

... language does connect up with my own life. And what is called 'language' is something made up of heterogeneous elements and the way it meshes with life is infinitely various. (PG 66)

References
Wittgenstein, L.

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