

The question of the essence of language: an inferentialist reading of Rhees' critique of Wittgenstein

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Abstract

The paper discusses Rush Rhees' critique of Wittgenstein, concerning the question of the essence of language. While Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, keeps on insisting that there is no such thing as the essence of language (*PI*, § 65), Rhees, in "Wittgenstein's Builders", argues for the opposite: that there has to be something in language to be called its essence, and sees this crucial element in "discourse", "dialogue" or "conversation". The present analysis reveals these aspects of Rhees' reflections to be parallel to Robert B. Brandom's more recent inferentialist project. Accordingly, such semantic stances as essentialism, propositionalism, holism and inferentialism – characteristic of Brandom's conception – are also ascribed to that of Rhees', along with the claim that the core of language constitutes the inferentialist "game of giving and asking for reasons".

In § 65 of *PI* Wittgenstein articulated his widely known view that there is no such a thing as the essence of language:

Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I'm saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all – but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all "languages" (Wittgenstein 2009: 36)

The affinity Wittgenstein speaks about here is the sort of similarity that can be called "family resemblances" between different "language games" (§ 66-67). Thus, there is no one specific game, or function, that would be essential for language, on virtue of which it can be named "language". Various language games, like games in the ordinary sense of the word, are not covered by any common definition, nor do they share any joint constitutive content. Instead, they are connected far less strictly, being akin to each other in a way the family members are: they all do not have to manifest one characteristic feature, but still are somehow similar to each other. On the same basis, what we call "language" comprises a variety of different dimensions and activities, none of which plays a special, essential role. In § 18 of *PI*, this matter has been captured by a suggestive simile; Wittgenstein writes:

Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses (Wittgenstein 2009: 22).

As it is impossible to answer the question: "how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?" (Wittgenstein 2009: 22), it is also unworkable to determine which and how many games it does take before language begins to be a language.

The urban analogy of § 18 can be interpreted – for example after Harald Johannessén (Johannessén 2008: 67) – in the following way. The pursuit of the essence of language resembles the search for the downtown of such an old city. Our quest for it could proceed gradually by discarding its particular quarters, streets, parks and houses, in hope of discovering its true core. Similarly, the philosophical pursuit of the essence of language consists in progressively tearing different language games off, as to get

to such a game that is constitutive of the language and thus can be regarded as its essence. This would be an *autonomous* language game, possible to be played out while, assumingly, not playing any other. Wittgenstein's answer suggests that in both cases, the city and the language, there is no way to get to the core.

In addition, it seems that Wittgenstein's words ought not to be interpreted to mean only that an autonomous, complete, essential language game does not exist; it also means that many various, even if primitive, language games are autonomous, still none constitutes the linguistic essence. For, at the beginning of § 18, he emphasizes:

Don't let it bother you that languages (2) and (8) consist only of orders. If you want to say that they are therefore incomplete, ask yourself whether our own language is complete – whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated into it (Wittgenstein 2009: 22).

Some examples of such primitive but complete language games would be – while following Wittgenstein's suggestions – a language consisting only of imperatives (§2, §8), of orders and reports in battle (§ 19), or "of questions and expressions for answering Yes and No" (§ 19) (Wittgenstein 2009: 22), or even Augustinian naming language of § 1. Yet, to repeat, the game that would constitute the real essence of language cannot exist.

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One of the first polemics with the above Wittgenstein's view was given by Rush Rhees in his "Wittgenstein's Builders" (Rhees 1959), whereas his wider critical reflections from the years 1957-1960 and 1967 (mostly from 1957, the year of Rhees working on "Wittgenstein's Builders") was published posthumously, in 1988, by Dewi Z. Phillips under the title *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* in 1988 (Rhees 2006). The present analysis of Rhees critique will refer just to the latter.

Rhees disagrees primarily with Wittgenstein's alleged abuse of the metaphor of games in his thinking of language, and claims that the author of *PI* was himself seduced by this picture of language, never being able to get out of it (Rhees 2006: 151). Therefore, he states, Wittgen-

stein regarded language as "a family of games"¹ (Rhees 2006: 116, 151). What is then wrong with such a view? First, the metaphor, when pushing too far, misleadingly suggests that „saying something”, or „understanding something”, is somehow similar to “a move in a game” – to simply our complying with some, more or less formal, rules of this game. Second, the picture of a family of games does not guarantee the *unity of language*, i.e. the mutual understanding of what we say, our capability of following conversation, our partaking in the same linguistic activity or “game”, speaking the same language.

The matter concerning lack of analogy between playing a game and speaking a language Rhees encapsulates, in the essay “What is Language”, in the following way:

If someone learns to speak, he does not just learn to make sentences and utter them, nor to react to orders either. He learns to say something. He learns what can be said; he learns – however fumblingly – what it makes sense to say. This is an accomplishment over and above being able to work together. It is not just an addition to the technique, as you might learn to operate a new tool. And to do this, he must learn how remarks hang together, how they may bear on one another. This is something different from learning general rules or general principles – even though it does not go without that.

And because he learns to speak, and he learns what can be said, he can go on speaking and go on learning (...). And the being able to go on is not like being able to continue a series, say, or being able to do further multiplications. This is not the same as learning the meaning of particular expressions, although it is impossible *without* that (Rhees 2006: 29).

From the above quotation one can infer that speaking a language assumes a sort of *unity* that exceeds the family resemblances between different language games, therefore language cannot be aptly described as a family of games. Moreover, because Rhees stresses the importance of what he calls “conversation”, or “discourse”, and emphasizes the fact that to say something goes closely with understanding what is being said, one concludes that according to Rhees, *pace* Wittgenstein, language has an essence: this essence is “conversation”, “discourse”. He states this explicitly in a passage from “Wittgenstein's Builders – Recapitulation”:

Not all discourse is conversation, but I do not think there would be speech or language without it. And if there were someone who could not carry on any conversation – who had no idea of answering questions or of making any comment – I do not think we should say he could speak (Rhees 2006: 161).

Then, although Rhees is aware of many different functions, or games, of language, he singles one of them out, the conversation, which can be regarded as a center – to recall Wittgenstein's simile of *PI*, § 18 – which other language games and functions are adjacent to, similarly to the way quarters of a city are built on its downtown.

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When speaking about conversation as the essence of language, one can go on and ask on what basis is the unity of

discourse, or of language, secured. And it seems that it can only be revealed through the analysis of the conditions of discourse possibility, through examining what makes conversation possible, authentic or real (Rhees 2006: 33–62).

Certainly, Rhees claims, the unity in question cannot be ensured neither by formal, logical relations between sentences, nor by “external relations” between expressions – analogical to rules that are in effect in a game. Rather, such a unity is secured by “internal relations of remarks people make to one another in a conversation” (Rhees 2006: 161), which should be understood as “connexions of meaning” (*ibidem*) of remarks that “hang together” and “bear on one another” (Rhees 2006: 29).

In another passage (essay “Signals and Saying Something”) Rhees makes one more interesting observation about meaning:

Where you talk of meaning, you can talk of other things that might be meant or might be said. And this belongs to understanding, somehow. Not that you need think of any alternatives; generally you do not. But understanding what is meant, or knowing what is meant: if you are said to “know something” then it is “something” which allows for such alternatives (Rush 2006: 100).

Therefore, an utterance, or a sentence, means something only in the context of something else, namely, another sentence. It makes sense only in possible, alternative connections with some other things that might be said.

In addition, Rhees seems to implicitly assume that participants in conversation have to make inferences – in relating different remarks to one another, in grasping the consequences of particular sayings and reasons for them. Still, he resists speaking explicitly of inferences, presumably due to the fact that by talking of inferences he mostly meant only *formal* ones – recall that Rhees himself, after Wittgenstein of *PI*, refused the view that the unity of language comes down to logical form of propositions and formal relations between them. Thus, he generally avoids using the term “inference”. One can justifiably assume that Rhees did not know, at least did not use, the terms “informal inference”, and particularly “material inference”² – the latter to be the main concept of inferentialism. Yet, to repeat, he implicitly allowed them. For he writes (in “Wittgenstein's Builders – Recapitulation”):

If people are speaking together, then the significance of this or that remark is not like the significance of a logical conclusion. But the remarks they make have something to do with one another; otherwise they are not talking at all, even if they are uttering sentences. And their remarks could have no bearing on one another unless the expressions they used were used in other connexions as well (Rhees 2006: 158).

In view of that, supposing participants in conversation relates different remarks or expressions to one another, and they use these expressions in connections with many other expressions, they simply make inferences, albeit not formal ones (based on logical form), but material ones – based only on conceptual content.

1 In fact, according to Rhees, Wittgenstein attempted to complement the concept of “game” with such concepts as “customs”, “institutions” or “forms of life”, yet remained totally preoccupied by the metaphor of games (Rhees 2006: 176).

2 In inferentialism, it is assumed that inferences may be based only on the content of expressions used in discourse: e.g. from “Pittsburgh is to the west of Princeton” to “Princeton is to the east of Pittsburgh”, from “Lightning is seen now” to “Thunder will be heard soon” and plenty of others. These inferences are believed to be good as they stand, irrespective of the possible enthymematic premises they could be supplemented with and of any logical form they might be afterwards arranged in (Brandom 2000: 52–55).

To sum up, four particular views can be ascribed to Rhees' philosophical stance: (1) *Essentialism* – the view that language has its essence; in Rhees such an essence is conversation, or discourse. While language having many various function, the function constitutive of it, the one which all other language games depend on, is conversation. (2) *Propositionalism* – the semantic position claiming that the basic items of meaning are sentences, not sub-sentential entities (e.g. names). As the essential game is discourse, in which the key functions are commenting something, answering questions, asking questions etc., one can infer that the elements to play fundamental, indispensable role are just sentences. (3) *Semantic holism* – the view that there are no separate and independent items of meaning, but, conversely, each item is tied with some other ones; each remark in conversation is somehow semantically connected with some others. Where Rhees says that when making a sentence, some other possible alternatives are available (Rhees 2006: 100), he manifests a holistic stance. (4) *Inferentialism* – the position claiming that meaning is conferred on linguistic expressions on virtue of their use in actual or possible inferences; and the inferences in question are not principally based on formal logical schemas, but depend primarily on the content of expressions deployed in them. In other words, these inferences are not formal, but rather material ones.

The four above stances are also general characteristic features of today's inferentialism in the philosophy of language as presented by Brandom (Brandom 1994, 2000).

The conclusion that flows from the present considerations is that Rhees' essentialist critique of Wittgenstein, as to the alleged analogy between language and games, can be interpreted in an inferentialist spirit. It also suggests a tentative, but plausible, claim that Rhees' agreeing on "conversation" to be the essence of language – along with his propositionalism, holism and implicitly assumed inferentialism – leads him inevitably to accepting Brandom's "game of giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 2000: 189-196) as the downtown of linguistic activity.

Literature

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