

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 20: Meaning and Games

1. The key idea (Wittgenstein): linguistic expressions (words, sentences, etc.) are pieces that we use to make moves in 'language games' (roughly: conversations).

Analogy: chess.

2. The meaning of an expression is not some object to which the expression is related, but the role that the expression plays in the game.

Lycan: Meanings are not abstract objects. Is this right?

3. To know the meaning of an expression is to know its role in the game – to know how to use it when playing the game (i.e. when conversing).
4. What one learns when learning a language is how to play the game – a complicated form of social behaviour (conversational behaviour). One learns the rules of a game: what to do when someone utters a certain expression, and what expression to utter to get people to do certain things.

Compare: learning chess.

5. We have a variety of games: the meeting and greeting language game, the wedding language game, etc.
6. Illustration: the building language game. A builder and her assistant use 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', and 'beam'. They engage in a language game. The meaning of each expression is the role it plays in this game. They are used to initiate action, not to refer to anything.
7. Plausible in the following cases: 'hello', 'excuse me', 'stop!', 'amen'. These are conventional devices for doing things, or getting others to do things, rather than standing for something or referring to something. They have functional roles, but do not refer.
8. Another consideration in favour: If the word 'game' stands for something, then what? Presumably, whatever it is that all games have in common. But is there any such thing? Similarly for 'chair'.
9. Problem: Why does a language game generate meaning whereas other games do not (e.g. chess)?
10. Problem: Perhaps the view is plausible for simple expressions like 'block', but what about for complex expressions such as 'The present queen of England is bald' – what is the role of this in the game?

Sellars: we have *inference* rules as well – rules about what one should utter in response to other utterances.

11. Problem: Language is compositional – the expressions we use have structure, and their meanings depend upon the meanings of their constituents. This is unlike the pieces in other games. How should we account for this?

And what about ‘pieces’ that never get used?

12. Problem: The language games on twin-Earth are the same as they are on Earth, but expressions there have different meanings (at least some of them do).

Reply: deny that they are the same games.

13. Problem (Lycan): It is possible to know how to use an expression without understanding it – Lycan’s students. Also: learning a word in a foreign country, robots.

14. Problem (me): Suppose we have the following game: you utter ‘bing’, I utter ‘bing’ in response. According to the game view, ‘bing’ is meaningful. But that seems wrong.

Reply: this game is too simple or too artificial to count.