HUMAN BEHAVIOR AS LANGUAGE: SOME THOUGHTS ON WITTGENSTEIN

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ABSTRACT: Language has been traditionally considered as a special psychological or behavioral phenomenon, with a logical status similar to other phenomena such as learning, memory, and thinking. Based on Wittgenstein's notion of language game, I argue that language is not limited to a psychological phenomenon, but rather it constitutes the functional dimensions under which human behavior develops and becomes meaningful. I propose three dimensions of language relevant to human behavior: a) as a medium, b) as an instrument, and c) as a form of life.
Key words: Wittgenstein, language game, behavior, form of life

Psychology, in its endeavor to understand human behavior, has been involved in the analysis of language as the crucial characteristic distinguishing human from sub-human behavior (Mowrer, 1980; Piaget, 1952; Skinner, 1957; Slobin, 1971; Watson, 1924). Although this concern has been approached from positions highly diverse regarding assumptions about language, most (if not all) share a common belief: language is a psychological phenomenon, and its morphology is central to any attempt to understand it. The conception of language as a psychological phenomenon has to do with two different sets of assumptions: a) language is seen as behavior (covert or overt) or as a special kind of environmental event (verbal stimuli), or b) language is seen as an external indicator of the structure of cognitive processes dealing with functions such as communicating, imagining, remembering, learning, perceiving, and so on.

I would like to argue against this general conception of language as a psychological phenomenon, and in order to do so I shall put forward a conceptual alternative based on the notion of *language game* (Wittgenstein, 1953). I will attempt to show that the notion of language game contains arguments and observations useful for the development of a theory of language and linguistic behavior. Wittgenstein's writings are not structured treatises dealing just with one issue. Rather, based upon samples of our language practices or usages in the form of expressions or episodes, Wittgenstein raises questions in order to show inconsistencies between what we actually mean (or do not mean) when saying

something and the conceptual distortions that derive from unwarranted assumptions and arguments about the meaning of language.

Given the characteristics of Wittgenstein's writings, I will quote him extensively in order not to distort his ideas. This expositive method has nothing to do with a doctrinary or exegetic attitude regarding Wittgenstein's claims; it is only a safe method to transcribe his arguments properly. Wittgenstein did not elaborate a philosophical doctrine. He developed a set of reflections and thoughts about a variety of philosophical issues as ethics, knowledge, esthetics, logic, and grammar. Many of his thoughts were directly relevant to the philosophies of language, psychology, and mathematics. Wittgenstein was concerned with the improper interpretations of language expressions disconnected from the action and context in which they are used. His questions and arguments were directed to show the confusions and distortions engendered by the improper interpretation of utterances and expressions. A correct analysis of expressions in context should allow us to "dissolve" the problems thus generated.

Wittgenstein analyzed psychological phenomena as cases or examples of the actual sense of language expressions regarding different contexts. In fact, he showed that words and expressions related to psychological phenomena such as "seeing," "remembering," or "knowing" have several meanings depending on the language game being played when they are used. Wittgenstein's remarks on psychological phenomena are not a psychological theory or a theory about language. They support arguments and reflections about the social nature of human life and how it is inevitably impregnated with language. However, these reflections cannot be put aside by psychological and linguistic theories. Although Wittgenstein's arguments do not constitute a theory, they are indispensable in order to avoid confusions and to dissolve false problems. They point to ungrounded interpretations of expressions and concepts. Malcolm (1971) characterizes this approach to philosophy by saying that ". . .Philosophical work of the right sort merely unties knots in our understanding. The result is not a theory but simply no knots!" (p. xi).

Human behavior cannot be understood if we separate language and social practice. Language without social practice and social practice without language are senseless. From this perspective, language, as an essential component of social practice, contextualizes every human psychological phenomenon. The logic of language is grounded on social practice and not on the fictitious universal logic of a rational or formal syntax or grammar. Human psychological phenomena, either identified as individual experience or as behavior, become meaningful only in the context of social life, always occurring as language and through language. That is why Wittgenstein asserts that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (1953, pp. 8, 19).

Language as Language games

Language is not a technical concept; it is a term with a wide range of meanings. Language is not only what people write and speak, but also the means

by which this is done: the sounds spoken, the signs written or read, and the meanings conveyed by them. Its multiple aspects include all manners of speaking, the words used (lexicon), and the rules by which those manners are described (syntax).

Language is all this, but it cannot be identified with any of these aspects by themselves. The term "language" is the only one that "refers" to itself, and it is a term included in and used in language. This may explain the particular elusiveness of the term and its extended meanings. In order to overcome the difficulties inherent in any attempt to define—or even to point out unequivocally—what language is, I shall resort to Wittgenstein's notion of "language games." Wittgenstein (1953) conceived language games as conventions forming part of social practices and relations: "Here the term 'language game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (p. 23).

To the extent that language articulates and is present in every kind of social activity, it is to be conceived of as a wide diversity of games in which meanings are related to and consist of one or more forms of life. In spite of its morphological and stylistic invariances, language consists of a multiplicity of language games, all of them framed by a given form of life:

> We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike. (1953, p. 224)

> You must bear in mind that the language game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life. (1969, p. 559)

The world (or reality) as a collection of things, events, and activities is not independent of language as a form of life:

> We're used to a particular classification of things. With language, or languages, it has become second nature to us. (1980, p. 678)

But this is because language as a form of life consists of actual activities that are meaningful to individuals sharing social conventions as proper and effective practices. A language game includes words, phrases, and sentences, but it does not comply with the "rules" of grammar, if we understand "grammar" as a *formal* and *prescriptive* discipline. When people speak, their speech is not the overt manifestation of an abstract grammar that rules and regulates what can be said or not, or how to say things. As I have remarked previously (Ribes, 1991), language as actual behavior has no grammar. Grammar, as an ideal structure of language, is an *a posteriori* abstraction of products and vestiges of the actual behavior of speaking and writing. It is a generic description abstracted out of language practices:

> Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs. (1953, p. 496)

In fact, grammar is an invention of the language games being played by individuals according to their practical conventions. Grammar is a description—sometimes inaccurate and delayed—of the *uses* of language as activities articulated *within* a form of life:

> The rules of grammar may be called "arbitrary," if that is to mean that the *aim* of the grammar is nothing but that of the language. If someone says "If our language had not this grammar, it could not express these facts," it should be asked what "*could*" means here. (1953, p. 497)

Grammar is not the condition that makes language effective or sound. On the contrary, grammar is the *consequence* of language as a *meaningful social practice*. The practices themselves lend their meaning to grammar, which is why:

> . . .A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it. For it is what we learn when the word is incorporated into our language. (1969, p. 61)

> When language games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change. (1969, p. 65)

According to what has been said, a basic assumption is proposed: language, as it is spoken and written in daily life, works as an instrument or tool. Its meaning, sense, and structure come from conventional practice, and, therefore, language does not require to be ruled by or to adjust to an ideal, abstract grammar, supraordinated to language that is *in* activities normally performed by individuals in society. Because of this:

> . . .it is clear that every sentence in our language "is in order as it is." That is to say, we are not *striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us. On the other hand it seems clear that where there is sense there must be perfect order. So there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence. . . (1953, p. 98)

Wittgenstein seems to be playing with *language* in three ways. I suggest the three uses of the term for analytical purposes, but in fact they are difficult to separate from each other both in Wittgenstein's conception as well as in the phenomenon of language as a social daily practice. I use these terms as the *dimensions* of language, language as a medium, as an instrument, and as a form of life.

Language as a Medium

Language is the *medium* in which any social practice takes place and becomes possible. Although the concept of language as a medium may bring about the analogy of physical media such as light, air, or water, in this case the medium—as in Kantor's field theory (1924)—represents where the phenomenon of meaningful social practice takes place. The medium represents the functional condition that makes the phenomenon possible. The medium is not, in this conception, an analogy of transmission. Social practice is possible only in a medium conceived of as *convention*, invented or created through that very practice itself. Language sets the boundaries where joint relations have emerged or developed, and it allows them to occur under similar conditions or circumstances. Otherwise, the behavior of individuals would take place as trial and error and would be frequently irrelevant or "meaningless" to others:

> So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinion but in form of life. (1953, p. 241)

> And this language like any other is founded on convention. (1953, p. 355)

Language as a medium involves the overall net of meanings relating social practices and products in which a particular activity may have sense. It includes the context and the elements of possible language games which allow for the varied activities of individuals within a social and cultural environment. Language, as a form of life, represents the "second nature" by means of which human behavior, through the incorporation of the elements of this conventional reality, becomes meaningful to and through others.

Language as a medium becomes apparent in the form of the words (spoken and written) through which conventional practice operates. Although language is built up as words, it originates in social practice and it is through practice that language becomes represented in the form of elements and rules:

> . . .It is *primarily* the apparatus of our ordinary language, our word-language, that we call language; and then other things by analogy or comparability with this. (1953, p. 494)

> We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. But we talk about it as we do about the pieces in chess when we are stating the rules of the game, not describing their physical properties. The question "What is a word really?" is analogous to "What is a piece in chess?" (1953, p. 108)

Learning of language as a medium involves three components (Wittgenstein, 1969, pp. 472, 476, 480): a) learning actions, b) learning words and their use, and c) learning about things and words (i.e., understanding actions and objects through language). These are the bases involved in learning any language game and, very

specially, the early language games taking place during "acquisition" of language. Understanding and using words (which are tantamount to learning) are the kinds of activities involved in the process of language *becoming* a medium for any individual: "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to master a technique" (1953, p. 199).

Language as an Instrument

Language may be conceived of as the instrument by means of which we directly affect the behavior of others, and indirectly the objects and events in the world and ourselves. The use of language as an instrument means to master a technique. Language is like a set of tools whose proper use produces desired effects. Language, as an instrument, means effective use in relation to the behavior of other individuals. Because of this, learning language as a medium is deeply interlocked with its use as the instrument of conventional practice:

> One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that. (1953, p. 340)

To consider language as an instrument entails thinking about its functions. These functions are highly diversified in their effects on social life: to name, to describe, to ask, to communicate things, to teach, to learn, to do things, to reject, to look for, to invent, and so on. Language, as any other game, has a limited number of tokens (words, in this case). Effective use of language requires the effective use of words and phrases as tools that produce different outcomes (i.e., to be affected by and to affect through the appropriate use of words and phrases in multiple situations). Language as an instrument involves mastering words through operations. In learning language (many times as a joint endeavour of learning it as a medium and as an instrument) the individual has to deal with *uses*:

> Now what do the words of this language *signify*? What is supposed to show what they signify, if not the kind of use they have? (1953, p. 10)

Language becomes an instrument when the individual learns the meanings of his own actions in and through words. Words in actions or as actions (Austin, 1962) produce different outcomes in relation to other persons depending upon the setting in which they are used. Words, and their place in sentences, do not represent, in any sense, properties or portions of the world:

> Think of the tools in a tool-box; there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, nails and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects (and in both cases there are similarities). (1953, p. 11)

> It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of words and sentences, with what logicians have said about the structure of language (including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). (1953, p. 23)

The effectiveness of language as an instrument is reflected in and depends upon the multiplicity of contexts. Meanings do not consist of pictures, descriptions, or images of actions and objects. Meanings are the *outcome* of the use of words in social contexts. Meanings are words *being used*. Representation arises from effective meaning, and thinking takes place only through the meaningful action involved in the adequate use of words:

> . . .We fail to get away from the idea that using a sentence involves imagining something for every word. We do not realize that we *calculate*, operate, with words, and in the course of time translate them sometimes into one picture, sometimes into another. It is as if one were to believe that a written order for a cow which someone is to hand over me always had to be accompanied by an image of the cow, if the order was not to lose its meaning. (1953, p. 449)

> When I think in language, there aren't "meanings" going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; the language is itself the vehicle of thought. (1953, p. 329)

The instrumental nature of language is also related to the fitness of the tools to the outcomes. Although words are limited in number, their functions are *almost* infinite. Concepts are the functions of words (Ryle, 1954), and concepts originate in the diversity of uses of words in different contexts. Concepts do not consist of separate meanings attachable to words. They are the functions involved in the technical use of words according to situations and purposes. Special words may be invented as particular concepts, although most of the time in ordinary language, common words being used are constantly reinvented as functional tools. Concepts deal with the pertinent use of words:

> Language is an *instrument*. Its concepts are instruments. Now perhaps one thinks that it can make no *great* difference *which* concepts we employ. As, after all, it is possible to do physics in feet and inches as well as in meters and centimeters; the difference is merely one of convenience. But even this is not true if, for instance, calculations in some system of measurement demand more time and trouble than it is possible for us to give them. (1953, p. 569)

Language is the instrument by means of which people relate with each other. Nevertheless, these relations are not to be explained by the communication between people by means of language. Communication is a phenomenon taking place as a special function of language and not as an equivalent to language:

> Not: "without language we could not communicate with one another," but for sure: without language we cannot influence other people in such-and-such ways; cannot build roads and machines, etc. And also, without the use of speech and writing people could not communicate. (1953, p. 491)

Language as a Form of Life

Language as a form of life consists in a diversity of language games that not only make up the meaning of words but the meaning of life itself. The meaning of words is always linked to the experiences as actions and outcomes involved in social practices. Even expressions in some language have several meanings for individuals participating of different cultures, contexts, or developmental times:

For words have meaning only in the stream of life. (1980, p. 687)

. . .Not until there is a language game are there reasons. (1980, p. 689)

Although language games may be described by rules that specify the functions of words and phrases in relation to their use and outcomes, language games as activities consisting in a form of life rest upon the considerations and beliefs that originate in prior social practices. Language games involve some tacit assumptions underlying their practice. These assumptions constitute, in Wittgenstein's terms, the *deep grammar* of language:

. . .Then what we do in our language game always rests on a tacit presupposition. (1953, *IV*, p. 170)

. . .Consideration is part of a language game. And that is why a concept is in its elements within the language game. (1980, p. 632)

And that is why: ". . .a language game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say 'can trust something')." (1969, p. 509)

Once an individual masters a language game and is able to drift from one language game into another, language is no longer restricted to functioning as an instrument to affect the world, but it becomes the instrument that gives meaning to the world. That is, we do not relate to the world only by means of language, we relate the world to us in terms of the meanings involved in the language game. A language game defines—tacitly or overtly—a) a practical domain, and b) the criteria by means of which the game-outcomes are fulfilled, and thus how the activities involved in the language game become effective. In other words, a language game specifies the situation where a game may be played and the rules regulating its practice.

Summing up, the notion of language game as developed by Wittgenstein involves the foundation for a psychological analysis of language in which language is not considered *per se* a psychological phenomenon or event. The outstanding assumptions of this view are the following:

1) Language is learned as in a training process and not according to rule prescriptions.
2) Language is learned based on assumptions and beliefs, and beliefs and assumptions are learned with language.

3) Language consists *primarily* in the words and sentences that may be said in certain contexts.
4) Language is used as activities in which words and phrases make sense.
5) Language's grammar is derived from the use of words in contexts.
6) Language is the vehicle of human activities in relation to others.
7) Language is instrumental in affecting the effectiveness of the relations with things and persons.
8) Language communicates through speaking and writing.
9) Language is a form of life; it encompasses the meanings of the activities of individuals regarding their world.
10) Language consists in a diversity of autonomous games in which words, sentences, and actual practices have different meanings.
11) Individual experiences and actions have sense according to and by means of language, but they are not identical to language.
12) Language is not the expression of ideas or the manifestation of the influence or following of rules when speaking and writing.
13) Although names and descriptions are used in language, language does not consist in naming and describing.
14) Language games may be learned in a practical manner without explicit rules and criteria. Learning rules and criteria about a language game are not the same as learning its practice.

Language and Behavior

It is not possible to accept Wittgenstein's notion of language game while, at the same time, considering language as a psychological phenomenon of the same kind as, for example, learning and thinking.

Wittgenstein views language as being *always* immersed in practical action. Words and sentences consist of partial components integrated in a more complex action involving movements and sensing of the context. Although language has a definite morphology, it becomes functional only because of its intermingling in simple or complex action patterns. Words and sentences are always part of an action, although they are not actions by themselves.

Psychology has not recognized that language, although ever-present in human behavior and its context, does not constitute a psychological phenomenon. Inherent in this failure has been the persistent view about language: a) as a kind of behavior, b) informing about other psychological events or phenomena, and c) sharing certain morphological (and therefore functional) properties with non-observable psychological processes such as thinking, etc.

Although language always occurs as action (writing, reading, speaking, gesturing), it is more than actions with a special morphology. Language is ". . .the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 7). *All human behavior is linguistic*, even when the actions involved do not encompass "linguistic" morphologies. The same may be said about objects and events in the environment. They are linguistic even when they do

not consist in verbal labels, texts, or linguistic sounds. Some examples about language games are the following (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 23): giving orders and obeying them, describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements, constructing an object from a description (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 or telling it, solving a problem in practical arithmetic, translating from one language into another, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

In seeing a table, seeing is a linguistic episode even though we do not see "through" words and tables do not have attached labels naming them (this does not apply to pre-linguistic individuals, although it would be questionable that they actually see "a table"). We do not see colors, forms, sizes, and other geometrical, physical, and chemical features and afterwards become aware through explicit verbal reconstruction that we are seeing a table. We *just* see a table, since we have learned through language (listening to the actions of others) that *a table is a table*. We are sure or self-confident that when we see a "table" we are in fact seeing a table. This happens even when we do not know why it is a table. Malcolm (1977) comments about the groundlessness of believing, especially in small children. Mere acceptance, on the basis of no evidence, shapes in many occasions our lives. Children are told the name of things, accept what they are told, and do not ask for grounds or proofs. That is why seeing and knowing are different, because they entail different language games:

> When a child learns language it learns at the same time what is to be investigated and what not. When it learns that there is a cupboard in the room it isn't taught to doubt whether what it sees later on is still a cupboard or only a kind of stage set. (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 472)

> The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn't so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level. (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 538)

To summarize, any human activity is impregnated with language because it takes place in an environment that is built up through language and as language, and because it always occurs along the routes fixed up by language, regardless of whether or not it is morphologically linguistic. Even such simple reactions as recognizing when seeing are linguistic, and seeing, feeling, thinking, and many other behavior relations always take place within the boundaries of multiple language games. Seeing, feeling, learning, and thinking, just to name some of the fundamental psychological phenomena described in and by ordinary language, are linguistic phenomena, not some sort of internal talking, listening, reading, or writing.

Based upon the analysis of the various conceptual levels embraced by the notion of language games, I propose a psychological conception about behavior as the practical content of language games. As a first step to that end, no distinction is

to be made between verbal and non-verbal behavior, or between linguistic and non-linguistic behavior. These distinctions isolate behaviors in terms of their morphology, segregating interactive patterns whose components lack functional significance by themselves. Words, movements, and reactions to events never take place separately. Words and expressions become meaningful only when integrated in actions in the form of episodes taking place in a given situation. In this proposal, language is conceived threefold:

1) As a collection of varied contingency systems, providing the medium where behavior is significant,
2) As an acquired reactional system that allows the individual to interact with other individuals and social meaningful objects and events, and
3) As the social device through which individuals may construct new contingency systems affecting the functions attributed to objects, events and behaviors.

These features of language contain or cover the behavior of an individual as psychological phenomena that become meaningful. The task of psychology is to analyze the functional organization of behavior in terms of the linguistic dimensions of the situation in which it occurs.

Morphological aspects of the acts of speech and writing may be relevant only with reference to their role in the situational episode in which they take place (Ribes, 1986). Thus, observational and analytical emphases must be displaced toward the nature of the language game and the functional properties of the behavior in correspondence to those situational "rules" regulating such a language game.

Language as a medium deals with the acquisition of speech and writing and the learning of a new environment and its related practices. Language becomes significant for psychology in relation to the acquisition of a conventional reactive system (the traditional issue of "language" acquisition) as both the development of new actions adjusting to a particular environment (saying things and doing things according to situational demands) and the development of differential reactivity to actions of other persons and of objects and events (understanding and recognizing the integration of linguistic and physical stimuli and their relation with actions).

Language as an instrument has to do with interactions in which writing, reading, and saying while acting are effective in the production of changes in the behavior of others and in the objects and events in the environment. The individual may be effective through language either in changing the behavior of others in relation to him or in changing the behavior of others regarding the effects of objects and events toward him. Language becomes significant to psychology in terms of its "performative nature" (Austin, 1962), encompassing the situational effectiveness of words and expressions as parts of actions.

Language as a form of life obviously includes its two other functions, as a medium and as an instrument. Functional dimensions and criteria are the core defining features of a language game. Thus, language becomes, in Wittgenstein's

metaphor, "the conceptual glasses" through which individuals look at the world and their own practice. Science, religion, and art are prominent examples of this third property of language regarding behavior. Consequently, psychology must be interested in this dimension, which not only represents an overall environment of individual practice but also the possibility of producing and creating new circumstances resulting from special classes of individual practice. The language of individuals modulates and creates the conditions under which other individuals may be effective in their interactions.

Language as a medium is the totality of functions that objects and actions acquire as conventional signals. It involves the reactions induced by stimuli, the differential reactions to or recognitions of stimuli, and the reproduction of stimuli. As an instrument it becomes effective practice within conventional situations and involves mechanical actions integrated with gestures, speech, reading, and writing resulting in mechanical, conventional, and behavioral outcomes. As dimension and criteria, or as a circumstance itself, it is a world conception. Language modulates what and how we see, what and how we feel, and what and how we talk and behave.

Wittgenstein's insights on language pave the way for psychology to re-address fundamental issues about the nature of human behavior and its relation with language. Wittgenstein's remarks and observations point to the mistake in assuming that speaking about our experiences and feelings entails speaking *about the mind*. Experiences and feelings cannot be detached from language as a social practice. Language, although based on words, is not just a special kind of behavior taking place while speaking or reading. Language provides meaning and sense to all human behavior to the extent that things, events, persons, values, goals, and any conceivable element in human life is dealt with through language and as language. As previously quoted, language is like a second nature for us, even though we may not be aware of this.

I will mention only some of the general premises derived from Wittgenstein's reflections that theoretical efforts in the analysis of language and human behavior might consider in order to bring in a much-needed conceptual shift:

1) The linguistic nature of human environment
2) The arbitrariness and futility of the verbal/nonverbal behavior distinction
3) The foundation of language in action and the acquisition of its basic elements through observation and listening
4) The irrelevance of grammatical models for the study of language as behavior
5) The impregnation of human psychological phenomena by language
6) The conceptual confusion in assuming the "existence" of private events corresponding to "inner" experience
7) The multiplicity of the functions of language
8) The intimate relations between knowing and learning

Contrary to our pragmatic culture, advances in psychology do not necessarily depend on empirical accumulation of evidence, especially when it is based upon conceptual misunderstandings. The critical revision of prevailing assumptions about human behavior may be a more adequate strategy to formulate meaningful questions.

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