

Meaning as Use: Peirce and Wittgenstein

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Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations* that the meaning of a word is its use in a language (Wittgenstein 1953, I, sec. 43). This is often interpreted to entail that he was no more interested in the relationship between language and the world. Words get their meaning by virtue of their relationships with other words and their use. It is, however, possible to argue that the use of words actually serves as a link between language and the world (see Hintikka and Hintikka 1989, 217-220). This interpretation puts emphasis on Wittgenstein's remarks according to which language-games do not contain only linguistic moves. "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions with which it is interwoven, the 'language-game'", Wittgenstein writes (Wittgenstein 1953, I, sec. 7). He points also out that there is an analogy between words and tools (ibid., sec. 11 and 14). He even calls language and its concepts instruments (ibid., sec. 569). In this interpretation words get their meaning when they are used in the context of other practices, and this combination of linguistic and non-linguistic practices just is the link between language and the world. If we can use the word 'table' correctly in the context of our other activities with or around a table, we also understand that the word 'table' refers to its object.¹⁾

The purpose of this paper is not to argue further for this interpretation but to point out that it has some connections with the views of Charles Peirce. One idea in common is the above-mentioned analogy between words and tools. Peirce writes that "what a thing means is simply what habits it involves" (CP 5.400, see also CP 5.495). The use of things like tools and instruments surely belongs to the habits that they involve. Also John Dewey puts the analogy quite clearly: "In short, the sound h-a-t gains meaning in precisely the same way that the thing 'hat' gains it, by being used in a given way" (Dewey 1916, 18). In other words, the use of a tool, instrument or any object that can be put to use is its meaning, just as the use of a word is its meaning.

This notion of meaning is wider than that of linguistic meaning, and it can be pushed further to entail that all objects of perception are meaningful entities that are ultimately interpreted in terms of habits of action. In Peirce's semiotics, signs are three-place relations that consist of an object, a sign-vehicle that refers to this object, and an interpretant by virtue of which the sign-vehicle is interpreted to refer to its object. The interpretant may consist of other sign-vehicles which require further interpretants in order to be elements of a three-place sign-relation, and this process of interpretation may continue to indefinite future. Peirce has, however, a special kind of interpretant, final logical interpretant which is a habit of action. "The deliberately formed, self-analyzing habit - self-analyzing because formed by the aid of analysis of the exercises that nourished it - is the living definition, the veritable and final logical interpretant" (CP 5.591). This ends up the process of interpretation and we get the statement mentioned earlier: what a thing means is simply what habits it involves. For example, a banana is interpreted to be an edible object in terms of habits of eating.

By using this semiotic approach we can see that our everyday activities, form of life, consist of meaningful practices. In our daily life we use things like doors and stairways, houses and roads, buses and bicycles, and the habits of using these things just is the meaning of these things. These practices are meaningful in their own right. The meaning of linguistic expressions is the use of these expressions in the context of these practices, and the result is a layered system of meanings, that is, uses of different kinds of sign-vehicles.

As Wittgenstein notes, the use is always extended in time (Wittgenstein 1953, I, sec. 138). Language is a "spatial and temporal phenomenon" (ibid., sec. 108). The same holds for other practices. When using ordinary objects of perception we move around in space and time. Forms of life are spatial and temporal phenomena.

What is it to think about and understand these meanings? Wittgenstein emphasizes that we understand the meaning of a word when we hear it, "we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time" (ibid., sec. 138). The use of words and other sign-vehicles takes place in space and time, but understanding and thinking deal with something not extended in time, that is, something timeless. In other words, because we can grasp a temporal sequence "in a flash", the object of this act of understanding, that what we grasp, must in some sense be timeless, non-temporal phenomenon.

Wittgenstein makes the same distinction between temporal and timeless phenomena when discussing the meaning of the word 'red'. Something red can be destroyed, but red cannot be destroyed, and therefore the meaning of the word 'red' is independent of the existence of a red thing, he writes (ibid., sec. 57). The meaning of the word does exist in its own right, and this idea "finds expression again when we say such a thing as that red is timeless" (ibid., sec. 58). Here the meaning is timeless because it is independent of the existence of red objects.

Wittgenstein discusses this dichotomy between temporal and timeless phenomena also with the example of a musical phrase. "You would say that the tune was there, if, say, someone sang it through, or heard it mentally from beginning to end... if someone says with conviction that now he knows the tune, then it is (somehow) present to his mind in its entirety at that moment" (ibid., sec. 184). Something extended in time is, in the mind, present in its entirety at one moment. The thought about a tune is present as timeless.

All these passages deal with the relation between temporal and non-temporal. Actual use and real physical objects are always temporal phenomena, but in thinking about these temporal things we are thinking about something non-temporal. Meanings as objects of thought exist in a way that makes them timeless in spite of the fact that the definition "meaning is use" refers to actual and thus temporal uses of words and other sign-vehicles.

It is quite difficult to explicate how temporal uses and timeless thoughts about these uses are actually related to each other, as is seen also from the need to use

the word 'somehow' in the last quote from Wittgenstein. Without penetrating further into these difficulties we can, however, return to the ideas of Peirce and note that there is another way to think about the issue. Interestingly, Peirce used the same example of a musical phrase when discussing how we think about habits.

"In a piece of music there are the separate notes, and there is the air... We certainly only perceive the air by hearing the separate notes; yet we cannot be said to directly hear it, for we hear only what is present at the instant, and an orderliness of succession cannot exist in an instant... These two sorts of objects, what we are immediately conscious of and what we are mediately conscious of, are found in all consciousness. Some elements (the sensations) are completely present at every instant so long as they last, while others (like thought) are actions having beginning, middle, and end, and consist in a congruence in the succession of sensations which flow through the mind. They cannot be immediately present to us, but must cover some portion of the past or future" (CP 5.395).

According to Peirce, the melody as a whole is not present to us at any one instant, but we are, however, able to think about it. Melody is an example of habits, so we have to ask what habits are, how they exist and how we can think about them. This is, in effect, to ask how meanings exist and how we think about them. Wittgenstein seems to think that meaning as an object of thought is a general mental entity that is present to the mind as a whole in one moment of time. A general entity is timeless, and its mode of existence is different from that of particular objects and uses of sign-vehicles.

Peirce has a different solution to the problem of general entities. For Peirce habits are general entities. Individual acts like uses of words or other sign-vehicles may be instances of habits, but a habit cannot be present here and now at any one instant. Does this entail that habits are timeless like thoughts of meanings for Wittgenstein? Not for Peirce. For him habit just is a tendency "actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future" (CP 5.487). That what makes a habit general is the fact that a series of act, an instance of this habit, is repeated several times under similar circumstances. All instances of a habit are temporal phenomena, and the habit consists of them. Generality is repetition (*Stetige Handlung*, as Kant put it) and thus requires temporality.

Habits do not exist in the past, because there have been only a finite number of instances of any habit. No real generality can be involved here. Neither do habits exist in the present, because in the present there can exist only individual acts. So they have to exist in the future. "For every habit has, or is, a general law. Whatever is truly general refers to the indefinite future... It is a potentiality; and its mode of being is *esse in futuro*" (CP 2.148).

Here we have to distinguish between two types of generality, actual and potential generality. This distinction is based on the difference between actually and potentially infinite sets. An actually infinite set, say the set of natural numbers, has infinitely many members. A potentially infinite set is not actually infinite, but the number of its members has no upper limit. No matter how big a natural number we choose, we can always go further. But all these numbers are finite numbers.

According to Peirce, general refers to potentially infinite number of instances of a habit, and that is all we can have. We can think of repeating an act many times without any certain upper limit, but it is not possible to repeat any act an actually infinite number of times. Generality is, for Peirce, only potential generality. And this potential generality can exist only in time, it is a temporal thing.

Actually general refers, according to this distinction, to actually infinite number of possible instances of a habit. Actually general is, or pretends to be, eternal, something that holds always. In that sense it can be thought to be timeless, and this is what, I suspect, Wittgenstein maintains in these quotes.

To think about potentially general things is to think about performing an instance of a habit, that is, performing a series of acts that can be repeated in the future indefinitely many times. Thinking is, in a word, anticipation of action. And here we must keep in mind that speaking and writing are also overt activities. To think is to anticipate what is the outcome of an act on the basis of previous experiences of performing similar acts under similar circumstances. Thought is a process that is continuously going on through our lives. It is a temporal phenomenon dealing only with temporal entities. To use Peirce's phrase: "Thought is a thread of melody running through the succession of our sensations" (CP 5.395).

Note

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