

## Ludwig Wittgenstein on Language Games: A Critical Appraisal

<sup>1</sup>Baridisi Hope Isaac, Ph.D, <sup>2</sup>Ishmael Ukie Gwunireama, Ph.D  
& <sup>3</sup>Tamunosiki Victor Ogan, Ph.D

<sup>1</sup>Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

*Philosophical linguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies the points of convergence between language and the structure of logical thought. Semantics is concerned with the study of linguistic meaning of morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences. This paper examines Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion or idea of language games as a linguistic theory of meaning. It x-rays the nature and character of language vis-à-vis its use. It employs qualitative research method, in which case, it is basically descriptive. It anchors or hinges on textual analysis. It contributes significantly to the general body of knowledge and, of course, adds to the corpus of existing literatures on linguistic philosophy. It posits, in conclusion, that Wittgenstein's theory of language-games is an ideal theory of meaning because it has plausibility. It recommends that there be a reconstructive adaptation of this theory or model in contemporary linguistics.*

**Keywords:** Ludwig, Wittgenstein, Language, Games, Critical, Appraisal

DOI URL: <https://doi.org/10.36758/jirses/v1n4.2021/2>

### **Introduction**

The central focus of this paper is to attempt a critical appraisal of Wittgenstein's theory of language game. It is a philosophical inquiry into the nature and character of meaning which is the major preoccupation of semantics as a branch of linguistics. It x-rays the major assumptions of Wittgenstein vis-à-vis language and its meaning with an impassioned mental disposition or dispassionate mindset or frame of mind.

Language is a structured system of communication used by humans consisting of sounds (spoken words) or gestures (signed language). Thus, the scientific study of language is called linguistics. It is, however, important to note that fundamental questions concerning the philosophy of language, such as whether words can represent experience, have been vigorously articulated and debated by Gorgias and Plato in the ancient period of Greek philosophy. It is germane to note that our perceptions or worldviews about reality are conditioned and shaped by the language in which they are expressed (Udoidem 110). In what follows, our knowledge of the meanings of the words we use enables us to understand our existential realities or social conditions (Ejele 3). These underscore the indispensability or necessity of semantics and syntax which are spheres or provinces of linguistics. This paper is domesticated within the domain or purview of Analytic Philosophy which is also known as Linguistic Philosophy.

### **In What Does Language Consists?**

In a nutshell, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* succinctly defines language as, "the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area" (Hornby 834). This way of communicating our feelings and ideas within the confines of a particular cultural context or social milieu. It is a form of mentefact that defines a given cultural identity. Nathan Idowu aptly opines that, "it is the application of a system of sounds and words by humans to communicate" (42). This implies that language entails the use of identifiable sounds and words.

Furthermore, Nnamdi Anumihe *et al* submit that, "words, signs and symbols are the vehicles of ideas and messengers of language for they convey the meanings of ideas, thoughts

and feelings in such forms as can be interpreted or translated into human activities”(1). The implication of the foregoing is that language utilizes the instrumentality of a well-defined signs, symbols, words, etc., to drive home its intended message. Still attempting to provide a working definition of language, Ozo-Mekuri Ndimele informs that:

Language is essentially a communication system in the sense that it associates meaning (i.e. the message) with a set of signs (i.e. the sounds or symbols). All linguistic units of expression (e.g. sounds, words, sentence, etc) are the signs of the objects, entities or states of affairs that they represent. The relationship between a sign and the entity it stands for is known as signification (1).

It therefore follows, *ipso factor*, that human language is essentially and ultimately a semiotic system. It is often described as a semiotic system because it entails the use of certain agreed-upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person to another within a given speech community or language group. It is both natural and artificial in usage. All the same, Karo Ogbinaka, while commenting on the nature and character of language as a social phenomenon, observes that:

(ii) helps to understand the concepts and terms used in logical argument and analysis.

Terms that are frequently used in our daily conversation. An understanding of these terms is important for it helps us to know the way they have been employed, distinguish between their definitions and their usage in a structure of argument (82).

Recall that philosophy, by its very nature, is a second order discipline. This is indicative or suggestive of the fact that philosophy plays a supervisory role in the systematization of all other disciplines (including linguistics). Thus, philosophy of language concerns itself with conceptual and linguistic analysis of terms or concepts with a view to bringing about clarity, coherence, and removing vagueness in the process of reasoning and in our use of language. Human language, which is the object of human communication, differs fundamentally from other systems of social phenomena in a good number of ways. It is a peculiar, distinct, and unique system of human social relations. It characterizes the world of social realities. There is no gainsaying that is the vehicle through which our deep emotions or psychological emotions are expressed in a systematic manner. Ndimele further posits that one of the essential characteristics of language is creativity. In his own parlance:

Language makes it possible for its users to be able to express new ideas, produce and comprehend new sentences which they have never said or heard before. This characteristics of human language makes it both an open-ended and a complex system (Ndimele 2).

There is no doubt that language, as a linguistic phenomenon, enhances human creative ingenuity. It promotes the culture of imaginative, creative, and rational reflection of human mode of acquisition of ideas – knowledge. It is, in the main, an intellectual instrument of creative or critical thinking. No wonder Boniface Nwigwe sums it up that, “language is an objective social reality” (3). Another feature of language identified by Philemon Audu is arbitrariness. For him:

Whereas there is a direct resemblance between calls and their meanings in animal communication, in human language, the relationship between sounds and meanings is arbitrary. Sounds in human language do not have any direct bearing on the meanings of the entities that the sounds designate (Audu 76).

To be sure, the meaning i.e. linguistic meaning in human communication is culture-bound and relative to the social context in which it is being applied. Thus, semantics is dependent on the speech community. Still commenting on the characteristic feature of language, Pascal Nwachukwu emphatically notes that there is duality in human language. He brilliantly observes that:

In animal communication, one call or word often represent one meaning, but in human language, there is an inbuilt mechanism in which several meaningless

sounds can be combined to derive meaningful longer expressions. Animals do not have the ability to combine their sounds (Nwachukwu 98).

Human language is unique in the sense that one word can imply more than one meaning that is understood to member of a given language group. In other words, language has multiplicity of meanings in human communication depending on its usage, and the context in which it is being used. That is to say that is relative to certain peculiarities which are definable within a given ethno-linguistic group. What is more, human language has pattern-congruity and constancy. In fine, there is fixed association between words and the real-world entities that the words designate. Language mirrors society and attempts to reflect on reality in linguistic terms (Idowu 5). This presupposes that we analyze and explain fundamental realities through the instrumentality of language. It is, therefore, a representation of the entire gamut of man's existential conditions or realities using sounds, signs, or logical symbols.

### **Wittgenstein on Picture Theory of Meaning**

The opinion or views expressed by Wittgenstein in first masterpiece, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, are representatives of the “Early Wittgenstein”. It represents a pictorial theory of language which is simply referred to as *picture theory* of language, in which case, language is seen as picturing reality. It shows the relationship between language and reality. The function of language, in the opinion of Wittgenstein, is to represent states of affairs in the external world. Here is Wittgenstein in full, “A proposition is a picture of reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it” (*Tractatus* 4.01). Language, says Wittgenstein, is meaningful to the extent that it mirrors facts or phenomena in the real world. The idea that a sentence is a picture of reality (sensible objects in the external world) underscores the picture theory of meaning. To be sure, there is a correspondence between the structure of reality (the world or cosmos) and the structure of language. In fine, the picture of language is a *model of reality*. The scheme below depicts a picture of Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning:

Language      —————>      World

### **Wittgenstein on Language Games Theory of Meaning**

The second phase of Wittgenstein's task of clarifying language ultimately culminates or finds expression in the ‘language game’ theory of meaning which is manifestly evident in his groundbreaking text entitled, *Philosophical Investigations*. The ideas espoused in this polemical book represent the “Later Wittgenstein” – a redefined version of his earlier work. This second major work occasioned a radical shift (Paradigm shift) in the analytic or linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein. He draws an analogy between language games and other games such as tennis, volleyball, etc. The meaning of words is from their use in a language game. Thus, philosophy is the activity of analyzing language games to dissolve philosophical problems (Lavine 405). In contrast to the *Tractatus* which assumed that there is one universal form of language – the form of language which consists of sentences picturing reality; in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejects this view as mistaken. He opines that giving orders and obeying them; describing the appearance of an object; speculating about an event; making a joke; translating from one language into another; asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying, amongst others, are all uses of language.

Historians, for instance, use language differently from lawyers or form engineers. Each is a different kind of language with its own rules. Each language game is played by its own rules. In an attempt to illustrate the relationship of language – games to one another, Wittgenstein uses yet another analogy. He says the different uses of language are like “family resemblances” (*Investigations* 67). His deep commitment to the pursuit of meaning and use of language is couched in the foregoing assertion. In Wittgenstein's parlance or formulation, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (*Investigations* 43).

More so, Wittgenstein used the metaphor of a ‘tool-box’ to exemplify or portray the workings of language – game. A language, he says, is akin to a box of tools. He compares

words to tools, each having a distinctive function (Lawhead 517). Thus, it is unrealistic to represent the multiplicity of structures of different languages in one single, absolute structure as he had tried to do in the *Tractatus*. The fundamental aim of philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is “To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle”. The proper role of the philosopher, in the opinion of Wittgenstein, is to remove “misunderstanding concerning the use of words” (*Investigations* 90). Thus, philosophy becomes a *clearing house* or *therapy* curing all linguistic problems arising from our abuse or misuse of words. Little wonder he surmises that, “Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” (*Investigations* 38). Put differently, there is confusion in human communication when language goes on holiday or recess.

### Critical Evaluation

The landmark contributions of Wittgenstein to the districts of Analytic Philosophy, Philosophy of Language, etc., cannot be overemphasized. His determination to construct a logically perfect language whose syntax and semantics would mirror the structure of the world, no doubt, marked a watershed in the annals of the history of linguistic philosophy. His ambition to develop an *ordinary language* enhanced clarity, consistency, and coherence in our use of language, thereby, eliminating grammatical fallacies such as Assent, Ambiguity, Equivocation, Tautology, etc.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined Wittgenstein’s analysis and understanding of language games as a linguistic theory. The task of philosophy, for Wittgenstein and his allies, is the pursuit of meaning in our use of language. Philosophical problems arise because the logic of our language is misunderstood. He, therefore, proposes or makes a case for the language games theory of meaning. This, in our view, is a systematic attempt to reconstruct language, meaning, and its use.

### Works Cited

- Anumihe, Nnamdi *et al.* *English Language in Communication: A Practical Guide*. Port Harcourt: Zelon Enterprises, 2006.
- Audu, Philemon. *Themes in Analytic Philosophy*. Jos: A-Z Publishers Ltd., 2017.
- Ejele, Philomena E. *Semantics: Lexical Structure & Lexical Relations*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages, 2014.
- Idowu, Nathan B. *New Trends in Philosophy of Language*. Akure: Fountain Press Ltd., 2016.
- Lavine, T.Z. *From Socrates to Satre: The Philosophic Quest*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984.
- Lawhead, William F. *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. USA: Wadsworth / Thomson Learning, 2002.
- Ndimele, Ozo-Mekuri (ed.). *Readings on Language*. Port Harcourt: M & J Grand Orbit Communications Ltd., 2017.
- Nwachukwu, Pascal A. *Understanding Semantics*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages, 1995.
- Nwigwe, Boniface E. *Language, Truth and Reality: A Philosophical Investigation of the Notion of Meaning*. Inaugural lecture delivered May 31, 2012. University of Port Harcourt Inaugural Lecture Series No. 86.
- Nwigwe, Boniface E.; Unegbe; Basil N. and Emedolu, Christian C. *Ethics and Corruption of Language: Perspective in Philosophy of Language*.
- Ogbinaka, Karo. *Fundamentals of Philosophy of Language*. Lagos: Sunshine Press, 2018.
- Udoidem, Iniobong S. *Understanding Philosophy*. 4th Impression. Lagos: African Heritage Publications, 2016.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1953.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1961.