Chap 4. IN THE MIDST OF LANGUAGE

(sketch)

The famous saying: "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use", might have been and I hope was a piece of advice to philosophers, and not to lexicographers or translators. It advised philosophers, I hope, when wrestling with some *aporia*, to switch their attention from the trouble-giving words in their dormancy as language-pieces or dictionary-items to their utilisation in the actual sayings of things; from their general promises when on the shelf to their particular performances when at work; from their permanent purchasing-power when in the bank to the concrete marketing done yesterday morning with them; in short, from these words *quâ* units of a Language to live sentences in which they are being actively employed.

Gilbert Ryle[1]

If the connection between "our words" and "what we mean" is a necessary one, this necessity is not established by universals, propositions, or rules, but by the form of life which makes certain stretches of syntactic utterance *assertions.*

Stanley Cavell[2]

1. Uses of "use"

In the huge literature commenting on, or taking its inspiration from, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the notion of "meaning as use" or "use theory of meaning" has been understood in a number of different ways. This variety has rarely been noted, in fact there is very little discussion focusing on the concept of use in itself.[3] Use has sometimes been understood along the lines of conformity with a practice or usage[4], sometimes along the lines of function or role[5]. What is in question may be the use of words, or types of sentence, or a particular uttering of a sentence.[6] Sometimes, the

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[1] Ryle, "Use, Usage and Meaning" in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.), *Theory of Meaning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 114. (Originally *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 35 (1961), 223-242.)

[2] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford etc: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 208.

[3] An exception to this is William P. Alston's essay "Meaning and Use", in Parkinson (ed.), op.cit. But hiw overview is limited to normative readings. It is also problematic in its running together of word meanings and sentence meanings.

[4] E.g. Peter Hacker, Hans-Johann Glock.

[5] E.g. Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty.*

[6] Dummett, Skorupski. Alston.

interest in use is descriptive, sometimes normative. The emphasis has been on use as a guide to *what* an utterance means, or as giving a clue to whether two utterances *mean the same* or not[7], or whether a word has been *rightly used*, or to whether an utterance *has meaning at all* or is nonsense[8]. Sometimes the relation between use and meaning is described in external terms, by saying that use *determines* meaning, at other times the relation is viewed as internal, *meaning consisting* in use.

It is true that this variety is partly due to the fact that Wittgenstein himself may not have had only one thing in mind in talking about use and meaning. Yet some of the readings are actually in conflict with one another, and are linked to widely divergent views of the nature of philosophy. In many cases they seem to betray a lack of sensitivity to Wittgenstein's own concerns. Rather than going through the different readings systematically, I shall do three things in this chapter. First (Sec. 2), I want to describe the background that has shaped many of these readings, and suggest why that background is misleading. Next (Sec. 3), I want to outline what I think is the central role of appeals to use in Wittgenstein's thought. After that (Secs 4-6), I want to argue that a focus on use, if consistently carried through, will lead to the reversal of a widespread view of the relation between word meanings and the meaning of what we say.

2. Meaning is "something"

Philosophers have traditionally taken it for granted that there is a feature, called meaning, that is associated with linguistic expressions and explains how communication is possible, i.e. how speakers learn to use words in communicating with others and to respond to other people's use of words. For me to be able to use some word in speaking, it is thought, I must either be cognizant of some entity in my mind or in the outside world which constitutes the meaning of the word, or I must have internalized some system in which the word holds a certain position. In the absence of this, it would be a mystery how the complex phenomena of linguistic communication are possible.

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[7] Rorty.
[8] Hacker, Glock, Conant.

On the one hand, then, the idea of meaning is thought to be required to explain how we are able to talk to and understand one another. On the other hand, it seems to be presupposed by some of the ways in which we commonly talk *about* linguistic phenomena (whether in philosophy or outside of it). When we judge whether someone's use of a word is *correct* or not we seem to presuppose that there is such a thing as the meaning of the word, which a particular application of it does or does not accord with. The notion that words are connected with something we call their meanings, then, seems to be a prerequisite of our being able to correct someone's way of using a word. Again, when a question arises whether two people really *meant the same* by some word or expression, the assumption is apparently made that there is an entity or feature, a "meaning", which the words or expressions may or may not share. And when philosophers argue that such and such a sentence or proposition has no meaning, is *nonsense*, it seems to be presupposed that meanings are features that sentences or propositions may have or lack.

It might be thought, then, that philosophers should be able to give an account of what meaning is. Against this background, it has seemed natural to read Wittgenstein as though that was precisely what he was providing. What he is taken to be saying is that while meaning is not constituted by intensions, or extensions, or reference, or truth-conditions, or assertion-conditions, it is constituted by something else: by use. When we are being told that meaning is use, we naturally tend to take this to mean that use provides a *relation* between a linguistic expression and its meaning. When the matter is put in that way, however, it immediately gives rise to a host of questions: what are the terms of this relation? are they words or sentences? are they tokens or types? and on the other hand: what is the nature of the relation: is it conformity or functionality? is it a normative or a descriptive relation? is it internal or external? etc.

What I shall be arguing is that there is no room for these types of question in Wittgenstein's thought. In bringing use to the fore, Wittgenstein is not proposing an account of the relation between expressions and their meanings, but simply suggesting a way of looking at what we do when we speak.

When Wittgenstein has been taken to provide an *account* of meaning, the concept of a language-game and the problem of rule-following have naturally come to occupy

centre stage. What we are being offered, it is thought, is a holistic and practical view of meaning: we are encouraged to look at the rules regulating the use of an expression in the context of some larger activity in which that expression has a role, an activity consisting not only in the saying of various kinds of things, but in various non-verbal actions as well. Among the advantages of such an account is that it widens our perspective on the sorts of things an utterance may be: apart from factual assertions (to which the analytic mainstream had for the most part confined its attention), there are also, say, commands, requests, questions, expletives, jokes, etc. Furthermore, in pointing to the connection between speech and various forms of non-verbal activity, it draws attention to the different role of words in different contexts, and more widely to cultural or historical variations among human speech forms and activities.

Among the drawbacks of this account, or should we say, of the way it has been understood both by some adherents and some critics, is the fact that it has lent itself to rather facile ways of dismissing philosophical problems, such as responding to a difficulty by saying, "Well, that's what the language-game is like"[9], or fitting recalcitrant forms of language into ready-made boxes (some contemporary philosophy of religion is a case in point); it has also encouraged some rather simplified conventional or relativist accounts of meaning and culture[10]. One of the most incisive critiques of the language-game view is that of Rush Rhees, who argues that it fails to do justice to the ways in which the various aspects of language hang together, and, on the whole, to the deep significance of language in our lives.

Unquestionably language-games and rule-following are prominent themes in Wittgenstein's later work. But I would suggest that these notions are best read as metaphors meant to help us get around certain types of philosophical difficulty, rather

[9] Thus, Anthony Kenny writes:
> In the *Investigations* as in the *Tractatus*, the nearest thing there is to proof in philosophy is the demonstration to a metaphysician that he has failed to give meaning to certain signs in his propositions. The demonstration, of course, now takes a different form: it consists of showing that he is using a sign without the support of any language game. (Either he has taken a sign from an existing language game and used it outside the network within which alone it has sense; or he has purported to invent a new sign without appropriately embedding it in a new game.)

"'Philosophy States Only what Everyone Admits'", in Erich Ammereller & Eugen Fischer (eds.), *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the* Philosophical Investigations (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 175.
[10] Criticized by Cora Diamond in "How Old are these Bones?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl. Vol. 73* (135-150).

than as offering an analysis of "what language essentially *is*". In exhorting us to think of questions of meaning under the perspective of use, Wittgenstein is not trying to advance an account of meaning in competition with those already current, but rather getting us to look at questions of meaning in ways designed to make certain difficulties disappear. Philosophers who read an account of meaning into Wittgenstein's remarks about use, I would suggest, are like the dog who keeps looking at your finger when you are trying to point at something.

3. Look behind the picture!
When we are baffled by the sense of some expression in the course of philosophical reflection, Wittgenstein is telling us, we should look at the actual life of the expression; i.e. at the way it occurs in human conversation. Here is an example from the *Philosophical Investigations* (I am using the revised translation by Hacker and Schulte):

> 305. "But you surely can't deny that, for example, in remembering, an inner process takes place." – What gives the impression that we want to deny anything? … What we deny is that the picture of an inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word "to remember". Indeed, we're saying that this picture, with its ramifications, stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is.

Think about the uses we make of the words "I remember": we may use them to make a judgment or to correct someone else's judgment, to explain what I do or why I am in a certain mood, or we may utter them in conversing about a shared experience, or in testing my ability to remember things, etc. Again, in saying that someone else remembered something or other, we may simply mean, for instance, that she succeeded in carrying out some task or answer a question. Whether or not some specific process of remembering occurred in the person said to remember, this has no relevance to the sense of what is said. In fact, there is no distinctive feature or phenomenon that is shared by all he different cases in which the verb "to remember" is being applied to a person. The conviction that there has to be such a feature or phenomenon seems to be grounded in the idea that something must guide our use of

the word "remember"; otherwise, how could we know when to use it or understand what others mean by it? This conviction is what keeps us from looking at what is going on in actual cases.[11]

What is it to be responsive to Wittgenstein's reminders? The problem is that we have subsumed the uses of an expression under a unified picture. The suggestion is not that the picture is the wrong one and we should exchange it for another (some readers of Wittgenstein, I believe, have taken the language-game to be intended precisely as a "better picture"). The problem, rather, is that *is* a picture. It gives us the idea that there is no need for looking at particular cases in all their variety: those cases, we assume, have nothing to teach us, since we already have an overview.[12]

> A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense unambiguously. The actual use, compared with that traced out by the picture, seems like something muddied. Here again what is going on is the same as in set theory: the form of expression seems to have been tailored for a god, who knows what we cannot know; he sees all of those infinite series and he sees into the consciousness of human beings. For us, however, these forms of expression are like vestments, which we may put on, but cannot do much with, since we lack the effective power that would give them point and purpose.
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> In the actual use of these expressions we, as it were, make detours, go by side-roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course cannot use it, because it is permanently closed. (*PI* § 426.)

4. On being held to one's words

To get clear about the role of appeals to use it is important, I believe, to note the difference between two types of question that may be raised about uses of expressions - or rather, to recognize how deep the difference between them is. The distinction I

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[11] On a similar theme, see *PI* §§ 348, 360, 363, 370, 383, 422, 423, 424, 426, 427, 520, Part II, p. 187 f.

[12] The reason why certain pictures should cause philosophical puzzles is a complex one, perhaps bound up with deeply engrained habits of thought, linguistic analogies and cultural predilections. It is no coincidence that many of Wittgenstein's examples, though not all, have to do with the idea of the inner.

have in mind has some affinity with that hinted at by Frege in the context principle, but it also finds expression, to some degree, in the writings of Rush Rhees[13], Stanley Cavell[14], Cora Diamond[15], James Conant[16], and Charles Travis[17], among others (and in a way too in the later work of Donald Davidson[18]). Those who note this distinction do not always seem to be fully aware of its radical nature, and hence end up with a kind of hybrid view of the problem.

The distinction that needs to be made here is that between the questions that may arise when someone has actually made an utterance by which she means (or is taken to mean) what she says, and those that may arise when a speaker is simply imagined to be saying something, or when a speaker says something without meaning it (as in a play or in a grammatical exercise). In the first case, there is a question of the speaker *being held* to her words and what that entails, in the second case there is no question of being held to anything.

Consider two examples:

> One: a teacher sends Stella to find an empty auditorium. She comes back, pointing to a door and telling the teacher, "*That* room is empty".

> Two: in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, we find the following definition of the word "empty": "containing nothing : devoid of contents : not filled … *esp.* : lacking typical, expected, or former contents…" (the definition goes on for most of a column).

The dictionary definition is an example of the latter type of claim: it does not *use* the word "empty" but says what someone would mean or might mean if she were to use

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[13] Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, ed. by D. Z. Phillips (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[14] E.g. *The Claim of Reason*, Chap. VIII.
[15] Especially "Rules: Looking in the Right Place", in D. Z. Phillips & P. Winch (eds.), *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).
[16] Especially "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use", *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998), 222-250.
[17] For instance, "Pragmatics", in B. Hale & C. Wright (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (Malden, MA etc: Blackwell, 1999).
[18] "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." Originally published in 1985. Reprinted in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd ed., New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

the word. What is the relation between the dictionary definition and what Stella can be held to? The received view is that, if true, her words are true *in virtue of* the fact which is recorded in the dictionary, i.e. in virtue of the fact that the word "empty" means what it does (and similarly for the other words she spoke). What the dictionary is saying, as it were, is: "supposing someone said [sentence containing the word 'empty'], what her words would mean is [sentence containing other words in place of the word 'empty']". Of course, the dictionary does not list everything anybody ever said and ever will say, but there is no need for it to do so, we think: the dictionary gives a general description that can then be applied in individual cases. It gives the *semantics* of a word, it will be said.

In this way, it might be thought, a dictionary definition will be sufficient as a guide to usage. However, as a guide it is rather crude. The dictionary speaks of "typical, expected, or former contents", but in the present case what matters is not what one might expect to find or what one will typically find in a lecture room, nor what used to be there before, but probably whether there is a class there or some other activity that would prevent one from using the room for whatever purpose one had in mind. Its being right for Stella to say that the room is empty is bound up with the teacher's reason for asking her to check. Are there students lingering there after class? Would that entail that the room was not empty? I suppose that would depend on what he needed the room for, on the culture prevalent at the university in question, on his position within it, and maybe too on the chances of finding an alternative auditorium. On the other hand, if Stella discovered that all the furniture had been taken out of the room, she probably would not tell the teacher the room was *empty*, even though it would then fulfil the dictionary definition, in lacking both its typical, expected and former contents.

This makes it clear that it would be no use to invoke someone like H. P. Grice here, and argue that while the dictionary gives the *literal meaning* of the word "empty", the question of what it would be correct or incorrect for Stella to say is a matter of conversational implicature. The idea would be that even if it were, say, literally true for Stella to say that the room is empty, it would still be conversationally false. The problem with that response is that "The room is empty" may be both literally true and literally false at one and the same time. So literal sense is no guide. On the whole, the

notion of literal sense is not a fruitful way of tackling the problem of the relation between dictionary definitions and actual use, since the distinction between literal and non-literal sense is itself context-dependent. In short, it is not clear what the literal sense of "literal" is.

Here it may be retorted that a dictionary definition may still be sufficient *in principle*, in the sense suggested above, to determine whether it would be correct to apply some word in a given situation. The definition would simply have to be extended to accommodate all the nuances of a situation that might possibly bear on its application; however, the task of doing so would be gigantic, and there is really no need for such a huge dictionary anyway, since we manage quite well without it. The main point, we think, is that the *kind of knowledge* we need in order to speak and to understand words is of the kind that could, "in principle", be reproduced in a dictionary.[19]

However, this idea is mistaken. Suppose there is a disagreement. When the teacher goes to the room he discovers that it is not empty: there is a group of students there engaged in a lively discussion. Stella tells him she thought that did not matter. Who is right? Suppose enough hangs on it for them to wish to settle the matter. And suppose there were this huge dictionary with all conceivable situations described (the type of dictionary we supposedly carry with us in our minds), would that settle it? Everything hangs on how they regard the situation. What definition applies to the present case? If they did agree on how to define the situation, there would be no disagreement in the first place; since they do not agree, the dictionary is no use.

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[19] Cp. the following remark in Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value* (2nd ed., p. 94e):

> How are we taught the word "God" (its use, that is)? I cannot give an exhaustive systematic description. But I can as it were make contributions towards the description; I can say something about it & perhaps in time assemble a sort of collection of examples.
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> Reflect in this connection that in a dictionary one would perhaps like to give such descriptions of use, but in reality one gives only a few examples & explanations. But also that no more than this is necessary. What use could we make of an enormously long description? – Well, it would be no use to us if it dealt with words in a language already familiar to us. But what if we came across such a description of the use of an Assyrian word? … In this description the word "sometimes" will frequently occur, or "often", or "usually", or "nearly always", or "almost never".
>
> It is difficult to form a good picture of a description of this sort.

What Stella can be held to when she says that the room is empty depends on how we understand the activity to which her speaking those words belongs. Her utterance is part of an ongoing interaction: how words enter into it depends on how that interaction is understood. We cannot lay down the correct use of the word "empty" once and for all because we cannot delimit the varieties of human activity once and for all.

Another way of making this point might be this: the dictionary definition is not to be read as making a categorical claim: at most, it could be taken to be saying that when a person uses the word "empty", she can ordinarily be expected to mean such and such. The definition does not, as it were, reach "all the way down": either we must be able to tell whether the definition holds in this case, or alternatively we must be able to decide what else the speaker means; if we cannot, we simply cannot be sure of what she is saying. But of course, in a great many everyday situations no problem of understanding arises: normally our understanding does reach all the way down. The dictionary fails to capture the *character* of our normal understanding.[20]

There is no anticipating all the different circumstances that will be seen to have a bearing on the application of the word "empty" in all conceivable situations. In a sense, the question exists only for those interacting or being involved or concerned. Once they are agreed, no problem remains. For bystanders, on the other hand, it exists only indirectly. The dictionary definition, on the other hand, seems dedicated to the supposed task of helping us describe the world as it is in itself, without regard to how description is dependent on context. The idea that *there might be* such a way of describing the world, however, is an illusion.[21] This does not mean that dictionaries

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[20] This point is analogous to Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation. If all we have to go on is external facts about the behaviour of language users, our understanding of other speakers could never be more than hypothetical. But of course that is not the predicament we are normally in, as members of a language community.

[21] Of course, the context will not necessarily involve practical activity. I might be reading a description, say, of the building of Hadrian's wall in Britain in the 2nd century AD. My understanding of the description is in no way dependent on my then acting or my expecting others to act in certain ways. However, it is connected with my understanding what kind of text I am reading, with the comments I might make or the questions I might ask about it.

are useless. They work because (or: to the extent that) the surrounding practices can be taken for granted.[22]

5. *The rest is psychology*

The dictionary definition, however detailed, will not capture what we as speakers or listeners bring to a situation of speaking, and thus it does not settle what we can be held to. What needs to be seen here is not just the contingent point that in many cases the use of our words is too complex to survey: rather, the dictionary definition is of the wrong order of things. We might say: in the normal case, the dictionary definition (the type of knowledge it expresses) has no power to overrule what we as speakers agree on in the particular case: its authority comes from its being true to what we do, not the other way round. Hence the particular case will take precedence over the general rule. It is not just that the landscape is too complex or that it shifts too quickly for any map to be useful, rather the whole idea of a map is misleading: strictly speaking, there is no landscape there to cover.

What the dictionary contains are rules of thumb, practical devices that have primarily been developed for the teaching of foreign languages, special vocabularies (technical, legal, etc) or regional, social or stylistic standards. We resort to them when we feel some word is not fully our own. They give the outsider's view. But before this ca be done there must be an insider's view.

Am I not overlooking the type of case in which we wish to say that some use of a word, though current, is still considered wrong, as when people use "disinterested" in the sense of "uninterested" or "convince" in the sense of "persuade"? We might call these a case of double standards; there is one standard that is internal to the actual practice and another, external one. Were it not for my familiarity with the current, "incorrect" usage I would not understand what the other is saying, so what I am *calling* incorrect is actually *correct* for understanding his words. And, unless I understood what he meant to say I could not correct him anyway.[23]

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[22] We tend to think that the ideal dictionary entry is one offering one or more straightforward substitutes for the word being defined: e.g. "*assay*, vt: try, attempt". But these are a minority. In many cases, the definition will contain a thumbnail sketch of the practice in which the word has a role.

[23] Of course, even if I am unfamiliar with the "incorrect" use of "disinterested" I might guess what he means from the context and the similarity of the words. But in that case if I did correct him I would

On the received view, a speaker's utterance is a syntactic and semantic structure which determines the conditions under which it is true or false. Philosophers have often thought about utterances on the model of mathematical expressions, the value of which is uniquely determined by the signs of which they are composed, by their place in the calculus. If somebody tells me I got an equation wrong, my defence must lie in an appeal to the rules for the use of the signs in the formula. However, mathematics leads us astray as a model for speaking. It is sometimes thought that "everyday language" is a crude approximation to the precision of mathematics, words being encumbered by ambiguity, vagueness and shifts in meaning. But this is not the point. The difference between the use of mathematical signs and words is not a difference of of degree but of kind: mathematical symbols have a different relation than words to the activity of which they are a part. The context for the use of mathematical symbols is mathematical calculations or proofs (except when they occur in a verbal context, say, in counting objects or giving measurements), roughly in the way the context for a chess move is a chess game and nothing else. This is connected with the point that someone who writes down or reads out a mathematical expression by itself is not *saying* anything, and so the sense of what he is reading or writing is not dependent on *what* he is saying. The mathematical expression has a fixed context, one that is given with its being regarded as a mathematical expression, whereas the context of "That room is empty", if imagined in isolation, is unlimited.

If semantics is what dictionary definitions describe, and if questions of logic are questions about what a speaker can be held to, then what I have been saying is that there are no logical connections between logic and semantics. And furthermore: it is really only with regard to the individual case that questions of logic can be raised. Semantics, in a sense, belongs to the realm of psychology: it consists in practical advice, based on observations of others' usage or on one's own sense of meaning. This means that the standard view of the relation between logic and psychology needs to be reversed: it has often been held that logic concerns itself with the general,

take myself to be drawing attention to a slip of the tongue, not imposing a standard. – We may have various reasons for trying to uphold an external standard: say, because we are afraid certain distinctions will get lost if they are not explicitly marked in the language. To what extent such fears are justified is connected with the larger question to what extent our ability to express or entertain thoughts is dependent on the availability of a specific vocabulary. I am not able to go into the question here, except to note that the dependence is not, at any rate, a straightforward one.

underlying structure of language, whereas the individual case, the question of "speaker's meanings", is psychological. What I have been arguing, on the contrary, is that there is no generality in logic; the only generality is on the level of psychology.[24]

Language-games as ready-mades

James Conant's essay "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use"[25] is a very thoughtful exposition of the significance of use in Wittgenstein's work. Conant points out that "[w]hat constitutes your meaning thus-and-so by uttering a sentence is … your employing the sentence in a context in which the sentence is able to do the … work of meaning thus-and-so." And he adds that if one tries to

> answer … the question what the expression means apart from a consideration of any context in which it is at work, then one will … fall into the mistake of thinking that "the meaning with which one uses a word" should be understood as a process that we experience while speaking or hearing the word.[26]

Thus Conant is suggesting that for Wittgenstein, as for Frege, the inclination to look at an expression in isolation and the temptation to regard meaning as a matter of psychology are closely connected. He also remarks that Wittgenstein has been misunderstood by those who think he wishes to supplement "our syntactic and semantic theory with a third layer, a theory of the pragmatics of natural language or a theory of speech-acts", and claims that his appeal to use is "meant to be far more threatening to traditional analytic philosophy of language…":

> Its point is that "for a large class" of occasions of speaking there isn't anything which can properly count as asking the question "What do the words … mean?" apart from a simultaneous consideration of questions such as "When was it said?", "Where?", "To whom?", "By whom?", etc.[27]

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[24] We should note that there are two different senses in which questions of meaning can be (mis)taken for psychological questions. On the one hand, there is what I believe Frege had in mind: the idea that meaning consists in one's associating an expression with some idea or image; what I have been talking about, on the other hand, are generalizations about linguistic behaviour.

[25] *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998), 222-250.

[26] Op. cit., pp. 239 f.

[27] Ibid..

So far, what Conant is saying seems to accord exactly with the point I have been making. However, on some points of nuance, there are still what I should like to call traces of the standard view in his account. They may not be important in themselves, but pointing to some of them may help me bring out more clearly what I have been trying to say.

According to Conant,

> Wittgenstein … seeks to generalize Frege's context principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of significant use, or – as Wittgenstein prefers to call them – language-games).[28]

Conant presents this extension as a matter of degree: Wittgenstein is applying Frege's point, but on a larger scale. I would argue that what we have here, if rightly understood, is a difference in kind. As Conant himself points out, we are likely to be misled as long as we think about the meaning of a sentence in isolation. His point, apparently, is that by widening the perspective from word to sentence to language-game, we narrow down the number of possible interpretations. While this is true, I would argue that as long as we confine our attention to hypothetical utterances, we remain in the realm of rules of thumb, i.e. meanings do not reach all the way down. It is only when we confront a case in which somebody is actually taken to have said something and meant it that there will be a question of what his words *really* meant. This may be the point expressed by Wittgenstein in the oft-quoted *PI* § 201:

> …there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call "following the rule" and "going against it".

What we need to look at is not an utterance taken together with a context, rather the looking itself takes place in the context. Stella, in telling her teacher the auditorium is

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[28] Op.cit., p. 233.

empty, is not interpreting the situation in accordance with some rule of use; she is expressing her understanding of the situation in a language she can speak.

The skeptic argues that all our knowledge claims are, in principle, open to doubt. According to Conant, the emptiness of the skeptic's doubt is based on the fact that it is not expressed within a language-game. The skeptical position dissolves when

> the grammar of our various language-games is exhibited to the skeptic, in order to present him with an overview of the various possibilities of meaning his words that are available to him.[29]

Here, Conant conveys the impression that the existing alternatives are already given. But there is no reason to suppose that the range of alternatives forms a closed system. In these connections, I would suggest, we should go directly to the consideration of particular cases, without taking a detour over the notion of a language-game. Or rather, the burden of showing should be shifted over to the skeptic: it is his job to paint a context in which the denial of knowledge is something with which we can identify.

This connects with the point that Wittgenstein is not providing an alternative account of meaning. He is telling us, in Ryle's phrase, to look at actual sayings of things without the mediation of any theoretical presuppositions or concepts, including language-games and rule-following. When we realize this, we can forget the worries, outlined in the introduction, concerning what exactly Wittgenstein meant by "use".[30]

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[29] Ibid., p. 350.