Grammatical Persons and Semantical Ideas
Further Wittgensteinian Reflections
on Brandom[1]

Abstract: Robert Brandom, adapting ideas of David Lewis and Donald Davidson, developped in *Making it Explicit* (MiE) a normative pragmatics in book-keeping terms on an I-you-basis. In this paper I argue, with the help of Kant and Wittgenstein, that to acount for our practice of judgement reference to all three grammatical persons is required.

Keywords: Meaning & Reference, Grammatical Persons, Theory of Judgement, Brandom

ملخّص:

كلمات مفاتيح:

Résumé

Mots-clés:

In his Hegel-Prize-lecture in Stuttgart (1992) Donald Davidson said: "There is no point in language beyond successful communication." It leads right to what I want to talk about in Brandom (RB) if one thinks a moment about why Davidson's dictum is not quite correct. There are monological uses of language which traditional philosophy subsumed under the title of ›Thought/thinking‹, which, in spite of Plato's view that thinking is a conversation of the soul with itself, cannot really be understood as communicative. The silent thinker does not communicate his thoughts to himself, even if he internally verbalizes them. But of course, what he thinks must be expressible and understood. A completely general version of Davidson's *obiter dictum* could read: there is no point in language beyond making understanding possible; understanding in its many senses, among them communicative ones.

In an interview about MiE he gave during his stay as Leibniz-Professor in Leipzig, Germany, RB characterized his enterprise in the book by saying (here I give the gist of what he says at minute five of part I of the interview, which you can find on Youtube): The task of communication is not so much the task of coming to share views, opinions or plans, but to navigate rationally between our different views etc. That is why the pragmatics of MiE is formulated in book-keeping terms concerning the respective commitments and entitlements of the partners in communication. RB adds that book-keeping proceeds on an I-you-basis and not, like much of traditional philosophy of language did, on an I-we-basis. Here we have the explicit mention of the grammatical persons, whose relation to one another and to semantical ideas in MiE as well as in our discursive practice I want to discuss.

I.

As I relate my critical discussion of RB's conceptions to Wittgenstein (LW) regularly, a few remarks on my understanding of Wittgenstein's (LW) philosophy are necessary.

For LW meaning is not and cannot be the object of an objectifying theory; meaning rather is the object of clarification and meaning-explanation. LW is notorious for having coined the slogan 'meaning is use'. It is well known nowadays that this is, at best, half of the truth. But more importantly, outside the confines of philological and determining interpretation of LW the following is often not taken notice of. LW not only somehow connected meaning with use, but

---

1 This essay is a sequel to my paper "Robert Brandom's Wittgensteinian Commitments", in: *Al-Mukhatabat* , No. 16, 251-264. (Tunis 2015)

also – and systematically more important – connected meaning with explanation of meaning – as is shown by PI para. 560.

The connection between both meaning-explanations for the term ›meaning‹ – 'meaning is use' & 'meaning is what meaning-explanation explains' – is this: What an *meaning-explanation* explains is the *use* of meaningful signs or symbols. There cannot be a metalinguistic theory of meaning for LW because for clarification and explanation in the sense relevant to meaning ['explanation-how (possible)', not 'explanation-why (in fact)'] the whole language with all its (descriptive, normative and meaning-explanatory) ressources has to be used.

This point, made in PI para.s 120-121, often is referred to by German authors like von Kempski, Apel and Habermas as 'ordinary language is the last metalanguage'. But this is utterly misleading for at least two reasons. First, whereas a metalanguage is related descriptively to its object-language, meaning-explanations relate normatively to what they explain. And second, because meaning-explanations as normative are related to meanings internally, they relate to them, as it were, horizontally, not vertically. In normal conversations meaning-explanations are needed only occasionally and in situations of imminent misunderstanding. The philosophical clarification of meanings is continuing this exceptional everyday language-game of meaning-explanation as its normal business in a systematic way; when it is not self-critically focussed on the dissolution of philosophical problems, as in LW's PI, but intends to survey descriptively the conceptual landscape of our (native) language.

The main descriptive philosophical problem throughout LW's life was the connection between language and reality or the world. In TLP he designed a logico-metaphysical theory to solve the problem, which centered around the concept of logical form as the form of reality (TLP 2.18) and invested a hypothesis of a language of thought. LW's later philosophy fundamentally criticizes this original metaphysical sin and develops a conception of that relation, which can be shown to be satisfied descriptively by his conception of ostensive definitions.[2] Like all clear solutions of problems it can be formulated in a single proposition as did LW in PG (IV.55 d):

> The connection between 'language and reality' is made by (meaning-) explanations of words – and these belong to grammar, so that language remains self-contained and autonomous.[3]

In German 'grammar' is either the borrowed word 'Grammatik' or the expression 'Sprach*lehre*'. ‚Lehre‘ means teaching – 'Sprachlehre' literally is 'teaching of language'. This is a conceptual connection LW uses in his elucidations because besides connecting meaning with use and (meaning) explanation, he also connects it with teaching: „I relate the concept of teaching with the concept of meaning" (*Zettel* para. 412). The one who receives a meaning-explanation thereby is *taught* the meaning of an expression.

Generally this implies that meaning-explanations, which in LW's conception take the place of truth-theorems in a conception such as Davidson's, must have a form suitable for teaching the meaning of an expression.

RB develops a rather complex normatively explanatory theory centering around the concept of an autonomous discursive practice (ADP) – a concept he explains in a way reminiscent of LW: autonomous is a discursive practice when it can be executed even if no other language-game is played. The core of ADP is taken to be the language-game of assertion. But here RB refers to one of his other heros, Wilfrid Sellars. I take it that the conception of ADP is a generalization of Sellars' ›autonomous stratum of language‹ in his magisterial demonstration in *Empiricism and the Concept of Mind* that sense-datum language is not an autonomous stratum of language and therefore cannot serve as the foundation of all other cognitive talk.

In RB LW's central problem has the form of the question how utterances come to have

---

2 Cp. PI para. 16.

3 Own translation. Kenny has 'definition' instead of 'meaning-explanation'.

representational conceptual content. The general answer is: conceptual content is ascribed by the listener of an utterance in the deontic bookkeeping which structures the normative pragmatics of the language used. (Of course, the utterer has to commit himself too, but he does so when the listener can ascribe the commitment rationally.) The linguistic exchange RB thematizes throughout confronts utterer and hearer in reciprocally taking 1st and 2nd person perspectives. But in this confrontation the 2nd person takes precedence and the self-ascription of conceptual content in 1st person perspective is considered a phenomenon to be derived. RB calls this approach 'phenomenalistic' (MiE 291-7) and social-perspectival because for him meaning, like many other normative phenomena, is „... in an important sense in the eye of the beholder" in such a way, „that one cannot address the question of what the implicit norms are, independently of the question of what it is to acknowledge them in practice." (MiE 25) For RB conceptual content and meaning of expressions rest directly on use and do not have any internal relation to the meaning-explanations, which speaker and hearer as well could give. This is incompatible with LW's view, because it tends to obliterate the difference of level between sense and meaning on the one hand, truth/falsity or satisfaction/non-satisfaction on the other. In order to be true a proposition has to have sense, must be understandable – and this may depend (in part also) on the meaning-explanations that could be given and accepted.

RB, in giving a theory of meaning with a claim to objectivity and explanatoriness, inevitably does so from a 3rd person perspective. But besides this the 3rd person does not show up in RB's theory systematically. In the following I want to show how the semantic concepts of sense (Sinn) and meaning/reference ('Bedeutung') as used in ordinary language (= as not theoretically regimented) are related to the system of grammatical persons. This is continuing on with RB's phenomalistic approach but tries to develop it in the spirit of LWs internally sense clarifying approach. It will make salient a trait of ordinary language use in forming judgements which remains hidden in RB's theory.

Persons who converse or use language for the purpose of coordinating action in fact confront each other in reciprocally taken 1st and 2nd person perspectives. Each one uses language with the generic intent to be understood. Therefore he has to take the role of the other (G.H. Mead) in trying to anticipate possible reactions and actions of her interlocutor. The differentiation of grammatical persons relates to this situation.

Grammarians in antiquity developed the differentiation taking as model the three speaker-roles of the antique theatre; the roles of the two protagonists and the third of the chorus. Such a role came to be called *persona* in Latin (*prósōpon* in Greek). The Roman author Marcus Terentius Varro (1st century BCE) put the explication succinctly: *personarum natura triplex es(se)t, qui loqueretur, (ad quem), de quo*. The 1st person is the one that speaks; the second is the one spoken to; and in 3rd person is expressed what is spoken about.

Now, not only who speaks and whom is spoken to is necessarily a person, what is spoken about can be a person too. If so, speaker and hearer have to take into consideration, that the third person could take a position to what is said about him, and they may have to reply. Speaker and listener themselves may be the 3rd person in conversations of others and they understand what the others say and also understand themselves, only if they command the use in all grammatical persons.

The basic possibilities of taking a position to whatever is said are 'Yes' or 'No'. If the 3rd person agrees in response to an assertive 'Yes' of a participant in the conversation, this evaluation is equivalent to 'true'. 'What he said is tue' is one standard context of the colloquial use of 'true' – a fact that the explication of 'true' as pro-sentential operator exploits. The phrase 'what he said' *is* a pro-sentence, that is a linguistic expression that anaphorically takes up what is said in a proposition like a pronoun takes up what is referred to by a name or a definite description.[4]

---

4 To be sure, LW hat no inkling of the >pro-sentential theory of 'true'<, he did not form the concept 'pro-sentence'. But he already

This structural possibility of taking a 3rd person position is already in play in the exchange between 1st and 2nd person. They generically want to be understood. The best option for securing understanding is to say something that could also be said from the 3rd person perspective, which, as I said already, both interlocutors must be in command of. This is the context, in which the distinction of sense and truth can be introduced explicitly – I shall come to this shortly. For one can, of course, try to say what could be said from a 3rd person perspective to secure understanding, but one cannot preempt how what is said is in fact evaluated by a 3rd person regarding truth/falsity or satisfiability.

Kant therefore in § 40 of his *Critique of Judgement* said (although not in exactly these words) that the one *who judges orientates himself on the idea of judgement* when he follows the three maxims of enlightened thinking: (1) thinking oneself ('Selbstdenken'), (2) thinking in place of everybody else ('… an der Stelle jedes anderen denken'), (3) thinking consistently ('mit sich einstimmig denken').

Understanding of what is said is not guaranteed. In case of incomprehension the listener can ask for an explication or explanation: 'What do you want (mean) to say?'; 'How am I to understand you?'; 'How is, what you say, to be understood?' The last paraphrase is the context in which the expressions 'meaning', 'reference' and 'sense' (regarding subsentential expressions) can be introduced explicitly. I therefore see no possibility of denying LW's claim that there is an internal relation between meaning and meaning-explanation as codified in PI para 560. For this internal relation is *constituted* in such explanations. They are normative. The speaker, giving the explanation, as it were says: „If you want to understand me correctly here, understand what I am saying in *this* way." He *teaches* the hearer the intended meaning. This relies on the internal relation between meaning and explanation of meaning as on the internal relation between meaning-explanation and learning and possibly-being-taught as well.

LW therefore relates meaning to meaning explanations, meaning explanations to teaching, which again is internally related to learning. As an early paper of Davidson has it in its title, languages are essentially learnable. This involves a further difference of the MiE conception to LW.

RB admits that his discursive model of ADP makes one substantial assumption from the start in that ...(it) takes for granted a set of inferentially articulated norms as an already up-and-running enterprise." (12) The question how this originally came about RB considers as a diachronic supplementation to the synchronic inferentialist analysis by a historical perspective for which historically Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* is said to have given an example.

For my discussion important is only that RB's conception, starting from an up-and- running enterprise, excludes any possibility of an *internal* genetic perspective for the theory. For the phylogenetic formation of languages this is explicitly said in MiE (155) and, given that one can only speculate more or less informedly about „how the linguistic enterprise might have gotten off the ground in the first place", this seems to be wise. But that a perspective on the ontogenesis of language use is systematically excluded, seems to be incompatible with the fact, that languages *are learned* and (by developing partial and spontaneous learning) also *taught*. LW's internal clarifications of sense, which connect meaning with teaching, do not have to pay the price of leaving the ontogenesis of language use unaccessible.

A speaker can attain objectivity for meaning-explanations, which semantically are not descriptions, but prescriptions, if he again orientates himself on the idea of judgement – then he will give the explantion anyone could give. In this way the norms of sense, of being

---

noted the conceptual connection: > „p" is true =p. The word „true" is used in contects such as „What he says is true", but that says the same thing as „He says „p", and 'p' is the case."< (BT 76 = PG VI.79 b; cp. PI para.s 134-137) This evidence should be taken to imply a methodological point. To assess LW's position in questions of philosophy of language it is not enough to take into account TLP and PI only. These two have a special, 'work-biographical' relation and PI therefore a much narrower focus than LW's 'method' (the only thing he claimed to have to teach) allows of. *The Big Typescript* (BT) is the most inclucive text LW ever composed.

understandable, can be generated in communication itself. In a certain sense language starts anew with each speaker of the language – that is, with the meaning-explanations he is able and willing to give for his expressions.[5]

As intimated the concepts of 'sense' and reference' can be introduced with relation to the 3rd person perspective. 'Bedeutung' (meaning) of a sign is what is important to understand regarding the sign. The connotations of 'Bedeutung' in German and 'meaning' in English are different. In German one can use the phrase 'ein bedeutender Mann' and mean by that a man important in some unspecified respect. Translating this literally as '*a meaningful man' is nonsense. So my thesis exploits a parochial trait of the German idiom – but so did LW, explicitly in *The Blue Book* (5). 'Bedeutung' of expressions in its most general meaning for him what is important to understand. 'Sinn' (sense), which originally means 'direction', by contrast relates primarily to propositions and is what has to be understood from a 3rd person perspective. A proposition is true if everyone (every 3rd person), who understands the words and their combination in the proposition, and who follows the rules of justification connected with the words, has to agree with, if he is (wants to be) rational. This connection of 1st and 2nd person with the 3rd is implicitly an *I/you-we* relation because the interlocutors orientate their exchange on all 3rd persons which are speakers of their language and which thereby are included in a We *in sensu diviso*.[6]

The crossing relations between 1st , 2nd and 3rd grammatical person form the locus of possible objectivity and impartiality. They are not systematically taken account of in RB's theory. Insofar our normal practice of judgement is not correctly represented by it and is generally speaking reductive. For RB's theory norms essentially are in „the eye of the beholder", but in fact they are in the eye of the speaker and actor as well.

<div align="center">II.</div>

RB gives an argument against seeing meaning and meaning-explanation as internally related– although, if I am right, this is senseless, because there is no denial of an internal relation. The argument follows Quine and goes against Carnap (and is opposed also to Kant). Both are said to have claimed that one has to give meaning to all expressions first before one can apply them.

> ... *first* one stipulates meanings, *then* experience dictates which deployments of them yield true theories. The first acitivity is prior and independent of experience; the second is constrained by and dependent on it. Choosing one's meanings is not empirically constrained in the way deciding what sentences with those meanings to endorse or believe is. Quine rejects Carnap's sharp separation … For him, it is a fantasy to see meanings fixed independently and in advance of our applying those meanings in forming fallible beliefs that answer for their correctness to how things are. Changing our beliefs can change our meanings. There is only one practice – the practice of actually making determinate judgements. Engaging in that practice involves settling at once both what we mean and what we believe.[7]

But Carnap's two-stage-picture uses the model of formal languages and their semantics which is misleading for the clarification of ordinary language. The model does not apply to LW who exactly by coming to accept this misleadingness freed himself from the logical objectivism of TLP:

> One is inclined to make a distinction between rules of grammar that set up 'a connection of language and reality' and those that do not. A rule of the first kind would be 'This colour is called "red"', a rule of the second kind; ' ¬ ¬ p=p'. With regard to this distinction there is a common error; language is not something that is first given a structure and then fitted on to reality. (PG IV.46 d)[8]

---

5 In PG VII.95 b LW writes that meaning-explanations are „explanations which *create* language."
6 This only means, that the implied quantifier is 'every', not 'all' (as in the collective *sensus compositus*).
7 RB: *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Havard UP 2002, 214.
8 Kenny's translation.

Against the application of Quine's critique of Carnap to his conception LW can appeal to the 'default-and-challenge'-structure of discursive practice in ordinary language, which RB himself accepts als the „vantage point won for us by the later Wittgenstein." (MiE 73, cp. 178) The regress-argument concerning rules (PI para. 201) implies that, as there cannot be rules for rules 'all the way down', there cannot be meaning-explanations 'all the way down' as well. This should not come as a surprise because meaning-explanations *are* or depend on *rules*: „The foundation of every explanation is training. ..." (*Zettel* para. 419) In spite of this limit to meaning-explanation in a factual practice of language learning and teaching, meaning is internally related to it. For meaning-explanations can retrogradely even penetrate the trained foundation of language use, although here the explanations peter out sooner and one has to end with statements like 'this just is what we do'. RB could integrate questions about what was meant in an utterance as a kind of challenge in the default-and-challenge practice. But he does not do so and, more importantly, he does not take them into account at all.

The decisive difference between RB's theory and LW's internal clarification of sense is the difference between a theory with explanatory aspirations and the linguistic description of language use and language-games. Whereas for LW explanations of 'sense' and 'reference' are connected horizontally with normal language-games, in RB's theory they belong into a semantic „metalanguage" – and this is how *he* preserves the misleading orientation of the philosophy of language on the model of formal languages and their semantics.

<div align="center">III.</div>

LW was sceptical about the possibility of having a general material concept of language – he took the general term in a way that reminds of his TLP category of 'formal concepts' (4.122 sqq.). Formal concepts are characterized by two features: In a formal notation they must be represented by a variable and not a functional expression; and every formal concept is given with each of its instances, even a single one. The TLP example was the (pseudo-)concept of an object (Gegenstand). Later he spoke of the expression 'language' as a 'collective name' ('Sammelname') meaning German, English, Latin etc. and several similar sign-systems. (*Zettel* para. 322; PG X. 137 b)

But LW's insight into the internal relation of meaning and meaning-explanation admits of a general conception of language. It can be explained as follows: Language (which we learn as mother-tongue), Language with a capital L, is the *universal medium of expression and representation*.[9] A justification for this concept-formation can rely on a comparison with the other media of expression and representation that humans use: dance, theatre, painting, sculpture, architecture etc. If something in these media is incomprehensible one has to speak, i.e. to use the language to clarify and explain it. But if something linguistic is not being understood, then language itself can be exploited for its clarification. As the almost perfect self-explaining medium of expression and representation language is universal. Because of its indispensible role in the clarification of non-linguistic difficulties for the understanding, it is in fact the only universal medium there is. Therefore language is not only de facto universal, there is a normative claim to universality to be accepted for language. (In German one can use two expressions to mark the difference, 'universell' for the descriptive character of language as self-explaining; and 'universal' for the normative claim.)

The universal status of language also explains the possibility of expressively much poorer language-games. Several times RB discusses LW's simple language-games and denies that they are languages – they are taken to be only 'vocal practices'. Seen from the vantage point of his concept of ADP (which, by the way, RB admits of being rather ill-defined) this is quite consistent. But the simple language-games evidently do service in the coordination of actions. Since this is one of the fundamental functions of language, the simple language-games cannot

---

9 The term 'universal medium' was coined by Jean van Heijenoort in 'Logic as Language and Logic as Calculus' (*Synthese* 1967), but I use and explain it differently.

be excluded from our normal concept of language, if the practice of its use should be taken account of descriptively.

Compared to the internal clarifications of sense attainable by LW's methods, a meaning-theory, as RB has given it, is an admirably complex formation of theroretical finger exercise and at the same time a collection of readable *genre pieces*. In this comparison I speak as a life-long piano player and think of the *Etudes* by Chopin, Liszt or Debussy. These are difficult training pieces for specific technical problems of piano playing and at the same time listenable romantic *genre pieces*. The inferentialist format of RB's theory is a semantic piece of exercise.[10] But many of his specific conceptual analyses – for instance of 'true' as pro-sentential operator, of knowledge as hybrid deontic status, the expressive conception of logic, the theory of practical inference etc. – are so readable and worth of attention as those romantic piano pieces are listenable.

REFERENCES

R. Brandom : *Making it Explicit*, Havard UP 1994.

R.Brandom: *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Harvard UP 2002.

R.Brandom: *A Spirit of Trust*, Harvard UP 2019.

D.Davidson: 'Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages', in: *Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation*, Oxford UP 1984.

D.Davidson: 'Dialectic and Dialogue', in: *Truth, Language, and History*, Oxford UP2005.

J.v.Heijenoort: 'Logic as Language and Logic as Calculus', in: *Synthèse* 1967.

L.Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

L.Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*.

L.Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Grammar*.

L.Wittgenstein: *The Big Typescript*.

10In his Hegel book *A Spirit of Trust* (Harvard UP 2019) RB comes near to admit this. He there writes about MiE that its inferentialist format was „adopted with a Popperian methodological malice aforethought" as the „most easily fasifiable hypothesis". (782 footnote 7)