

## *Reflexivity of Language and philosophical Reflection*

Whenever philosophical reflection sticks to its methodical core it proceeds by *reflective conceptual clarification*. In this short presentation I am going to argue that it thereby relies and develops the *reflexivity* built into the very groundwork of a *propositional language* (as to be distinguished from a language of signals). In my argument I rely heavily on two basic insights of Wittgenstein.

### I

The first is his contention that the meaning of a word is what the explanation of its meaning explains. (cp. *PI* para. 560). Properly understood this reflective proposition presents the reflexivity of language in the nutshell of its essential elements – words. What it effectively says is that the meaning of a word is equivalent or in the best case amounts to its explanation, given by (an)other word(s). Take an explanation of >heteronomy< as >dependence from the law- or rule-giving of another / of others<. This explication, were it not an inconvenience, could be used in place of the word and nothing different would have been said or given to be understood.

Not all meaning-explanation can – as in the example >heteronomy< – be given by a strict equivalence, (but it is worth reminding that equivalence is a reflexive relation in logical sense). Notwithstanding this concession I propose to generalize the limiting case to get the thesis, that a propositional language together with the meaning-explanations of its words form a reflexive structure. The reasoning is that meaning-explanations are not meta-linguistically descriptive only but above all *normative*. A meaning-explanation says what *is to be understood* by the word – and this on the very same level as the use of the word itself. The pragmatic expression of this fact is the possibility to correct and self-correct mistakes in the course of a conversation. This could not be the case if the meaning-explanations were simply meta-linguistic in the technical sense.

In normal parlance meaning-explanations are given only occasionally and in order to either introduce a usage or to forestall a misunderstanding. But my thesis is that philosophy continues these marginal practices in a systematic manner and without any pragmatic restrictions. This is the first respect in which philosophical reflection as reflective conceptual

clarification relies on the reflexivity of language.

## II

The second respect is related to a second insight of Wittgenstein which led him to distinguish formal from proper or material concepts in the *Tractatus* (TLP 4.122-4.128). My reading of this introduction of formal concepts is – as defended elsewhere<sup>1</sup> – that Wittgenstein thereby determined the logical form as *variables* of what Aristotle and Kant called *categories*. It is a special case of the Kantian insight recently made pivotal by Brandom – „the idea that besides concepts whose characteristic expressive job it is to describe and explain empirical goings-on, there are concepts whose characteristic expressive job it is to make explicit necessary structural features of the discursive framework within which alone description and explanation are possible.“<sup>2</sup>

But not only did Wittgenstein determine the logical form of what should exclusively be called categories, he was also quite clear about it that normal or everyday language contains (uses of) words that have precisely this explicative and expressive function. For one of his reasons to introduce formal concepts he said to be to remove the temptation to confusion concerning some uses of words.

His prime example for a word expressing a formal concept when used in a certain way is >object< (>Gegenstand<). The use in question is not that equivalent with >material object<, but rather the use leading to talk about the >object of a discussion<. That use presupposes the formal concept of an object for only taken in this sense do >material object< and >object of a discussion< belong under the same concept. Although his explicit technical reasons for introducing formal concepts – the confusion between external and internal relations (4.112 c) and the confusion pervading the whole of the old logic (4.126 b) – do not show this on their face, the introduction of formal concepts provides also a tool for the critique of normal language. Other words in normal language that in some uses have >categorical< function are >space and time<, >world and reality<, >person<, >language<, >animal< (understood as living being), >action<, >culture<, >morals<,> law<, >society< and >the state<.<sup>3</sup>

But there is only limited use in giving a list of everyday categories, because the central

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1 Cp. 'Ways of Concepts' on [www.emilange.de](http://www.emilange.de) and academia.edu.

2 *From Empiricism to Expressivism* – Brandom reads Sellars, Harvard UP 2015, 35.

3 Vgl. E. M. Lange :'Philosophy' on [www.emilange.de](http://www.emilange.de) and academia.edu.

feature of formal concepts as variables is that they are *already given with any of their instances* (4.12721). If one has concepts of >chair<, >apple<, >rod<, >computer< etc. one does not need additionally >material object<. This implies that the explicit formation of formal concepts remains *optional*. That is one of the reasons for Wittgenstein's resuming remark in his treatment of formal concepts: „The logical forms are *anumerical*.“ (4.128)

In the clarification of concepts that have categorical uses in everyday language lies the second respect in which philosophy relies on the reflexivity of language as it continues and elaborates the meaning explanations already (to be) given in normal language, because they constitute the very meaning of words.

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