

What's the use of meaning-use-analysis?

Wittgensteinian Reflections on Brandom's *Between Saying and Doing*

In a former essay I discussed the Wittgensteinian commitments in Brandom's Philosophy of Language without distinguishing the two phases in Brandom's theory marked by *Making it Explicit (MIE)* and *Between Saying and Doing (BSD)* respectively. This time I want to concentrate on the latter work.

The relation of the two phases of his Philosophy of Language is characterized by Brandom (RB) as that of „broadly compatible“, but „largely orthogonal enterprises.“ (BSD XIII). I find it difficult to make sense of this geometrical simile. But RB mentions as points of common interest of the two books the relation between semantics and pragmatics and the nature of logic and its role in philosophy (BSD XIII). More important to me seems to be that in both books a conception of language is presented which centers around the concepts of asserting and inferring constituting what RB calls „an autonomous discursive practice (ADP), in the sense of a language game one could play though one played no other“. (BSD 41; cp. 13, 27 and index sub vocem 'autonomous discursive practice'). Since an explicit explanation, let alone definition, of 'language-game' is lacking, this again is a metaphorical characterization which moreover meets with the difficulty that RB explicitly criticizes Wittgenstein's use of the term 'language game', which was his invention. Wittgenstein used 'language-game' as an aspect illuminating metaphor to highlight the family-resemblance of language with games according to constitutive rules (one of his favorite examples for games was chess). In any case, the relation to Wittgenstein again is of decisive importance to understanding the project of RB in *BSD*.

Apart from LW being the author most often referred to in *BSD*¹, his importance further elucidates from the self-proclaimed purpose of the project – the establishment of an analytic pragmatism (the subtitle of *BSD* is „Towards an Analytic Pragmatism“) by reconciling the two strands of Analytical Philosophy, the classical analysis of Russell, Moore, the *Tractatus*, the Cambridge analysts of the 1920s, the Vienna Circle, Ayer, Goodman, and Quine (cp. *BSD* xviii) and its pragmatist challenge, for which „the towering figure“ was, „of course, Wittgenstein“ in his later philosophy. (*BSD* 3) I therefore first look to RB's explicit references to Wittgenstein and only afterwards to what becomes of his pragmatist challenge of analysis in RB's analytic pragmatism. In particular, I shall be interested in the use of RB's meaning-use analysis for understanding our normal, pre-scientific

¹ LW is referred to 28 times, closely followed by Sellars (25). The next important authors (according to the Name Index) are Kant (20), followed by Russell (16), David Lewis and Quine (15), Hegel (13), Kaplan (11) and Frege (10). All others are referred to less than 10 times, for example Perry (9), Anscombe, Carnap and Dewey (8), Hume (7).

understanding implicit in our use of ordinary language.

I.

The intention to combine into a new theoretical project two traditions in Analytical Philosophy being caught in an „epic confrontation“ (1) evidently needs some rearrangement in their respective positions from the very start. As to the tradition of logical analysis this rearrangement takes the form of redescription. RB says that the tradition of analysis has „as its center a concern with semantic relations between ... (what he calls) 'vocabularies'.“ This redescription lets Russells paradigm of analysis – the theory of definite descriptions – come out as follows: „everything expressible using definite descriptions(,) is expressible already in the vocabulary of first order quantificational logic with identity.“ 'Vocabulary' is one of the central operative concepts in *BSD* (and has by far most entries in the Subject Index). It is introduced as a variant (an equivalent?) to 'sort of locutions', afterwards mainly by the citing and treating of examples (the most important being „logical and semantic vocabulary, indexical vocabulary, modal, normative, and intentional vocabularies.“) The promise of RB's new analytic pragmatism is „to think about the relations between meaning and use every bit as rigorously and systematically as it has proven possible to think about sorts of relations between meanings that are codified and explored in classical formal semantics“ (xii). This promise contrasts with the late concession that „the field of vocabularies“ is „admittedly, in general, ill-defined“. (225) But to discuss this further belongs in a later place.

Apart from redescriving the project of analysis in terms of 'vocabularies' RB criticizes some of the main uses analysis historically was put to, namely the defense of what he calls the theoretical core programs of Analytical Philosophy, empiricism and naturalism (to which he adds AI-functionalism in the Philosophy of Mind). But throughout he endorses the central role of logical tools in analysis, what he calls the „commitment to '*semantic logicism*'.“ (2) One of the pay-offs of the theoretical machinery of meaning-use-analysis is said to be a justification of the role attributed to logic in the project of analysis (by showing that logic is 'universally LX' for every ADP – LX meaning: being explicative of and elaborated from; ADP meaning 'autonomous discursive practice').

Wittgensteinian pragmatism as the big challenge to the project of analysis is treated much more harshly than what it challenges. This cannot come as a surprise for several reasons. First: LW is a difficult and not easily surveyable author. To distill from the enormous (over 20.000 pages) body of the *Nachlass*, in which his later ideas are expressed (*PI* itself belongs to the *Nachlass*, for which LW gave his executors the mandate to publish everything they would consider as fit for print), a definite position as his 'pragmatism' naturally needs a lot of regimentation. Second: If one does not want to interpret LW extensively – and evidently one cannot do this, if one wants to put some of his ideas to

own theoretical purposes – one implicitly decides on the importance of issues perhaps on insufficient justification. If one, for instance, decides that only the two main books of LW – *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* und *Philosophical Investigations* – are to be taken into account, one may well miss LW's most important ideas about language in general. This for the following reason: As the *Preface* of *PI* explicitly states, the content of the book is result of all his work since 1929 ('the last 16 years'), and he did not want to write but one book after *TLP*. But his conception of the book underwent a lot of changes the most important resulting from a reading of *TLP* together with a friend (Nicolas Bachtin) in 1943. As I understand this change, LW only then decided to give his book a primarily self-critical format, because he immediately afterwards approached CUP with the proposal to publish the *Tractatus* and *PI* in one volume. His reason was, as he said, „that he liked the idea of publishing a refutation of ideas in the *Tractatus* alongside the *Tractatus*.“² And for the purpose of self-critique of his older thought many of the themes that had occupied him in between were unimportant. So it may well be that LW's most important ideas about language are not contained in *PI*. A much more comprehensive source would be the text later published under the Title *Big Typescript*.

However that may be, RB understands pragmatism in general as the view „which situates concern with the *meanings* of expressions in the broader context of concern with proprieties governing their *use*.“ (xii) And a central tenet of LW is said to be acceptable as a consequence, namely, „that ... the home language-game of the concept of meaning ... (is) explanation of how expressions are correctly *used*.“ (5) Whether this characterizes a position of LW correctly depends on how the concept of 'explanation of meaning' is understood. I suspect that RB understands it as compatible with the analogy he ascribes to Quine and Dummett: „*meaning* is to *use* as *theory* is to *observation*.“ (4) And this certainly is nothing compatible with LW's idea of 'explanation of meaning', because LW admits of no difference of levels between expressions used and their meaning-explanations (cp. *PI* para.s 120-1), stating explicitly the equivalence of the meaning of a word with the explanation of its meaning. (*PI* para. 560) For LW 'meaning' and 'explanation of meaning' are everyday concepts, not theoretical ones (because the basic meaning of 'meaning' is 'importance'³ – explanations of meanings express what it is important to understand by the explained expression). One reason why there cannot be a *theory* of meaning on Wittgensteinian presuppositions is this view of explanation of meaning. One constraint on this conception is that explanations of meaning can be used *to teach* the use of expressions (presupposing, of course, that some language has been acquired already by imitation, observation and training). [I take it that RB

2 Ray Monk: *Wittgenstein – The Duty of Genius*, New York 1990, 457.

3 Cp. *The Blue Book*, New York 1958, 5.

would not like to claim that the explanations of 'vocabularies' his new theory offers can be used in teaching the language.] In LW's view normative expressions are mingled with the use of language from the very (ontogenetic) beginnings and explanations of meaning are normative, say how expressions *are to be used*. These normativities cannot be elaborated from some base- 'vocabulary' only afterwards, as RB's meaning-use-analysis has it concerning his basic normativities of *commitment* and *entitlement*.

If these remarks about meaning and explanation of meaning in LW are remotely correct, it can be said already now that RB's reconciliation of the two analytic traditions of logical analysis and pragmatism is a bit slanted, does not treat both on equal terms. Rather it tries to incorporate some thoroughly revised Wittgensteinian ideas into the tradition of logical analysis.

RB, of course, does not deny that LW's critique of logical analysis is much more radical than that of Sellars and Quine (cp. 3-4) and he explicitly criticizes LW's opposition to the project of theory of meaning as „*descriptive particularism, theoretical quietism, and semantic pessimism*.“ (7) Concerning the first two gravamina RB does not sufficiently recognize that LW explicitly sought for a descriptively „surveyable representation“ (cp. *PI* para.s 126, 127). That *PI* does not present it may be due to its self-critical format. What *PI* gives is not the only possible way to present results of applications of LW's method which was, as he repeatedly pointed out, the only thing he had to teach. He characterized this method concisely as consisting essentially in the transition from the question of *truth* to the question of *sense* (Sinn). (cp. MS 106, 46) And concerning the third gravamen the Wittgensteinian response is that normal explanations of meaning are all we need for reflective conceptual clarification which for LW (as for Kant in his *Logic*!⁴) is philosophy's central task.

So RB's analytic pragmatism and LW's philosophy simply pursue different goals. But there are further references to LW to be commented on critically.

RB ascribes to LW in quotation-marks the claim that *language has no downtown*. (5) Now, the only place I know where LW uses an urban metaphor for language, seems to say just the opposite, if I may take it that 'downtown' is an expression meaning the center of town (under some concept of centrality). In *PI* para. 18 it reads:

Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses.

4 Cp. *Logik*, 1800, A 95: „Der Philosoph macht nur gegebene Begriffe deutlich.“ (own translation: The philosopher does nothing but clarify given concepts.)

Would one not call the old city the center of town as against the new suburbs? LW's picture of the center of language just looks different from what RB thinks it should. A later comment on the earlier ascription, which, taken in a literal way, seems to be just false, makes it clear that what RB wanted to express was that LW denies a core of language that were an analogue to his own ADP. (41-2) And this, of course, is correct. But in the same context another contentious move is made.⁵ His own conception of ADP as the center of language leads RB to a critique of LW's simple language-games as not really being *language-games*, because mere *vocal* practices, not *verbal* ones. This evidently depends on the concept of language/a language⁶ presupposed. If one of the basic functions of language is the coordination of actions in cooperation, then the builder's game in *PI* para. 2 is a *language-game* pace RB, following Davidson's maxim: „There is no point to language beyond successful communication.“⁷

RB declares to be indebted to Hans Julius Schneider's interpretation of the later LW's conception of meaning. (6) But he does not bother to address Schneider's conception of 'syntactic metaphoricity' which Schneider develops from the Wittgensteinian pluralism of language-games (implying the denial of an ADP-core of language), which adduces additional *arguments* for LW's descriptivism. LW's conception implies a developmental aspect on language from the very start, which RB calls „the dynamic developmental-historical character of vocabulary-use“ (217 n. 13) and claims to have confronted. In any case, RB's conception has developmental aspects only on the fixed basis of ADP as the core of language. In *MIE* RB admits that this means that the core of language is treated as being in place from the very (analytical) start as an 'up-and-running enterprise'.⁸ Finally it is significant that RB concedes with respect to LW's pointing out the family-resemblance character of the concept of a game (and therefore of language-games): „It certainly can coherently be denied that there is any core of practices-or-abilities common to all autonomous discursive practices.“ (41) This is said to be the reason for the as literal quotation wrongly ascribed claim that language has no down-town.

Two other references to LW should be commented on before I close this part of my discussion. As will be discussed further in the next part, the first application of meaning-use-analysis that RB undertakes is in the theory of automata which, in deploying syntactically specified vocabularies, can be understood as practical embodiments of algorithms. One central concept to describe the relations

5 The same move already in *MIE* 172.

6 I elaborated on what I think are the Wittgensteinian versions of these concepts in the part on language in my paper 'Person, Sprache, Welt' (on www.emilange.de)

7 Davidson : 'Dialectic and Dialogue', in: *Truth, Language, and History*, Oxford 2005, 258. – Davidson seems to me certainly right concerning the beginnings of language, which are one focus of LW's simple language-games. To convert his dictum into a completely general one has to replace the term 'communication' by 'understanding'.

8 I merely remember, but cannot recover this specific formulation; but cp. *MIE*, 155.

of automata of different complexity to one another is the concept of algorithmic elaboration of practices-or-abilities: „...algorithms generally say how some set of primitive abilities can be so exercised as to constitute more complex abilities.“ (32) The first example is the putting together of the capacities to multiply and to subtract so as to amount to the capacity to do long division. Now the concept of algorithmic elaboration may be capable of explaining the results of rising complexity in the theory of automata, but it is very doubtful that it fundamentally, let alone exclusively can explain the rise of complexity in the development of *linguistic* practices-and-abilities. At this point RB refers to what he calls „one of the master ideas animating the thought of the later Wittgenstein“ and calls it „practical elaboration by training“. (83-7) RB's presentation gives the impression that practical elaboration of practices-or-abilities combined with algorithmic elaboration is all one needs to reconstruct linguistic complexity.

LW had no need for and no concept of algorithmic elaboration. But he was led to acknowledge the contingent facts of learnability in a comparable movement of thought. The formal fetish in his early thought, comparable to automata in RB's thought, were formally characterised 'pictures' as explicated in TLP's picture-theory. LW deconstructed it in his self-critique. The decisive text for this move is Appendix 4.B. to Part I of his *Philosophical Grammar*. The picture-theory claims pictures to be possible only by a kind of formal agreement between picture and pictured called 'form of representation' (*TLP* 2.15-2.2). And the self-critique simply states, that sometimes there is such a formal agreement, but sometimes also representation is made possible simply by the fact „that we have *learned* to apply the signs in such-and-such a way.“⁹ RB's acknowledgement of elaboration by training would come to a whole-sale acceptance of LW's point were it not framed by the meta-theoretical conceptual apparatus of meaning-use-analysis.

The last LW-reference I like to comment concerns, believe it or not, a mere question of interpretation which RB sees, but does not solve. I address it because it closely relates to one of the bases of a Wittgensteinian response to the meaning-use-analysis of analytic pragmatism.

In the long *Afterword* (201-235) RB discusses and answers some objections to his conception of an analytic pragmatism. Concerning one objection to metaphysical implications of his program he confesses to be „somewhat moved“ (221). This connects with the fact that investing a concept of ADP „brings into view the notion of *universal* base vocabularies.“ (218) And this again seems to connect with a notion of „all possible vocabularies“, of which RB suspects that it does not come with a clear sense. (223) This problem he likens to LW's talk of 'all facts' in *TLP* 1.11, although it is officially denied that it can even be said that there are facts. (4.1272) And this is the interpretative

9 Own translation, my accentuation. German: „...eine solche Beziehung besteht freilich *manchmal* in einer gewissen Übereinstimmung, manchmal aber nicht in einer Übereinstimmung, sondern nur darin, dass wir die Zeichen so und so anzuwenden gelernt haben.“ (*PG* 213 b)

problem: „Is it, then, something that is *shown*? But how?“ RB does not answer his questions, but they have an answer. This is a long story I have to make into a short one here. Facts are for LW – as for Frege (223) – true propositions or true thoughts. The world is said to be the totality of facts. And that it is, is shown by the general form of the proposition (4.5; 6). Of course, the form of the proposition is the form also of all false (or as yet undecided) propositions. That's why the ontology in *TLP* needs the expression 'reality' besides the expression 'world' . One has always seen a difficulty in finding *TLP* 2.04, 2.06 and 2.063 jointly compatible. They can be shown so if one takes into account that the world for *TLP* is surrounded by all possibilities (everything that can be expressed by propositions with a sense), that is: by reality.

The identification of 'world' and 'reality' in 2.063 is meant to point out, that the unrealized possibilities (states of affairs) belong to the world insofar, as what is there is determinate only in the light of what is not. The reason is the internal relation of language and the world (4.014), that the world is given to us in sentences/propositions that can be negated. LW's conception in *TLP* is therefore as directly modal as RB's incompatibility semantics (*BSD* Ch. 5), because 'real' is a modal expression too. (And so *TLP* contains another and probably more basic way of introducing the alethic modalities than by elaboration from ADP.)

The basic totality *TLP* needs is the totality of all propositions (true and false). To presuppose this totality is plausible within an orientation towards formal calculi with enumerable or recursively specifiable vocabularies and definite (sets of) formation rules. There is no license for transferring this model of formal calculi to natural languages.¹⁰ And this insight was one of the main reasons for LW's divorce from the semantic logicist tradition to which *TLP* belongs. [RB therefore counts *TLP*, although a metaphysical treatise (224), also as a work of logical analysis (xviii)]: „Language is nothing to which a structure is given and which only then is adapted to reality.“ (PG IV.46 c)¹¹

II.

Meaning-use-analysis codifies meaning-use-relations between vocabularies. As I mentioned before RB admits that vocabularies, in general, are ill-defined. (225) The two basic meaning-use-relations are PV-sufficiency and VP-sufficiency. 'V' is short for vocabulary, 'P' short for practices-or-abilities. A practice-or-ability is said to be sufficient for deploying a vocabulary (PV-sufficiency), a vocabulary is said to be sufficient for specifying a practice-or-ability (enabling one to say what one

10 This is what Schneider (*Phantasie und Kalkül*, 1992) argues on the basis of his conception of 'syntactic metaphoricality' and which RB in his use of some of Schneider's insights (6) fails to take into account.

11 Own translation; German: „... die Sprache ist nicht etwas, dem eine Struktur gegeben, und das das der Wirklichkeit aufpasst wird.“

must *do* to count as *saying* the things the practice is sufficient for; VP-sufficiency) itself sufficient for deploying another vocabulary. RB is especially interested in the case, where a expressively weaker vocabulary is sufficient to specify all one has to do to deploy an expressively stronger one. This phenomenon is call '(strict) expressive bootstrapping'. But the general case occurs as a result of the basic meaning-use-relations being in place and resulting in a more complex meaning-use-relation between vocabularies, their composition, in which one vocabulary is a pragmatic meta-vocabulary for the other. Being a pragmatic meta-vocabulary for another is the paradigm for pragmatically mediated semantic relations which meaning-use-analysis discovers (constructs – cp. 227) and lays alongside the conventional semantic ones of logical analysis. (cp. 11)

RB displays the meaning-use-relations (MURs) in meaning-use-diagrams (MUDs) and the first exemplification is, as already remarked, in a pragmatic theory of automata. In them practices are represented by (grey) rounded rectangulars, vocabularies by ovals, MURs by arrows, resultant MURs by dotted arrows. (In view of a later remark: RB does treat of practices and vocabularies as black boxes in the form of grey rectangulars and ovals.) For instance (MUD 1.8; 23) a Push-down automaton is PV-sufficient to deploy a context-free vocabulary, which is VP-sufficient to specify a Turing-machine which again is PV-sufficient to deploy a recursively enumerable vocabulary. The resultant MUR between the context-free and the recursively enumerable vocabulary shows the first as a pragmatic meta-vocabulary for the second and at the same time is a case of strict pragmatic bootstrapping.

Now, this machinery is completely transparent in its application to the theory of automata, because in the case of automata what is their practice and which vocabularies are deployed is clearcut. We are promised that some of the lessons to be drawn from meaning-use-analysis carry over from the simple and clear cases of syntactic automata to the semantic cases RB deals with – logical, modal, normative, and intentional vocabularies. (15) But the demarcating property of the simple cases – the precise delineation of what is meant by 'vocabulary' and 'practice' respectively – does evidently not carry over. This may go unnoticed because RB technically speaks of the *deploying* of vocabularies as something that computers and persons equally do. But persons simply use their language by using locutions belonging to it and, for instance, a single use of 'possibly' may not be the use of modal or epistemic *vocabulary*, but only the expression of unspecified uncertainty. Normal speakers do not relate to vocabularies *in toto*. But the MURs are said to relate vocabularies *in toto*. If what is contained in the respective vocabularies remains unspecified, one simply cannot assess what is being asserted.

These qualms point to the principal objection against the use of 'use' made in meaning-use-analysis: It is against the spirit of talking about use in the first place. The use of locutions may

generally be specified by giving the rules, but rules have to be applied. The first is in question, when meaning is defined as „use *in the language*“ in *PI* para. 43. But when in the *Blue Book* it reads 'Don't look for the meaning, look for the use!' what is intended is the application of the rules in a concrete (datable) utterance (otherwise the contrast drawn would be without sense). In the last sense talk of meaning as determined by use is meant specifically to bridge the gap between the general rules and what use (application) is made of them in a concrete case, which has to be investigated additionally. At least this concrete-application-use of 'use' is elided in meaning-use-analysis completely. But as it is a principal source of linguistic creativity and linguistic change, it should better be taken into account by a philosophy of language.

III.

To end these reflections on a more positive note I want to sketch a way on which the vocabularies in the status of which RB is most interested can be anchored in our reflective understanding much more easily than by showing them as being elaborated from ADP. With the exception of modal vocabulary (although even this is disputable, but I shall not dispute it here), all the philosophically interesting vocabularies relate not only causally, but also intentionally to the fact that language-users are *persons* – acting, language-using and self-evaluating animals. Insight into the conceptual status of 'person' as a basic concept of everyday understanding was one of major material achievements in the discussion from Strawson to Frankfurt and beyond (Gary Watson). The given explication – acting, language-using and self-evaluating animal – resumes their results. But, as far as I can see, nobody has as yet commented on the linguistic fact that 'person' not only expresses the material concept under scrutiny in those discussion, but a formal concept too. 'Person' also is the noun corresponding to 'somebody' like 'object' corresponds to 'something'. Quine taught us that indefinite pronouns are the models of bound variables in a formal notation. But himself he makes use only of 'something' in his canonical notation (quantification theory). The teaching, however, is: 'To be is to be the value of a variable.' It follows: In normal discourse 'somebody/someone' is an independent variable. This means, if an application of Quine's teaching is licit, that normal discourse ontologically presupposes the existence of persons.

Now, 'object' and 'person' considered as expressing formal concepts, are different in one respect – 'object' cannot be used as a material concept too ('How many objects are in this room? is senseless – *TLP* 4.1272 – , but not 'how many persons are in this room?'). To this difference corresponds that not 'object', but 'person' comes with a distinguishing mark. Implicitly it is the mark of language-use, because a *person* essentially is an animal that has a *personal name* by which it can be *addressed*, *spoken* to and *talked* with. Since the formal core of the concept of a person is to be presupposed for

language-use from the start, logical, normative and intentional vocabularies can be predicted to develop for the the activities and accomplishments of persons to become expressible in language.

What then is the use of meaning-use-analysis for the conceptually clarifying reflective understanding that is the task of philosophy to deliver? Proceeding from the concept of ADP meaning-use-analysis is constructive (227), not descriptive (211). It is operating on the presupposition of what RB admits to be an „ideal Sprachspiel“. (*MIE* 241) LW also took his simple language-games (and logical calculi) as, in a sense, ideal: as models or „*objects of comparison*“ which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language.“ (PI para. 130)

I believe that the real use of the constructions of meaning-use-analysis is exactly analogue to LW's objects of comparison. Which would mean that the real work (the comparisons) is still to be done when the labour of construction is over.

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