

(Baker on) Wittgenstein on 'Language' and 'Grammar'

This paper is occasioned by my reading belatedly G.P. Baker's (B.) *Some Remarks on ›Language‹ and ›Grammar‹*. It was published first in a Festschrift for Brian McGuinness in 1992 and reprinted in the posthumous edition of Baker's later papers by K. Morris.¹

Baker, as is well known, with P.M.S. Hacker co-authored the first two volumes of what has become the standard commentary to LW's *Philosophical Investigations*. In his later papers he found reason to retract massively on the joint interpretation he had helped to establish as standard. The paper to be discussed belongs to this retractive movement. My discussion takes issue with some of B.s retractions.

I.

Baker starts out by confessing not to do in the paper what he originally intended: „to present a systematic, if schematic, account of Wittgenstein's employment of the word 'Sprache' and 'Grammatik'.“ Heir to this intention unexecuted „is an unsystematic description of a few aspects of Wittgenstein's use of the terms“. (53) In what I shall have to say critically I try to execute B.s original intention.

For B. in the end justifies his commenting only on a few aspects of LW's remarks by pronouncing canons of interpreting LW, when he says:

„What I have attempted here is to demonstrate by examples a method of reading Wittgenstein's texts and expounding his ideas. ... Piling up more examples would achieve little, since the method must be justified by its *works*, i.e. by clarifying Wittgenstein's remarks from case to case.“ (66)

The canons of the method are „a strong principle of charity“ regarding the texts LW himself composed; the rule that a remark should be given the admissible interpretation „which gives it the minimum generality compatible with the context“ (67); the rule strictly to keep in mind LW's therapeutic aim in discussing and dissolving philosophical problems whatsoever. A possible fourth rule is the admonition that LW's remarks using the terms 'language' and 'grammar' play very different roles in different contexts.(68-9)

The method Baker follows and recommends thus is radically contextualist. To counteract the pernicious philosophical 'craving for generality' the interpreter is advised to eschew general conclusions as far as possible. It naturally invites objections on the counts of 'language' as well as 'interpretation'.

¹ *Wittgenstein's Method – Neglected Aspects*, Oxford ²2006, 52-72- Page-references in the text are to this edition.

As concerns the first one has to remind the platitudinous fact that (descriptive, characterizing) words in language very rarely are for one-time-use only. Therefore the re-use of a word used before in a context carries a presumption in favour of assuming that a topic raised with the use of the word is continued or taken up again by its re-use. A certain degree of generality seems to come with the mere use of *words*.

As concerns interpretation one has to remind the fact that interpreting texts of authors, with whom one cannot communicate about their texts, is a one-sided affair. The lack of possibility of communication is partly compensated for by a rule – the rule of maximal inclusiveness of relevant textual evidence. B.'s from-case-to-case and step-by-step methodology of interpretation tends to fall foul on this general hermeneutical maxim. Strictly understood B. never comes near to saying something about 'samples' in LW's philosophy, but only about 'samples' in PI para.s ... (2, 8, 50 ...). Of course, this is an exaggeration, but what B. says points in its direction.

II.

Fortunately, B. does not always follow his method. If he did, there would be little to discuss about his interpretative proposals, because he also insists to merely be showing alternative and neglected *possibilities* of understanding LW and does not seem to see interpretations being situated in the alternative of right or wrong (or at some point on a scale from right to wrong).

Unfortunately, the example I want to adduce for this contains an assertion, which is made twice and which is wrong. In the first place reads thus:

„The tendency to exaggerate the scope of strictly limited generalizations ... arise in part from a feature of German grammar, namely the demand for the definite article with abstract nouns.“ (54; cp. 55)

As a native speaker of German I assure the reader that this putative demand does not exist. There even is a use of 'Sprache' in German, where the word expresses something akin to a formal concept (see below), in which the definite article not only is not demanded, but is positively excluded. Moreover, I can adduce a formulation of LW's which B. himself cites, which can be seen to falsify B.'s contention. LW's formulation is from PI para. 50 (cited by B. on p. 55):

„Was es, scheinbar, geben *muss*, gehört zur Sprache.“

The definite article is conspicuously missing, because it is by no means guaranteed that 'zur' always is an abbreviation of 'zu *der*' – according to my linguistic intuition here it is not. But the English translators have taken this for granted, for in English the quote reads: „What looks as if it *had* to exist, is part of *the* language.“ (second italics added) B., with all his insistence on scrupulous

respect for LW's wording, does not seem to have taken seriously LW's German wording² and instead takes the English translation for granted!

III.

But these are niceties and the only justification for having commented on them is that B. wants the interpreter to occupy himself even with niceties.

What is bothering about B.s remarks on 'language' is that what really was the problem for LW with this term does not even come into sight by using his method.

We are lucky to have the texts in LW's *Nachlass*. In these completely general explanations for 'language' as well as 'grammar' can be found. These texts are relevant to the interpretation of each and every context in LW's writings because of the hermeneutical maxim commented on above – the maximal inclusiveness of textual evidence. The methodological canon should not be to eschew generalizations as much as possible, but to ask with respect to every context under consideration, whether something in it stands in the way of operating with the general explanations.

The general explanation for 'language' is to be found in Ch.X of Part I of *Philosophical Grammar*. I give the quote in German, adding in parentheses Kenny's translations of crucial formulations:

„... ›Sprache‹ ist für mich ein Sammelname (a name for a collection) und ich verstehe darunter die deutsche Sprache, die englische Sprache, u.s.w., und noch verschiedene Zeichensysteme, die mit diesen Sprachen eine größere oder geringere Verwandtschaft (affinity) haben.“ (PG 190)³

The linguistic observations first: 'Sammelname' in German is an expression in use. The dictionary explains it as 'designation by a name taking together several individuals'⁴. Kenny's translation merely circumscribes an unitary term. Could one not construct the expression 'collective name' corresponding to the lexical item 'collective noun' in English too? – 'Verwandtschaft', in view

2 I have adapted here the 'muß' in LW's text of para. 50 to the orthographically now mandatory 'muss'. Did I thereby tamper with LW's wording?

3 A precursor of this remark reads thus: „Justified use of the word 'language': It either means the empirical fact that people talk [Menschen reden; (use language)] {on the same level as the fact that dogs do give barks}; or it means: instituted [festgesetzt] system of *communication*/words and grammatical rules/ in expressions as 'the English language', 'German language', 'language of negroes' etc. 'Sprache' as a logical concept could only be equivalent to 'proposition' and would then be a/the title of a part of grammar. If it should be the title of the whole of grammar [der ganzen Grammatik], it is not a word at all and not to be used. /If I say 'the language is unique' [die Sprache ist einzig] this just means that 'language' here is no word, i.e. cannot be used in this way.“ (MS 110 65-6; WA Bd. 3, 197) [own translation; orthographical convention for brackets in quotes translated: square b. [] and round b. () insertions of the translator; arched b. { } in LW's text; dashed b. // in LW's text to mark off alternatives in formulation.]

4 *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. XIV, column 1743: „namensbezeichnung, welche verschiedenes einzelne zusammenfasst.“

of LW's simile of 'family-resemblance', should be translated with a stronger (genealogical) expression than 'affinity' ('kinship', 'relationship').

As to the content, I take it to be obvious that the remark is intended as a general meaning-explanation for LW's use of 'Sprache'. The use of 'Sammelname' in this explanation is important for what it conspicuously avoids – the use of the term 'concept'.

LW treated 'language' as expressing a 'formal concept' in TLP – the concept of the totality of propositions. (TLP 4.001) In his second phase he continued to experiment with the contrast of formal vs. material concept. It was evident to him that 'language' does not express a material concept, because such a concept can be empty, 'language' cannot, because the very use of this (and any) expression presupposes language. LW argued thus: If 'language' did express a material concept it should be possible for us to remember that, during the period, when we did not yet speak the language, we lacked something (our mother-tongue). But such a remembrance is impossible. (MS 109 89⁵).

Why LW did not conceive of 'language' as expressing a formal concept explicitly – giving its minimal TLP-explanation of being already given with each of its instances and having to be represented in a formal notation by a variable, not a functional expression (cp. TLP 4.126 sqq.) – I do not understand completely. Certainly there is a problem to use the term, if the contrast material-formal is not seen as to be applicable at all. It probably too is connected to the fact that the concepts of German, English etc., which were to be classified by 'language', were it a formal concept, are much more indeterminate than is admitted by LW's family-resemblance considerations and this for reasons B. himself discusses (inter alia the doubtful lexical status of samples and gestures – cp. 61-2).⁶

In any case, he did not explain 'language' as expressing a formal concept, but as being a *Sammelname*. This explanation is, and is intended to be, the general explanation of the word when used without definite article (in German as well as in LW's German). In one sense, this explanation betrays resignation, for LW avows:

5 „Drury told me today that he thought about [the fact] that one cannot *remember the state* [Zustand; period] *in which one could not yet speak* [make use of language]/that it is impossible to remember the state before *having learnt* to speak [make use of language; vor der *Erlernung* der Sprache]. – Of course one could have memory-images [Erinnerungsbilder] from that/this time, but one cannot remember/think of [erinnern/entsinnen] the feeling of a lack of language, because one cannot have a concept of language before one speaks [makes use of language], and, to be sure [freilich], one too cannot have such a concept after having begun to speak [make use of language; auch nachher nicht], because there is no such concept. Also, one cannot remember the need [Bedürfnis] for linguistic expression [Bedürfnis nach dem sprachlichen Ausdruck], for when it exists, there too already is a language in which one thinks [gibt es schon eine Sprache in der man denkt].“

6 LW, on the one hand, explicitly states that, taken as a general concept, language „zerfließt“ (Kenny: dissolves) and, on the other, that „the indeterminacy of generality (I take it: also of a concept; EML) is ... (a freedom of movement,) not a logical indeterminacy.“ (PG 115) But a dissolving concept, material or formal, is logically indeterminate.

„How does 'making use of language' compare to 'playing a game' [?] For this, too, is one of *the* activities ...[of humans] and one, moreover, which is similar to the use of signs.

/ ... /

/In grammar the word 'language' will not show up.

/'Language' in contrast to 'sports', yes, – but this, of course, is of no concern to grammar.

/ ... /

But why then do I rack my brain about the concept of 'language' instead of just making use of language?

For this racking my brain is justified only, if we *have* a general concept.“ (MS 111 188)

The result of LW's reflections did not determine 'language' as a concept and in this respect it is a frustration of his ambition. But on the other hand, being a 'Sammelname' points out a kind of generality different from the generality of material or formal concepts (or quantifiers). And it is one of LW's general aims to 'teach us differences' and to insist on generality being of different types. (cp. PG pt. II II, 257 sqq.)

His general explanation for 'language' moreover links it internally to a network of weighty philosophical expressions, for instance in the precursor-remark of the general explanation for 'language' in PG (quoted above in footnote 3). There he distinguishes three different uses of 'language', the second of which evidently is his object of interest (cp. below footnote 7):

„instituted [festgesetztes] system of *communication*/words and grammatical rules/ in expressions as 'the English language', 'German language', 'language of negroes' etc. 'Sprache' as a logical concept could only be equivalent to 'proposition' and would then be a/the title of a part of grammar. If it should be the title of the whole of grammar [der ganzen Grammatik], it is not a word at all and not to be used.“ (MS 110 65)

But even in prohibiting it LW cannot avoid to use it. And some of his remarks he evidently held to be descriptively correct. In a passage from MS 111 he discusses the question, called „fundamental“, how one knows that the description one gives of a new experience is a proposition. In the course of his reflections one can read the following:

„/The word „proposition“ and the word „experience“ already have a certain grammar.
/That means their grammar has to be fixed in advance [muss im vorhinein bestimmt sein] and does not depend from some future event.

/ ... /

/How is the grammar of the word „proposition“ related to the grammar of propositions?

/,„Proposition“ evidently is the title [Überschrift] of the grammar of propositions. The title of the whole of grammar, in one sense, therefore equivalent to „grammar“ and „language“.

/ ... /

/This is also what it means to say that there can be surprises in the world, but not in grammar.

// ... //

/ It complicates our question further that the words „world“ and „reality“ are also equivalents of the word „proposition“. (MS 111 169-70)

This certainly calls for explication. The basic commitment of LW's philosophy from the start is

to the principle that the world or reality is given to us centrally in propositions. 'World' and 'reality' are expressions for different, but connected totalities. The TLP-conception is well known: 'world' designates the totality of facts (of what is the case), 'reality' the totality of possibilities that can be understood (of 'sense'). In fact, there are reasons from German usage to switch the explications and LW's later wavering on using both terms is a reflection of them. But both ways the network von 'proposition'-'language'-'grammar'-'world'-'reality' articulates the center of LW's conception early and late. It is based on the fundamental distinction between 'sense' and 'truth/falsity' ('satisfaction/non-satisfaction' for the none-indicative/assertive uses of sentences) and the insight that truth *and* falsity (satisfaction *and* non-satisfaction) presuppose sense. What cannot be understood – what does not have sense, is not meaningful – cannot be true *or* false (...).

LW's conceptual disposition implies that there is an internal relation between language and one of the totalities – he, in TLP, preferred *reality* as the totality of sense, I prefer *world* in this role. The internal relation between language and world (cp. TLP 4.014) means that language and world cannot be thought of being separated from one another (an internal relation is one impossible not to exist). In TLP he explicated this internal relation by a constructive theory of logical form and pictoriality ('Bildhaftigkeit'), in his later philosophy by his conception of ostensive definition which is understood *to forge* the internal relation of words with elements of reality by „calibrating“ (D. Pears) them on paradigms.

This is why LW repeatedly remarks on the inseparability of language and world (cp. MS 107 49; PB V.47, 80). And this is what made it possible that LW definitively settled the seemingly unsolvable controversy between realism and idealism. For the realist the relation of language and world is completely external, for the idealist it is completely internal (the world is merely 'our representation'). The realist relies on the fact that whether our propositions are true or false, depends on what is the case, not on us. The idealist claims that the world is given to us exclusively in concepts of our own making. LW's solution is Kantian⁷: both protagonists incorrectly assume that there can only be an external *or* an internal relation. With the basic level distinction between sense and truth/falsity it can be seen that in different respects there can be both kinds of relation – the internal one of sense between language and the world and the external one of truth/falsity between language and reality. This is a result of paramount importance and LW achieved it before he finally embarked on the route to PI. Nevertheless it is in the background of everything he says in PI and resumes there with „Das *Wesen* ist in der Grammatik ausgesprochen.“ (PI para. 371) An early

⁷ The argumentative strategy from Kant's *Transcendental Dialectics* more directly came to LW via Frank Ramsey (*The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, London 1931, 115-6. – Of a 'Kantian solution of the problem of philosophy' ('Kantischer Lösung'; the problem is the relation of language and world) LW himself wrote in another context (Culture and Value, rev. ed., 13/13e = MS 110 61: 10.2.1931) – unbeknownst to him in a direct parallel to an argument in Kant's *Logik* (ed. Jaesche), A 70.

presursor of this remark reads thus:

„But the essence of language is a picture of the world's essence and philosophy as /administrator [Verwalterin] of/ grammar really can get at [erfassen] the essence of the world [-] only not in propositions of language but in rules for this language which exclude senseless combinations of signs.“ (MS 107 2 = 231 in a consecutive numbering)

The only difference of PI para. 371 is a greater reticence of the point's formulation.

IV.

The general explanation of 'grammar' which I find in LW too comes from *Philosophical Grammar*:

„That one empirical proposition is true and another false is no part of grammar. What belongs to grammar are all the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. That is, all the conditions [necessary] for the understanding [/all necessary conditions of understanding (the proposition)]; German: „alle Bedingungen des Verständnisses“/] (of the sense) [German: „(des Sinnes)“].“ (PG 88)

The explanation seems to be 'less general' than the one for 'language', because it only deals with 'grammar of a proposition' (my italics). But to believe this would be misleading because of what was cited from MS 111 at the end of the last section and because „it is only in a language that something is a proposition. To understand a proposition is to understand a language.“ (PG 131)⁸

The general explanation of LW's understanding of 'grammar' is that grammar is what determines all conditions of sense. It therefore delineates the bounds of sense by demarcating sense from nonsense. In a period when LW still the interest of presenting positively descriptive results directly he remarked that one (he) has to start with the distinction between sense and nonsense and that nothing is possible without it, because otherwise one (he) could not say anything at all. (MS 109 42-3) His method he then declared to consist mainly in the transition from the question of truth to the question of sense. (MS 106 46)

This method can be used in therapeutic as well as in systematic philosophizing.⁹ To a kind of the latter LW himself aspired to during his years leading up to the beginnings of PI. In view of the

8 But cp. the restricting considerations PG 170-1, which, I must admit, are closer to B.s conception. LW here points out his personal interest in paying attention to the „system of language“. This is evidently connected to the therapeutic conception of philosophy, as is evident from BB 25 sq.: the „one-sided way of looking at language“ as a system is motivated by the hypothesis „that the puzzles we try to remove always (!;EML) spring from just this attitude towards language.“ Therapeutic intervention, however, not only presupposes correct insight into the pathogenic connections but also some conception of normal functioning. This is so in psychoanalysis and in philosophical therapy as well. LW's description of language therefore contain the potential of being developed into a descriptive account claiming correctness. To deny this is simply wilfully ignorant. But it is true that LW after his middle period was no longer interested in developing this descriptive potential of his reflections on language and focused exclusively on therapeutic considerations. That does not imply that Wittgensteinians have to.

9 I tried to give an example for it in part II of my book *Kreffels Ruminationen*, Stuttgart 2019.

difficult standing of LW's conception in contemporary philosophy interpreters of it should be the last to deny this or to contribute to watering it down.

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