Wolfgang Nedobity
Infoterm, Wien

Concepts versus Meaning as Reflected by the Works of E. Wüster and L. Wittgenstein

Attempt at evaluating the different methods of investigating the meaning of a term in the writings of L. Wittgenstein and E. Wüster. It is shown that Wittgenstein's view of meaning is in constrast to conceptual thinking. The differences in approach and result are pointed out. Parallels of semantic methods to the ones in conceptology are shown.   (Author)

1. Introduction

This article tries to evaluate the different methods applied in the investigation of the meanings of linguistic designations. One approach is that of conceptology which is based on the findings of logics and which deals with the vocabulary of special languages. The other approach is that of semantics which is based on the findings of linguistics and which chooses standard language as its object of investigation.

Despite these different starting points, the two disciplines overlap in many aspects and support each other. In the earlier part of this century, Vienna was one of the places where most of the research on this topic was carried out. The investigation of meaning was mainly pursued by the members of the Vienna Circle and its associated scholars such as Ludwig Wittgenstein; the investigation of the relationships of concepts and their representation was the foremost activity of Eugen Wüster, who founded the Vienna School of Terminology.

2. Terminology – a practical application of conceptology

Eugen Wüster was the first to create a theory which attempted to apply the findings of logics and epistemology to solve communication problems of subject specialists. The main purpose of Wüster's work in this field was to create a classification for ordering concepts in vocabularies (1). One of the principles that Wüster adhered to was based on the fact that order is to be the base of every well-managed life and occupation. He went so far as to apply this principle also to language, in particular to subject vocabularies which are used by specialists for unambiguous communication.

He propagated thy systematic approach in termino-

logical lexicography where the concept relationships determine the sequence of entries in a vocabulary. Term collections of the vocabulary type are to be preferred to those of the dictionary type because the first mentioned works display major subject relationships in a gradually unfolding general to specific order. In other words, their classification proceeds from concepts of great extension and small intension to concepts of great intension and small extension. This enables the users to locate the exact place that a concept has in the system which makes it possible to determine the related concepts.

Terminology is a further advancement of lexical semantics which is restricted to special languages only. As pointed out before, its methods are based on the findings of conceptology. A kind of forerunner of terminology was a discipline called 'onomasiology' which is best described in Dornseiff's work (2). It has in common with terminology the concept oriented approach. In contrast to semasiology it does not start at the various words or terms in order to list their meanings, but it takes the object or concepts as its aim of investigation and looks for possible designations. Wüster applied the principles of onomasiology to special languages and developed a theory of terminology.

3. Wittgenstein's view on 'meaning' in contrast to conceptual thinking

It is certainly worthwile to have a closer look at Wittgenstein's works since both *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* are concerned with the topic of meaning.

One can summarize that for Wittgenstein the slogan held true that "meaning is use", which means: to understand a sign is to have mastery of a technique or custom of using it. In other words, he identifies understanding with its characteristic experiential accompaniments; in linguistics this is called the context. For Wittgenstein therefore it is not sufficient in a case of "meaning a sign in particular way" that some items occur in one's mind; e.g. a picture of a tree when one uses the word "tree". This is not sufficient because the picture does not in itself determine the correct use of the associated word; we cannot read off from an associated picture how a word is to be applied. In terminology, however, the application of a concept is determined by its position in the system of concepts and this information is usually given in the definition of a concept in question.

In linguistics and in lexicography explanations of words are frequently given. These, however, cannot depend on the context but on the acquired knowledge of the reader because when one explains the meaning of a word to someone, one presupposes that he understands the words of our explanation, and no explanations of meaning would be possible unless some words were understood without (verbal) explanation. Understanding must ultimately rest on more than the association of one symbol with another. Most explanations, however, are nothing else but the substitution of one sign for another. Unfortunately, the view of structural linguistics on this matter is also not of much help. This theory claims

that there is a basic or deep level of language whose semantics is perspicuous and requires no explanation – in other words: a level of self-interpreting signs. But if meaning fixes correct use, meaning cannot be interpretation since the latter cannot determine linguistic correctness.

In his *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein suggests a direct connexion between understanding and use: understanding is essentially connected with use because it precisely is the capacity to do certain things with signs. He thinks of understanding through the notion of ability which points towards its essential connexions with behaviour and distances itself from the idea of understanding as an inner state of mind. If understanding were just the coming before one's mind of some sign or quasi-sign, then understanding would be certifiable simply by introspection – you just scan the contents of consciousness to find the appropriate experience. Wittgenstein, however, questions the usefulness of definitions in this connection when he says:

"A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. – Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. – But 'I impress it on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right." (3).

This is in strong contrast to the Vienna School of Terminology where the definition of concepts plays a central role in understanding special language. One must admit, however, that there is no check on whether the words which the single speaker understands are being employed with a constant meaning from occasion to occasion. McGinn summarizes Wittgenstein's objections against thinking by means of 'concepts' in the following way:

". . . what comes before one's mind when an absent object is meant is not the object itself but an image or picture of the object, which serves as a proxy or simulacrum for the absent object. Hence one arrives at the idea, which is of course one of Wittgenstein's chief targets, that meaning something is having something like an image of it come before the mind: if we can't have the object itself in our sights we can at least sight (by the mind's eye) an object that ressembles that object. Wittgenstein's critique of this whole way of thinking questions (a) the supposed simplicity and primitiveness of ostensively meaning something – this is not in fact a situation in which meaning something is somehow perfectly transparent and unproblematic; and (b) the idea that such mental proxies can ever confer meaning." (4)

Proposition 2.1. in Wittgenstein's Tractatus reads: "We picture facts to ourselves" (5) while we are told at the beginning of Eugen Wüster's fundamental writings that man forms "concepts of objects".

What is the difference between Wüster's "concept" and Wittgenstein's "picture"?

Wittgenstein continues in proposition 2.13: "In a picture, objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them." A picture therefore does not simply represent an object; it shows a constellation of objects which are related to one another, thereby enabling a statement. This statement is in turn made in the form of a proposition. Proposition 4.026 reads: "The meanings of simple signs (words) must be explained to us if we are to understand them. With propositions, however, we make ourselves understood." Wüster limits himself to defining

concepts and showing their relations to related concepts, but not to the "picturing internal relations" which can exist between concepts in reality when a specific state of affairs is at issue. Both scientists, however, hold fast to the maxim that a "logical structure" is necessary if we are to depict and describe the world. Wittgenstein tried to arrive at such a structure by using on a universal basis the language of mechanics researched by Hertz; and, by systematically replacing terms, he created an ordinary language which represents the world pictorially. The only things depicted are those which are essential for the structure of the phenomenon in question.

Wittgenstein is also very concerned with the truth content of pictures. A sentence is true if it reproduces a constellation of objects in a manner that is faithful to reality. In conceptology, these sentences appear in the form of definitions which are correct if they represent the distinctive characteristics of a concept according to a structured scheme. In Wittgenstein, however, sentences serve only to capture meanings: "Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning" (5, propos. 3.3). With regard to conceptology this would mean that a concept exists only if it has previously been defined – in other words, if it has been related to other concepts. According to Wüster, concepts are related only to concepts whichs are allied to them on the basis of similarity or a contiguity in space/time. One also refers to facts and pictures which are inherent to the concept or object.

Wittgenstein's sentences describe relations which go beyond this and which are based on a state of affairs which has arisen arbitrarily. Wittgenstein's purpose in proceeding in such a way with his propositions differed from Wüster's; in his dictionaries the latter wanted to group and name things that have traits or characteristics in common, in order to offer specialists better access to the "structure" of a specialized field and to enable them to communicate clearly. The conceptual system is only one side of a science, however. Knowing what kinds of screws there are does not mean one can build a machine; one also has to know the laws of mechanics, of the transmission of power. Knowledge such as this is expressed in sentences. Concepts and propositions complement one another. Wittgenstein sees this too one-sidedly when he says: "The world is the totality of facts, not of things" (5, propos. 1.1). This view is weakened, however, when he has to admit, a few propositions later: "If I know an object (i.e. understand it conceptually), I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs" (5, propos. 2.0123), and thus emphasizes the importance of "usage" in grasping the meaning.

In literature on semantics it is usually assumed that the meaning of a sentence or syntagmatic expression is the product of the meanings of its constituent lexical units; and the meaning of each lexical unit is the product of its constituent semantic components. Thus in a text an amalgamation of all semantic components takes place.

Wüster showed very clearly in his theory of terminology that the amalgamation of semantic components underlies a number of definite laws which become only obvious when thinking in the lines of conceptology.

The method of semantics which is known as "analysis of semantic components" has, however, some remarkable parallels in conceptology. In semantics one presumes that the meaning of all lexical units can be described by means of their basic components. For instance the word "man" can be described by the components "masculine", "grown up" and "human". In the course of the development of structural linguistics, attempts were made to formalize and operationalize this type of semantic analysis by using binary oppositions, e.g. + or - animated.

It was presumed that the semantic components were independent of any particular language, but the search for a class of universal components met with no success as far as common languages are concerned. With respect to an international unification of concepts and terms, the methods of conceptology have proved more adequate since they are not only based on the system denoted by de Saussure as "langue" but on the cognitive structure of the human mind.

Semantic components which do not refer to a system in the way charateristics do, are of little use since they are not in conformity with any criterium of order (type of characteristic) which determines their relevance. In terminology one speaks of "essential" and "accidental" characteristics. A definition should contain only the characteristics which are essential and immediately relevant for the identification of a concept within a particular system on concepts. The distinguishing characteristics should be chosen according to the relevant system of concepts.

4. The distinction between concepts and meanings as espoused by Wittgenstein and Wüster

Eugen Wüster distinguishes clearly between meaning and concepts. The former is a phenomenon of ordinary language and is therefore a subject to be investigated in semantics, while the latter is an entity in special languages, one that exists independently of the context and is established in accordance with the laws of logic.

Ludwig Wittgenstein did not make this distinction, with the result that his conclusions are not entirely appropriate for language and thinking. A. Burkhardt demonstrated this very clearly when he made use of numerous examples from Wittgenstein's work to show that "Wittgenstein does not distinguish clearly between 'meaning' and 'concept'. On the contrary, he has no inhibitions about using these terms largely as synonyms, thereby covering up what has been shown to be an important problem for linguistic theory" (6). Wittgenstein believes that a description of everyday linguistic usage will solve all our philosophical problems. This is especially evident in his *"Philosophische Grammatik"* [Philosophical Grammar] where he states: "The connection between 'language and reality' is made through explanations of words, explanations which belong to grammar, with the result that the language remains autonomous and self-contained" (7).

Burkhardt is therefore quite right in criticizing that Wittgenstein, in adopting this method, does not do justice to what he claims to do. Burkhardt comments: "Wittgenstein, however, interprets every explanation as an explanation of meaning or as a description of usage and asks how the words in question are used on an everyday basis, but he is unable to criticize language on the basis of this kind of conception" (6, p.76).

It must be said, nevertheless, that Wittgenstein and Wüster did not differ so very much in their intentions. On the subject of Wittgenstein's intentions Haller states: "His primary intention in criticizing language is to describe language usage, in the first place in order to demonstrate that one is misled and misleading when language is used in the philosophical realm and, secondly, in order to thereby render such misleading usage harmless" (8). Wüster's theory is even more general in its orientation, being directed at the use of specialized languages, usage which can be resolved only through the strict organization, i.e. systematization, of its fundamental concepts. In practice, however, the latter method has proven to yield the desired results in a better way and also to correspond to the intentions more adequately. The method has therefore been accepted in many national and international standards and consequently provides valuable assistance to many specialists in expressing their knowledge in language.

Wüster was primarily a conceptologist, but he had always tried to bridge the gap between philosophy, linguistics and terminology. He was keenly interested in the theory of semantics but was well aware of the fact that different methods have to be developed for applied linguistics if subject communication was to be investigated.

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