

THE PROBLEM OF MEANINGFULNESS

In the inner world of man language is perhaps the most powerful machinery through which theoretical activities like representation, hypothesising, reasoning can be most fruitfully and smoothly carried out and certain kind of rapport be established with the outer world. But language poses a challenge in so far as making use of that complex machinery inevitably demands certain degree of freedom, imagination and ingenuity on the part of the user of language, for there is every possibility that the user of language may misuse the freedom and ingenuity entrusted upon him to make the best use of language. A communicator may misuse his freedom and ingenuity by constructing indeterminate or even meaningless expression. Such possibility of misuse of language is ingrained in the very nature of language. Though language with a certain insight has been compared to a game like chess and construction of particular expression with a particular move in a game, giving the impression that, as if there is no scope for arbitrariness in 'linguistic moves', yet the comparison must not be stretched too far. This comparison is correct only so far as it draws attention to the fact that both language and game are something mere 'possibilities', while the 'moves' in the both (construction of a particular sentence, moving the knight.....) are something concrete. It is only in the particular move, that a language and a game 'show' what they are really like. The comparison is also correct so far as both construction of expressions and making of 'moves' are governed by certain rules. But in other respects languages and games are significantly different from one another. Whereas a game of chess is a self-contained system of rules, language, in spite of being governed by rules, is not a self-contained system and barring certain preliminary disputes no significant dispute about construction and interpretation of linguistic expression can be settled with reference to rules. Indeed, the rules of language can only be of a flexible kind because unlike a game of

chess, in language there are innumerable possible moves, innumerable ways of making the moves. How can we frame rigid rules for the 'infinite'? It is not even theoretically possible to count the number of possible expressions in a language. Also unlike a game a language grows and develops to meet various human requirements. (Observation of many philosophers about 'human nature' of language seems to be substantially correct).¹ And what is still more important is the fact that the human requirements which a living language has to fulfil is governed by ever expanding dimension of knowledge, experience and other human activities. It is not only that our knowledge, experience, etc., expand uninterruptedly, it is also true that we feel the growing need to represent those activities in order to reflect over them. Consequently, there is a corresponding expansion and development of language to cope with the expanding dimension of knowledge and activities.² Now for a growing and developing language there can be neither a fixed number of expressions, nor a fixed manner of constructing expressions (as it is the case with 'moves' in a game). A speaker or a writer often feels the need of constructing new kinds of sentences, apart from mere coining of new words and phrases. This is particularly true of construction of new hypotheses about frontier region of human knowledge. But it is left mostly to the ingenuity of the communicator in what better way he can express the new situation, new ideas and experiences. In this aspect construction of linguistic expression is comparable to the complexity and freedom involved in artistic activities. It is no wonder then that often arbitrary or meaningless expressions occur in the course of human communication! But can we reconcile ourselves to the fact that meaningless expressions are often constructed and leave the matter as it is? Is there no way of ascertaining the meaningfulness of a given linguistic expression, *at least when it is challenged by the receiver — by a listener or a reader?* Conceive of a situation where some heated dialogue is going on centring round 'modern art', 'worth of spiritualism in modern age'..... and each participant is accusing others of uttering non-sensical expressions, but

each participant at the same time claiming of his utterances to be perfectly meaningful. Ryle, for instance, wanted to silence the libertarians just by saying that to say that 'voluntary action is a free action' is to make a non-sensical utterance, (*The Concept of Mind*) not just to make a false statement. What a hellish affair it would be if we cannot come to some agreement about the meaningfulness or meaningfulness of this utterance by the libertarians? Of course it may not be always possible to arrive at a perfect agreement as to the definite meaning of an expression, ambiguity may be a universal phenomenon with all linguistic expressions. There may be no actual meaning of a given expression, all expressions may mean 'more or less', there being always a possibility of expressing ourselves better or deciphering the same expression more accurately. But from all this it does not follow that no agreement as to even the meaningfulness of a given-word, sentence. is possible. It is quite possible that we are not very sure about the meaning of a statement though the statement appears meaningful, 'a part of space cannot move to a part of space'. Therefore if human communication is to be really something significant then we must be able to say of any linguistic expression at least that, *it is meaningful or meaningless, whether or not the meaning of the expression is clear*. But then the problem arises: what is it for an expression to be meaningful? how can one be satisfied that an expression is meaningful? It is of course not easy to grasp what is actually being asked in these questions. Is it a problem of defining 'meaningfulness' or the problem of enumerating the marks of meaningfulness? The way the general problem of meaning is posed by the many distinguished philosophers of language it is not clear whether they are thinking of certain marks of meaningfulness or certain way of giving a definition of meaningfulness. *But it is of vital importance to clear it out whether the real significant problem about the concept 'meaning' is the problem of 'definition' or the 'marks' of meaningfulness*. For it is very doubtful if a non-circular or non-stipulative definition of meaningfulness is possible. This doubt appears to be genuine even if

we do not take seriously the general apprehension about the possibility of a strict non-stipulative definition of meaningfulness owing to the indeterminate character of linguistic construction.³ But other considerations tell against such a possibility. The concept of 'meaning' like the concept of 'truth' is a primitive one, it is difficult to think, what can be simpler than the concept of meaning or the concept of 'meaningfulness' in terms of which 'meaningfulness' can be defined. The attempt to define 'meaningfulness' in terms of, for instance, 'linguistic expression', 'intention and belief' (Grice) or in terms of 'synonymy' already presupposes the concept of meaningfulness. We can not comprehend what it is to have belief without language or meaningful expression. It is only when something is said or articulated in language that the question of believing something arises. But various formulations of the general problem of meaningfulness (a second order problem) *are rarely able to spell out whether the problem about meaningfulness is a problem of definition or a problem of marks of meaningfulness.* Austin writes that the general question which we want to ask about 'meaning' is best phrased as "what is the meaning of (the phrase) 'what is the meaning of (word) "X" ? ? ?" Alston formulated the meaning question: "How must one expression be related to another in order that one can be exhibited in a specification of the other?" Or "What is it for two expressions to be synonymous"? Surely these are round about ways of putting the second order question about meaning. However, it is possible to raise the problem about marks of meaningfulness in a more straightforward way. We talk of a linguistic expression being meaningful in contrast to some combination of letters or words that appear arbitrary to us, we also talk of a particular expression having this or that meaning. Or we say, 'this expression is meaningful' and also we say, 'I can follow the meaning of this expression'. Here we can distinguish two different ways of talking about 'meaning' or making statements about meaning (meaning statement). To say, 'I know the meaning of "....."' etc. is to make a first order statement about meaning and to say "....." is meaningful etc. is to

make a second order statement about meaning. Thus there are two types of questions. (1) What is the meaning of 'X' (an expression)? (2) What do we signify when we say that 'X' 'Y' . . . (any expression) are meaningful? A lexicographer is interested in the question of the first kind, but we are interested in the question of the second kind. Of course these two questions are related, an answer to the question, 'what is the meaning of 'X'' may be necessary to justify the meaningfulness of 'X'. To be meaningful an expression must have a meaning. Yet these two questions must be kept distinct, for we may be quite sure about the meaningfulness of an expression, not about the exact meaning of the expression. Also meaning of an expression may be more or less clear, but an expression can be just meaningful or meaningless.

In the question (2) we are concerned with the 'marks' of meaningfulness, why it is that we say of some expression 'X' that it has some meaning or other? We may think of meaningfulness as detectable through certain characteristics (linguistic characteristics) which are exhibited by only certain form of combination of letters or words etc. A particular form of combination of letters, words which exhibit certain linguistic characteristics are meaningful expression, i.e., are instances of bearer of meaning.⁴ When some-linguistic expression is presented to us in the form of speech or writing we may at once apprehend it to be meaningful. We may intuit that 'architecture is frozen music' is meaningful, whereas, green colour tastes sweet, is meaningless. We may just have a feeling of meaning in 'architecture is frozen music', we may not be able to give an immediate reason why it is so. To a less imaginative person it may even appear to be meaningless. But he also may not be in a position to say why this expression appears to be meaningless. But it is untrue to say that people do not have any reaction at all to these two expressions or that they intuit no characteristics of those expressions. Actually, people intuit different kinds of 'linguistic characteristics' as if in a flash. A native speaker gets himself acquainted with

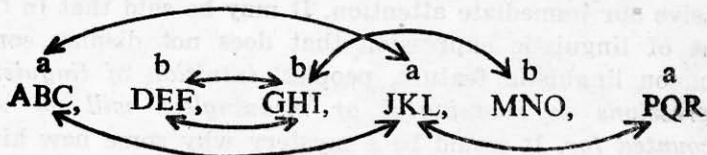
different linguistic characteristics (some of which may be even innate) through a long process of language habit, but now can see at a flash whether some of these linguistic characteristics or similar one is present in this — 'architecture is frozen music', novel form of expression. Much of imaginative faculty and experience are necessary in order to be able to intuit certain linguistic characteristics in such a novel form of expression, like 'music is frozen architecture'. But the fact is that *it is possible to point out certain 'linguistic characteristics' as marks or criteria (Sufficient or necessary) for justifying the intuition of 'meaningfulness'*. However, what is really problematic is: to reveal these linguistic characteristics through a meticulous analysis of what is involved in certain linguistic expressions (arbitrarily selected) supposed to be meaningful; and simultaneously by trying to determine what is wrong with certain linguistic expressions supposed to be meaningless (Green idea sleeps furiously).

But is it even possible to identify certain marks of meaningfulness? Certain marks (linguistic characteristics) of linguistic expression through which we can justify an expression to be meaningful? Wittgenstein may be interpreted to have raised a serious objection even to such a humble attempt, not to speak of defining 'meaning'. The recent literature on meaning, however, shows⁵ no cognizance of Wittgenstein's objection, but we feel Wittgenstein's objection must be seriously considered. In the dictum 'do not ask for the meaning (what meaningfulness is) but use', this objection is sounded. For by 'use' of linguistic expressions Wittgenstein understands 'multiplicity of uses' and even this multiplicity is said to be some thing not fixed, but "new types of language, new language game comes into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten". Passage 10 of P. I. also suggests that all the 'uses' are very much unlike one another. Wittgenstein's comparison of language with an 'ancient city', or a 'maze', suggests the impossibility of even describing marks of meaningfulness, for like an ancient city or a maze it is 'unknown and un-

knowable'. He goes to the extreme to suggest that there is nothing common in different appearances of linguistic expressions, "What confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print".⁶ 'What is common in all meaningful expressions is merely the heard sound or seen printing', that is, the token! There is no common characteristic that we may hope any meaningful expression should display. He says that in order to show that language displays some essential features we must be able to classify expressions. But uses of linguistic expressions being so diverse, no classification other than arbitrary one seems possible. His manner of speaking suggests, as if, every linguistic expression is a class by itself, a unitary affair. Generally, we speak of meaning of an expression being vague. But Wittgenstein says that even the second order statement about meaning is vague. " 'Make sense' (and also 'does not make sense') is vague and will have different senses in different cases".⁷ If first order statement about meaning is vague and also the second order statement, then third order statement about meaning must also be vague. Will not there be complete failure of communication or at least fruitful communication?

But on the other hand philosophers of language like Mill, Frege, Russell had attempted to classify linguistic expressions and draw our attention to different kinds of linguistic features like 'reference', 'predication', 'belief — conditions'. These features of language are thought to be something determinate; and 'meaningfulness' has been attempted to be identified in terms of these linguistic characteristics. Against Wittgenstein their points of view may receive our immediate attention. It may be said that in the case of linguistic expression that does not display some common linguistic feature, peoples' intuition of linguistic expressions as meaningful or meaningless will go unaccounted for. It would be a mystery why some new kind of expression appears to be meaningful while other not.

But a different interpretation of Wittgenstein is possible, an interpretation which will make him appear less radical about the possibility of identifying linguistic characteristics of meaningfulness. General passages of P.I. suggest that Wittgenstein is looking at language not as something piecemeal but as a whole, his comparison of language with a game and the description of game as complicated net-work of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing suggests the idea that language is a unitary thing, a pattern or net-work, where the particular linguistic expressions are constituents that make up the whole patterns. But if language is a pattern surely it is not something without a form. To understand what is a game *we cannot limit ourselves to looking haphazardly at some moves only.* We should look at as many moves as possible; we should not look at the game in a piecemeal way, but as a whole. Then a game will appear not as sum total of arbitrary moves but as a *kind of system or pattern.* The same is true of a language (Of course the comparison between the language and game may not be very much accurate because though there are different kinds of games it is doubtful if there are different kinds of language. Can English language and Bengali language be treated as different kinds of language in the way the game of chess and the game cricket are treated as different?) However, in comparing language with a game Wittgenstein's chief motive is to pin-point the 'Pattern-aspect' of language. Though no common linguistic character runs through every linguistic expression, there is family resemblance of linguistic characteristics. Thus if ABC, DEF, GHI, JKL, MNO, PQR are linguistic expressions and a, b, are linguistic characteristics then two linguistics (a, b) are present in the four expressions in the following way.



The six expressions are kept within a rectangle to give hint

that they constitute a family, no one linguistic characteristic is running through all the linguistic expressions though each of the characteristics may be present in common but only in a limited number of expressions is. *But this way of looking at language as unitary thing, a net-work, though gives language a distinct unity of its own, would not help us to justify the meaningfulness of a particular expression with reference to this pattern-aspect.* It would be impossible to determine the meaningfulness of an expression by trying to find out the coherence between the particular expression and the language which is supposed to be a pattern or net-work. For language as a whole pattern or 'net-work' is never given to us, there being no fixed numbers of possible expressions. It is only in imagination that we can think of language as a complete pattern. In fact language is some thing incomplete unlike a game which is comparatively a complete system. We have already pointed out that language is some thing which 'grows' and develops to meet human requirements.⁸ We accept it firmly that language has a development, it proceeds more and more towards a pattern of an ideal scheme. There is such a distinction as less developed language and more developed language. Thus, whereas we can determine if a particular move in a game is correct or incorrect by trying to accommodate it in the pattern of a particular game, *a linguistic expression cannot be similarly judged by comparing it with a given pattern of language, for language as a complete pattern is not available to us. So how can we compare a particular expression with something not given as a complete thing?* But in some phases of his mind Wittgenstein seems to believe in the possibility of language having a different kind of unity. Some passages of P. 9 (pages 92, 108, 122) suggest that he believes language to have some essential characteristics which are not so far 'digged out', or 'language is identified with wrong essence'. "For they see in essence not something that already lies open to view but something that lies beneath the surface". He seems to maintain, at least implicitly that there is 'some thing' which lies within the language and which we can see

when we look deeply into the nature of language. He also seems to say that to understand the essence of language we must look 'how proposition really works', not that language has no essence. Also we should consider Wittgenstein's remark about 'misuse of language', his frequent complaint that 'our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity' (PI 122). He often grumbles that our intelligence is bewitched by use of language, *but our intelligence can be bewitched by wrong use of language*. And if there is such a thing 'wrong use of language', there must be 'right use of language'. Also Wittgenstein's distinctions (though rather evasory) between 'surface grammar' and 'depth grammar',⁹ suggests the possibility of an ideal or right use of language. But to believe in right or ought-to-be-form of language is but one step to believing in certain kind of 'logic of language'. James Bogen observes "it is hard to believe that a man who promises us a perspicuous representation of grammar (PI 122) did not crave order unity of language."¹⁰ If the alarm raised against the possible misuse of language, is not just a false cry then we cannot but imagine that use of linguistic expressions must have certain inner logic of their own. And actually we find that Philosophers like Ryle consistently with his raising of alarm against misuse of language, tried to discover different elements of correctly used expressions. Ryle's paper 'Categories' needs at once be mentioned here. Ryle, for instance, speaks of different kinds of 'sentence factors' and shows how category mistake occurs when trying a sentence-factor in a sentence where it has no place.¹¹ Ryle also says "to say something senseless is to betray silliness, muddleheadedness. . . ." ¹² His article 'Systematically Misleading Expressions' tacitly suggests that there is possibility of constructing 'non-misleading' expressions. And in 'Philosophical Argument' Ryle consistently and candidly speaks of every proposition having a 'logical power', on the strength of which propositions are variously related with one another in the way of being compatible, incompatible etc. Similarly, we must take into consideration the activities of some ordinary-language philosophers. Austin, for instance, has introduced various kinds of ling-

uistic acts (Locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary). His believing that only certain form of expression (Performatory) can be happy or unhappy and only certain form of expression (constative) true or false suggests clearly that form of proposition has some logic of its own. Thus it is not all arbitrary, how we say some thing significantly or meaningfully or communicate successfully with fellow beings, give a threat, command, with the help of language. One thing that may stand in the way of imagining that there is a logic or laws of saying things meaningfully, is that we cannot conceive what may possibly be that logic or laws. It cannot be just analytical nor physical laws, like the laws of gravitation. But other possibilities may be there. We can think that inner logic of meaningful assertion may be something similar to law of 'mind'. Mental world is not completely identifiable with the physical, but it has its own law not exactly like the physical laws, e.g., the enjoyment of the beauty of music. It is quite possible to imagine that a principle of meaningful assertion has some thing to do with both mental and physical world. There is the physical world and the representation of that physical world through symbols is a fact of different kind in the way artistic activity is different from the 'laws of planetary motion'. But as artistic activity being different from purely physical fact does not imply that artistic activity is not governed by certain laws or logic, representative activity being different from physical phenomena does not suggest that it has no peculiar logic of its own.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Sapir in "Culture, Language and Personality".
2. 'represent' means many things besides 'recording', to use language for 'greeting' is also to involve in representative activity. We can conceive of a situation when

there was no activity called 'greeting' in human society and no language of greeting was practised. This shows that language also grows and develops.

3. See page 2.
4. Linguistic characteristic is not identifiable with physical characteristic like 'redness' of coral island. The linguistic characteristic is something which is the product of interaction of the physical (the outer world) and the mental (our way of looking at the world and trying to represent it in a certain way) and are exhibited by the meaningful expressions in certain extra linguistic content (the settings of utterances, the identity of the speaker. . . .). For instance, it is most important linguistic characteristic that meaning can be expressed only through a medium or the bearer of meaning (The problem of the bearer of meaning is as intricate as the problem of 'the bearer of truth'. I simply identify the bearer of meaning with 'expression-universal, particular sentence, word etc. being the instances of the 'expression-universal'). Similarly the duality of subject and predicate is a characteristic of certain linguistic expression and when we understand a linguistic expression to be meaningful, we intuit this syntactic aspect. Or a meaningful expression may have the characteristic feature of yielding the belief or dis-belief, truth or falsity. . . .But it is beyond my scope here to peruse the matter any further.
5. Philosophical investigation 18. (paragraphs)
6. *Ibid.*, 10.
7. G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein's Lecture in 1930-1933, p. 249.
Printed in 'Classics of Analytic Philosophy' (ed.) by R. R. Ammerman.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
9. Philosophical Investigations 664, this remark is of course not elaborated by him.
10. Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language, p. 3.
11. Logic and Language, Vol. II.
12. Use, Usage & Meaning by G. Ryle.