Wittgenstein on linguistic meaning:

Beyond the mental lexicon

"What we say will be easy,
but to know why we say it will be very difficult."

L. Wittgenstein

Who was Ludwig Wittgenstein?

- An extremely rich Viennese, trained as an engineer, who came to Cambridge to study logic with Bertrand Russell (he later gave away all his money)
- Born and raised Jewish, he later became an obsessively religious quasi-Catholic, influenced largely by Tolstoy's politico-religious idealism
- He was obsessed with ethical questions, which color all of his work in subtle and much-debated ways- and with the relation between logic, ethics, meaning, and sin (!)

The two Wittgensteins

- There are really two Wittgensteins: the early Wittgenstein, and the late Wittgenstein.
  - The early Wittgenstein is captured in the only book he published in his life-time, his doctoral thesis, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.*
  - The late Wittgenstein is captured in his most famous book, *Philosophical Investigations,* an collection of his writings that was put together after his death (like all of his many other books).
- He changed his mind almost completely between these two books, in ways and for reasons that we will see

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Common ideas

- The late Wittgenstein did, however, retain a few ideas from the early
  - Those mostly have to do with the limits of understanding [and therefore (for Wittgenstein) with religious philosophy]
- There are, so far as I know, exactly two sentences that appear in both the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*:
  - **Only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning.**
                    and
  - **If everything behaves as if a sign has meaning, then it does have meaning.**

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

- The Tractatus founded on the logical atomism of Meinong and Russell: eg. On the idea that there was a mapping between the form of logical propositions and what actually exists in the world
- It postulated a crystalline 'state of affairs' in which real-world entities slotted together like elements in a logical proposition (we might say: the Lego view of the world)

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

- Wittgenstein made this postulate of a logical form to the world to 'rule out of bounds' the philosophical discussion of certain ethical and religious propositions (but not to deny them)

"Philosophy will signify what cannot be said by presenting clearly what can be said."

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning.

- In the Tractatus this means (roughly): if logical analysis of a proposition is possible, then the elements of that proposition have an independent existence in the real world

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If everything behaves as if a sign has meaning, then it does have meaning.

- In the Tractatus this means (roughly): There is nothing more to being meaningful than being amenable to a logical analysis

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The (famous) last words

"The right method of philosophy would be this: to say nothing except what can be said…and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other- he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy- but it would be the only strictly correct method. My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes me as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these; then he sees the world rightly. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent."

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Philosophical Investigations

- The later Wittgenstein made an about face (which, however, does have many roots in the *Tractatus*): he abandoned the idea that logic had any natural claim to Truth, and (therfore) meaning
- Instead, he argued that logic (and meaning) was rooted in social agreement, defined by *grammars* arising from *forms of life*

"*Philosophical Investigations* is a vote for sanity over system."

Jan Zwicky / *Lyric Philosophy*

Why the change?

"Wittgenstein and S. Sraffa, lecturer in economics at Cambridge, argued together a great deal over the ideas of the *Tractacus*. One day (they were riding, I think, on a train) when Wittgenstein was insisting that a proposition and that which it describes must have the same 'logical multiplicity', Sraffa made a gesture, familiar to Neapolitans as meaning something like disgust or contempt, of brushing the underneath of his chin with an outward sweep of the finger-tips of one hand. And he asked: 'What is the logical form of that?' Sraffa's example produced in Wittgenstein **the feeling that there was an absurdity in the insistence that a proposition and what it describes must have the same 'form'**. This broke the hold on him of the conception that a proposition must literally be a 'picture' of the reality it describes."

Norman Malcolm

What's a 'grammar'?

"Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology is grammar)."
Ludwig Wittgenstein / *Philosophical Investigations*

"Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs."
Ludwig Wittgenstein / *Philosophical Investigations*

"Distrust of grammar is the first requisite for philosophizing."
Ludwig Wittgenstein / *Notes on Logic*

What's a 'grammar'?

- A grammar is a set of heuristics for achieving certain purposes
  - To say they are 'heuristic' means they are ad hoc, not guaranteed by any formal analysis to work
- They are underlain by social agreement in subcultures ('forms of life')where they matter for some purpose: **a consensus of action**
  - Wittgenstein even argued that logic and mathematical rules, which seem as formal as possible, are in fact only agreed-upon conveniences for achieving certain purposes desirable in certain situations

What's a 'grammar'?

- If meaning is rooted in a consensus of action, then philosophy becomes a form of social commentary or anthropology

- "Verbalised principles, rules and values must be seen as endlessly problematic in their interpretation, and in the implications that are imputed to them. They are the phenomena to be explained. They are dependent, not independent variables. **The independent variable is the substratum of conventional behaviour and underlies meaning and implication**."
  D. Bloor / *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*

- And indeed Wittgenstein never published another book in philosophy and spent the rest of his life (as a tenured philosophy prof!) heaping derision upon philosophy's pretensions to explanatory power

Only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning.

- In P.I this means (roughly): if it works in a given context, it's meaningful.

"Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? In use it is alive."
L. Wittgenstein / *Philosophical Investigations*

If everything behaves as if a sign has meaning, then it does have meaning.

- In P.I. this means (roughly): if it works in a given context, it's meaningful.

Where is meaning?

"...nothing is more wrong-headed than calling meaning a mental activity! Unless, that is one is setting out to produce confusion."
L. Wittgenstein / *Philosophical Investigations*

Sound familiar?

- Entrenched metaphors become invisible (unconscious) to us
- Many of those invisible metaphors were painstakingly constructed over a long period of (historical or evolutionary) time
- Many were transmitted to us by people to whom they were also invisible
- You and I are the recipients of these unconscious conceptual tools, which have been selected over a long period for their utility in doing the kind of stuff people like to have done
- The strong question is: Without this entrenchment of its conceptual underpinnings in mapping between domains, would language be impossible?

Incidentally…

- Wittgenstein never intended the 'anti-system' laid out in P.I. to be nihilistic and depressing
- The P.I. can be properly read on one level as a system for living happily, at peace with the world and free from philosophical torment
  - Whether it works or not is debatable
  - Wittgenstein was a miserable and tormented man, but claimed on his deathbed to have had a wonderful life: How many of us will claim as much?