

# **Wittgenstein's Concept of Language games and Family Resemblance: An Analysis**

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## **Introduction:**

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was an Austrian British ordinary language philosopher. Wittgensteinian philosophy mainly can be divided into two parts one is earlier and another is the later. Wittgenstein's conception in his book "Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus" is known as early Wittgenstein and his conception on 'Philosophical Investigations' is known as later Wittgenstein. The main theory of Tractatus is the picture theory of meaning and the main theory of Philosophical Investigations is the concept of language game. His notion of family resemblances is closely related with his theory of language game.

## **Language Game**

'Language games' signify diverse use of human language as a form of communication. Wittgenstein writes, "I will something speak of a primitive language as a language game." "Primitive language" refers that language is not fixed, but growing phenomenon. It is dynamic in character. It is the most developed form of human communication. Wittgenstein maintains that his concept of language games may appear to critics as simple, naive, and perhaps even dull and uninteresting. He writes 'What we say will be easy but to know why we say it will be very difficult'<sup>2</sup>

In philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein holds the view that language is instrument and its concepts are also instruments. In the language of Wittgenstein, "A is building with his building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose, they use a language consisting of words, 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out, B brings the stone which he has learnt (at such a call) to bring at such and such a call."<sup>3</sup>

Under this symbolic form of communication between A and B, Wittgenstein tries to bring out a process which is embedded in the form of linguistic activity i.e. training process. So, training process is the essential factor in language games.

Wittgenstein proceeds to examine those words of language which are generally supposed to refer to essentially 'private experiences'. Words like 'pain', 'itch', 'ache', 'mood' and others are used to signify private experiences. It is believed that only I know my pain, others can only guess. Similarly I can never know certainly that somebody is in pain. Thus sensation and feeling words name and describe private experiences. G.E. Moorereports that in the early 1930's Wittgenstein accepted the popular view that sensation words describe 'primary experience'. He also maintained that both first person and third person words describe the same sensation. For example, the propositions "I have toothache" and "He has toothache" mean the same. But Wittgenstein realized soon that these propositions had different meanings. Wittgenstein gives another strong point is the name of a sensation which I experience only in the privacy of my own consciousness, then I cannot even understand what it mean to say that another person has a pain. If the word "pain" only denotes for me, an item in my consciousness, then 'pain' can exist only when I am aware of it. Wittgenstein believes that mind is real and mental states are logically connected with the behaviour of the human beings and what is true of "pain" is true of all mental predicates. Wittgenstein has neither denied the existence of sensations, feelings etc. nor has he formulated any theory about language. His claim is very modest, namely to describe the logical grammar of sensation expressions. Wittgenstein introduces a powerful attack on the view that the word sensation stands for private sensations by examining the possibility of a private language. The meaning of 'pain' and other sensation words is necessarily tied up with our private sensations. Consequently, the meaning of 'pain' is determined independently of pain behaviour and other publicly observable characteristics of the situation in which 'pain' is used. But a private language is an impossibility. Wittgenstein makes two observations in this connection. First, a man could not make himself understood when he used these words and secondly we cannot say that these words are names of sensations.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* arose logical positivism or logical empiricism and his *Philosophical Investigations* gave birth to a trend which is called 'ordinary language school'. Russell also said something very similar with Wittgenstein, "A logically perfect language would be very likely private to one speaker. That is to say, all names that it would use would be private to that speaker and could not enter into the language of another speaker."<sup>1</sup>

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejected the solipsist position because he realised that the problems posed by contemporary natural sciences cannot be coped with by a solipsist doctrine. But both in the "Tractatus" and in the *Philosophical Investigations* he advocated that philosophy is confined to language. Wittgenstein's philosophy is not concerned with reality as a whole or the relation of man and nature or with ethical or aesthetic values, etc., but it simply describes the uses of words. He holds, "We may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its power of illumination - i.e., its purpose from the philosophical problems."<sup>2</sup> But how does language create problems in philosophy? In this context, Wittgenstein says, "Language (or thought) is something unique" - this proves to be a superstition (not a mistake!), itself produced by grammatical illusions. And now the impressiveness retreats to these illusions, to the problems."<sup>3</sup> For Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* the job of philosophy is not even to interpret or analyse language but "leave everything as it is". In fact, according to him, there is nothing to explain: "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything, since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain."<sup>4</sup> Thus in his later philosophy, Wittgenstein held that philosophy does not propound any doctrine nor does it offer any fresh information. It has nothing new to say-philosophizing is an activity which follows a technique of describing functions of words with a view to dissolve philosophical problems. Here his position is that the method of philosophy is not analysis but only description of various uses of expressions of our day-to-day ordinary language. Criticizing analysis as a method, here he held that in our ordinary day-to-day language there is nothing which can be regarded as simple or complex. What is simple from one point of view may be complex from another point of view.

Wittgenstein also rejected his earlier view of the *Tractatus* that ordinary language hides the real form of the propositions and that this real form is revealed through analysis. In the *Philosophical Investigations* he denied the form itself. He said "We see that what we call 'sentence' and 'language' have not the formal unity that I imagined, but are families of structures more or less related to one another."<sup>5</sup> Here Wittgenstein did not deny the hidden in the domain of existents. But he denied the concept of essence or the universal common something in the domain of language. In the *Tractatus* he had maintained that the essence of language is the analysed perfect language where there is one-to-one relationship between the form of the perfect language and the form of the fact. It is the essence of language which Wittgenstein rejected in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Here rejected that language has only one functions, i.e., describing "atomic facts", and advocated that there are multiple ways in which language functions. Wittgenstein realised that knowledge must include a content and goes beyond the use of symbols which stand for "immediate objects of experience." To achieve this he formulated another method of interpreting the concept of meaning. This is known as the 'use of theory of meaning'. Wittgenstein writes, "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a stupid prejudice."<sup>6</sup> Thus the use theory of meaning has a significant role in his philosophy of mind. He held that the meaning of an expression is determined by the way in which an expression is actually used in a specific context.

The later view of Wittgenstein shows that language is the vehicle of our life. The use of words which may be called speech activity plays the most important role in his later philosophy and this is called Language game by Wittgenstein. He uses the term language-game much more broadly than speech activity. By language game he includes pure speech activities such as telling a joke, reporting an event, describing a room etc. and also the activities as constructing an object from a description, obeying orders which involved non-linguistic activities or behavioural essential components. Thus, language game is of two kinds pure language game and impure language game. The difference between the two is one of degree only. Pure and impure language games are not decided into two water tight compartments. Impure means to have slightest regulative force. Wittgenstein considers impure language game as the basic and holds that pure language is related upon them in a crucial way.

According to Wittgenstein to speak a language is to behave in certain highly complex ways. To speak a language is to behave in certain ways which exhibits various abilities. Speech behavior isolated mode of behavior. Linguistic and Non-Linguistic behaviours are taken together into an integrated organic whole. Speaking a language is a matter of being able to do a variety of things to act or behave in certain ways and to do sounder appropriate conditions.

The use of words is compared by Wittgenstein with the playing of games. The concept of language game came to Wittgenstein's mind while one day he was passing a play field where the football game was going on. The difference is only that in language we play games with words. Later the notion of language game is the central idea of his philosophy which has its origin apparently in this incident. Language game are the original home of the words.

Wittgenstein is more interested to impure language games, but words are used in pure language game also. Words are commonly used in conversation therefore, it would seem that his account is inapplicable the use of words in pure language game. For this reason it is objected that his view is of limited interest. The restricted concept of behavior helps to raise the objection. But there is no justification that Wittgenstein would do so. He admits the use of words in pure language games, but such use, as he emphasizes is dependent on their use of impure language. Thus after having mastered one impure language games one can engage in the more sophisticated pure ones. The mathematical or logical symbols of higher level have no use in impure language, they have uses only in pure language, i.e. calculations, inferences proving theorems etc. Wittgenstein claims that if we examine the various uses of the words or if we examine variety of language games we shall free ourselves at last from bewilderment.

### **Family Resemblance:**

Wittgenstein compares games to a family. He writes, we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing. Sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."<sup>6</sup> Here he mentions that just as in a family members have similarities or resemblances with members. So also games have resemblances with other games. And just all the members in a family are not identical with each other, so also games are not identical with each other. In this regard, Wittgenstein introduces his famous conception of family resemblances. He writes that "games form a family".<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein's notion of Language games and his notion of "family resemblance" have importance in his thought because he wanted to find a cure for our craving for generality against the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case. The notion of family resemblances provided a solution to the problem of universals".<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we find that Wittgenstein puts forward a resemblance in order to discard the prevalent and age-old concept of generality which was popularly present in Plato's idea of Good, Spinoza's concept of substance and Leibnitz's concept of pre-established harmony.

Wittgenstein concept of family resemblance can be symbolically represented as follows- suppose, there are games taken to be played such as board games (A), tennis games (C), Cricket games (D), ring-a-ring-a roses (E), hockeygames (E) etc. And all the games have some characteristics like C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6 etc. But the problem is that all the games have some mentioned characteristics, but not one uniformly present in all games. Rather they overlap and criss cross in all these games. We cannot view that there is one common characteristic present in all the games. Thus, it can be summarised that just as different games do not possess a common feature so also different linguistic activities like acting, reporting an event, ordering etc.do not indicate a common linguistic feature. Still, there is a resemblance among different linguistic activities in case of speaker, performer etc. In this context, Wittgenstein compares the resemblance among members of a family. Just as members of a family are not identical with other members in respect of weight, colour, intellect, structure of the body etc., so also different types of games are not identical with other games. That is why Wittgenstein holds that games form a family. And as a result he brings out the concept of family resemblance.

Through the concept of language game and family resemblance, Wittgenstein's main interest is to show how we can remove our puzzles or confusions due to misunderstanding of language. His philosophy is also known as language therapy. 'Language games are means to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities but also of dis-similarities'.<sup>9</sup>To Wittgenstein, philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. Because they are isolated from practical situations. So, philosophical problems are not solve but dissolved. Language games include the concrete entities of language as they actually occur in the life of language, not abstract entities that have been taken out from the totality of definite linguistic use like a tiny wheel from a watch. The individual language games are actually found in communication, i.e., in a concrete situation of an actual use of language. They are not some abstractions or inferred structures. His concept of language games is also known as instrumentalist theory of language. Just as tools have diverse use so also the functions of words are diverse. Linsky remarks that the instrumentalist view is the centre of gravity of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Regarding family resemblance, Wittgenstein mentions, "We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."<sup>10</sup> Thus, Wittgenstein compares games to a family.

## Notes & References:

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2. Wittgenstein L: Philosophical Investigations Tr. G.E.M Anscombe sec-7
3. Ambrose, Alice(ed): Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge,1932-1935 p-77.
4. Wittgenstein L: Philosophical Investigations, Tr. G.E.M Anscombe, sec-11
5. Ibid, sec-126
6. Ibid, sec-66
7. Ibid, sec-67
8. Banbrough, R- "Universals and Family Resemblances", Wittgenstein(ed) G. Pitcher.p-192
9. Wittgenstein L- Philosophical Investigation Jr. GEM. Anscombe, sec-130
10. Ibid,sec-66

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