

Imagination and Calculus:
Wittgenstein's Later Theory of Meaning
by Hans Julius Schneider

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Hans Julius Schneider: *Wittgenstein's Later Theory of Meaning: Imagination and Calculation*. Wiley Blackwell: Oxford, 2014. Translated from German by Timothy Doyle and Daniel Smyth.

In a detailed textual analysis, Hans Julius Schneider aims to show the relevance of the later Wittgenstein's investigations to the project of a theory of meaning as it is understood in the post-Fregean tradition. This English translation contains the systematic core of Schneider's original *Phantasie und Kalkül* (1992).

Wittgenstein's Later Theory of Meaning wears its stance on its cover. Did the later Wittgenstein offer a theory of meaning? A theory of meaning, traditionally understood, is an account of what it is that we know in knowing how to speak a language. To give such an account out of the blue, not as a correction to particular philosophical confusions, seems to be incompatible with Wittgenstein's resistance to theses in philosophy.

At best it would consist of a series of truisms: "If someone were to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them" (*PI* 128). However, Schneider argues that Wittgenstein's anti-theoretic remarks should be taken with a grain of salt: there is something like a theory of meaning to be found in Wittgenstein's later work.

Schneider takes his cue from Michael Dummett. Of course Wittgenstein does not offer, as Dummett thought was needed, an axiomatic-deductive theory. But according to Schneider he does offer a wealth of more or less systematically connected remarks that together explain what it is that "knowledge of a concept consists in" (p. 175). This explanation is full-

blooded in the sense that Dummett has proposed is an appropriate ambition for theories of meaning. It explains – without relying on – semantic notions such as that of a concept. What it cannot be is fully systematic. Language has a non-systematic side. It is just by seeing that there can be no fully systematic theory that we are supposed to be able to hold on to Dummett’s ambition of full-bloodedness.

The main theme of the book is the interplay between the systematic (algebraic) and non-systematic (hermeneutic) side of language. The one associated with grammar, in the grammarian’s sense, the other with various forms of metaphor and secondary use. Their relation is understood through a fictitious order that unfolds in time, a fictitious genealogy (p. 3). Schneider thinks Wittgenstein offers the prospect of understanding our language as built up out of simple language-games, which are then extended step-by-step by adding new forms (p. 18). The most important or interesting form of expansion is projection: an application of a word, or type of word, or syntactic structure, into a new and unexpected type of context, especially in a way that contravenes established grammatical boundaries. Any established rules of usage cease to give guidance to understanding; we have to use our imagination instead. Because the phenomenon is pervasive, imagination is involved in most cases of understanding.

Schneider uses the phenomenon of projection to interpret Wittgenstein’s distinction between surface grammar and depth grammar in *PI* 664: “compare the depth grammar, say of the verb ‘to mean’, with what its surface grammar would lead us to presume. No wonder one finds it difficult to know one’s way about ...”. The example Schneider gives here (p. 99) can help to explain his central idea. The verbs to mean and to say share a surface grammar, but have very different depth grammars; their superficial similarity can lead to philosophical confusions. The surface grammar is, as Wittgenstein puts it, “the way the word is used in the sentence structure,” or, “what can be taken in by ear” (*PI* 664). This is the same in both cases: they both function as verbs, and they accept, in the grammarian’s sense, the same phrases. One may be misled by this into thinking that to mean, like to say, describes an action. This would be to miss “the projective step”. The projective step in this case, I take it, is an expansion of a language-game in which verbs are used to describe actions to one in which verbs are also used to describe acts that are not actions. One can imagine such a development. The verbs that are used in this new way (and some of them might be new verbs), will have a very different depth grammar (use) than the ones that are still used to describe actions. But Schneider does not further clarify how he understands the concept of use.

Schneider argues that this makes for something that one could call a theory of meaning that satisfies Dummett's ambition of full-bloodedness, in opposition to modest approaches (p. 3, p. 172). But Schneider's understanding of modesty is problematic. He unquestionably accepts Dummett's characterisation of modesty, without mentioning the criticism by proponents of modesty such as McDowell; he mentions that certain philosophers have criticised Dummett's ambitions, but does not mention what their criticism is. According to Dummett and Schneider, modesty is to acquiesce in giving merely circular explanations of semantic concepts, thus failing to ask philosophical questions (p. 2, p. 172). In the hands of McDowell, modesty is a resistance to the attempt to describe language from "sideways-on" – the attempt to say what it is that we know in knowing how to speak a language, without relying on the standpoints that we take up in exercising this knowledge (McDowell 1987, 1997). This theme is hardly hidden in the work of Wittgenstein. When it is not even noted, a resistance to modesty stands in danger of falling into the mistake its proponents warned against. One would like to see an

argument for why that is not a mistake.

Nor is this an isolated case. Positions Schneider rejects are not so much described as maligned. Even so, the idea that attention to the non-systematic side of language may allow for more substantial explanations seems to me an important one. Schneider's development of this theme would have gained much from a charitable discussion of the alternatives to his view.

References

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