

Wittgenstein and the Creativity of Language

edited by Grève & Mácha

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Grève, Sebastian Sunday and Mácha, Jakub (eds.), *Wittgenstein and the Creativity of Language*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, xxi + 318pp.

Wittgenstein and the Creativity of Language brings together ten essays (plus an introduction by the editors) on a family of topics in Wittgenstein scholarship, loosely united by a joint concern with the creative aspects of language. The volume is divided into five sections. After an editorial introduction (I) and an “overture” in which Stephen Mulhall explores certain parallels between reading poetry and reading philosophy (II), there are three thematic sections – one on the creativity of Wittgenstein’s own writing process, one on the arts, and a final section on ethics, each consisting of three thematically similar essays.

The volume’s composition is notably Wittgensteinian in inspiration. The editors – and, following their lead, the contributors – opted not to treat the question “what is creativity in language?” by offering some general definition or theory of linguistic creativity. This is in part

because they take creativity to be a family resemblance concept, and thus assume that there is no one feature that all instances of (linguistic) creativity share. Instead, the editors themselves express the hope that the essays in the volume might serve as “instances and objects of comparison” which, when read together, allow the “distinctive richness” of the concept of linguistic creativity to “shine through” (4; cf. Wittgenstein 2009, §130).¹

One result of the “objects of comparison” approach is a strikingly eclectic volume. Topics covered include: Wittgenstein’s (creative) writing style and process, mathematics, philosophy of language, aesthetics, art, poetry, metaphysics, and ethics. Given this diversity, and the complexity of the various essays,

¹ All citations from Grève and Mácha 2016, unless otherwise indicated.

the most sensible evaluative approach is to explore whether the volume as a whole achieves its stated ambitions, rather than simply summarizing the contributions.² Do the essays, in fact, serve as useful objects of comparisons and do they, when read together, provide a perspicuous presentation of the complex phenomenon of linguistic creativity?

The honest verdict is, I think, mixed. Several of the essays do work well together, illuminating overlapping issues from different angles. Other contributions, though, seem frankly out of place. It is worth illustrating both points, to give readers both a sense for the volume's flow and coherence as a whole, and a sense for the successes and pitfalls of the editorial approach.

Let us take the positive first. One admirable achievement of the volume is its dispelling of the illusion that the later Wittgenstein's account of language is committed to some sort of "linguistic conservatism". This charge is an old one – it goes back at least to Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things* (1959) – but has seldom been examined in light of more contemporary understandings of Wittgenstein's work. If valid, the allegation would indeed constitute a serious obstacle to understanding linguistic creativity from a Wittgensteinian perspective, so it

seems an appropriate place to begin such a volume.

The accusation is presented in different ways throughout the volume, and the essays nicely build upon one another in their responses to it. On one version of the charge, Wittgenstein is taken to hold that utterances are meaningful because of (communally endorsed) rules that govern language use. This suggests a puzzle about how linguistic innovation is possible: if meaningful utterances must conform to pre-given rules, it seems that truly new forms of linguistic expression are, perhaps, impossible. Offhand, the accusation looks like a stretch. However, the editors (and Read, in his contribution) suggest – plausibly, though perhaps not with maximal charity – that many readings of Wittgenstein seem implicitly committed to the implication: not only those who endorse a communitarian interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following remarks³, but equally those who see

² This exegetical work is, in any case, nicely provided by the editorial introduction.

³ One should be careful here: not all positions that could be classified as "communitarian" fall prey to the object. Take Bloor's meaning finitism, which holds that although community consensus helps fix meaning, terms have no fixed extension (1997). They are extended based on parallels with exemplars. Since the extension is always finite, new cases are only decided by the community's agreement that they fit this or that exemplar. But that decision, crucially, is always an open one. Accordingly, this version of communitarianism seems to allow ample room for an account of creative language.

Wittgenstein as committed to a project of grammatical taxonomy.

In response to Wittgenstein's alleged conservatism, the editors respond that (a) the rule following discussion is *itself* intended as an analogy (c.f. Wittgenstein 2009, §81), and (b) Wittgenstein's own creativity as a writer – the literary devices (e.g., the metaphors, comparisons, and analogies) that he himself uses – suggests that he could not have *intended* to endorse conservatism. This reply may help shake the confidence of those who take Wittgenstein to be a linguistic conservative. However, this response is only partially satisfactory since, as readers of the *Tractatus* know, Wittgenstein was not always necessarily averse to using language in ways that flaunt the implications of his own account.

Different, more satisfying, responses are found in Rupert Read's and Garry Hagberg's contributions. "Metaphysics is Metaphoric," Read's wide-ranging essay, argues that Hackerian approaches of mapping *the* grammar of language fail to recognize "Wittgenstein's fundamentally dynamical vision of language" (285). Language is not a fixed unity but, as Wittgenstein emphasized, more like an ancient city: "a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods (Wittgenstein 2009, §18). What counts as a mistake at one time may, down the road, become part of established use; while all of grammar cannot be, *in toto*

suspended", particular bits of grammar can be "recast" (286).

Building on and expanding this insight, Hagberg's essay, "Verbal Creativity and the Expansion of Artistic Style", aims to counter approaches to both language and art that aim to "police the borders of sense". By this suggestive turn of phrase, Hagberg means the activity of, in the case of language, producing a sort of map or taxonomy of speech acts such that one can determine *a priori* whether a statement does or does not make sense, or, in the case of art, producing a taxonomy of artistic forms such that one can determine according to some general rule whether something is or is not art. Both views rely on an impoverished understanding of rule following, envisioning rules as being, necessarily and in all cases, "fixed, exact and predictable" (158).

Rather, Hagberg thinks, communication "opens an interpretive space between the giver and the follower of the rule" (159) where the rule's implications can be negotiated in a context in which the criteria are often vague. Then, drawing on the work of art historian Kirk Varnedoe, Hagberg shows how artistic style develops by disregarding certain artistic conventions. He emphasizes how modern artists played with areal perspective, flaunting the dominance of vanishing point perspective, in order to produce new and innovative ways of seeing.

Out of this discussion, then, we get a persuasive response to the thought that Wittgenstein's views imply linguistic conservatism. Moreover, this constitutes a sort of ground-clearing for a potentially fruitful understanding of linguistic creativity.

Danièle Moyal-Sharrock adds some further substance to this picture in her essay "Wittgenstein: No Linguistic Idealist". In the first part of her essay, Moyal-Sharrock rebuts the charge that the later Wittgenstein's views leave us (as Bernard Williams once suggested) trapped in a kind of "linguistic" idealism: spinning in our webs of significance, detached from external reality. In the second and here more relevant part, Moyal-Sharrock outlines an understanding of linguistic creativity which draws on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between "constituted" and "constitutive" language. Constituted language is everyday "conventional language," which contains a reserve of already sedimented meanings; it makes communication with one another possible. In contrast, constitutive language is literary language (in the broadest sense of the term), which brings meanings into existence. It is through this "dialectical movement" between constitutive language and expressive acts which imperceptibly reconfigure language that new meanings become possible.

If there is an overall picture of linguistic creativity we get from the volume, then, it is this: one cannot create *ex nihilo*. Something – some

background of established use – must be already given in order for artistic creation to unfold; indeed, creativity unfolds precisely through a complex interaction with what is already there. The general insight here is an important one, and it forms the core of the volume. (The point holds even in the limiting case of linguistic creativity – that of literally creating a new language; it is no surprise that L. L. Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, already spoke several languages).

However, not all of the essays in the volume work so well together. Some seem like outliers, which have little bearing on the volume's other contributions or relevance to the idea of linguistic creativity. This is most obvious in three cases: Ben Ware's "Finding it New: Aspect-Perception and Modern Ethics", John Hyman's "The Urn and the Chamber Pot" and Sebastian Grève's and Wolfgang Kienzler's "Wittgenstein of Gödelian 'Incompleteness', Proofs and Mathematical Practice". I will focus only on the last two cases.

John Hyman's contribution focuses on Austrian architect Alfred Loos's influence on Wittgenstein. The essay introduces Loos, chronicles the building of the Wittgenstein House, and then concludes with some general remarks about the similarities between Loos and the early Wittgenstein. In this last respect, the essay concludes both men shared a set of aesthetic values (austerity and practicality), and sought to separate the inessential (the "ornament", in Loos's terms) from

the essential (the logical structure, in Wittgenstein's terms). The parallel is carefully crafted and undoubtedly interesting. Yet, although the essay deals with the aesthetic values involved in Wittgenstein's philosophy, and Wittgenstein's own creative involvement in architecture, the specifically *linguistic* dimension of creativity receives little attention. It thus remains unclear what the piece contributes to the volume's topic.

Similar problems befall Kienzler and Grève's contribution. Their essay offers an original close reading of *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* I, Appendix III. The central claim of the chapter is that Wittgenstein's focus in these remarks is not Gödel's proof or its correctness. Rather, Wittgenstein aims to question what role "Gödelian explanations" (87) of what the proof aims to show. Specifically, the chapter argues, Wittgenstein aims to question the role that a certain kind of sentence of the form "there exists a sentence P, which is true but unprovable" (83) could play in mathematics. Leaving aside the question Wittgenstein is correct in his skepticism about the function of Gödelian explanations, Kienzler and Grève reconstruct the argument of the text with great care and present the relevant passages with remarkable clarity. Yet, as was the case above, it is hard to see how the chapter fits with the larger purpose of the volume. The justification offered is that a close reading of the remarks reveals that Wittgenstein crafted them in a "rigorous and systematic"

manner (78). Surely, this is correct. But the demonstration of the remarks' "tight-knitted" (78) internal structure itself constitutes neither a contribution to understanding linguistic creativity nor to understanding Wittgenstein's own creative process.

In fairness, Wittgenstein's own creative process is not left unexplored by the volume. An essay that does make a significant contribution to understanding Wittgenstein's creative process is Alois Pichler's "Ludwig Wittgenstein and Us 'Typical Western Scientists'". Pichler argues that there is a close connection between the form of Wittgenstein's writing and his conception of philosophy. Wittgenstein's later work exhibits a "writing strategy" of "syncretistic" or "criss-cross" writing⁴, which positions itself in a field of questions that is "in continuous flux and open-ended" (69), rather than closed and predetermined. Pichler then contrasts this kind of writing with two alternative writing strategies – puzzle writing and linear writing – which Pichler argues reflect a scientific conception of philosophy, rejected by Wittgenstein. Pichler's essay helps, as much as any piece on the topic, to make perspicuous why Wittgenstein's later philosophy exhibits the peculiar

⁴ Pichler borrows the terms "writing strategy", as well as "syncretistic", "puzzle" and "linear" writing from Austrian linguist Hanspeter Ortner. He also challenges Ortner's own view that the *Investigations* is best characterized as puzzle writing.

compositional form that it does; that is, why Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is "really only an album" (Wittgenstein 2009, Preface).

In short, at times, the book seems to lack the sort of unity around the theme of linguistic creativity that one desires in an edited volume of this kind. The volume could have also benefited from a deeper engagement with the wide variety of philosophical and psychological theories of creativity on offer.⁵ While these theories might uniformly fail to capture the whole of creativity, many certainly capture central parts. A more sustained, critical conversation with such accounts would perhaps have served as useful foils to the Wittgensteinian approach, or at least may have highlighted what sets it apart.⁶

Perhaps this will not trouble some readers. Those interested, generally, in all aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy as well as readers with particular interest in the intersections of philosophy and the arts, I suspect, will tend to find the volume more satisfying than readers with more a narrow interest in the volume's titular theme. Of course, one must add, unity is not the only measure of a successful volume. Many of the essays are of high quality, and the volume explores a theme – the creative aspects of

language – that is underexplored in Wittgenstein scholarship. For these achievements, editors should be commended.⁷

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References

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⁵ Read's piece is here an exception, as it deals with Chomsky's theory of linguistic creativity.

⁶ See for example: Bardsley, Dutton & Krausz 2009.

⁷ I would like to thank Katharina Sodoma for helpful discussion and insightful comments.