An Approach to the Concept of Meaning: Wittgenstein and Derrida

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Abstract

The concept of meaning is a fundamental issue of Semantics. Analytic philosophers have adopted the method of analysis in case of searching the meaning of language. In a sense, analytic philosophy is a critique of language. Therefore, it can be said that there is an affinity between Wittgenstein and Derrida in case of exploring the meaning of language. Both Wittgenstein and Derrida started the campaign of analysis of language against the philosophy of essentialism. As a result, Wittgenstein formulated the concepts like language games, family resemblance, use theory of language, etc. While, Derrida involved the concepts like deconstruction and logo-centrism. Thus, this paper attempts to discuss the concept of meaning from the perspective of philosophy of language forwarded by Wittgenstein and Derrida.

Key words: Analysis of language, Language games, Family resemblance, Use theory of meaning, Logocentrism, Deconstruction

1.   Wittgenstein : Concept of Meaning :

Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning is the fundamental concept of Semantics. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning replaces the picture theory of meaning. The central point in his Investigations is to dissolve the mystical meaning rooted in Tractatus. He

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writes-"Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their applications is not presented to us so clearly. Especially not, when we are doing philosophy" (Wittgenstein, 1953). To Wittgenstein, grammatical similarity predominates in his earlier work and as a result, the picture theory of meaning claims that there is a hidden structure or essence in every form of propositions or sentences. However, in his later work he discovers the use theory of meaning which insists on language-uses or language-games. Therefore, he maintains, "language is instrument and its concepts are instruments" (Wittgenstein, 1953).

The most important issue in Wittgenstein's later work is the use theory of meaning. He compares the notion of use with language-game, which is the original home of language. He said, "I shall ...call the whole, consisting of language and the action into which it is woven, the 'language-game'" (Wittgenstein, 1953) and he also said, "...the term 'language game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953). To remove the notion that the meaning of a word is something unique and mysterious, he mentions, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1953). He writes giving the example of five red apples. However, what is the meaning of the word "five"? No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein in this context compares the connection between meaning and use with that between a builder and a worker. Suppose, X is working with materials like stones, pillars, slabs and beams. When X says slabs, then 'Y' as a worker brings them. It is correct to say that the meaning of 'slab' does not consist in the objects it names, but in the way, it is used in a language. 'X' is not naming the object but asking 'Y' to bring it.

The use explains the meaning of an expression. So, he says, "The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning i.e., if you want to understand the use of the word "meaning" look for

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what are called 'explanation' of meaning" (Wittgenstein, 1953). The explanation of meaning shows exactly what meaning is all about. In explaining the function of a word, we have already explained what the meaning of the word is. In this sense 'meaning is physiognomy" (Wittgenstein, 1953). A physiognomy is meaning found in phenomena, a subject which remain in the background of Philosophical Investigations, but is of great importance in connection with Wittgenstein's view on art and religion." (Finch, 1977)

In the context of use theory of meaning, Wittgenstein criticises the verbal definition or primacy theory of meaning and ostensive definition. To him, "Naming something is like attaching a label to a thing" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Labeling does not imply the intended meaning in language. Bruce Goldberg writes as follows, "Suppose that I label my desk 'a' and write in a book "a. =object worth more than five dollars". I then show someone else that I have labeled the desk and ask him to find other objects in the house to which 'a' applies. Of course, I do not show him the book. There are obviously hundreds of different ways he might proceed. He might say it applies to the chain, the cat, the record player, the light shining through the window, and so on. What is clear is that he cannot tell simply by knowing that the desk is labeled 'a', what the meaning of 'a' is. He has the object right in front him and still he does not know whether it is right or wrong to apply 'a' to any other objects. I might have written in the book "a=my desk". Carrying this conclusion further, he cannot even know whether he would be right in applying 'a' to the desk. I might have defined 'a' as object bought by the person using the term 'a'. What the definitions do, in effect, is provide different ways of comparing the desk with other things. The desk itself does not show how it is to be compared. That is why the labeling alone does not determine what is to happen next...The error to which Wittgenstein in drawing attention, I believe is what he expressed at sec 264 (P. I). "Once you know what the word stands for, you understand, you know its whole use." This is an alternative way of expressing the thought that the object associated with the word

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determined by itself how it is to be compared with other things" (Forge, 1986).

Therefore, Wittgenstein is not satisfied with the naming theory of meaning and as a result, he tries to solve the problem through ostensive definition. When the meaning of a thing is explained by pointing to an object then it is ostensive definition. Thus, if I know that someone means to explain a colour word to me, the ostensive definition "That is called 'sepia'", will help me to understand the word" (Wittgenstein, 1953). However, ostensive definition is not sufficient, because we can understand what somebody is pointing at. Then his immediate response is that it depends on the circumstances in which cases the object is used. Therefore, he emphatically asserts that pointing to an object is not sufficient, if we do not know the actual uses of language. He in this context explains this point by an analogy with chess, "When one shews someone the king and says, "This is the king", this does not tell him the use of this piece- unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point: the shape of the king" (Wittgenstein, 1953).

On Kenny's view, Wittgenstein objects to primacy of meaning (PN) for the same reason he objects to POD (Primacy of Ostensive Definition). Reporting Wittgenstein, Kenny says that if ostensive definition is to be successful: "...the learner must not only be acquainted with the bearer, but also grasp the role in language of the word to be defined...the ostensive definition will not suffice by itself, because it can always be variously interpreted. For instance, suppose that I explain the word 'Tove', by pointing to a pencil and saying this is called 'Tove'. The explanation would be quite inadequate, because I may be taken to mean 'This is a pencil' or 'This is a round' and so on. So, in the acquisition of the understanding of a word acquaintance with the words bearer is not so important as mastery of the words general use"(Forge, 1986). John V. Canfield attended Wittgenstein's lectures (1934-1937) and he said, "If I am asked to answer, in one sentence, the question, 'what was Wittgenstein's biggest contribution

to philosophy?', I should answer 'His asking of the question "can you play chess without the queen?"'

Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning insists on "following a rule" and is as much dependent on 'practice' as playing a game is" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Therefore, Wittgenstein makes a distinction between surface grammar and depth grammar. By surface grammar, he means the uniform appearance of a sentence or a proposition like 'He goes to walk' and 'He wants to play'. However, by the depth grammar he means the multifarious uses of a sentence or a proposition. Therefore, it is evident that Wittgenstein in his later work put so much emphasis on depth grammar, which evaporates his picture theory of meaning. So, he writes, "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains, nor deduces anything, since anything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain, for what is hidden, for example is of no interest to us" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Depth grammar indicates that there is not one occasion, context, or situation or circumstances in which we use fixed rules. Therefore, it has no boundary or limitation. Therefore, to Wittgenstein 'To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs' (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein asserts that rules (grammar) are not enough if we are not able to use language in actual cases. Therefore, he insists on the practice of rule following or grammar. He mentions, "And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence, it is not possible to obey a rule privately; otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it" (Wittgenstein, 1953). He points out that "grammar is not accountable to reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extant are arbitrary" (Wittgenstein, 1974).

Wittgenstein has shown that the rules of grammar determine meaning and reference. The rules constitute meaning and the rules make the use of language possible in the context of the world. Antal as a linguist defines the meaning of a word as the rule for the use of a word in a context. So, to Antal, the meaning of a word is the rules for the use of a word, the meaning of a word must be prior to its use. Antal argues, "from this it

follows that, if we use the words, according to their meaning, then the meaning precedes the use of the word, just as the use of a language presupposes knowledge of the language" (Hardwick 1971). Wittgenstein writes in this context, "Do not ask for the meaning, ask for the use." Meaning is embedded in language games. Meaning is connected with non-linguistic behaviour. Therefore, uses bring meaning from non-linguistic to linguistic behaviour. Language-games include both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. Both are important to language games, because linguistic activities are embedded in non-linguistic behaviour or impure language games. Wittgenstein opines, "Non linguistic behaviour are basic, and pure language games are parasitic upon them in a crucial way" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein believes that words derive their meaning from the language game, as it includes both linguistic and non-linguistic activities. So, there is a connection between them.

Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning holds a connection between meaning and use. In this context, some interlocutors seek to deviate him from his own position in this way that we may use sometimes a word without knowing its meaning; again, we may know meaning of a word without knowing its use. Wittgenstein in this context replies that there are some cases in which meaning and use do not proceed necessarily; still it cannot be held that there is no connection between meaning and use. According to him, words get their meaning from its uses, not from their verbal definition or ostensive definition. Again, he asserts that words are used as instruments. Just as instruments are used for various purposes, words are also used. Therefore, Wittgenstein explores his use theory of meaning in his later philosophy). He writes, "For a large class of cases though not for all in which we employ the word meaning." It can be defined thus: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein views that meaning and use are explained for a large class of cases, though not for all as he explicitly asserts. But, the real implication of his assertion is that for a large class of cases "meaning is determined by use" (Dwivedi, 1977).

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Wittgenstein's major topic in "Tractatus" is the copy theory or the picture theory, which holds that meaning is a mental activity. His tendency has been modified in his later work. He proclaims that there may be something in our mind but that private activity cannot render meaning to words. As he writes, "But is not it our meaning it that gives sense to the sentence? (And, here of course, belongs the fact that one cannot mean a senseless series of words). In addition, meaning it is something private. It is the intangible something, only comparable to consciousness itself" (Wittgenstein, 1953). According to Wittgenstein, meaning and understanding do not designate any private activity, because if there were any inner process in our mind, then we would have been to trace - out and identify them by introspection. However, we fail to trace out anything like that. He asserts that there is no mental content out of which words get its meaning. He explains this in this way. Consider the following example: "Think before speak! 'He speaks without thinking", what I said did not quite express my thought.", "I did not mean a word of what I said', "The French language uses its words in that order in which we think them" (Wittgenstein, 1958).

Wittgenstein asserts that mental activities depend on how it is used, not on its occurrence. As for example, the word elliptical derives its meaning from the language games in which it is used. He again denies any kind of image as the necessary element in the meaning of a word. He gives explanation to remove the misunderstanding as mental activity. Suppose, A writes series of numbers down: B watches him and tries to find a law for the sequence of numbers, if he succeeds he exclaims; 'Now I can go on!' ─so this capacity, this understanding is something that makes its appearance in a moment. A has written down the numbers, 1, 5, 11, 19, 29, at this point B says he knows how to go on. He watches 'A's writing and all sorts of vague thoughts go through his head. Finally, he asks himself, 'What is the series of differences"? He finds the series 4, 6,8,10 and says now I can go on" (Wittgenstein, 1953). He shows that 'know how to go on' mean different things in different situations, as the statement 'He can walk now means different things in different situation'. Therefore,

Wittgenstein tries to show that mental content or process cannot be the factor in case of the use theory of meaning. Therefore, he mentions, "In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristics of understanding, understanding is not a mental process" (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Some analytic philosophers like Quine, Frege and Dummett also discussed the point carefully. Quine holds that meaning is a matter of behaviour. His assertion cannot be accepted from the view point of Wittgenstein. Because he holds that meaning is embedded in language games. Meaning comes into light when language is used. Therefore, Wittgenstein's view is that there may be linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour, but it does not entail that meaning is also related with behaviour, which Quine holds. But, Frege's view in this context is clear. He asserts that meaning cannot be matter of psychology. Psychological matters are subjective because they are completely subjective. Wittgenstein also opposes private language, which has no outward criteria. Without outward criteria, no language can be public. So, to Wittgenstein, we cannot follow rule privately. His well-known saying is that language is a form of life.

Language is essentially embedded in structural activities that constitute a 'form of life'. Almost all of the activities that human beings engage in are once that are intrinsically connected with, or somehow grounded in, our use of language, our form of life is everywhere shaped by the use of language, and it is that "I tried to capture earlier by saying that our form of life is fundamentally cultural in nature. Learning our language, or coming to participate in our form of life, is essentially with acquiring mastery of countless kind of language games" (McGinn, 1997).

Dummett is also not ready to accept thought content as a factor in the context of meaning. If thought content is presupposed then thought content becomes independent of language or meaning and then meaning will become subordinate to thought content. Therefore, he maintains that thought content cannot be pre-supposed in matter of semantics. To him, "To grasp the meaning of an expression is to understand its role in the

language, a complete theory of meaning for a language is therefore a complete theory of how the language functions as a language. Our interest in meaning, as a concept is thus an interest in how language works..." (Dummet, 1993). So, it is evident that the meaning of a sentence depends on how it works. Again, the meaning of a sentence is embedded in language use. Therefore, Dummett also like Wittgenstein puts emphasis on the use theory of meaning" (Pradhan, 2001).

Wittgenstein once held that "we are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomena of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Malionwski in this respect points out that meaning arises out of concrete situations, and that it is the particular situation that indicates the meaning of a word. In this case, it may be a cry or utterance, something that would not even pass for a word outside the situation that serves as a pull the net. But for those participating in the situation it would have a definite meaning" (Hardwick, 1971).

Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning constitutes a basic theme in 'Philosophical Investigations". In the present context, he has only argued that knowing how to use an expression is a necessary condition for knowing its meaning. However, in his later work, he comes close to saying that knowing how to use an expression constitutes both necessary and sufficient condition for knowing its meaning.

2.   Derrida : Concept of Meaning :

Derrida involved a logocentric approach in order to show that the great thinkers of western civilization had a preoccupied mind in cases of their writing and thinking. According to him, it was the case of biasness against the concept of writing. Therefore, he searched a new concept that is deconstruction in order to be free from Logocentrism. Logocentrism is a process of getting to the essence of meaning. And also, it is a procedure of picking up a right word for an idea. It is also a belief that we can come to the essence or fixed kind of meaning by focusing more on speech or thinking than writing. It denotes that writing is an indirect process of contacting to the actual or thing. Rather, speech is a sign of directly

relating to the actual or thing. Thus, the essence or the actual nature of meaning is embedded in the concept of speech. Derrida discredited the essence of meaning or the search of certainty by human reason through the concept of Logocentrism. Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laid more emphasis on dialogues or speech rather than writing in search of getting into the exact or essence of meaning. Derrida therefore thought that there was not given a proper justice by the then great minds in case of writing. "Logocentrism tends to give greater value to one of the two poles of binary opposites: light over dark, fact over fiction, cooked over raw, male over female, capital over labour, and occasionally indeed, the other way around " (Johnston, 2014).

Logocentrism involves when we give more emphasis on spoken word rather than the written word. Speaking is a sign of presence. It means that when we speak to somebody, he/she is with us. On the other hand, writing is a sign of absence because it indirectly represents something or that we are at a distance to represent something. Logocentrism holds the view that words are the copies of the real things. Derrida attacked the theory of presence or the tendency of priority of speech over writing. He in this context views that both speaking and writing are the two forms of signs. None can be considered the excellence over the other. He also in this respect viewed that those who undermined the sense of writing thought that writing is derivative. Philosophically speaking, Derrida attacked the notion of absolute or certainty under the notion of deconstruction. Both speech and writing are the two forms of signs. They are equally useful in case of language. We can never come close to the essence of meaning. Therefore, language is a partial presence and a partial absence.

Derrida viewed that meaning can be derived under the difference found among signs. We cannot directly come to the meaning. Derrida claimed that meaning is never immediate, it is always deferred. Derrida showed that undecidability or uncertainty is a factor of western tradition. According to him, there are many words in the western tradition, which are ambiguous. Again, the words can be interpreted in a good or bad sense. As for instance, texts frequently fail to indicate this ambiguity and

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cut one of the binary poles of meaning. Derrida in this context pointed out that words do not have unitary or fixed meaning. Rather, words have more than one meaning. As for instance, the word 'pen' means a writing instrument, a female swan, a small enclosure for animals, while in the USA it is used as short for 'penitentiary' ; in the Caribbean, it can mean a cattle farm and also a fortified dock for submarines. Although the English word 'pen' have different meanings, still the searching meaning can be derived through the context which can give us the sense" (Johnston, 2014).

Therefore, Derrida claimed that there is a basic undecidability about language. Hence, we cannot go to the essence of meaning. As a result, he formulated the de-construction method to remove the uncertainties involved in case of language. Derrida holds that meaning is not simply confined to the relationships of signs, rather he emphasised on the fact that meaning must include the people who seek and create meaning. He therefore says, "There is nothing outside the text."

3. Concluding Remark :

From the above discussion, it is clear that both Wittgenstein and Derrida formulated the anti-metaphysical approach through the concepts like language games, use theory of meaning, Logocentrism and Deconstruction method. Both of them agree on the point that we never come to the essence of meaning. Meaning is relational. There is nothing like absolute meaning or exact or fixed meaning found in language. Meaning is multidimensional. It depends on the context. The dissimilarities involved in Wittgenstein's and Derrida's philosophy of language are only term-centric. Wittgenstein in case of searching the meaning of language used the term function of language; on the other hand, Derrida explored the concept of meaning within the backdrop of text.

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