

# Wittgenstein on naming and ostensive definition

PHIL 43904

Jeff Speaks

November 20, 2007

A central idea of the *Tractatus* was that all meaningful propositions are truth functions of elementary propositions, and that all elementary propositions are concatenations of names. There's a very real sense, then, in which names are the foundation of meaningful language use.

One of the central themes of the first part of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is that this is a mistake. Naming already presupposes too much about the ability to use language in order for it to be the foundation of that ability. A representative passage is the following:

“Now one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass, and so on. The definition of the number two, ‘That is called “two”’ — pointing to two nuts — is perfectly exact. — But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn't know what one wants to call ‘two’ . . .

Perhaps you say: two can only be ostensively defined in *this* way: “This *number* is called ‘two.’” For the words ‘number’ here shows what place in language, in grammar, we assign to the word. But this means that the word ‘number’ must be explained before the ostensive definition can be understood. . . . And we can prevent misunderstandings by saying: “This *colour* is called so-and-so” . . . and so on. . . . But is there only *one* way of taking the word ‘colour’? — Well, they just need defining. — Defining, then, by means of other words! And what about the last definition in this chain? (Do not say: ‘There isn't a ‘last’ definition. That is just as if you chose to say: ‘There isn't a last house in this road, one can always build an additional one.’

So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use — the meaning — of the word when the overall role of the word in the language is clear.” (§§28-30)

One reading of what Wittgenstein is doing here is as follows:

The rule-following paradox as a problem for the idea that expressions like “+” are names for special sorts of objects.

What is Wittgenstein’s alternative to the idea that language is a sophisticated way of naming objects and states of affairs? This is complicated, and it is not easy to say. But one cornerstone of his later view is that the foundation of language is not naming, but (something like) custom, or training, in certain kinds of activities. The oft-quoted slogan is: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”

This is meant to be a replacement for the view of meaning which is, arguably, present in the work of Moore, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein: the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands.