

Wittgenstein's Evaluation of the Interface between Language and Society

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ABSTRACT : Language has always stood as the bridge upon which human society crosses from solitary thought into shared existence, yet the philosophical question of how words come to mean, and how that meaning binds a people together, has remained a contested terrain. This paper investigates Ludwig Wittgenstein's evaluation of the interface between language and society. It traces his intellectual passage from the austere picture theory of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the earthy, rule-bound world of language-games and forms of life presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The problem the paper confronts is, can meaning be adequately explained as a private, logical correspondence between word and world, or must it, of necessity, be anchored in the shared practices, customs, and institutions of a community? The paper adopts the expository, analytic, and comparative method. It draws on primary Wittgensteinian texts and recent scholarship to examine the later Wittgenstein's claims regarding rule-following, the impossibility of a private language, and the notion of forms of life. It situates these claims further within the Nigerian and African social context, particularly political rhetoric and communal epistemology. The paper finds that Wittgenstein's mature philosophy establishes language as an irreducibly social institution, one whose meaning is constituted, sustained, and occasionally corrupted by the very community that speaks it. It concludes that Wittgenstein's evaluation offers Nigerian society a useful lens for understanding how words shape, and are shaped by, social life.

KEYWORDS: *Wittgenstein, Language-games, Forms of life, Rule-following, Meaning as use, Society, Nigerian discourse*

I. INTRODUCTION

Human society is, before it is anything else, a society of speakers. Long before the market woman calls out her price, before the elder pronounces judgement beneath the village tree, before the senator rises to address the chamber, there is already a language holding the community together like an invisible rope binding many hands to one task. To ask what language is, therefore, is never a small question, for it is at once to ask what a people is, how they cohere, and how they occasionally come apart. Few thinkers have taken this question as seriously, or turned it about with as much patient suspicion, as the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's career divides, famously, into two seasons that seem, on the surface, to quarrel with each other. In the first season, marked by the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he pictured language as a kind of mirror held up to the world, its propositions gaining sense only insofar as they pictured a possible state of affairs; meaning, on this early view, was a private and logical affair, settled between a proposition and the fact it depicted. In the second season, opened by the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein turned sharply against his own youthful austerity. Meaning, he now insisted, is not a hidden correspondence but a public practice; a word means what it does because of the use to which a community puts it, the rules it follows, and the form of life within which it is spoken. It is this second, mature Wittgenstein whose evaluation of language as a social phenomenon forms the heart of the present inquiry.

The paper is animated by a single, pressing question: is language essentially private, a matter between a solitary mind and the world it represents, or is it essentially social, a matter that cannot even be conceived apart from the community that sustains it? Nigeria offers a fitting laboratory for testing this question, for it is a nation of many tongues, where language routinely serves as a weapon of division just as readily as it serves as glue for unity, and where a single careless word, uttered from a podium or typed onto a phone screen, can set a whole region ablaze.

This paper proceeds in the following manner. It first traces Wittgenstein's philosophical migration from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*. It then examines, in turn, the notions of meaning as use, rule-following and

the private language argument, and forms of life, treating each as a fresh layer in Wittgenstein's evaluation of the interface between language and society. It afterwards turns to the Nigerian public square, and to a comparative reading of Wittgenstein alongside African communal epistemology, before offering a critical evaluation of the entire framework. The paper closes with a conclusion that draws the threads together and reflects on what Wittgenstein still has to teach a nation such as Nigeria about the weight, and the risk, of the spoken word.

II. FROM THE SILENCE OF THE TRACTATUS TO THE CHATTER OF THE INVESTIGATIONS

In his first great work, composed in the trenches of the First World War and published in 1922, Wittgenstein set himself the austere task of drawing the limit of thought by drawing the limit of the expression of thought.¹ Language, on this picture, was a logical mirror: a proposition was meaningful only if it pictured, truly or falsely, a possible arrangement of objects in the world, and where language could not picture anything, as with ethics, aesthetics, or the mystical, it was best passed over in silence.¹ The *Tractatus*, though brief, was total in its ambition, for it proposed nothing less than a single, universal logical form beneath every meaningful sentence ever uttered by man.

Yet a philosophy this tidy could not survive contact with the untidiness of ordinary speech, and Wittgenstein himself became its sternest critic. Returning to Cambridge after some years teaching village schoolchildren in rural Austria, he came to see that the picture theory, elegant as it was, could not account for commands, questions, jokes, prayers, curses, or the thousand other things people do with words that have nothing to do with picturing facts.² The *Philosophical Investigations*, assembled from notebooks and lectures and published two years after his death, therefore reads less like a system and more like a long, patient conversation with his younger self, one in which he confesses, gently but firmly, that he had mistaken one use of language, the descriptive, for the whole of language.²

This turn was not a minor correction; it was a philosophical earthquake, for it displaced logic from the throne and enthroned use in its place. Recent commentary continues to find in this shift a positive, therapeutic ambition, an attempt to give philosophy peace by returning words from their metaphysical employment to their everyday work.³ Wittgenstein came to regard the craving for a single, crystalline essence of language as itself a kind of sickness, a picture that held philosophers captive long after it had ceased to serve them.⁴ Where the *Tractatus* had asked, quietly, 'what must the world be like for language to picture it?', the *Investigations* asked, loudly and with evident relish, 'what are we doing when we speak?' And the answer it gave was resolutely social: we are playing, together, one of the countless language-games into which human life is woven.

III. Meaning as Use: The Language-Game and the Weaving of Words into Action

At the centre of the later Wittgenstein's evaluation of language sits the deceptively playful notion of the language-game, a term he uses to designate the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven.² A builder who calls out 'slab!' to his assistant is not picturing a fact but issuing an order, and the assistant's obedience, not any correspondence to reality, is what fixes the word's meaning.² Meaning, on this reading, is neither a private mental image summoned behind the eyes nor a metaphysical essence lodged inside the word; it is, rather, the sum of the practices, customs, and responses that a community has built up around a sign over time.⁴

This is why Wittgenstein insists that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life, and why he multiplies examples of language-games with an almost mischievous generosity: giving orders, describing an object, reporting an event, speculating, telling a joke, translating, cursing, greeting, praying, thanking.² No single feature runs through every one of these activities to bind them into a tidy definition; rather, they resemble one another the way members of a family resemble one another, sharing now a nose, now a temperament, now a gait, without any single trait common to them all.³ This is the celebrated doctrine of family resemblance, and it quietly performs a great service: it frees philosophy from the ancient itch to hunt for hidden essences, and it redirects attention to the ordinary, observable ways in which words actually labour among us.⁵

Contemporary scholarship continues to mine this vein with evident enthusiasm, reading the language-game not as a museum piece from mid-century Cambridge but as a living framework for understanding meaning amid the churn of digital communication, multicultural encounter, and rapid cultural change.⁵ What is meant by a word in a courtroom differs, often sharply, from what is meant by the same word among friends at a bar or between lovers exchanging a private joke, and the philosopher who insists on a single fixed meaning for all occasions has simply failed to notice that language, like a river, takes the shape of whatever bed it flows through.⁴ It is a modest thesis, on the surface, yet its consequences are vast, for it means that a dictionary can never be the final court of appeal for meaning; only the living community of speakers, doing what they do with their words, holds that authority.

IV. Rule-Following and the Impossibility of a Private Tongue: Language as a Social Institution

If meaning is use, then a further question presses itself upon us: what makes a given use correct, and a rival use mistaken? Wittgenstein's answer arrives by way of one of philosophy's most disquieting puzzles, the paradox of rule-following, which he states with characteristic bluntness: no course of action, he writes, could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule.² If a person has only ever added numbers below sixty, what fact, precisely, guarantees that he will not suddenly 'add' in some deviant fashion once he crosses that threshold? Saul Kripke's celebrated reading of this passage sharpened the paradox into something close to scepticism about meaning itself, arguing that no private fact about an individual mind can settle, once and for all, what that individual means by a sign.⁶

Kripke's reconstruction, still debated four decades on in volumes marking its anniversary, locates Wittgenstein's escape from the paradox not in logic but in the community: it is agreement in judgement among a community of speakers, and the practice of correcting and being corrected, that supplies the only standard of correctness language can have.⁷ This communal solution to the rule-following paradox connects directly to Wittgenstein's most famous, and most misunderstood, argument: the private language argument. Could a person invent a language referring only to his own private sensations, a language in principle unintelligible to anyone else? Wittgenstein answers with a firm and, to some, an uncomfortable no.² His imagined diarist, who resolves to write a sign in a journal each time he has a certain sensation, discovers that he possesses no independent check on whether he has used that sign correctly today as he did yesterday; whatever seems right to him is right, and where nothing can be wrong, the very notion of correctness collapses.²

The upshot is momentous for any evaluation of the interface between language and society: language cannot, even in principle, be a private possession, for its very meaningfulness depends on the possibility of public agreement, correction, and shared training.⁶ Where two or more do not agree in their reactions and judgements, no rule, and therefore no language, can take root among them. Society, on this account, is not merely the audience to which language happens to be addressed; it is the very soil without which language could not grow a single root.

V. FORMS OF LIFE: THE DEEP INTERFACE BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

Beneath the language-game and beneath the rule lies a still deeper stratum that Wittgenstein names, sparingly but decisively, the form of life. He tells us that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life,² and that what has to be accepted, the given, is, so one could say, forms of life.² The phrase is used only a handful of times across his writings, and he nowhere pauses to define it with the tidiness a system-builder might wish for, yet its scarcity has not stopped it from becoming, arguably, the load-bearing wall of his entire later philosophy.⁸

A form of life names the shared background of natural and cultural regularities, of agreement in reactions, customs, and practical certainties, within which language-games alone make sense.⁹ It is why a shrug, a smile, a raised eyebrow can mean so precisely much among people who have grown up together, and so little, or so differently, among strangers; the words are the same, perhaps, but the form of life that renders them intelligible may not be. It is also why translation between distant cultures is never a mechanical swapping of dictionary equivalents but a delicate negotiation between two different ways of living, two different tables of what counts as obvious, sacred, shameful, or comic.

Recent Wittgenstein scholarship has returned to this concept with fresh urgency, some arguing that the term deserves renewed philosophical weight precisely because it resists tidy definition, and that its very elasticity is what allows it to do justice to the layered, sometimes contested character of human community.⁸ Others have pressed the concept toward contemporary anxieties, asking what becomes of the notion of a form of life when human life itself is said to be ending, whether ecologically, technologically, or culturally, and whether Wittgenstein's framework can survive being stretched over such large and troubling questions.¹⁰

For the purposes of the present paper, what matters most is this: language and society, on Wittgenstein's mature view, are not two separate things that happen afterwards to meet at an interface; they are, rather, two aspects of a single, seamless fabric. Society does not merely use language as a tool laid ready to hand; society is, in a deep sense, made of language, woven together out of the countless small agreements, corrections, and shared reactions that constitute a form of life. To ask after the interface between language and society is therefore, on Wittgenstein's evaluation, almost to ask after the interface between a river and its own wetness.

VI. Wittgenstein in the Nigerian Public Square: Political Rhetoric and the Weaponised Word

Nowhere does Wittgenstein's evaluation of language ring truer, or more urgently, than in a plural society such as Nigeria, where scores of languages jostle for space beneath a single flag, and where political speech is rarely just a description of the world but almost always a move within a high-stakes language-game whose rules the speaker knows very well. Political actors, particularly in the heat of election season, do not merely report facts about their opponents; they perform derogation, stereotyping, dehumanisation, scapegoating,

demonisation, and polarisation, each a distinct move sanctioned by the grim rules of a language-game whose form of life is ethnic and religious anxiety.¹¹ The 2023 presidential contest, studied across newspapers and social media platforms, revealed precisely such patterned strategies, deployed along the fault lines of ethnicity, religion, ideology, and historical alliance, each utterance gaining its destructive force not from any private meaning in the speaker's head but from the shared, communal understanding of what such words do within Nigeria's fractured public form of life.¹¹

The same pattern recurs in the digital sphere, where hate rhetoric circulates on social media platforms with a velocity earlier generations of Nigerians could scarcely have imagined, each post a small language-game move whose rules of engagement, sadly, reward the most inflammatory contribution with the widest circulation.¹² What Wittgenstein's framework illuminates here is not merely that such language is offensive in the abstract, but that its offence is thoroughly social in character: a slur wounds precisely because a community has agreed, however tacitly, on what that word does, and a speaker cannot retreat into the plea that he 'only meant it privately', for Wittgenstein has already shown that no such private, self-authorising meaning is available to anyone.²

There is, admittedly, a more hopeful side to this same coin. If language is constituted by communal agreement and shared practice, then a community that has learned to weaponise its words has also, by that very fact, demonstrated its capacity to disarm them, for the rules of a language-game are not laws of nature but customs sustained by ongoing human agreement, and customs, unlike gravity, can be renegotiated.⁶ Nigerian scholars of language have long argued that clarity about how words function within a linguistic community is a precondition for using that community's resources responsibly,¹³ and Wittgenstein's evaluation supplies exactly this kind of clarity: it insists that whoever would reform political speech in Nigeria must reform not merely the vocabulary but the shared form of life, the underlying agreement in judgement, out of which that vocabulary draws its terrible or its healing power.

VII. A COMPARATIVE GLANCE: WITTGENSTEINIAN SOCIALITY AND AFRICAN COMMUNAL EPISTEMOLOGY

It would be a pardonable temptation, though ultimately a mistaken one, to treat Wittgenstein's later philosophy as an exotic European import with little to say to African thought; a closer look reveals, instead, a striking family resemblance, to borrow his own idiom, between the Investigations and the communal epistemology long native to African philosophical reflection. The African understanding of personhood, famously distilled in the declaration that a person is a person through other persons, and that one is because the community is,¹⁴ rests on precisely the conviction that undergirds Wittgenstein's rejection of private language: that meaning, identity, and even selfhood cannot be constituted in isolation but only within a web of shared relationship and mutual recognition.

Nigerian philosophers of language have, for their part, long insisted that meaning cannot be adequately theorised apart from its social and cultural setting, treating semantic and pragmatic questions as inseparable from the community's living use of its own linguistic resources.¹³ Wittgenstein's insistence that language is inalienable from the sociological nature of man finds a ready echo here, for both traditions refuse to abstract the word from the world of shared practice in which it is spoken, prayed, sung, and occasionally shouted.⁴ Where the Investigations offers the language-game and the form of life as its governing images, African communal thought offers proverb, ritual, and the palaver of the village square, yet both point toward the same conclusion: that truth, meaning, and correctness are established communally, in the open, and not privately, in the solitary chamber of an individual mind.¹⁵

This affinity is not merely decorative; it carries real philosophical weight for a Nigerian scholar seeking to apply Wittgenstein at home rather than merely to import him. Inaugural reflections on language, truth, and reality within the Nigerian academy have themselves argued that meaning is anchored in the shared reality a linguistic community inhabits together, rather than in any purely logical or referential scheme detached from that community's lived experience.¹⁶ Read this way, Wittgenstein does not arrive in Nigeria as a stranger bearing foreign concepts; he arrives, rather, as a fellow traveller who, working from a very different direction, independently rediscovered a truth that African communal wisdom had already been quietly practising: that no one, and no word, means anything all by itself.

VIII. CRITICAL EVALUATION: STRENGTHS AND SHADOWS OF WITTGENSTEIN'S SOCIAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Every philosophy, however illuminating, casts its own shadow, and Wittgenstein's social theory of language is no exception. Its great strength, already rehearsed above, is that it rescues meaning from a lonely, private mentalism and restores it to the observable, teachable, correctable practices of a community; in doing so, it explains why children can be taught language at all, why dictionaries must forever chase after usage rather than dictate it, and why a word can shift its meaning across a single generation without anyone having broken any law of logic. It also equips the philosopher with tools sturdy enough to diagnose social pathologies of

language, such as the political weaponisation traced above, without needing to appeal to any mysterious inner realm of private intention.

Yet the theory is not without its difficulties. Kripke's sceptical reading, however illuminating, has been faulted for perhaps overstating the paradox at the expense of Wittgenstein's own quieter, more descriptive temperament, and scholars continue to dispute, four decades later, whether the community view genuinely solves the rule-following paradox or merely relocates the same puzzle from one mind to many.⁷ If agreement among a community is what fixes meaning, one may reasonably ask what fixes correctness when an entire community agrees upon an error, as, tragically, whole societies have sometimes agreed upon prejudice, propaganda, or plain falsehood; the theory risks, at its weakest points, collapsing correctness into mere consensus, a conflation any Nigerian who has lived through an era of mass-shared misinformation will recognise as dangerous.

The concept of forms of life, too, for all its explanatory fertility, remains stubbornly underspecified, and commentators sympathetic to Wittgenstein continue to argue among themselves over whether the notion names a single, universal human form of life or an indefinite plurality of local, culturally specific ones, a disagreement with real stakes for anyone hoping to use the concept across cultures.⁸ Still others worry that stretching the concept to cover ecological catastrophe, technological upheaval, or civilisational crisis asks more of a modest, largely descriptive notion than it was ever built to bear.⁹

None of these shadows, however, extinguish the light Wittgenstein casts. They rather confirm his own deepest teaching: that philosophy's task is not to erect a final, unshakeable system but to keep returning, patiently and honestly, to the rough ground of ordinary life where language, imperfect and communal as it is, continues to do its daily work among us.

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine Ludwig Wittgenstein's evaluation of the interface between language and society, and it has found that interface to be, on his mature reckoning, no interface at all in the ordinary sense, no meeting point between two independently existing things, but rather a single, seamless weave. The private, logical language of the *Tractatus* gave way, in Wittgenstein's own hands, to a public, rule-governed, communally sustained practice; meaning became use, correctness became agreement in judgement, and language itself became inseparable from the form of life within which it is spoken. A private language, strictly and literally private, turned out on close inspection to be no language at all, for wherever there is no possibility of being corrected by another, there is no possibility of being right or wrong, and where there is no right or wrong, there is, properly speaking, no meaning either.

For Nigeria, a nation whose many tongues can either knit a people together or tear them cruelly apart, this evaluation carries a weight beyond the merely academic. It teaches that the poison in political rhetoric and the venom in online discourse are not private failures of individual malice alone, however much malice may be present, but social achievements, sustained and renewed daily by a community's shared agreement about what certain words are permitted to do; and it teaches, with equal force, that such agreements, because they are human customs and not laws of nature, remain within human power to unmake and remake. The comparative glance at African communal epistemology showed, moreover, that Wittgenstein's insight is not a foreign transplant onto Nigerian soil but a discovery that resonates deeply with an older, indigenous wisdom that had long insisted a person, and by extension a word, becomes fully itself only in the presence of others.

Wittgenstein, then, leaves us with a sober but ultimately hopeful evaluation: language and society rise and fall together, and neither can be reformed while leaving the other untouched. If Nigeria wishes to heal the wounds language sometimes inflicts upon it, it must attend not merely to the words spoken but to the shared form of life out of which those words draw their meaning, for it is there, in that quiet and continuous agreement among speakers, that every language, healthy or diseased, truly lives.

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