Boryana UZUNOVA[*]

The Limits of Language in the Later Wittgenstein[**]

Abstract

In this text I will argue that language according to the later Wittgenstein has no limits and that this is not a self-contradicting claim. First, I'll try to show how can the notion of duality of the boundary of the language game function as a key to allowing language to have no limits and at the same time to work. Then I will proceed to showing how the concept of meaninglessness can be a valid one – a view Wittgenstein shares – without this putting a limit on language. After that I'll turn to the language – activity relation and try to show it as not only not limiting language but really as something of a guarantee for its unlimitedness. And finally, I'll say something about the possibility of speaking about language without this implying that we are limiting it.

Key Terms

Wittgenstein, Language, Language Game, Limit – Unlimitedness, Meaninglessness, Philosophy, Language and Activity.

İkinci Dönem Wittgenstein'da Dilin Sınırları

Özet

Bu metinde Wittgenstein'ın ikinci dönemine göre dilin sınırlarının olmadığını ve bunun da kendisiyle çelişen bir iddia olmadığını tartışacağım. Öncelikle, dil oyunlarının sınırlarının düalitesi fikrinin, dilin sınırlarının olmamasına ve aynı zamanda onun işlemesine imkan vermede nasıl anahtar görevi gördüğünü göstermeye çalışacağım. Daha sonra ise anlamsızlık kavramının – Wittgenstein'ın katıldığı bir görüş – dile bir sınırlama getirmeksizin nasıl geçerli bir kavram olabileceğini göstermeye devam edeceğim. Sonrasında dil – eylem ilişkisine geri döneceğim ve bunun sadece dili sınırlandırmadığını değil fakat aynı zamanda onun gerçekten sınırsızlığının bir çeşit temanatı olduğunu göstermeye çalışacağım. Ve son olarak dili sınırlandırdığımızı ima etmeksizin dil hakkında konuşma imkanına ilişkin birşeyler söyleyeceğim.

Anahtar Terimler

Wittgenstein, Dil, Dil oyunları, Sınır – Sınırsızlık, Anlamsızlık, Felsefe, Dil ve Eylem.

Text

The aim of this paper is to show that language according to the later Wittgenstein has no limits and furthermore that he does not contradict himself claiming it. In the course of the text I'll follow out some of the aspects of the way language functions which aspects render the upper claims possible.

First, let us see how can a language having no limits work at all. Under the conditions of a given language game there is a certain degree of sense uniformity.[1] In other words, as functioning or in a certain language event language attains high self-identity of meaning. But how is such oneness possible given the illimitable and irreducible variety of usage of the linguistic units in the case of language as seen by the later Wittgenstein? It is possible through the medium of purpose-defined language entities – the language games. In choosing a particular phrase and in using it in a particular way in a language game a person is guided by the thing he/she wants to achieve. Thus the linguistic purpose in a certain way specifies the use of phrases in the language game. It always stands in a defining relation to the use of words and phrases.[2] This is the dependence that allows for language to be realized under the conditions of self-identity of meaning without the latter being a limitation. That's because the purposes of the language events are not limited in number. Respectively unlimited are the ways to use a linguistic unit. At the same time the purpose – use connection is a key one for the language functioning since it allows for such spaces of intertwined language and activity to be differentiated where we find the uniformity of use – respectively uniformity of sense – needed for language to be realized. Thus language games both provide the organization and differentiation needed for language to work and at the same time manage not to appear as language limiting, being irreducibly plural. Language, then, functions as purpose-defined, as a language game. At the same time language as a phenomenon, as a whole, stays undefined by any purpose for it is entirely indifferent to the choice of a particular language game. Thus it avoids being limited by such a definition, namely purpose definition.

So boundary appears to be a necessary condition for the language functioning. However, the unlimited multitude of language games sets the boundary as in a way illusive. For it is not an absolute but only an instrumental requirement of language. Inside of a language game something like a core is formed to which grammatical rules

---

[1] Here I mean language as seen by Wittgenstein. Thinkers such as Derrida wouldn't agree that even in a particular case of a language game any realization of meaning is possible other than it being constantly delayed, always forthcoming.

[2] Вж. Arrington, Robert L.; *The Grammar of Grammar*; "Wittgenstein – Eine Neubewertung. Akten des 14. Internationalen Wittgenstein-Symposiums, Kirchberg am Wechsel (Österreich); Verlag Hölder – Pichler – Tempsky, Wien 1990, I; p. 213-14.

apply as if they were absolute. This allows for judgements concerning what is correct and what is not, what has sense and what has not, to be made within the game since they express the correspondence of the units judged to the grammatical rules molding the game. The inner boundary is the means of a functional unambiguity. But the boundary is "twofold". This duality is what brings the language game in a relation not only to itself but to the other language games too. The mere fact of the language games being a multitude lays the other aspect of the limitation, namely its relativity. The boundary of a language game is informed with its own relativity and the arbitrary character of the rules that set it. But that stays as a deposited permeatedness in the periphery of the game unit. For the most part it is the potential for transformation – transformation of the purpose, of the game, of the rules. Being dual the boundary sets apart an inner space but it also stays open, permeable; it fluctuates. That way it does not allow the games to become isolated and to pretend to be absolute models of language at the same time differentiating them as autonomous language situations. Wittgenstein writes:

> „If we look at the actual use of a word, what we see is something constantly fluctuating.
>
> In our investigations we set over against this fluctuation something more fixed, just as one paints a stationary picture of the constantly altering face of the landscape."[3]

And exactly the needs of that two-layered situation do the dual-boundary model serve.

Let us now turn to the concept of meaninglessness. For the later Wittgenstein the statement of meaninglessness is a valid one. This again presents a danger before the thesis of limitlessness of language. For meaninglessness presupposes meaning having limits. But there is a way for it to work as a concept and yet not to presuppose limitedness of language. Such case is namely the present one since the grounds of meaninglessness are only relative. The concept pair meaningful - meaningless appears already within the framework of a language game, not outside of it or before it. Toward a language game with purpose and rules something can be rendered meaningless. But not toward language as a whole – there we do not have purpose definition of meaning to allow us to fall into meaninglessness. What does it mean to say that a given combination of words has no meaning? It means that „no stipulation has been made about it"[4]. But that is within the framework of a particular language game, of a particular arrangement. The criterion for something to be inadequate to a language is the grammatical rule which is the interposition of language and activity. But rules develop, so does the game itself. One could enter another game or reformulate the same one; the thing is that language always finds a way to be fulfilled. And for a combination of words to be meaningless really is for it "(not to) belong to the particular game its appearance makes it seem to belong to"[5]. That way seen, toward language as a whole there is nothing meaningful and meaningless – not absolutely anyway.

---

[3]   *PG;* § 36; p.77.

[4]   *PG;* § 81; p. 125.

[5]   *PG;* § 81; p. 126.

Philosophical speaking, however, is quite specific, quite different from the other kinds of meaningless discourse. Generally, meaningless expressions find some application for they can be proved meaningful functioning in another language game. Philosophical statements – as Wittgenstein sees it – cannot possibly apply. The reason for that impossibility can be found in the pretensions philosophy raises to the language game in which it would be proved meaningful. We are talking here about pretensions that contradict the way language games work; i.e. they contradict multiplicity. For language games function as being manifold. However, philosophical discourse raises explicit claims to being considered absolute. It's an expression of universal rules and common grounds. And that kind of discourse can't be realized as a language game informed of its relativity. Language is a multitude of language games that get interwoven and modified. This fluctuating and many-sided structure reflects the way it works. In his attempt to speak in a universal, generalizing game, the philosopher is really trying to speak, so to say, "outside of a language game"; he is trying to speak a meta-language that justifies all other languages and forges their rules. Such discourse, though, is not really meaningless but possible; rather, it is impossible for it appears to be in a direct conflict with the manner language works. Language has no common purpose and no common use. Trying to realize language in a way it is impossible for it to be realized, namely as universal, philosophy doesn't realize it as meaningless, it doesn't realize it at all. What is actually carried out is what Wittgenstein calls meaningless kind of talk that is, speaking within a language game by the rules of another one.

"For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday."[6]

For philosophical discourse is yet a discourse, albeit not the one philosophy claims it to be. The mix of language games that occurs actually makes sense considering the aptitude of philosophy for general concepts. As a result of that aptitude resting on the identity of expression of a linguistic unit philosophy illegally mixes its usages applying it improperly to a language game where another of its usages is relevant.

 "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 application is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!"[7]

But how are we to understand this impossibility of philosophical discourse the way philosophy claims it to be, namely universal? Paradoxical as it may seem, that impossibility does not confine language but just the opposite – it opens its boundaries since the possibility of an absolute universality would be a sign of language having limits. If a set of universal grammatical rules is achievable it would present us with a perfect condition of possibility of language. And being an absolute condition of possibility it is also an indication of impossibility. That way, eliminating the possibility of absolute universality of language means guaranteeing the absence of a possible hindrance before its having no limits. And that is exactly how impossibility could open boundaries – namely by appearing as impossibility for limiting.

---

[6]   *PI*; § 38; p. 16.

[7]   *PI*; § 11; p. 6.

If we continue to look for possible limiting language formulations in the position of the later Wittgenstein we are not allowed to miss the connection between language and activity he considers inevitable:

"And to imagine a language means to imagine a life-form."[8]

This sentence from *Philosophical Investigations* uncompromisingly states the language – activity relation. And it's not just about the connection and cooperation of two independent instances. Here we find the two sides of one and the same thing. Language and activity are mutually intertwined and constitute one another in the form of life. Yes, here we have dependency but it is not just that language is conditioned by activity; they run together in a shared process of mutual determining. We can't say that language is limited by the boundaries of activity, because the two of them – language and activity – are actually two of the aspects of one and the same thing. They constitute the form of life:

„Here the term "language *game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity or of a life-form."[9]

The form of life flows in its own directions by the measure of the mutually determined language and activity. Language cannot cross the boundaries of activity. This looks very much like a boundary but it is not one imposed on language from the outside. For language is really the face of activity and they share common destiny. It comes into being already intertwined with activity; activity is what gives it life. That's why if we say that language couldn't function beyond activity, it doesn't mean that we are imposing limits on it from the outside, that we are putting a barrier to it where it could otherwise go on. The entire field in which language could spread out, all the ways it could develop – they are all going to be inevitably accompanied by the parallel spread and development of activity. All attempts to bring language beyond the practices that call it to life and which are – respectively – realized at all due to it are attempts to bring language, so to say, beyond language. In that sense practice does not limit language. The original part of language is to be as one with it and it would be unnatural for language to be inclined to transcend it. And here it must not slip our attention that activity is infinitely diverse. That is to say that sticking to it language does not only remain unlimited but through their relationship it also gets the structure and dynamics of its own functioning as limitless.

This can be traced through a series of examples. One of them is the impossibility of meta-language that the practice-fastened language game is allotted to. As we saw earlier such impossibility is not a limiting one, on the contrary.

Another example is the equivalence of meaning and use of words. Such an identity leads from the boundlessness of the practical use of a word to the analogous boundlessness of its meaning.

Yet another example of the way being bound to practice favors language in its limitlessness has to do with purpose. A language game is always a purpose-defined one.

---

[8] *PI*; § 19; p. 7.

[9] *PI*; § 23, p. 10.

But these purposes are not isolated language purposes. They are in fact the purposes practice sets. Language games chase the purposes of the practice. And they are indeed an endless multitude.

The last example to be mentioned here deals with the rules of grammar. There the connection between language as practice and language as boundlessly diverse appears as the impossibility for grammatical rules to be formulated in a universal language, i.e. abstractly and externally from a particular language game. This is because of the thick integration of the grammar of a language game with that language game, of the rules of language with its use, of the theory with practice. And as long as rules are not universal, unchangeable, and abstract, they do not appear as a possible defining of language threatening to limit it.

Finally, I wish to say something about the possibility of speaking about language without this implying that we are limiting it. Let us ask ourselves: What is the status of this speaking about the way language is, about the way it functions, about language games, etc.? That is, we are claiming that there can be no universal meta-language game. At the same time, are we not nevertheless trying to give *the* way language is and functions; are we not trying to formulate *one* common framework for language? Wittgenstein would resolutely disagree with that. But how can we avoid the trap? – Well, simply by clearly stating that we are not laying any claims to be speaking in an absolute respect. Speaking about language is not different from any other speaking in that it too is speaking within a language game, in that it is a relative speaking:

> „We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language:
> an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders;
> not *the* order."[10]

Talking about language is a talking which keeps that balance. Some order is being created within the general chaos. An organized space is delineated in which determinate rules are valid. This is done so that something at all can be said in such a way that it has its weight and place. We have the need for some stability and self-identity of meaning in order to start playing a language game and sustain its flow. At the same time the order created is but one of the possible orders, one among many. This order does not itself claim absolute correctness or justification – not with respect to other orders. It is a language game in which we are speaking about language, a language game looking for clarity, a language game demonstrating the diversity within language and practice, a language game preventing the unjustified tendency for excessive generalizations and absolutist statements that abuse language. This is the heart of its purpose. And precisely as such it is inexhaustible. It is an example of a language game that puts relativity in its core. Multiplicity, irreducibility, and non-generalizability stand in the centre of its problem field. It addresses its topics by making explicit precisely the aspect of their relativity. Difficulties in its conducting, absence of smoothness and an upset rhythm, a multitude of paradoxes threatening to destroy it: all of these traits mark it and this is understandable. Because in some sense it compromises its own functionality by placing the manifoldness of meaning in its centre. And as we saw, with reference to a language game the lack of uniformity of meaning is a problem. But in

---

[10] *PI;* § 132; p. 43.

spite of that, this language game still works. It works, moreover, not only in a negative respect – by discrediting absolutist positions – but also in a positive respect, by giving more adequate to their relativity reconstructions of some problems.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FOGELIN, Robert (1976) *Wittgenstein*; Routledge & Kegan Paul; London.

GLOCK, Hans-Johann (1996) *A Wittgenstein dictionary*, Blackwell, Oxford

КЪНЕВ, Александър (2003) *Витгенщайн за границите на езика*; Академично издателство „Цонев", Свищов, (Kanev, Aleksandar; *Wittgenstein za granicite na ezika; Akademichno izdatelstwo "Tzonev", Svishtov, (in Bulgarian).

КУН, Томас (1996) *Структура на научните революции*; изд. „Петър Берон"; София, (Kuhn, Thomas; *Struktura na nauchnite revoljucii;* "Petar Beron"; Sofia, (in Bulgarian).

NAESS, Arne (1968) *Four Modern Philosophers – Carnap, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre;* The University of Chicago Press.

PEARS, David (1971) *Wittgenstein*; Fontana / William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, Glasgow

RORTY, Richard (1982) *The Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972 – 1980)*; University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

RORTY, Richard (1991) *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers"* Vol. II; Cambridge – Cambridge University Press.

RORTY, Richard (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth. Philosophical Papers"* Vol. I; Cambridge – Cambridge University Press.

РОРТИ, Ричард (1998), *Философията и Огледалото на Природата*; изд. „Наука и изкуство", София, (Rorty, Richard; *Filosofiyata i Ogledaloto na Prirodata;* "Nauka i izkustwo", Sofia, (in Bulgarian).

РОРТИ, Ричард (1998) *Случайност, ирония и солидарност*; изд. къща „Критика и хуманизъм", София, (Rorty, Richard; *Sluchajnost ironiya i solidarnost;* "Kritika i humanisam", Sofia, (in Bulgarian).

STRAWSON, Peter F. (1967) *Critical Notice of Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations";* "Wittgenstein and the Problem of Other Minds"; Harold Morick, ed.; McGrow – Hill Book Company; New York.

ВИТГЕНЩАЙН, Лудвиг (2006) *Синята книга. Кафявата книга (СККК)*; изд. къща „Критика и Хуманизъм", София, 2006. (Wittgenstein, Ludwig; *Sinyata kniga. Kafyavata kniga (SKKK); "Kritika i humanisam",* Sofia, (in Bulgarian).

WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1974), *Philosophical Grammar (PG);* Basil Blackwell Ltd; Oxford.

WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1953) *Philosophical Investigations / Philosophische Untersuchungen*; Blackwell Publishing Ltd; Oxford.

A Wittgenstein Symposium – Girona, 1989; Amsterdam – Atlanta; GA 1993.

Wittgenstein – Eine Neubewertung. Akten des 14. Internationalen Wittgenstein-Symposiums, Kirchberg am Wechsel (Österreich); Verlag Hölder – Pichler – Tempsky, Wien 1990, I, II.

Sprache, Logik und Philosophie – Akten des 4. Internationalen Wittgenstein Symposiums, 1979 Kirchberg am Wechsel, Österreich; Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Wien, 1980.