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1977

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Carpenter, Elizabeth T., "Wittgenstein's "Language-Game"-A Tool For Cognitive Developmentalists" (1977).
Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies. 459.
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WITTGENSTEIN'S "LANGUAGE-GAME"—A TOOL FOR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENTALISTS

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During the last seventeen years of his life, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in several works, set out his remarkable concept of the "language-game"—a notion of understanding language that focused attention upon the ways in which we use language in actual situations as one might focus on the ways players move pieces in a game. I propose that this concept (with slight modifications) be included among the cognitive developmentalist's tools for analysis. It is useful in describing the growth of some important communicative abilities an individual develops from infancy to fluency in the uses of expressions of the language of his culture. A sketch of the salient features of the "language-game" is presented, along with examples of its application to some typical samples of data.

As an analytic instrument, the "language-game" concept possesses sufficient flexibility to deal realistically with the various conceptual patterns one meets in ordinary situations and allows enough clarity of description to make replicability of application readily possible. These are exactly the qualities the developmentalist needs in instruments with which he must make sense of data gathered within the dynamic surrounding of ordinary human communicative activities.

† † †

INTRODUCTION

In his later philosophical works (post-1933), Ludwig Wittgenstein presents his notion of the "language-game" as an essential part of his method in working with difficulties which he thought resulted in philosophical problems. In this paper I shall present the key aspects in the concept of "language-games" which would enable one to recognize specific instances of a language game and to describe them; then I shall illustrate the steps by which a person develops his competence in operating within a given language game. The point will be to show how the "language-game" concept may provide an instrument for the comparison of language behavior at different levels of development so as to define what sorts of behavioral changes constitute cognitive or conceptual "growth."*

The following are key aspects of Wittgenstein's "language-game" concept. First, the focus of this concept is on the "speaking of the language" as only one part of an activity

*Since every reference used in this paper is to one of the works of Wittgenstein listed at the end, only specific citations will be given in the text: P.I. will be used for *Philosophical Investigations*; Bl.B. for *The Blue Book*; and B.B. for *The Brown Book*.

which has some point, or end, to which the speaking markedly contributes (P.I.:§23). Second, the child develops his understanding of his mother-tongue by way of his participation in the various forms of the activities in which speaking has a role (Bl.B.:17). Third, learning a new language is learning new behavior with regard to a particular end (P.I.:§244). Fourth, if we organize our observations of ordinary activities that involve language according to the place of the words in relation to the point of the activity, the aspects of "system" and "regularity" appear, much as we would expect them in the playing of a "game" (P.I.:§207). Early in *The Brown Book*, Wittgenstein (B.B.:81) sketches descriptions of different sorts of activities in which vocal expressions are used with regularity, along with gestures, in the course of pursuing some end. He refers to these as "systems of communication," saying:

They are more or less akin to what in ordinary language we call games. . . . When the boy or grown-up learns what one might call special technical languages, e.g., the use of charts and diagrams, descriptive geometry, chemical symbolism, etc., he learns more language games. . . .

What sorts of activities Wittgenstein has in mind may be seen if we do as he suggests:

. . . Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:
Giving orders, and obeying them—
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements, . . . Reporting an event—
. . . Forming and testing a hypothesis—
. . . Making up a story; and reading it—
. . . Playacting—
. . . Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying."
(P.I., 23)

These are to be regarded as quite ordinary to human behavior, for ". . . Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (P.I.:§25). The character of the surroundings which are part of the context for our playing these "games" have direct bearing on the character of the games, the point of the activities, etc. (P.I.:§142, re: "normal" and "abnormal cases").

Several of the "language games" Wittgenstein mentions are activities in which the players interact in a certain sequence so that taking turns is not an uncommon characteristic of the playing, particularly in stylized games involving more than one player. In such situations, each player's turn within the whole activity may be looked on as a "move"; his adeptness within a game, as a quickness or finesse in his "moving"; his competence in playing, as measured by his "knowing how to go on." And something like a sense of moving in space is brought into the notion of "going on" by way of analogies with "finding one's way about" in a labyrinth (P.I.:§203) and in a section of a city (P.I.:§18), as though there were decisions to make along the way occasioned by the encounter of a "barrier" in the "pathway."

All the above characteristics must be integrated in order to provide a guide for recognizing specific sets of behaviors as cases of the playing of a specific language game. It will be most strikingly apparent in examples. Here are descriptions of activities which we may consider instances of persons engaged in the first type of language game mentioned by Wittgenstein in the passage above (P.I.:§23)—the game of "giving orders and obeying them."

- I. Think of the 9- to 12-month-old child who is able to get around his home by crawling and to reach articles on the tables by pulling himself up near them. Adults in charge of the surroundings in which the baby must negotiate are quite often levying orders in the form of rules—"Don't touch!" and "No, No!"—along with the slap on the hand, the shake of the head, and the stern look.
- II. Around 18 months, having begun to use specific sound patterns in connection with specific activities, the baby, coming up to a table covered with objects, may be observed to reach out and touch one and then withdraw his hand, shake his head, and say, "No, No, No!" Then perhaps he goes on to other parts of the room and other activities.
- III. Further, in an encounter between that child and another some months later (about 30 months of age), the former slaps at the hand of his friend who has reached out to pick up the figurines on the table. The first acts in this sequence: first, saying, "No. No touch!"; then, if the friend does not react in a specific way (i.e., by leaving the things alone), pushing the other out of the way, taking the figurine from his hand, and returning it to the table—all the while shaking his head "No."
- IV. At 4 years old, the child asserts his authority over others in a play situation in which he's pretending to be the parent of another child and, in the acting out, sets himself in the role of giving the other

the order, "Don't touch the glasses." When his playmate does not respond (in the acting out) so as to obey the command, but rather proceeds to pick up and play with the forbidden objects, the first child employs the hand slapping and—if that does not bring forth the reaction of "leaving the objects alone"—the further response of "spanking the disobeying child."

At such a point, children may well be seen to enact and re-enact this set of activities many times—and to take turns playing the roles of orderer and obeyer as well as disobeyer and punisher. And in the course of these actings-out, there may appear a number of sets of expressions, including: "I told you not to do that."—"You naughty boy!"—"I'm going to have to spank you."; or "If you don't quit that, I'm gonna give you a beating!"—"You better be good and don't touch them things!" There will, of course, be a number of variations in the ways specific children grammatically express themselves which will reflect the dialectal aspects of the societal groups to which they belong and, thus, the dialects with which they are directly familiar.

- V. At about the same time or very soon after the above, repeated role-playing occurs in the activities of the child; he begins to explore another sort of reaction to the order-giving act—i.e., the use of the question "Why?" to lead the order-giver to provide some expression of the forcefulness or importance of the order's being followed. During the ensuing 4 to 5 years, various sorts of possible "answers" occur in the game. Those grow to include the assertion of the "giver's" authority—"Because I say so"—the expression of the "giver's" desire or wishes—"Because I want to have it done"; and the laying out of probable consequences to the act that are wanted or not-wanted—"Because if you don't, you will get hurt."
- VI. After the child is capable of entering into the facet of the game in which he concerns himself with possible "justifications" for the order-giving, he may enter into a similar consideration of the action which is a consequence of the following or the not-following, the obeying or the disobeying. Thus, the result is the child's practice of judging the "fairness" or "fittingness" of the "reward" or "punishment." The child's concern proceeds in line with the growth of his socialization in that he goes from evaluation of the fairness of the reward or punishment on the basis of whether *he likes* or *wishes* the action or object given, to the evaluation of the degree of severity of punishment in relation to the degree of diver-

sion of the individual's reaction to the order, taking into consideration other points of view, measures other than his own personal likes or dislikes.

Review of the above examples of the child's behavior reveals that within his first four or five years he has picked up the following ways of handling himself within this sort of context: (1) turn-taking or sequencing actions where the "order-giving" behavior is expected to be followed by "following" behaviors; (2) the order-giver acts to give some sort of force to bring the follower to comply in some way or other; thus, (3) the "following" is not automatic, making room for the order-giver to wait to see if the follower behaves "properly"; further, (4) the possibility of non-following behavior ("violating" or "disobeying" behavior) brings forth a place for retributive action by the giver, thus "punishment" and, alternatively, "reward" get fitted into the conceptual arrangement; (5) in addition, the evaluative consideration of alternatives in orders and justifications for orders and later of alternative retributive actions and their weights in relation to the behavior in pursuance of the order-giving are integrated into the whole activity at points which are conceptually appropriate to the language of the adult.

In summary, I have indicated how Wittgenstein's concept of "language-game" may be used to clarify certain aspects in the growth of the individual's competence in an area of his language. The aspects with which I have been concerned are of importance to the cognitive developmentalist, since they are involved in the development of the child's ability to operate within the communicative systems prevalent within his society. What is revealed in the development of the ability within the language game of "giving orders and following them" may be seen as the growth of the child's grasp of the conceptual grammar of that and similar activities of human interaction.

I see in this an instrument for schematizing data of the child's activities with his mother-tongue which is both solid enough to allow the developmentalist reliability in applying the "game" model to data, and yet flexible enough to allow the points of actual behaviors to become the focus for any "game" description so that a comparison across ages is possible, as is essential for the developmentalist's instruments.

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