
Linguistic Agency and Linguistic Norms

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Résumé

It has been over seven decades since Ludwig Wittgenstein emphatically acknowledged the close connection between meaning and use. Yet, the debate goes on as to the significance of this acknowledgement. Some have taken it to entail the end of any interesting philosophical theorizing about meaning. (McDowell 2009, Stroud 2000.) Others have taken it to entail the recommendation that closer attention be paid to people's linguistic behaviour, understood non-semantically. (Dummett 1978, Horwich 2010.) Thus, the reading of Wittgenstein's remarks has been either quietist or reductionist. Both sides of the debate rightly recognize that what people mean by their words essentially depends, at least in part, on how they use them. But the quietist insists that all we can do is describe the multifarious ways in which people *use their words to mean what they do* in different contexts and on different occasions of use. The reductionist, on the other hand, argues that what people mean by their words can be explained in terms of their *non-semantically described use*. I propose to read Wittgenstein in a third way, neither quietist nor reductionist. What neither side has recognized is that the agency in which language users must engage in order to mean anything by their words involves more than using words to mean things or using words in certain ways. Both sides fail to consider the use of language from the first-person point of view of the language user rather than from the third-person point of view of the observer. The question is, whose use endows any particular language user's words with meaning to begin with? Following in the footsteps of Donald Davidson, I argue that, in order to mean something by their words, language users must actively impart their meaning to their words, in effect, create their words' meanings, rather than passively receive them from others. Importantly, it follows from this that language users must be committed to using their words in certain ways, and that meaning is in that sense essentially normative.

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Mots-Clés: Agency, norms, meaning, use, reductionism, quietism, Wittgenstein, Davidson