

Can We Experience the Meanings of Words?

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“Meaning is use” is a famous slogan used to characterize Wittgenstein’s conception on word’s meaning in his later philosophy. As for the ordinary language school, “meaning is use” seems to be the most important tenet. Nevertheless, after Paul Grice’s reflections on the logic of conversation and meanings, this tenet hardly keeps wholly intact. However, it does not follow that Wittgenstein’s later conception on meaning is untenable. Actually Wittgenstein pays a lot of attention to other aspects of words’ meanings in addition to uses. Some of his remarks even directly contradict with that slogan, which inspire us to review his main ideas on the related problems.

Among the remarks, the ones on experiencing the meanings of words are remarkable. Furthermore, Wittgenstein himself has introduced two phenomena, namely ambiguity and synaesthesia, to clarify what exactly meaning is.

Ambiguous words are the ones having ambiguous meanings or uses. But we still have to tell the difference between ambiguous words and homonyms. In alphabetic writings (phonetic writings), sometimes it is not easy to say whether an seeming ambiguous word is real ambiguous or just a label of two homonyms. In this sense, both Japanese and Chinese are better examples for real ambiguity. The significance of ambiguity lies in the cases in which a word is uttered or heard without any context, e. g. in Listen and Write. If we can hear an ambiguous word independent of any context (and of course we can) and come up with any experience related to its different meaning, we have to concede that something else (besides a word’s uses) could be extracted from various factors in the utterance of this word.

Synaesthesia is quite similar with metaphor, and both of them are not the primary meanings of words. However, they could not be identified with each other. As for synaesthesia, there are no more direct descriptions of it. For example, French poet Rimbaud has said in his *Voyelles* that A, E, I, O, U have their own colors. In Wittgenstein’s view, here the introducing of color is not metaphorical, because we could not express what Rimbaud wants to say in any other (a more direct) way. Therefore synaesthesia is not a ‘metaphorical’ meaning, and without it we could not express what we actually experience or feel in poem or other fields of aesthetics. So we get another example for experience of meanings as well.

It follows that, besides words’ uses, Wittgenstein admits that there are senses or intuitions of words (or better to say, sense of language). By the same token, there are experiences of meanings of words, which play significant roles in our lives.

In summary, in this paper I would like to answer there internally related questions: are words accompanied by any experience? If they are, what is the relation between the experience and the words’ meanings? And can we experience words’ meanings? Some of the answers are still open to further discussions, whereas the second question is a little hard to be answered. Even though it is

not possible to give a definite answer here, we can still get a better understanding on Wittgenstein’s complex conceptions on meaning after these discussions.

I further argue that, “Meaning is use” could not cover all the cases in Wittgenstein’s remarks in his later philosophy, although it does characterize the most significant aspect of his conceptions on meanings. Even Wittgenstein himself concedes that some senses or feelings of words play roles in some fields, such as aesthetics. In this sense, the ordinary language school misses some crucial ideas of later Wittgenstein.