

## The Implications of “Language Games” in English Teaching

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**Abstract.** “Language games”, as a key term in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, emphasizes the everyday usage of language. This concept not only plays a revolutionary role in the development of philosophy but also provides new insights into language teaching. The thesis explores the implications of “language games” to language teaching in aspects of the three relevant notions of forms of life, family resemblance and rule ruling, providing new insights into English teaching in China from the perspective of language philosophy.

### Introduction

"Language game" originally means “one of those games by means of which children learn their native language”, and as a key term in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, it is extended to cover “the whole activity of language and what consists of language and into which it is woven” [1]. According to Wittgenstein, language games involve all human behaviors, all human activities, the foundation of which is the language use. Drawing upon the theme that the meaning is the use, Wittgenstein develops several vital notions relevant to the concept of 'language games', that is, forms of life, family resemblance and rule-following. These ideas help make clear his view about language that language is best regarded as an activity involving the use of words as tools.

Via the conception of language games, Wittgenstein aims to bring back words from metaphysics to everyday usage. Wittgenstein's notion of language games focuses on not the language system, but the day-to-day use of language. This inversion not only plays a revolutionary role in changing the development of philosophy but also provides new insights into linguistics and language teaching. As Dolhert suggested, “Wittgenstein's concept of language-games could prove valuable to help educators, and particularly educational philosophers, and deal with some of the murky and confusing terms and concepts which have existed in the field of education” [2]. In this essay, I will discuss the implications of “language games” to language teaching in aspects of three relevant notions of “language games”, aiming to provide new insights into English teaching in China from the perspective of language philosophy.

### Forms of Life and Authentic Teaching Content

Like any other game, language is not an abstract system but always connected with human activities. Wittgenstein used the term "language-game" to designate simple forms of language, “consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven”[1]. The concept was intended “to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life” [1]. By the term he means something like the basic patterns of behaviour on which we must agree if we are to understand one another. According to Professor Hunter's interpretation of forms of life in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, “forms of life” are “a sort of package of mutually related tendencies to behave in various ways: to have certain facial expressions and to make certain gestures, to do certain things like count apples or help people and to say certain things” [3]. Such expressions of our form of life as giving orders, reporting an event, making a joke, etc., are all activities in the

language that we understand. As Wittgenstein stated, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." [1]

Since language is woven into life, sharing a Language tends to mean sharing a common way of life, that is a unique cultural identity and language usage. In this sense, language-games cannot be understood outside the authentic context of a form of life, the total environment in which the language is used as part of the language game. As Anthony pointed out, "the words plus their behavioral surroundings make up the language-game"[4]. The study of language-games refers to the study of the use of language against the background and within the context of a form of life. Therefore, to enter a game system, language learners, first of all, should experience a living language through the main inter-recognition and sharing a way of life.

The idea that different "language-games" make up different forms of life emphasizes the everyday usage of language in "language-game" as social activities of ordering, advising, measuring, and counting and so on. According to the thesis of language games being forms of life, our language teaching content should be more authentic, more connected to real life, particular to the life of language learners, aiming to help the learners enter and enjoy the real life. That is to say, the main content of language teaching should focus on training the learners in how to use language in life by providing the authentic language teaching materials and creating authentic teaching environments. A person who aims to learn how to use a language must be exposed to a large quantity of authentic materials in the authentic language environment.

As to the English teaching in China, the real materials are those that are used by native speakers of English and can be used as teaching materials of the target language to meet the needs of learners, including televised political speeches, televised game shows, the original English teaching materials, films, newspapers, magazines and articles, etc. Such authentic learning linking language with life will shape learners' experience and help learners enter "a second life", which virtually transforms the target language environment to the second one. Through the authentic language learning materials and environments, the living language with a sense of life will motivate students to participate the language games and become real participants of language games.

The implication of forms of life seems to be a big challenge for the traditional theory and practice of language teaching. According to the school of traditional linguistics, grammar is regarded as the core of language and the main content in foreign language classrooms. Therefore, the teaching of the target language grammar was once the focus of ELF classroom, and the teaching materials mostly taken from literary works were arranged according to the grammar system. Although a systematic study of grammatical rules plays an important role in fostering students' ability of reading and producing grammatically correct sentences, it cannot help learners to experience the form of life, the whole context into which language is woven. As a result, memorizing grammar rules and bilingual word lists fails to motivate students to actively communicate in the target language. The disjunction between learning and life will eventually lead to the alienation of the learners with the language use, which will in turn increase learner's burden and decrease their leaning interest and learning effect.

As early as 1897, Dewey suggested that "education is not preparation for life; education is life itself", aiming to emphasize that education is to meet the desire of the students and to enable them to enjoy life[5]. Therefore, we should apply Wittgenstein's insights of "forms of life" to our English teaching and try to realize the authenticity of the teaching content, thus enhancing the learners' authentic language experiences and enable them to use a second language and enjoy a second life.

### **Family Resemblance and Social/Contextual Teaching Process**

Another central theme of Wittgenstein's Investigations rests on the concept of family resemblance of language games, by which Language games are similar to while at the same time different from one another.

Having answered the nature of language games, Wittgenstein raised another question: What is common to all the activities included within the concept of language games? After having examined and compared various games and showing that many common features drop out while others appear, Wittgenstein answered, "Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am

saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, ...but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language’”[1]. The concept that Wittgenstein introduced to characterize the similarities among games is "family resemblance." He explained this by saying "the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way," so he concluded that "games form a family"[1].

Similarly, Wittgenstein argued that there is a family resemblance among the various uses of a word. He suggested that to search for the common meaning of a word is as unproductive as to look for the essential feature of games. Jones, W.T. gave some conclusions for the family resemblance of the meanings of words. He commented: “Wittgenstein held, there are a number of similarities. None of the meanings are characterized by all these similarities, but every one of the meanings is characterized by some of them” [6]. Wittgenstein proposes that the meaning of a word is tightly connected with how it is used, in other words, the use of the words determines its meaning which constitutes the basis of his concept— language game. According to Wittgenstein’s explanation of family resemblance of language games, the only way to make sense of a language or a word is to examine it as it is used in different ways.

The concept of Family resemblance of language games sheds much new light on our language teaching. Firstly, since family resemblance suggests that different language games sharing many similarities have different functions and can not substitute for one another, English teachers should help the learners recognize the differences and similarities between Chinese and English. In fact, Foreign language teaching researchers (for example, F. X. Wang 2001) have made more comparative studies between Chinese and English, which are two quite different language games in pronunciation, word, sentence, discourse, and pragmatics[7], and their research achievements should be applied to the teaching practice. Besides, because there is an inextricably connection between language and culture, teachers should further cultivate a new awareness of cultural diversity and its effects on the teaching and learning process. As Csibra and Gergely argued, much language and cultural information transfer is achieved through a goal-directed social process of teaching and learning[8]. In a similar vein, the family resemblance also encourages teachers to adopt social and cultural teaching process, rather than a simple process of knowledge imparting, to help learners realize the similarities and differences between different languages and those between different cultures. Exposure to a social or cultural process of teaching and learning, during which the social or cultural uses of language become transparent, will help learners realize the positive transfer of their native language and culture and cultivate learners’ cross-cultural communication competence. Secondly, family resemblance indicates that although there are more similarities within a language game, the language game still varies according to the contextual factors of language use, including social and situational factors. To master an element of language is to master its use in various situational contexts. This point indicates that language learning should lie in instruction in different situational contexts. For example, the simple sentence "It is cold today. " has different meanings when used in different places. It may be a description of the weather or a request for someone’s closing the window. Therefore, as Dunn suggested “instruction should take place in rich contexts that reflect the real world and are as closely related as possible to contexts in which this knowledge would subsequently be used” [9].

To sum up, the concept of “family resemblance” of language games implies that language learning and teaching must always be viewed in a context, whether a socio-cultural context or situational context, which can make the relationships between language form and language function transparent. The contextual process of language teaching and learning will help learners to cross social, cultural and language barriers and cultivate ability to communicate.

### **Rule Following and Interactive Teaching Mode**

The concept of “language games” does not suggest that we play games with words, but that language activity, as a part of "life form", is a kind of game. Just as we must abide by certain rules to carry out any game, we should display language games in compliance with the rules of the game

rooted in life. Wittgenstein argued that the rules of language games are the use of language, which is a necessary prerequisite for the language-game to be meaningful: “When one speaks of use one may think of rules which are employed in language. One has learned what a piece of language means by observing what other people do because one knows that people who speak the language will use it in that way” [1]. In addition, as stated above, the words of language games, have a multiplicity of uses in different contexts, from which their different meanings emerge. Therefore, apparently, to enter a language game, we should abide by not only the grammatical rules but also the pragmatic rules which vary according to different contexts.

After having made clear what rules of language games to abide by, Wittgenstein further interpreted how to abide by them. In real life, we usually play the language games before understanding the rules, while on the other hand the nature of game requires that we carry out language games in compliance with the rules of the game. In this way, a paradox seems to emerge in that language games cannot start without the conduct of rules, while rules cannot display without the process of the games. Regarding the paradox, Wittgenstein suggests that generally we do not use language according to strict rules, nor is language taught to us by such rules outside of some highly specialized applications[1]. In fact, language rules are not learned in advance but emerge through the process of the games, so we neither master the language rules before entering the game, nor understand the rules after entering the game, but perceive the existence of the rules and keep on the compliance of the rules in the process of language learning. In *Philosophical Investigations*, language was no longer thought to be a simple product of rules but came to be viewed as a complex process of our natural history. Wittgenstein drew an analogy of language with chess to illustrate the autonomy of language: “in the game of chess it is not essential to point to some object outside of the game for meaning, for meaning takes place within the game of chess, just as winning occurs within the game and not outside of it” [1]. Similarly, language, considered to be something which cannot be defined, requires no justification in advance. In Wittgenstein’s view, we can master the rules of a language only when we can play the various games that constitute the language concerned. Therefore, language learning lies in day-to-day contact with the language rather than metaphysical analysis of its rules, and only through social interaction can learners get the free access to the language game system.

Since the rules of language games can only be acquired through interaction, the language teaching process will not be a one-way knowledge transmission from the teacher to learners, but a two-way interaction involving two sides. In this sense, language courses will adopt an interactive mode with emphasis on the interaction which is realized through the establishment of the symmetry of relationship between the teacher and students in equal positions. However, “teacher-centered” traditional English teaching focuses on the analysis of grammatical rules, and in the model the students become the recipients excluded from the social contact where language is used. Such language teaching outside social interaction is like teaching how to walk on the smooth surface of the ice, the condition which is ideal but not inhabitable.

As Wittgenstein claimed, “We want to walk: so we need friction” [1]. The learner-based interactive teaching mode helps to provide “friction” to solve this problem. In this mode, the classroom is characterized by equality, harmony and vigor, and there is always interaction between the teacher and students, among students, inside groups, and between groups, through which students may effectively learn how to abide by the rules of language use. Therefore, we should transform the traditional model into the interactive model, which will help students master the rules of language through the practice of using language.

## Conclusion

Language game analogy, together with its three relevant themes of a form of life, family resemblance and rule following, attaches great importance to language use and reveals the real state of language. This philosophical explanation of language offers great value in cleaning up the current linguistic muddle in educational theory and practice. Based on the above analysis of the implications of “language games” to language teaching, our English teaching should focus on the teaching of language use through the authentic teaching content, the social/contextual teaching process and the

interactive teaching mode. On the contrary, since ‘exam-oriented’ education is still prevailing in our country, the use of language has not been given enough attention in our English teaching. As a result, though some of students can get high marks in the Entrance Examination, few can use the language for real communication. To our satisfaction, the education department and researchers have realized the ineffectiveness of foreign language teaching and determined to reform our English teaching in aspects of teaching goal, content and model. The College English Curriculum Requirements issued in 2004 emphasized the importance of cultivating students’ integrated language capabilities, adopting task-based language approach and multi-media network, which embodies the implications of Wittgenstein’s “language games”.

The English teaching reform will be a huge project, involving new text-book compiling, teacher training and so on. But I believe the first and the most important step that we English teachers should take is to have a better understanding of the implications of the theory of “language games” and apply them to our teaching practice, aiming to make the language learning more efficient and successful.

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