Language at Play. Games and the Linguistic Turn after Wittgenstein and Gadamer

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Wittgenstein and Gadamer: The Impossible Encounter

If there ever was a philosopher whose personality could be exactly the opposite of Ludwig Wittgenstein's radical temperament, it must be Hans-Georg Gadamer. Wittgenstein's life was intense and often dramatic whereas the days of Gadamer were joyful and calm. When Wittgenstein attained recognition in the philosophical world, he was barely thirty years old and had not applied for any academic positions while when Gadamer received major attention he was more than sixty and had a comfortable position as a Professor in Heidelberg. These differences in temperament become more obvious when comparing the *pathos* of their 'official' biographies: Ray Monk's (1991) thrilling examination of Wittgenstein's life; contrasts with Jean Grondin's (1994) symphonic account of Gadamer. But there are more than just differences in their respective personalities; these two thinkers differ in philosophical style. Gadamer was a scholar: erudite and meticulous. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, was an anarchistic spirit who wrote in feverous floods of thought, without giving them any systematic form.[1]

Despite the fact that they were two of the most important philosophers of the 20th century and that they were, specifically, two major thinkers of the so-called *linguistic turn*, Wittgenstein and Gadamer never had any personal contact. It is doubtful that they had even been aware of each other's existence. It was not until Wittgenstein died in 1951 and

became world famous that Gadamer became aware of Wittgenstein's revolutionary philosophy. Both philosophers also had a big influence in parallel but separate schools of philosophy. Philosophy departments all over the world declared Wittgenstein the founding father of analytical philosophy. Gadamer saw his philosophical hermeneutics as a possible development of a tradition of more than two thousand years of continental thought (although it was not called 'continental' until 'analytic philosophy' invented these labels).[2]

For all these reasons, it might seem nonsensical to try and compare these philosophers. In fact, few writers have attempted to do so.[3] In the meantime, such comparisons across traditions are becoming not only common, but interesting and desirable.[4] A pluralistic tone is dominant nowadays and this is good news for philosophical dialogue as well as integrative perspectives. Therefore I attempt to show that if we aim for a complete picture of the philosophical world during the early thirties, and in particular the history of the philosophy of language, there is a need for an integrated approach to Wittgenstein and Gadamer. Their writings present fundamental convergences, as Gadamer appreciated many decades later. They shared the intuition that philosophy had to move beyond the solitary *Geist* to ordinary language if proper access to philosophical problems was to be found. As Wittgenstein once stated: 'When philosophizing you have to descend into the old chaos & feel at home there' (CV: 74). Both thought that one of the main problems of philosophy is how to describe the nature of language. Language and history are the stuff we are made of, but what if language keeps playing tricks on us and hiding its very essence? So, their first concern was to clarify how language shapes our mind, instead of assuming that our words are mere 'translations' of our ideas, as modern epistemology did. The focus has changed: instead of searching for a mental connection with an ethereal

and ideal world of meanings, we have to look at language working in ordinary communicative contexts. For this task, we can use the concepts of games and play,[5] since the inner structure of these phenomena allows a more accurate explanation of the functioning of language.

Wittgenstein's 'Language Games' as Theoretical Instruments for the Study of Language

Wittgenstein's first mention of games appears in 1933 as he tries to elucidate how small pieces of communicative acts function. During 1933 and 1934 Wittgenstein explored many such examples, often through discussion with his students. The notes of these classes were later known as *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book*. The discussion on language games is given a broader theoretical context in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein examines some examples from Augustine's *Confessions* on learning language. Wittgenstein takes Augustine's work as an example that fits with his own earlier conception of meaning described in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (published in 1922). The problem with his earlier theory of meaning is that it can only explain how a specific class of propositions, the *declarative propositions* or *assertions*, make sense and distinguishes between true and false propositions. Such assertions are typically the propositions that refer to concrete objects (e.g. 'the hut is red') or relationships between objects (e.g. 'the hut is on the table'). But Wittgenstein's theory fails to explain how other types of proposition (that express desires, orders or hypotheses, e.g. 'I wish I had a red hut') can be meaningful for others. Wittgenstein had to admit that not all propositions are reducible to propositions about objects. Immersed in this crisis of the *Tractatus*-paradigm, he invented the concept of a 'language game'. 'Language games'

do not correlate to any particular linguistic reality but are rather a simplified reconstruction of a common linguistic situation. As Wittgenstein defines them, language games are:

> '…ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. Language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages.'
> (BlB: 17)

Thus, language games are primarily devised as a model or object of comparison[6] for the purposes of showing how *plural* our actual use of language is. Wittgenstein describes in the famous aphorism 23 of the *Philosophical Investigations* the different language games he tries to study. They include activities such as giving orders, reporting an event, making up a story, making a joke, thanking, greeting or praying, among others.[7] But in using the phrase 'language game', Wittgenstein never intended to reduce linguistic acts to games, nor did he assume that language games are any kind of metaphysical entities. The phrase 'language games' can be understood as a *metaphor*, or more properly as an *instrument* for the study of language. In the phrase 'language game', the first term has priority over the second. Wittgenstein does not provide any definition of games. He only states that we use the term 'game' in very different situations, and that therefore what a 'game' is, is open to interpretation.[8] What is essential for any given game is that the game is constituted by its rules: the rules define the game.[9] Furthermore; games are activities that take place in specific contexts. Subsequently, language games refer to the totality composed by language and the activities with which language is interwoven.[10] A language game refers to a communicative situation which involves persons, objects, relationships and contexts: its goal is to represent synoptically how all these elements interact. Performance criteria are essential to understanding linguistic utterances. When we communicate, we give life

to words, we play with them. It is such a performance that transforms something in the world. If communication is successful, things should never be as they were before.

Wittgenstein's language games became powerful conceptual tools in the philosophy of language during the 1960s. But a question still remains: how did Wittgenstein get the inspiration to talk about language as a game? Wittgenstein never gave any indication of where his idea of language as a game originated. There were, indeed, other theorists working on games and play during this time who expressed similar ideas to Wittgenstein: for example, Johan Huizinga, George Herbert Mead and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Since there is no indication that Wittgenstein engaged with any of these thinkers in his writings, the inspiration must have come to him through other paths. The most common example used by these thinkers is, as Gunter Gebauer (2009: 22) recalls, a game like chess, where the role of every piece defines its function in the whole.[11] Monk's biography of Wittgenstein discusses the purpose of language games, but says nothing concrete about where the concept originates from. Language games are described as a technique for dissolving philosophical confusion.[12] In Allan Janik's (2006) opinion, the most direct influence appears to be Heinrich Hertz's mechanical models, but Wittgenstein does not mention him in the *Investigations*. Elsewhere Norman Malcolm claims that Wittgenstein got to his idea as he was observing a football match. Such a hypothesis would be undoubtedly more attractive than that offered by Janik; however, it is difficult to support it with textual evidence.[13]

Gadamer: Games, Play, Art Works and Language

Gadamer's first mention of play and games occurred in the late twenties as he was finishing his first large philosophical work: the *Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the 'Philebus'* (1929).[14] In this work, Gadamer mentions play and games by pointing to Heidegger's brief observation in his lectures on Leibniz, that the existence of the *Dasein* (our being in the world) is a game.[15] The purpose of Gadamer's lectures on Ancient Greek philosophy was to regain the original sense of Plato's dialectics in order to present a dialectical form of wisdom which could be set against the *monological* model of modern science. This first approach to games and play was not strictly thought to be applicable to language, so I will not consider it further in this paper. Gadamer's second attempt to analyse games and play would occur thirty years after these lectures.

Gadamer's analysis of the word *Spiel* (which means both games and play)[16] is detailed in two sections of his most important philosophical work *Truth and Method* (1960). Here Gadamer reflects on the nature of aesthetic experience and previous inquiries into the nature of language. Originally Gadamer conceived *Truth and Method* as wanting to show the ontological relationship between artworks, *Spiel* and language. This relationship can be explained in an intuitive manner: when we contemplate an artwork, we often feel that the artist is trying to say something to us. We are immediately involved in a conversational game between the meaning of the piece of art and its potential audience. Immanuel Kant, one of Gadamer's references, described how, in the *Critique of Judgment,* the experience of beauty is the result of the interplay of our cognitive faculties. Nevertheless, the application of the ontology of games and artworks to language was not properly detailed by Gadamer because he assumed it was self-evident.

In order to understand what the nature of play is, Gadamer begins with an examination of our everyday uses of the terms 'play' and 'games.' In language we find plenty of phrases that express the joy and ease of play. We play the piano, the waves play with the sand, the bees play amongst the flowers, and so on. Within this context, the idea of a 'game' mostly refers to *aimless, effortlessly performed movements, which are constantly repeated.*[17]

If we examine Gadamer's definition of play, we can see how the analogy between language and play actually works. Language refers to a movement, to something occurring between two or more people. When we are competent speakers of a language, we are aware of grammatical rules (i.e. the rules that define what a meaningful utterance is and what it is not) but we speak without being aware of them all the time. It is as if we were playing: we manage to form meaningful utterances spontaneously, without having the feeling that we need to make considerable effort.[18] We also find repetition in language. Words have to have fixed meanings, so that we can be sure that in future uses our expressions mean the same things.[19] Language is an instrument for communication but it does not belong to an individual or to any social institution. Language is the common property of a community of speakers and has an independent life beyond that community: in this sense the movement has no definite aims; its aim is in itself. Although Gadamer does not pay as much attention to (as Wittgenstein does) the criteria for defining a 'game,' he does acknowledge that rules are an important part of any game. The moves within a game, which are *a priori* potentially infinite, are restricted by the rules, which define the space or universe of the game. The player who does not respect the rules is either (a) not playing the same game as others, or (b) spoiling the game by their refusal to follow the rules of the game. This is also the case with language. If we are not respectful of

grammatical rules, we may (a) not be speaking the same language, or (b) ruin the possibility of true communication.

Gadamer's Reading of Wittgenstein

It took Gadamer around ten years to write *Truth and Method*. After all, he was trying to summarize decades of teaching experience and intellectual work. He experienced the completion of this - his *opus magnum* - as an awakening to the world after a long period of reclusion. Whilst he was writing *Truth and Method* very interesting philosophical debates were taking place. As he recounted many years later,[20] the first works that caught his attention during this period were the poetry of Paul Celan, the essay 'Ousia and Gramme' by Jacques Derrida[21] and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations.* As he read Wittgenstein, he was astonished. The coincidences were striking. Wittgenstein had written about 'language games' (*Sprachspiele*) and Gadamer had finished his work with a lyrical note about wordplay and language games (*sprachliche Spiele*), through which we, as learners, develop our understanding of the world.[22] But, at the same time, some important differences between his own work and that of Wittgenstein became clear to Gadamer. His reading in the sixties now gives the impression of having been superficial. Two themes are central to Gadamer's disagreement with Wittgenstein: a critique of metaphysics and a critique of language.[23] By focusing on these areas, there are strong parallels between Gadamer's own critique and the wider interpretation of Wittgenstein's work as positivistic during the 1960s-1980s.

Gadamer shares with Wittgenstein the conviction that language was not created originally for the purpose of doing philosophy. As Gadamer sees it, the desire to capture reality with abstract concepts has always been something tragic and desperate: we live in a kind of constant linguistic poverty.[24] But Gadamer did not understand Wittgenstein's refusal of all metaphysical questions. For Gadamer, metaphysics is part of human intellectual history. And, whilst we may have to live in linguistic poverty, we do have the possibility to find new languages and to enrich our actual language use, too. Perhaps if he had read the *Philosophical Investigations* more closely, Gadamer might have recognized that Wittgenstein's spirit was not only critical, but also radical in the original sense of the word. Wittgenstein was trying to go back to the *roots* of philosophical puzzles, which is close to the hermeneutic method of analysis in our conventional interpretation of these concepts.

Almost twenty-five years elapsed before Gadamer returned seriously to Wittgenstein. TM had become the centre of many philosophical debates: a fact that surprised Gadamer, who was not expecting so much attention. By the eighties, Gadamer's hermeneutics was so popular that Gianni Vattimo (1989) declared it the 'new *koiné*' (a term used by the ancient Greeks to refer to the 'common language') of philosophy. Since Gadamer was defending the idea that language gives us access to the world, Gadamer might have been pleased with Vattimo's declaration. All of these debates forced Gadamer to examine the key concepts of philosophical hermeneutics in order to come in terms with his critics. Over time, Gadamer became particularly concerned about the precarious application of aesthetic experience analysis, which was based on the ontological discussion of games and play, and the universal linguisticality (*Sprachlichkeit*) of our world-experience. After all, world-experience and language is something that we learn through imitating others.[25]

Nevertheless, these examples are few and far between: there are only a few examples of Gadamer moving in this direction.

In the nineties Gadamer published his essay entitled 'Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language' (1992) where he seeks an anthropological foundation to his philosophical hermeneutics via the analysis of rituals, celebrations, and symbols. In order to emphasize the priority of conversation over other basic forms of life, such as rituals or habits, Gadamer uses Giambattista Vico's concept of 'rhetoric'. Originally, Vico used the term 'rhetoric' to refer to our primary and linguistically articulated access to the world. It is important to note that in this case Gadamer considers language not only verbal or spoken but every simple form of exchange. The life of any given community is considered from two points of view: *Mitsamt* (which could correspond to our 'natural', instinctive behavior) and *Miteinander* (which could be called 'hermeneutic' behavior, i.e., oriented to mutual understanding). These forms of communal life encompass everything from animalistic rituals to the highest tiers of literature. We could say: from the material basis to the spirit. These forms could also include all sorts of games and play, from the most rudimentary, childish games to the most complex and elevated. Wittgenstein is mentioned in this essay and we can feel his implicit influence on Gadamer as he pays attention to the ways in which we acquire language in our childhood. Although Gadamer could have opened a promising line of inquiry from this essay, these notes remained marginal in the context of his main philosophical focus: hermeneutics.

Perhaps the lack of success in Gadamer's attempt to integrate Wittgensteinian concepts was due to historical circumstances. In these years, Gadamer was involved in two crucial polemics: one with the critics of ideology (Apel and Habermas among others in the

seventies), another with the deconstructionists (mainly Derrida, in the eighties). Maybe the *kairós* (the right moment) had not arrived yet, since the debate in Europe and America insisted on maintaining the chasm between analytic and continental philosophy. Furthermore Gadamer could have profited more from Wittgenstein's aphorisms on certainty, but they remained unpublished until 1969. He probably would have realised how close his own concept of tradition as the hermeneutic background for common life and language was to concepts of the late Wittgenstein, such as in the form of life and world-picture.

In one of his lasts interviews with Riccardo Dottori, the centenarian Gadamer looks back on his philosophical career and again mentions his deep intellectual kinship with Wittgenstein. Gadamer states that there are two concepts which give credibility to the claim that he and Wittgenstein could be seen as counterparts in the history of philosophy: the concept of game and the concept of individuality.[26] Reconstructing their analogies between language and the games we play allow us to reveal ways in which their concepts of game may be unified.

Language, Games and Play: Limits and Virtues of the Analogy

Wittgenstein and Gadamer were working in different conceptual frameworks, but their analyses of play and game in the context of the study of language are significantly similar. These similarities have to do with the function of the analogy between the language and the games we usually play:

In the first instance, an analysis of games and play in relation to language is meant to be strictly *phenomenological*, i.e., *descriptive.* Play activities have structural parallels with the sort of activity that language is and therefore play is a good way in which to explain the nature of language, but language should be more than merely a game we play. In other words, initially, Wittgenstein and Gadamer try to avoid the 'ontological temptation' to identify the object with the model. Language games are not autonomous entities; they do not exist as such in the real world. On this point, Wittgenstein was more consistent. In his analysis, Gadamer uses language to explain what games are, and afterward returns to language through the perspective of an everlasting game that is played and that recreates itself beyond the intentions of the speakers.

The second similarity between Gadamer and Wittgenstein relates to the inner structure of games that helps both philosophers to stress the following aspects of language, its: *normativity*, *social character* and *creativity*. *Normativity* refers to the existence of rules that define what is allowed in a game, and what is not. The rules define the game, so that, when we stop playing, we are sure we can play the same game in the future. For example: Today I can play chess online with someone living in Barcelona. I am sure that the rules of the game we are playing will not change tomorrow and that we will be playing chess when we meet online next week. As sure as we are that we play the same game on different occasions, the normativity of the meaning (the fact that a word always denotes the same class of objects) is what makes us sure that the same word has the same meaning in its different contexts of use. As there is no game without potential partners, even if we play alone, language is a *social* phenomenon that needs other potential speakers to exist. Solitary games are only possible because 'normal' games exist. Solitary use of language is a secondary use, derived from normal uses. Although rules restrict movement within

the game so that not everything is possible, they also still allow for surprises, and this creativity is the joy of the game. This is also the case in language: we can introduce new, unexpected uses of words.

Furthermore, these three aspects of language (normativity, sociality and creativity) are internally linked. A norm cannot exist without a community that accepts it and supports it. In addition, any society cannot exist without sanctioning behaviour as appropriate or otherwise. A creative pattern of behavior (linguistic or not) can have its source in the genius of a single personality experimenting with the possibility of new patterns, but it will not be more than a solitary experiment if there is no society that acknowledges it and if it is incompatible with the rest of socially sanctioned patterns.

The *social* aspect of the game is perhaps one of its most important features, as it has consequences for the concept of language. If language, as games, is primarily social, that means that its existence and nature depends on a collective. In modern epistemology, language is a 'mere' translation of the ideas of the transcendental subject referring to objects of the world. But there are many uses of words that do not fit into this schema. What Wittgenstein and Gadamer are saying is that our language conforms to the way in which transcendental subjects cope with the world. And in doing so, they manage to overcome the strict subject-object schema regarding community, history and dynamics for the study of language. Language is no longer the 'mirror of nature' or the 'incarnation of mind'. Language, as Gadamer beautifully states, *is* only in the conversation.[27]

Gadamer's link to this analogical case is, as Walter Schulz (1970: 311) points out, his claim that the terms 'history', 'language', 'conversation', and 'game' all end up being

synonymous. All these terms can be equated to the concept of game. Indeed, one of Gadamer's favourite poems is the *Friedensfeier* by Friedrich Hölderlin. *Seit ein Gespräch wir sind* ('since we are a conversation') is one of the *leitmotivs* of Gadamer's work and life. Gadamer chose for the opening of *Truth and Method* Rilke's poem on an 'eternal partner in the game'. Gadamer's interpretation of Rilke's metaphor consists in a personification of the whole tradition we belong to, and with whom we keep playing in an endless conversation.

Unfortunately Gadamer and Wittgenstein never had the occasion to meet in person or to discuss each other's ideas. However, there is a pertinent remark of Wittgenstein around 1948 that reminds us of the spirit of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: 'In a conversation: One person throws a ball; the other does not know: is he to throw it back, throw it to a third person, or leave it lying, or pick it up & put it in his pocket, etc.' (CV: 84). The analogy between games and language has proven to be a good starting point for this conversation between philosophical traditions. The next move is our turn.

Notes

1. Wittgenstein confesses in the opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*:'The best I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination' (PI: viii).
2. As Jean Grondin (2003) tells the story.
3. I base my reflections mainly in Apel (1976), Arnswald (2002), Del Castillo (2001), Habermas (1985), Habermas (1999), Habermas (2001), Kambartel (1991), Tietz (2000) and Zimmermann (1975).
4. See for instance: Hacking (1975), Grondin (1994), Stekeler-Weithofer (2004).
5. I am going to use the english words 'play' and 'game' as equivalents to the german term *Spiel*, which is the term used by both. A comparative linguistic study of the terms in the semantic field of play activities is to be found by Huizinga (1962). Maybe the most important difference between the terms 'game' and 'play' is that in 'game' the rule component seems to be stronger whereas in 'play' the component of creativity and freedom seems to have more weight. Play also relates to the performative element in the arts (music, drama, etc). I use the phrase 'play activities' to refer to all the phenomena that fall under the German substantive *Spiel*. George (2011) refers only to the concept of play by Gadamer but in the context of the aesthetic experience. Since Gadamer uses 'game' sometimes related to language, I use the term in this context, too.
6. Cfr. PI, 130: 50.
7. Cfr. PI, 23: 11.
8. Cfr. PI, 69: 33.
9. Cfr. PG, I, II, 26: 63.
10. Cfr. PI, 7: 5.

11. See, for instance PG, I, II, 31:67.
12. See Monk (1991: 337).
13. Malcolm had never heard this story from Wittgenstein. It seems that Wittgenstein mentioned it to Freeman Dyson, a young physics student who was staying at the Trinity College: 'Dyson recalled one anecdote of Wittgenstein's which is of considerable interest: One day when Wittgenstein was passing a field where a football game was in progress the thought first struck him that in language we play *games* with *words*. A central idea of his philosophy, the notion of a 'language-game', apparently had its genesis in this incident.' (Malcolm 1962: 65).
14. This work was afterwards revised and published as *Platos dialektische Ethik* (1931).
15. Cfr. Heidegger (1990). See also Kusch (1989), Fink (1969) and Zúñiga (1995).
16. See note 3.
17. Although Gadamer has other important sources, his phenomenological analysis of play and game is directly taken from Huizinga's definition in *Homo Ludens*. See Johan Huizinga (1962).
18. This is the case when we use our mother tongue or when we speak a language with which we feel confident. It might not be the case when we speak foreign languages at the beginner's level.
19. The constant repetition of the game is explained through the concept of celebration (*Fest*). The performance character, whose origin comes from the inside of the movement is linked to the categories of the autorepresentation (*Selbstdarstellung*) and execution (*Vollzug*). These categories are more related to the specifity of aesthetic experience and they are difficult to translate in the terms of linguistic normativity.
20. In his essay "Hermeneutik auf der Spur" of 1994 (GW10: 149).
21. Published in Derrida's collection *Margins of Philosophy.*
22. Cfr. TM: 484. Unfortunately, the English translation cannot reflect the German nuances. Wittgenstein's *Sprachspiele* are technical concepts invented by him. When Gadamer writes *sprachliche Spiele* he means the games language plays, as language itself were a character acting.
23. The most important essay of Gaamer mentioning Wittgenstein in the sixties is 'The phenomenological movement' (1963, see GW3).
24. Cfr. GW2: 83
25. Cfr. GW2: 5. The most important development of the aesthetic concept of play is the essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (1977, see RB).
26. Cfr. CP: 74-75.
27. Cfr. GW8: 369.

Bibliography

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[CV] *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
[OC] *On Certainty*, New York: Harper, 1972.
[PG] *Philosophical Grammar*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
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[CP] *A Century of Philosophy. A Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, London: Continuum, 2003.
[PH] *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
[GW2] *Wahrheit und Methode. Ergänzungen*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999.
[GW3] *Neuere Philosophie I. Hegel-Husserl-Heidegger*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1999.
[GW8] *Ästhetik und Poetik I. Kunst als Aussage*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1999.
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