

The Use of 'Use'

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... the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Not every use ... is a meaning.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein)¹

1 Introduction

The dictum that meaning is use, that for a word to have a meaning is for it to have a use, is typically presented as placing emphasis on the public nature of linguistic activity, as appropriately situating the notion of meaning in its characteristic context of communication, and more generally as dissuading us from a Cartesian conception of subjects as essentially cut off from one another in private realms. According to its proponents, the appeal to use promises to de-mystify meaning by suitably re-connecting talk of meaning with the familiar and concrete linguistic practices into which we are naturally habituated. Since its first airing, the claim that meaning is use has gained considerable currency. While perhaps not as popular as it once was, it is fair to say that, in one form or another, it is accepted by many prominent philosophers. Indeed, Brian Loar claims that contemporary 'theory of meaning is divided into two: *truth* theories, and *use* theories' (2006: 85; cf. Borg 2004: 4).² It seems, then, that the

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'Homeric struggle' Peter Strawson famously identified battles on (2004: 132).

The use-theorist does not merely suggest that linguistic meaning is (in some sense) determined by or had in virtue of use, that how expressions are employed fixes what meanings they possess. Whatever their disparate views on the nature of meaning, many philosophers would accept such claims as more or less trivial (see Davidson 2005: 12-3; Glock 1996: 209; Higginbotham 2006: 75; Lewis 1975). Indeed, one might ask, how else could the terms of a natural language such as English, a conventional sign-system, acquire the meanings they have? The more controversial claim is, rather, that a meaning, that which is thereby determined, just *is* a use.

This putative insight has been elaborated into various full-fledged theories that apart from their common root might otherwise bear little resemblance to one another.³ Given the details of a particular worked-out proposal, various objections to a use-centred theory of meaning might or might not be effective. Among the multitude of concerns is whether such a theory could accommodate the constancy and communicability of meaning, explain the connections between words and reality, or do justice to the productivity, learnability and systematicity of language.⁴ While these matters are no doubt pressing, I shall address an objection which is in many ways more fundamental and applies equally to any use-theory whatever its details. The objection is simply that the notions of meaning and use are not equivalent.⁵

Against this claim, I shall argue that, once one specifies the relevant use to be identified with meaning, the two do *not* come apart. Of course, this response concedes a certain amount of ground to the critic; it admits that there are cases where the use of 'use' and of 'meaning' diverge. But, surely, it is never the view of the use-theorist that the terms are interchangeable

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in *all* contexts; this is obviously false. One talks of the meaning but not the use of life, and one talks of the use but not the meaning of a hammer. Rather, it is the more modest but potentially illuminating claim that there is *a* use of 'meaning'—one which calls for philosophical investigation—which coincides with one of 'use'.

Significantly, it turns out that distinguishing the relevant kind of use to be identified with meaning takes us full circle; that is, it requires employing semantic notions of the same general sort as meaning (if not meaning itself). While this is quite a different problem to that with which we started, and which is the main concern of this paper, I nevertheless offer some remarks intended to dampen, if not extinguish, its threat.

Note that I do not propose, in this paper, to argue *for* the view that meaning is use. The primary aim is only to show that the prominent, putative counterexamples to that claim are unsuccessful. Needless to say, there might be more. It would be tedious, however, to anticipate and assess each (actual and possible) case in turn. Instead, I shall present particular responses to certain sorts of counterexamples with the hope that it is clear how they might generalize.

2 A preliminary sketch

Use is a nebulous notion. Although for present purposes I need not and should not commit to a particular, full-blown account of meaning, some preliminary remarks are in order regarding how the appeal to use is to be understood. While remaining as neutral as possible on the finer details, this will provide sufficient substance to the dictum to begin a critical investigation of the purported similarities and differences between meaning and use. While there might be aspects of what is said that certain use-theorists will object to, I am confident that a

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representative number of philosophers would accept the sketch that follows.

To begin with, one must distinguish *an occasion of use* from *the way of using* an expression. By way of illustration, imagine John and Jill fall from a boat into a stormy sea. John utters 'Please help me' and Jill utters 'Please help me'. In this scenario, there are two particular utterances of the word 'help', that is, there are two occasions of use. Crucially, however, there are not two meanings here—'help' means just the same on both occasions, namely *aid* or *assistance*. Hence, one should not equate the meaning of a term with its use on an occasion. Notably, however, there is a clear sense in which Jill and John are using the word in just the same manner, that is, 'help' is being used in the same way by both. Since there is just one way of using the expression and one meaning, it would seem that one should equate the meaning of 'help' with the way of using it.

Next, one must distinguish the *actual* from the *proper* use of a word. By 'actual' use, I mean how a person (or group of people) happens as a matter of fact to employ an expression and how she is (or they are) disposed to do so. By 'proper' use, I mean how a word is *correctly* employed, how it *should, may* or *ought* to be used.⁶

One might assume that meaning is obviously to be equated with actual use. Doing so, however, appears to deliver the wrong results; specifically, it leads to false attributions of meaning. Imagine that Bill habitually uses 'refutes' interchangeably with 'denies', and regularly makes transitions from sentences such as 'Ali denies the theory' to 'Ali refutes the theory'. If one were to identify the meaning of 'refute' with how it is actually employed, it would seem that one would have to judge that it means *denies*, when in fact it means *disproves*. One might note, however, that Bill is using 'refute' incorrectly; he is not

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employing it as he should, i.e. as we use 'disprove'. Hence, equating meaning with proper use entitles one to judge that, Bill's actual employment notwithstanding, 'refute' means *disprove*.

That meaning is an intrinsically *normative* notion is controversial.⁷ Engaging with the discussion surrounding this idea would take us beyond the scope of this paper. Fortunately, doing so is not necessary for present purposes. One can admit that *prima facie* the meaning of a term is its proper use and yet leave open the questions of whether appearances in this instance are deceptive, and whether this superficially normative notion can be reduced to more basic, non-normative notions.

In summary, I suggested that, for the use-theorist, the meaning of a word is to be equated with the proper way of employing it, rather than its actual use or any occasion of its utterance. While this is already to go beyond the mere dictum that meaning is use, there remain a myriad of ways in which these ideas might be further unpacked. In this paper, I shall not explore such ways but instead, sticking with this rough-and-ready characterisation, assess the extent to which the notion thereby characterised diverges from that of meaning.

3 Use without meaning

The first objection to consider is that there exist expressions that have a use but not a meaning (Lycan 2000: 95-7; Rundle 1990: 190-1).⁸ Examples include:

um

bee-bop-a-lula

abracadabra

tallyho

Meaning and use cannot be identical if there can be the one without the other. While Glock (1996a: 207) grants this point—taking it to 'refute' the claim that meaning and use—I think it

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can be challenged.

Evidently 'um' is used, perhaps when searching for the right word or to signal that one's pause does not indicate that one's utterance is complete. Nevertheless, there is no way in which 'um' is to be used. Should one litter one's talk with instances of 'um', it would no doubt be irritating but one would not be making a linguistic *mistake*; one would not be conflicting with its *correct* use, as none has been laid down for it. Since it is the proper way of using an expression that is to be equated with meaning, and since there are no proprieties governing its use, 'um' does not present a counterexample to the equivalence claim (so interpreted). (Parallel remarks apply to 'bee-bop-a-lula'.)

The putative counterexample of 'tallyho' is more awkward. As Peter Hacker points out, it *does* 'have a rule governed use and [is] not invoked merely for the sake of the jingle' (2005: 155).⁹ Thus, Hacker concedes a difference 'between the use of "the meaning of a word" and the use of "the use of a word", even within the limitations specified'. Nevertheless, he seeks to preserve a link of sorts:

'Tallyho' does not readily lend itself to explanation in the form of "'Tallyho" means ... ', and one cannot say that the meaning of 'Tallyho' is ... [...] Does this mean that it has a use but no meaning? That would be too swift. For one would be loath to say that it is *meaningless*. We might say that it has meaning but not *a* meaning. (2005: 155)¹⁰

Unlike Hacker, I find myself quite ready to judge that 'tallyho' is meaningless. Reluctance to do so perhaps arises because that phrase is typically used to contrast words such as 'exercise' or 'piano' with utter gibberish such as 'shalbypombadoo'. Evidently, 'tallyho' is more akin to the former than the latter. Nonetheless, one can admit this much without admitting (as I doubt one usually would) that it has *meaning*.

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A different strategy would be to distinguish different *kinds* of proper use, equate meaning with one such kind and show that 'tallyho' has another. Consider an uncontroversial example of a meaningful word: 'vixen'. There are certain transitions that one might make involving that term, e.g. from 'There are vixens' to 'There are female foxes', certain words with which one might combine it, e.g. 'is a mammal', and certain words with which one would not, e.g. 'is a prime number'. Plausibly, 'vixen''s having the meaning it does is to be equated with its having this kind of *intra*-linguistic role.

In contrast, 'tallyho' has only what one might dub a 'perlocutionary' function.¹¹ While it might be uttered with the intention of achieving some *extra*-linguistic effect¹²—specifically that of bringing one's audience to believe that a fox is sighted—there are no expressions with which one might combine 'tallyho' and no transitions to and from sentences in which it is used that one might make. Hence, while 'tallyho' has a use, even a proper use, it does not have the kind of proper use possessed by expressions that have meaning, and hence does not constitute a counterexample. (The same story can be told of 'abracadabra'.)

One might consider this response *ad hoc*. However, the addendum was not introduced only to avoid an otherwise damning objection; it was independently motivated by reflection on the distinctive role of 'tallyho' and the respects in which it differs from that distinctive of meaningful expressions. Thus, one can view that objection as providing opportunity to refine how 'use' in this context is to be construed. Although it clearly shows that 'use' is not in all its applications interchangeable with 'meaning', it does not show that there is not *a* sense of 'use' in which it is interchangeable with 'meaning'.¹³

4 Differences in use not differences in meaning

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Regarding the view that the meaning of an expression is its use, Bede Rundle further objects that 'when, by whom, and to what end' an expression is used can change without it changing meaning (1979: 384-5; 1990: 9; cf. Katz 1990: 40). That is, words can differ in use in the above respects without differing in meaning. Therefore, meaning cannot be use but, in Hilary Putnam's words, 'a coarse grid laid over' it (1978: 99).

Consider, for example, the following scenario. Abraham Lincoln in 1863 in Gettysburg utters, 'Be sure to walk on the sidewalk'. Gordon Brown in 2007 in London utters, 'Be sure to walk on the pavement'. Evidently here are differences in when, where and by whom 'pavement' and 'sidewalk' are *used*, but nonetheless they *mean* the same thing. The change in use does not result in a change in meaning.

As both Hans-Johann Glock (1996a: 207) and Hacker (2005: 153) astutely point out, this criticism fails to distinguish, in the terms given above, between an *occasion of use* and a *way of using*. The above differences in speaker, geographical location and date are all differences in the former not the latter; the occasion of use changes but the way of using remains constant. Since it is the latter that is identified with meaning, the above does not constitute a counterexample.

Rundle, however, has a reply (2001: 102-3). Words such as the German articles 'die' and 'das' differ in proper usage—the first is to be coupled with feminine nouns, the other not—but they do not differ in meaning—each means *the*.

In response, one must point out that meaning is to be equated only with a specific kind of proper use and, with respect to that kind, 'die' and 'das' do *not* differ (even though they do in

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other respects). But what kind of proper use is that? I am not sure there is much one can say that is informative here. It is the kind a difference in which bears on *what might be said* by utterances of sentences in which the relevant expressions occur. A person might, for example, use either 'Das Gespräch ist interessant' or 'Die Unterhaltung ist interessant' to say that the conversation is interesting. More straightforwardly, one can individuate the use as the kind that is constant between a word and its *translation*.

While the objection points to a difference in use that does not result in a difference in meaning, it is not of the relevant kind. The undeniable divergence in how 'das' and 'die' are properly employed does not show that their use is not the same according to less fine-grained criteria. One can therefore continue to treat meaning as use so long as one identifies the specific sort of use, and the distinctive proprieties governing it. That said, making the relevant distinctions in this instance evidently requires drawing on semantic concepts of the same sort as that of meaning. I shall return to address this below (§6).

5 Features of use not features of meaning

A further objection Rundle raises (1990: 9; 2001: 100), and Glock elaborates (1996a: 208), is that there are features of use that are not features of meaning. Specifically, a use but not a meaning might be ill-advised, unjustified, encouraged, prohibited, accompanied by gestures, revealing, widespread, misleading, dying out or occasion disputes. Use and meaning clearly cannot be the same if one can have properties the other cannot.

Surely, however, *the way a word is to be used* cannot be fashionable, although actually uttering an expression in that way can. To say that the use of an expression is fashionable to say that there is a tendency to use a word in a certain way. Such a trend can increase or

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decrease as fickle attitudes change, but the way a word is to be used does not admit of degrees. The same can be said of the other features listed above. All are features of an occasion of use, or a tendency of use, rather than of the proper way of using an expression. It is the latter, however, that is equated with meaning.¹⁴

A remaining case, which Glock raises, is less easily dealt with. The way an expression is to be used might involve gestures, but a meaning could not.

Here one must, again, distinguish the way of using equated with meaning from others. One might single it out as that which is conveyed by a *definition*, is constant between an expression and its *translation*, or one must grasp if one is to *understand* it. That way of using does not involve gestures. Hence, while there are ways an expression is to be employed that involve gestures, there remains a sort that does not. It is that sort which is to be identified with meaning.

Notably, some of the notions by which the intended use is picked out are semantic notions on a par with that of meaning. For this reason, one might not be prepared to countenance some of the moves made here. In the next section, I shall respond to this concern.

6 Circularity

In a rather different context, Donald Davidson writes:

It is empty to say meaning is use unless we specify what use we have in mind, and when we do specify, in a way that helps with meaning, we find ourselves going in a circle. (2005: 13; cf. Rundle 2001: 101)

One might think that the preceding discussion only supports such a contention. Throughout, talk of use has been presented as talk of correct employment. But, intuitively, the 'correct'

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use of a word is just that which accords with *meaning*. And in further restricting the notion of proper use so as to ensure it coincides with that of meaning, I appealed to notions such as *translation, definition, understanding, and what is said*. Surely, one might argue, for a theory of meaning to appeal to such semantic notions is circular.

In response, there are a number of points to note. First, even if it is true that the relevant sense of use can only be distinguished by appeal to notions of the same kind as that of meaning, this does not show that the notion of *meaning* itself must play such a role. Instead, one might pick out the distinctive use via notions such as *translation* or *understanding*, which might be intelligible independently of that of meaning, if not more basic. One would need to provide an argument as to why this is an illegitimate strategy.

Second, even if ultimately the notion of use can only be distinguished by employing the notion of meaning itself, that would not as such undermine the appeal to use. An account might be circular without being *viciously* so. Indeed, it is far from obvious that philosophical illumination of a given phenomenon can only be achieved when it is couched in independently intelligible and more fundamental terms. Even if it should turn out that grasping the relevant sense of 'use' requires a prior or simultaneous grasp of the concept of meaning, talk of use might nonetheless be more perspicuous than talk of meaning and so genuinely contribute to revealing the latter to be epistemologically and ontologically unproblematic. Moreover, by suitably connecting the 'meaning-laden' notion of proper usage to other semantic notions, and more widely to the style of intentional and psychological explanation to which it is intimately related, one might find considerable room to maneuver and, thereby, scope for illumination.¹⁵

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Needless to say, there is much hand-waving here and nothing has been done to show that such a non-reductionist approach would indeed bear fruit.¹⁶ The aim, however, was only to take some of the sting out of a seemingly urgent worry. At the least, it should not be accepted without question that the possibility that, on inspection, the claim that meaning is use takes us full circle counts against it.

Finally, and most importantly for present purposes, should the circularity objection stick, it provides no support for those who deny that meaning is use. On the contrary, only if the two notions overlap in the relevant respects, only if they are too close for comfort, so to speak, could the circularity objection get off the ground. Since this paper's primary aim is to deny that meaning and use diverge, the circularity objection is beside the point.

7 Conclusion

Rundle tells us that 'you cannot readily say that the meaning of a word just *is* its use' (2001: 103). Likewise, Glock remarks that 'the notions of meaning and rule-guided use ... diverge in important respects' (1996b: 378). Again, Hacker speaks of the 'failure to plot the ragged contour lines of the concept of meaning within the scope of the concept of the rule-governed use of a word' (2005: 158). I have tried to show that such judgements are unwarranted.

There might, of course, be further examples that demonstrate a divergence between meaning and use but those so far considered have not done so. Certainly, the cases examined establish that the notion of meaning equates only to *a* specific notion of use but, I argued, this does not establish that it does not equate to *any* notion of use. Picking out the relevant use does, however, appear to require appeal to concepts of the same kind as that of meaning.

Nevertheless, this does not show that in principle the appeal to use is of no philosophical

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worth. Whether or not in fact it is remains to be seen.¹⁷

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Notes

¹ Respectively Wittgenstein 1967: §43; Wittgenstein 1982: §289. Note that this paper is intended as neither an exegesis nor a defense of Wittgenstein's views.

² For present purposes, this diagnosis will suffice, although the relationship between use-based and truth-theoretic approaches to meaning is somewhat more complex than one of mere opposition.

³ Contrast, for example, the very different accounts in Brandom 1994 and Horwich 2005.

⁴ For critical overviews of such issues, see Lepore 1994 and Whiting 2006a.

⁵ To say that the notions of meaning and use are equivalent is, for present purposes, to say that they are co-extensive. Certain proponents or detractors of the claim that meaning is use might have a stronger reading in mind than this. Nevertheless, for the most part I shall stick to this weaker interpretation since, if it is false, any stronger version will also be false.

⁶ In virtue of what a way of using is 'proper' is an issue that I cannot resolve here. The idea is, roughly, that linguistic practitioners implicitly or explicitly introduce standards against which the employment of expressions is checked, that is, the proprieties of use are instituted by the users themselves.

⁷ Kripke popularized the view that meaning is intrinsically normative (1982). For recent criticism, see Boghossian 2005; Glüer 1999; Hattiangadi 2006; Wikforss 2001. For recent defence, see Glock 2005; Whiting 2007b.

⁸ A specific case in point is proper names, which have a use but according to a prominent view no meaning (see Lycan 2000: 94; Rundle 2000: 101). Adequately discussing the phenomenon of proper names is beyond the scope of this paper and I shall not address it here.

⁹ I attribute this view to Hacker alone although it is expressed in Baker and Hacker 2005. The chapter in which the issue is discussed is an addition to the revised edition, which Hacker prepared independently. This is not to suggest, of course, that Baker would not have endorsed

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Hacker's position.

¹⁰ Hacker also draws attention to words, such as prepositions, of which one would not say 'The meaning of x is ...' but would readily say 'The use of x is ...' (2005: 155). This, in Hacker's view, demonstrates significant differences between the notions of use and of meaning. Interestingly, however, Hacker recognizes contexts in which such a form of words would be suitable, e.g. when providing a *translation*. One might comfortably say, for example, 'The meaning of "es" is *it*'. That one would not readily do so for such an expression in one's own language surely has more to do with the availability of terms in that language that could be used to give the meaning of the relevant word than with differences between meaning and use. Specifications of meaning of the above form function by displaying a (familiar) term or terms with the relevant meaning (or usage). Words like 'it' typically have no counterparts within the language and cannot be decomposed. Thus, sentences of the form, 'The meaning of "it" is ...' are not ill-formed but of little utility in conveying how an expression is to be understood.

¹¹ The term 'perlocutionary' is borrowed, more or less faithfully, from Austin 1976: 100-1. Incidentally, Austin introduces the term in order to distinguish 'the different uses of the expression' 'use', which in his view is 'a hopelessly ambiguous or wide word, just as is the word "meaning"'.

¹² Here, 'extra-linguistic effect' excludes what Austin calls 'uptake', i.e. the mere recognition of which act is being performed (see Hornsby 2006: 900).

¹³ Recently, opponents of the appeal to use have presented *derogatory expressions* as a converse counterexample, i.e. a case of words with a meaning but no use (see Hornsby 2001; Williamson 2003). I shall not assess such claims here but do so in Whiting 2007a.

¹⁴ Another case is that a use might be *ungrammatical* while a meaning could not be.

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However, this point does not apply since, as Hacker says, talk of the use of a word in this context 'is intended to select something *normative*. It is use that accords with what is regarded as correct explanation' (2005: 153).

¹⁵ These sketchy remarks are supposed to gesture to the mode of analysis that Strawson dubs 'connective analysis' (1992: ch. 2).

¹⁶ For more extensive remarks on why a reductionist account of meaning in independently intelligible or more basic terms is not required (and perhaps not feasible), see Whiting 2006b. For a recent and excellent example of how much work can be achieved by a non-reductionist, use-based approach to meaning, see Alston 2000.

¹⁷ I am indebted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding that made writing this paper possible. Versions of it were presented, in various circumstances, at Lancaster, Reading, Southampton and Stirling. I am grateful to the audiences and respondents on those occasions for valuable feedback. Thanks also to Emma Borg, Hanjo Glock, Javier Kalhat, Adrian Moore, Bede Rundle and Galen Strawson for helpful discussion of earlier incarnations of the material, and to an anonymous referee for suggesting changes that greatly improved the paper.