

Secondary Meaning in Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics

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Abstract

This paper presents the possibility of interpreting the two uses of the words “same”, “analogous” and “similar” that are discussed in *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* as the primary and secondary meanings he discusses in *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* and *Philosophy of Psychology — A Fragment*. Although the hitherto overlooked significance of the concept of “secondary meaning” has been pointed out by a number of commentators, to the best of my knowledge, little research has been done on its potential significance in Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics. This paper is positioned as a preparatory work to discuss the significance.

(1) Research Topic

This paper proposes to interpret the two uses of the words “same”, “analogous” and “similar” that Wittgenstein discusses in LFM as the primary and secondary meaning, respectively.

(2) Background and Previous Research

At §276 of *Philosophy of Psychology — A Fragment*, Wittgenstein distinguishes between the primary and secondary meaning of a word. In order to see what the distinction is like, we must look at the preceding section:

Given the two concepts ‘fat’ and ‘lean’, would you be inclined to say that Wednesday was fat and Tuesday lean, or the other way round? (I am strongly inclined towards the former.) Now have “fat” and “lean” some different meaning here from their usual one? — They have a different use. — So ought I really to have used different words? Certainly not. — I want to use *these* words (with their familiar meanings) *here*. (PPF §274)

At first glance, the sentence, “Wednesday is fat”, might not seem to make any sense. However, this kind of expression does make some sense to some people (including Wittgenstein and the author of this paper)¹. At least, it is probably safe to say that this *prima facie* nonsense is totally different from, say, the nonsense of the babble of a baby (cf. PI §282). It is this kind of meaning that Wittgenstein calls “secondary meaning”.

In a nutshell, secondary meaning consists in applying a certain word with the familiar meaning (i.e., the primary meaning) in new contexts (cf. LW1 §797). When we say, “Wednesday is fat and Tuesday is lean”, we mean what we literally mean by the words “fat” and “lean”. In actual fact, even if someone asks us what it means for Wednesday to be fat, we cannot express what we mean in any other way. This linguistic phenomenon is what Wittgenstein calls secondary meaning.

More specifically, Wittgenstein points out the following four characteristics of secondary meaning:

1. Some words (such as “fat” and “lean”) have a different use (not a different meaning) when they are used in the secondary sense (PPF §274).
2. The secondary meaning is not a metaphorical one, for one could not express what one wants to say in any other way than by means of the word at issue (PPF §278).
3. The secondary use (the use in a secondary sense; cf. PI §282) is parasitic upon the primary one. Wittgenstein says that “[o]nly someone for whom the word has the former meaning [=primary meaning] uses it in the latter [=secondary meaning]” (PPF §276).
4. One does not describe something with the secondary use of a word (cf. LW1 §§72–73). Michel ter Hark (2014) explains:

In particular, the situation is not to be conceptualized as if we first have to recognize and identify the weekdays as fat and then describe this experience by saying ‘Wednesday is fat’. For asked what experience one refers to, one can only repeat the original expression, e.g. ‘Wednesday is fat’. But if one cannot ‘describe’ the experience without repeating the same words, they are not what

is called a description. (p. 516)

In light of the strangeness or peculiarity of the sentence used as an example (i.e., “Wednesday is fat”), it may seem as if the linguistic phenomenon Wittgenstein is discussing here is such a trivial one that it has no philosophical importance whatsoever. But the important aspects of the secondary meaning have been indicated by a number of commentators. For example, Cora Diamond, in her seminal work (Diamond 2001a), pointed out the relevance of the secondary meaning to some of the issues addressed in Wittgenstein’s “A Lecture on Ethics”. Malcolm Budd (2006), Benjamin R. Tilghman (1984) and Oswald Hanfling (2002) discuss the applications of this concept to aesthetics, and ter Hark (2010), in criticizing such attempts, emphasizes Wittgenstein’s therapeutic purpose when he discusses the concept of secondary meaning. Thus, Wittgenstein’s concept of secondary meanings is a potentially versatile concept that allows for a variety of applications.

However, to the best of my knowledge, little research has been done on its potential significance in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mathematics². Therefore, as a prelude to discussing the implications the concept has for Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mathematics, this paper proposes a reading that interprets as the primary and secondary uses the two uses of the words “same”, “analogous” and “similar” which are discussed at length in LFM. In the next section, we will see the parallels between the salient features of secondary meaning and what Wittgenstein says about the two uses of those words³.

Note, however, that, mainly because of the limited space, this paper does not make the following assertions as what Wittgenstein would have made. That is, it would require another paper to present the following claims as Wittgenstein’s.

(3) Author’s Claim

Wittgenstein makes the following distinction in LFM regarding the use of the word “analogous” (LFM p. 59):

- (1) We describe a particular pattern, say, on wallpaper, by saying, “It

is analogous to so-and-so.”

(2) “This is the analogous case, not that.” — This is quite different. For in this case we have two things before us; but in the former case we had only one thing before us and described another thing (or ordered him to do another thing) by means of the word “analogous”.

Based on this distinction, Wittgenstein goes on to describe the grammar of this word (and its two synonyms) in its two different uses. We take (1) above as the primary use of the word, and (2) as the secondary one. And we will demonstrate below that what Wittgenstein discusses about them is consistent with the characteristics of the secondary meaning listed in the previous section.

As for 1, this might seem evident from the passage quoted above. However, Wittgenstein states at one point that “the words “same”, “similar”, and “analogous” are each used *in two different senses*” (LFM p. 58, italics mine). Should we see this sentence as contradictory to 1 in the previous section? I do not consider this to be inconsistent for the following two reasons.

First of all, Wittgenstein prefaces the above sentence with the caveat, “although this is not a good way of putting it” (ibid.). It would be virtually impossible not to think of this proviso as referring to the italicized part, for, otherwise, what does it refer to? Indeed, Wittgenstein talks almost exclusively about the *uses* of these words in the subsequent lectures (LFM pp. 58, 60, 63, 64 and *passim*).

Second, we can point out that Wittgenstein uses the terms “primary *meaning*” and “secondary *meaning*” even though he says that there is a difference in use rather than in meaning between the primary and secondary use of a word. If it is in this sense that Wittgenstein uses the phrase “two different senses” in the above-mentioned remark, then it follows that there is no inconsistency here.

Now let’s move on to the second feature of secondary meaning. We discuss this point here with the example of a pupil in PI §185, who continues a series (“+2”) in a strange way: The pupil continues the series of numbers successfully up to 1000, but once he reaches 1000, he starts to deviate and writes 1004, 1008, 1012, etc. To make him understand that

he is wrong, we might point to the series of numbers up to 1000 and the series after 1000 that he wrote and say, “This is not the same as that”, or “This is not analogous to that”. Note that the use of the words “same” and “analogous” here is the secondary one. Now, what else can we say here to get our point across to him? Obviously, all we can do is repeat the old explanations. And that is precisely the heart of the problem presented by Wittgenstein as what we call the rule-following paradox in the first place. We want to use the words “same” and “analogous” in this very situation, and it is impossible to express what we want to say with any other words⁴. Therefore, the secondary use of these words is not a metaphorical one.

The same example can be used to discuss the third feature. The teacher teaches the pupil a certain rule by saying, “This is the same as this”, or “This is analogous to that”, while enumerating some specific examples, but only those who can follow that rule themselves can use the words “same” and “analogous” in this way. In other words, the pupil, who is not yet able to follow the rule, cannot use the word “same” in the same way as the teacher does. Only someone for whom the word “same” in “continue in the same way”, which is used in the other sense (viz., (1) of the two uses mentioned above; cf. LFM p. 59), makes sense uses it in this sense (viz., (2), for, when we say in this example, “This is the same as this”, we have more than one thing in front of us).

To sum up, of the two uses of the word “same”, (2) is parasitic upon (1), so we can say that these two uses are respectively the secondary and primary uses of the word. What this means, after all, is that only those who are able to follow the rules themselves can teach them to others⁵.

Finally, we discuss the fourth feature. In this regard, Wittgenstein himself explicitly says as follows:

But now we have quite a different language-game. I point to two things in turn and say to you, “Surely this is analogous to this.” The difference now is that we point to two things instead of to one. Hence this game is not to describe what is here or what is there; for we have both things in front of us and can see them. (LFM p. 60)

In teaching a pupil how to follow a rule, we say, “Surely this is analogous

to this.” The point of this language-game is not to describe something, but to train the use of the word “analogous” (cf. *ibid.*).

In fact, there is a rather interesting parallel between what ter Hark says about secondary meaning and what we are discussing here:

Hence their role is not to inform another person about something, i.e. an experience. Rather, they are aimed at inducing the other person to join the same expression (and hence the same experience). (ter Hark 2014, p. 516)

Ter Hark says that the point of using a word in the secondary sense is to induce “the other person to join the same expression”. If this is true, it helps to bolster our reading because we could say that the word “same” that is used in the sense of (2) also has its point in “inducing” the other person to join the same expression. Namely, when we say, “This is the same as that”, we are training the person to use the “same” in the same way that we use it.

As we have seen above, the various features of the two uses of the word “same” that Wittgenstein distinguishes in his lectures on the foundations of mathematics fit fairly well with those of what he calls the primary and secondary meaning. Hence, there seems to be some validity in interpreting the two uses of the word as the primary and secondary ones.

(4) Future Prospects

What is presented in this paper is merely the possibility of interpreting the distinction Wittgenstein makes regarding such words as “same” and “analogous” as the distinction between primary and secondary meanings. It remains to be further discussed what kind of perspective this interpretation allows.

Words that are used secondarily imply the existence of some special or bizarre kind of facts (e.g., “Wednesday being fat”). Similarly, the word “same” that is used in the secondary meaning, if it is confused with the one that is used in the primary meaning, gives the spurious impression that it describes something which is to be discovered in some sense, thus facilitating a particular picture of mathematics as discovery⁶. However,

the misunderstanding can be removed by recognizing that the words used secondarily do not represent any special sort of fact, but are actually parasitic upon the primary meaning (cf. Diamond 2001, p. 234; Kindi 2009, p. 203). Additionally, the interpretation in this paper may also shed new light on the rule-following considerations, given the pivotal place that the word “same” occupies in there.

To summarize, Wittgenstein’s points may become clearer if we reframe the distinction he makes in his lectures as the distinction between primary and secondary meanings. However, the examinations of this issue and the possible ramifications for the rule-following considerations require another paper.

Notes

1. According to some interpreters, secondary meanings are prevalent in our language; for example, Diamond (2001a) remarks that “sad” and “timid” in “sad music” and “timid face” are also used in a secondary sense. Wittgenstein himself also refers to “calculating in the head” in discussing secondary meaning (PPF §277).
2. Diamond (2001b) is a work that attempts to clarify the significance of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mathematics by using “secondary sense”.
3. Wittgenstein says, “whatever I say about one of these words in this lecture will apply to all of them” (LFM p. 58).
4. The word “same” used in the primary meaning can be replaced by other words: “When we told him to continue in the same way, we expected him to write certain things. So in this case our saying to him “Continue in the same way” or “Work according to the pattern” means “Write 104”. And similarly “He continued in the same way” or “He worked according to the pattern” means “He wrote 104”.” (LFM p. 59).
5. The connection between the word “rule” and the word “same” is pointed out and discussed by Wittgenstein (cf. PI §225).
6. One of Wittgenstein’s major objectives in LFM is to distinguish between discovering and inventing something (cf. LFM p. 67). See also LFM p. 22.

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