

# Games after Wittgenstein

Marical Boo

## 1 Language as an Ancient City

“Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 18

### For the teacher:

Words have history wrapped up in them. Knowing a word's history can help you and your students understand its present, and more easily see the links between the word in English and similar words in other languages. It can also be fun.

### For the classroom:

1. On a large blank sheet of paper, ask your students to draw a map of the route they take from home to work or from home to school. But they mustn't put any words on the map.
2. Now ask them to write words along the route wherever they feel like it. But the words cannot be nouns. Then ask them to explain their words to their partner. Why did they put each word where it is? Are there any more words they could add? How do the nouns fit in now?
3. Ask your students to write the words they have used on pieces of card. Give your students, in groups, access to a good dictionary (i.e. one which includes the date when a word was first used, and the language of its origin).
4. Ask your students to find out how many languages they can find referred to in the dictionary (i.e. how many languages has English borrowed words from?). What is the first recorded use of a word in the dictionary (i.e. can they find the oldest usage?)
5. Ask your students to write on each of their cards the date the word was first used in English and the language it came from or it is related to. For example, next to the word 'dark', they could write "originally from German", "used at least from 1598"; next to 'complicated', they could write "from Latin", "first used 1626".

6. Together, you are going to make a historical map of their maps using their own words. On the white board (or on the floor if you'd rather), get your students to build a city with their words. Perhaps this could be done along the lines described above by Wittgenstein – with the oldest words in the middle and the newer words in the suburbs. Alternatively, your students might want to group the words according to the language they've come from or are related to. Or perhaps the common words could be the main streets, and the rarer words could be the back streets. It's up to you and your students to decide. For example, is there a Latin Quarter in your city?
7. Get your students to write a story about this city you've created. Do they like it? Do they belong there? Where are good places to go?

## 2 Vocabulary Classification

[Looking at language] “is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. ... But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 12

### **For the teacher:**

When you or your student look at a piece of text full of words, you can sometimes be overawed – like looking at the handles in a steam train, or the buttons and levers and flashing lights in the cockpit of an aeroplane. ‘Grouping’ words can make it easier to remember what they do. Dictionaries do this. But what criteria do dictionaries use to classify words? Would other categories be as useful?

### **For the classroom:**

1. Ask your students in groups to divide words in English into, say, six categories. To help them, you could give them a text, or words written on cards. What categories did they come up with? Were six categories too few?
2. Traditionally, we have divided words into the grammatical categories of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. These are often the categories dictionaries use to classify words. How do your students know what category the dictionary has put the word in? What abbreviations are commonly used, for example?
3. List the dictionary categories on the white board. What can your students do with the words in these categories? Try to make your students think about how

they use these words, in what contexts, and how, rather than just define what a noun is, for example.

4. How do your students know what category a word 'belongs' to? Give them some 'invented' words – like *denk*, *sard*, *brank*, *orseth*, etc – as well as some 'real' words. What clues do the words have in themselves which might suggest how they might be used?
5. You will soon need to give your students some examples of how these words (both real and invented) are used in practice. Examples will give the game away – e.g. “she likes to denk on Sundays”, “there’s a denk on the grass”, “it was a denk afternoon”. Examples which show words in action can be more useful than knowing its classification. Your students could write down an example of a word’s use, instead of a definition, as a way of remembering it.
6. There are many other ways of classifying words. Your students might have thought of some already. Ask them to think of others – these could be based on what the word looks like (e.g. words which begin with ‘t’; words with an ‘x’ in), or based on what the word sounds like (e.g. words with soft sounds; words which sound like the wind in the trees), or based on occurrence (e.g. words from newspapers, words I don’t often see), or based on meaning (e.g. words I use at work), or based on subjectivity (e.g. words I like; words I find difficult to remember), or any other category (e.g. words to use when I don’t know what to say) etc.
7. What classification is most useful do you think? Remember that words, like all tools, are useful only when they are used. So, just like the buttons on a video-recorder – if you don’t think you’ll need the word, don’t learn it. You can always look it up in the manual later.

### 3 Language rules as Wittgensteinian Signposts

“A rule stands there like a sign-post. – Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it show which direction I am to take when I have passed it ...? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or in the opposite one? – And if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground – is there only one way of interpreting them? So I can say, the sign-post does after all leave room for doubt.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 85

#### **For the teacher:**

Rules are signposts that help us on our way. But we need to understand how rules work in order to follow them (e.g. we follow a signpost in the direction it’s pointing,

not off to the side; and we follow instructions by giving words their accepted meaning, not different ones). We can also choose whether we want to follow the rule or not. Following rules often leads us down a well-signposted path which many others have trodden. Deciding not to follow the rule – not to ‘play by the rules of the game’ – could lead us down an unmarked path, which might end up being better or worse for us. Without a signpost, it’s a risk we can’t know.

**For the classroom:**

1. Ask your students in groups to think of rules that exist in their societies. These might include ‘don’t spit in public’, ‘drive on the left of the road’, ‘boys must ask girls to dance, not vice versa’. Are there different versions of these rules in different countries? What are the rules they’ve noticed in the UK. Were all of these rules pointed out to them? If not, how do your students learn them? Write some of these rules on the white board.
2. Now ask your students to think of rules in the English language. These could be ‘speak of yourself using the first person singular’, ‘you can add an ‘s’ to some words to make a plural’, ‘I normally look at the person I’m talking to’. Some of these rules are set out in grammar books. But is that how your students learned all these rules? Which ones are the same in their own language? Which ones are only ‘rules of thumb’? Write your students’ rules on the white board.
3. Ask your students to look at both sets of rules in turn and ask two sets of questions. First, ask your students to think about the purpose of the rule. What is the rule good for? How are these rules helpful? (Are they useful for more than being just sign posts? Do they help to order society?) Do this for both the list of social rules and linguistic rules.
4. Then ask your students to imagine what would happen if they chose not to follow the rules. How would they break a rule? What would the effect be? What kind of people might want to break each rule? Would breaking the rule make your students’ lives easier or more difficult? Ask them to pick one social rule and one linguistic rule and imagine themselves breaking these rules. How would they feel? What would happen?
5. Are there any circumstances when it is acceptable to break these rules? For example, when you’ve been shot, it’s OK to spit (blood) in public. Or if you’re the Queen, you are allowed to speak about yourself in the first person plural. Are there any rules for which you can’t think of times when you can break them?
6. What rules do your students think it would be a good idea to stick to in the classroom?

## 4 Discussion on nature of truth

“...how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? ... Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me and vice versa?”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 79

### For the teacher:

We often take on trust that something is ‘true’. But history has shown us that some statements once thought to be self-evident have had their ‘supporting props’ questioned and removed one by one until they were revealed to be ‘false’. In this way, one model of the world replaces another. However, as individuals, we cannot live questioning everything all the time. And the act of questioning some assertions can represent a challenge to our very sense of self. So we are right, often, not to question our belief that certain things are true.

### For the classroom:

1. Get your students into two teams. Give each team 10 minutes to think of 2 or 3 statements of things that they are certain are true. These statements are entirely up to the members of the group, but examples might be ‘the earth goes round the sun’; ‘the second world war lasted from 1939 to 1945’; ‘this room has 13 people in it’ ‘my father is a dentist’. When the groups have come up with a list of these statements, write them on the board. Now get Group B to think of things which might stop Group A believing their statements to be true. And vice versa. What would have to be proved (and how) for them to believe the opposite of their statements? For example, would your students still believe that the room had 13 people in it if they were shown that ghosts exist, or that one of the people in the room is a robot, or a mirage?
2. In small groups, ask your students to tell each other whether there have been any times when they have changed their point of view? When (as teenagers or adults)? How (who said or did what)? Have they wanted to change their minds more recently?
3. Have your students ever met anybody with radically different thoughts or beliefs to theirs? Who were they? What beliefs did they have? How did your students react? Did your students change their views as a result of their meeting? Or did it confirm them in what they believed before? Do your students believe the same as their parents? If not, how and why did their views change?
4. We often categorise people with different beliefs into a different group. Do your students remember the first time they met someone who belonged to a different group to theirs (i.e. someone from a different religion, or with a

different political viewpoint, or with a different skin colour, or who was differently abled physically or mentally)? Did meeting them change their attitudes or beliefs about anything?

5. There are some things which are important for us to believe. Ask your students in pairs or small groups to discuss those beliefs which they would not want to give up believing in no matter how strong the evidence to the contrary. These statements might include: 'there is a God'; 'my job is worthwhile'; 'my daughter loves me'; or 'my mother is my real mother'. These statements are intrinsic to the way we feel about ourselves. These beliefs make up our identity.

## 5 Discussion on models students measure themselves against

“For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison – as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 131

### For the teacher:

Comparing ourselves with others is an important means for us to check that we are comfortable with who we are and what we believe. It allows us to compare our model of the world with that of others. Making comparisons can also help us move away from models of the world which we don't like, and move towards one we're happier with.

### For the classroom:

1. Ask your students in pairs or groups to think of someone who has been or who is a 'measuring-rod' or role model in their lives. Perhaps someone they compare themselves with. Or someone they look up to. This could be their mother, father, brother or sister, work colleague, friend or partner. They do not have to name them – they can call their measuring rod 'person A'. Do your students compare themselves with all aspects of that person? Or only some?
2. Have your students' role models changed over the years? Who did they look up to and measure themselves against when they were a young teenager, or an adolescent, or at university, or in their twenties, etc.? How do they feel now about their former role models?
3. Do your students have an 'ideal' of themselves which they compare their 'real' self with? Do they ever say to themselves 'I wish I ...', for example? Or they might have an ideal of themselves in 5 or 10 years' time. How do they think they could get to their ideal?

4. Ask your students whether there are other people who look up to, or measure themselves against, them? Who are they? What do they see in your students? Did your students ever dream of doing something that they can do now – something that others would look up to?
5. What about in language? How well would your students like to speak English? What is their measuring-rod? Is it a person they know, or is it a 'level of ability' which they'd like to get to?
6. Has this linguistic measuring rod shifted over time? What was their first linguistic ambition when they started learning English? Can they remember? Often students want to be able to read the newspaper, to understand the radio, to be able to talk to native speakers. These goals may well have been gained already. Can your students do now what they aimed at when they started? Are other students aiming at what they can do now? What is their goal now?
7. Ask your students to imagine a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being 'no ability' and 10 being perfect. When they first started learning English they were near the bottom perhaps, but where? Where would your students be now? Do 0 and 10 mean the same to your students now as they meant when they started learning? How has your students' scale changed?

## 6 The written versus the spoken word

“Let us try the following definition: You are reading when you derive the reproduction from the original. ... But why do we say that he has derived the spoken from the printed words? Do we know anything more than that we taught him how each letter should be pronounced, and that he then read the words out loud? ... [Or that] he shows that he is deriving his script from the printed words by consulting the table.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 162

### **For the teacher:**

Does the spoken word precede every written text? When you read a text, what are you re-creating in your mind? Is it a set of words which someone has once spoken? Or was it originally a written text? What is the difference? What happens when you write? Do you 'say' things in your head, or does it appear for the first time on the page?

### **For the classroom:**

1. You will need to play a cassette for your students – something from the radio, perhaps, like 'Thought for the Day' or a play on Radio 4 – something that is spoken but that could (or could not) have been written first. What follows will depend on what you record, with a greater or a lesser emphasis on the written

or the spoken aspects. Perhaps you could record a variety of programmes – each no more than a couple of minutes – to see what the differences are. Perhaps you can transcribe one of the extracts so that your students can read it as well.

2. Ask your students to look at and listen to written and spoken versions of the same text. Can they tell which is the original? What are the clues that tell them that one has been derived from the other? With some texts, it's easy – cumbersome sentence structure with sub-clauses can indicate a written text, whilst lots of repetition and hesitation can indicate a spoken text.
3. But sometimes it's not so clear. How about a poem? How do we know whether it was the written or the oral version which came first? What does it mean for something to be written to be spoken?
4. Ask your students in groups to think about the differences between speaking and writing and the relative importance of each. Which came first historically, the written or spoken form? Does that make it more important? Why do you think writing developed? What function did it serve? Which is more important to our society today? Get your students to think about the role of speaking and writing in our own societies. What is the function of each? And what can be best done by speaking and what by writing. Can you say whether one is more important than the other? What do your students consider to be the role of speaking and writing in the future?
5. Get one group to imagine that they belonged to a society that does not write, but only speaks. Another group belongs to a society which only writes but doesn't speak (an internet society?) What would be the consequences of this on the way the society is organised?
6. What relative priority do your students attach to learning to read and write, as opposed to learning to listen and to speak, in English? Have they advanced more rapidly in one than the other? Why might that be? Is learning to speak more important than learning to write or vice versa? How might they both be important in different ways? What are their own priorities and how should they focus their energies and their time?