Does Language Have an Essence? From Wittgenstein *via* Rhees to Brandom

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§1. Introduction

IN § 65 OF *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS*, Wittgenstein articulated his widely known view that there is no such thing as the essence of language:

> Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I'm saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all —but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all "languages". (Wittgenstein 2009, § 65).

The affinity which Wittgenstein speaks about in the passage is a kind of similarity that can be termed "family resemblances" between different "language games" (§§ 66–67). Accordingly, there is no one specific game or function that would be essential to language, by virtue of which something could be named "a language". Various language games, like games in the ordinary sense of the word, are not covered by any common definition, nor do they all share any joint constitutive content. Instead, they are connected far less strictly, being akin to each other in the way in which family members are —i.e. not all of them must manifest one and the same characteristic feature, but still are, in some way, similar to each other. On the same basis, what we call "language" comprises a variety of different dimensions and activities, none of which play a special, essential role. In § 18 of *Philosophical Investigations*, this matter has been captured by an evocative metaphor, where Wittgenstein compares language to a city:

> Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a

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multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses (Wittgenstein 2009, § 18; from now on *PI*).

As it is impossible to answer the question: "how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?" (*PI*, § 29), it is also unmanageable to determine which and how many games it takes before language begins to be a language. The urban analogy of § 18 can be interpreted —for example after Harald Johanessen (Johanessen 2008, p. 67) —in the following way: the pursuit of the essence of language resembles the search for the centre, or downtown, of such an old city. Our quest for it could proceed gradually by "tearing out" its particular quarters, streets, parks and houses, in the hope of discovering its true core. In the same vein, the philosophical pursuit of the essence of language consists in progressively "cutting off" different language games, so as to get to a game that will turn out to be constitutive of, as well as indispensable to, the language as a whole, and thus may be regarded as its essence. It may be assumed that it would be an autonomous language game, possible to be played out while, assumingly, no other game is being played. Wittgenstein's answer suggests that in both cases, i.e. that of the city and the language, there is no way to get to the core.

In addition, it seems that Wittgenstein's words ought not to be interpreted as implying only that an autonomous, complete, essential language game does not exist; it might also mean that there are possibly many various, even if primitive, language games that are autonomous, still no one constituting the linguistic essence. For, at the beginning of *PI*, § 18, he emphasizes:

> Don't let it bother you that languages (2) and (8) consist only of orders. If you want to say that they are therefore incomplete, ask yourself whether our own language is complete —whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated into it (*PI*, § 18).

Some examples of such primitive but complete language games would be —while following Wittgenstein's suggestions —a language consisting only of imperatives (*PI*, §§2, 8), of orders and reports in battle (*PI*, § 19), or "of questions and expressions for answering Yes and No" (*PI*, § 19), or even Augustinian naming language of § 1. Yet, to repeat, the game that would constitute the real essence of language cannot exist.

The aim of this paper is to present a certain line of criticism about Wittgenstein's view as sketched above, as well as to point to a particular, convincing alternative to it. The criticism proceeds in two stages and comes from two different philosophers:

Rush Rhees and Robert B. Brandom. The two writers come from different philosophical generations[1] and represent slightly different philosophical orientations; moreover, one rather cannot detect any direct theoretical inspiration or influence of Rhees exerted on Brandom[2] although the influence of Wittgenstein upon both is undisputable and overtly declared. Yet, it seems that their criticisms of Wittgenstein's stance on the essence of language have several important points in common, and as such —may be tentatively treated as, to some extent, complementary. In particular, Rhees' considerations may provide additional reasons for Brandom's belief that language does have an essence, and shed some light on the motivation for his claiming that the so–called *game of giving and asking for reasons* —the core of inferentialism —is that thing constituting that essence. Thus, the paper is also aimed at showing that Brandom's inferentialism can find additional support in some of Rhees' texts.

It is worth noting that the paper will not analyse and evaluate the correctness of neither Rhees' nor Brandom's reading of Wittgenstein (particularly the opening sections of *Philosophical Investigations*). Nor does it raise methodological questions concerning the appropriate interpretational approach to *Philosophical Investigations* (Pichler 2007), despite the fact that in the case of one's taking strong therapeutic and anti–theoretic approach[3] to this book (Goldfarb 1983; Cavell 1962), it might turn out that both the critical arguments of Rhees' and Brandom's might miss their target, i.e. miss Wittgenstein's actual stance on language. The main assumption —and conviction —underlying it is that both Rhees' and Brandom's considerations have considerable importance independently of whether they refer to the actual view of Wittgenstein or the view deduced from his writings through interpretation.

§ 2. Rhees' Wittgenstein: language as a family of games

One of the first polemics against Wittgenstein's view, as roughly outlined above, was voiced by Rush Rhees in his "Wittgenstein's Builders" (Rhees 1959), whereas his

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[1]   Rhees (1905–1989); Brandom (born in 1950).

[2]   In *Making It Explicit*, his opus magnum, Brandom does not mention Rhees at all.

[3]   In this respect, an especially interesting view is presented by Goldfarb, who claims that Wittgenstein, at the very beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* (in § 1) strives to make us aware how the apparently obvious, commonsensical and unproblematic picture from Augustin's *Confessions* may give us a temptation to take it as "a particular conception of the essence of language" (Goldfarb 1983, p. 267). That is why § 1 deliberately deludes and lures us into philosophy, creating a situation in which "We read the commonplaces through philosophically tinted spectacles" (Goldfarb 1983, 281).

wider critical reflections from the years 1957–1960 and 1967 (mostly from 1957, the year of Rhees' working on "Wittgenstein's Builders") were posthumously collected and brought out, in 1998, by Devi Z. Phillips under the title *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (Rhees 2006). The present analysis of Rhees' reflections will refer just to the latter.

Before discussing Rhees' own insights, and his critique of Wittgenstein, it is worth presenting his overall account of Wittgenstein's thought and development. According to him, the issue underlying the whole philosophical enterprise of the author of *Tractatus* was the question about the possibility of discourse, about how "saying something" is possible. In the *Tractatus*, this possibility was thought to be guaranteed by the logical form of the proposition, the form being assumed to be the same in all, even in changing, contexts. Only then, as Wittgenstein seems to have believed, might the meaningfulness of what we claim be secured. Therefore, in the *Tractatus*, it is logic that determines what *can*, and what *cannot* be said at all: what makes sense and what is nonsensical. Logic is what gives language and discourse its unity, and what, in consequence, enables sentences to have meaning and makes it possible for us to communicate with the help of these sentences. One can draw the conclusion that in the *Tractatus* it is logic that is the essence of language, whereas language is the set of all propositions: "The totality of propositions is the language" (Wittgenstein 1922, § 4.001).

The question concerning the possibility of discourse underlies the *Philosophical Investigations* as well, yet here the whole perspective is shifted. Instead of reflecting on what *can*, and what *cannot* be meaningfully said, Wittgenstein is focused on describing, in its different forms, what *is* already said and actually *makes* sense. He does not pursue one formal logic that constitutes all possible meaningful propositions but instead examines the actual *grammar* of language expressions embedded in various contexts and used in different ways. Then, in *Philosophical Investigations*, in opposition to the *Tractatus*, he does not presuppose that there *must* exist one logical form that is common to all our claims, but tries to inspect and describe different grammars of language, and then *see* whether they actually have something in common (Phillips 2006, pp. xxvii–xxviii). The concept of "language games", introduced by Wittgenstein, serves just this task perfectly well. Each and every instance of language–games mentioned in *Philosophical Investigations* presents some aspect of language use. The whole diversity of these aspects and contexts is what may be called *language*. That is why, claims Rhees, it is fully justified to ascribe Wittgenstein the view that "language is a family of language games"[4] (Rhees 2006, p.

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[4]   It is worth noting that Rhees' reading is not shared by many interpreters of Wittgenstein, in fact often

23, Cf. also pp. 176, 222–225).

Although the stance just mentioned —"language is a family of language games" —looks, at first sight, as though it were a general answer to the question "What is language?", the more expanded and detailed answer would be piecemeal and strictly descriptive. For, according to Rhees, Wittgenstein's approach assumes that:

> (…) if anyone were to ask what language is, you might give him examples, and then say "…and things of that sort". That would be a legitimate answer. Whereas if you were to begin by trying to give something like the essential function of language or if you were to try to give a general account of what "saying something" is —then at best you could describe something to which certain of our uses of language might conform, but others would not. You cannot, so to speak, describe the kind of game that "language" is. What you can do is to describe various language games, and then say "and so on" (Rhees 2006, p. 119).

Rhees, therefore, claims that the general question about the essence of language, about how it is possible to say something, is still present in *Philosophical Investigations*, even though Wittgenstein's answer is actually negative: There is no such thing as the essence of language (*PI*, §§ 18, 65); and quietist: one should refrain from seeking the essence, and content oneself with describing the use of language (*PI*, § 124).

How then is one's saying something and others' understanding it possible? Having abandoned in *Philosophical Investigations* his earlier Tractarian view that the unity of language has formal character, similar to logical calculus, Wittgenstein goes on to search for this unity in the family resemblance that covers all, even very different language games (Rhees 2006, pp. 23–24). The unity of language relies on the unity of language games. The crucial problem comes down to the issue of whether the family resemblance is really able to explain and secure the unity of discourse. Rhees himself claims that such a conclusion would be premature: although Wittgenstein's giving up the early formalistic view on language was right, still, in *Philosophical Investigations* there is no convincing alternative that would ensure the unity and common understanding of what we say to each other. The considerations leave "the connections between the different 'games' too external. And partly for that reason, it does not help us to understand why they are *language* games at all" (Rhees 2006, p. 119). It is true that our everyday experience shows that such minimum unity and commonality of meaning are there. Our playing different language games usually do

criticised (see Phillips 2006, xxxii–xxxiii). For example Cora Diamond maintained explicitly that Wittgenstein was "not working with a language–game theory of language" (after Johanessen 2008, 72).

not make mutual understanding impossible. However, the trouble with Wittgenstein's solution is that both his comparison of "saying something" to "moves in a game" and his seeing the basis of our mutual understanding in family resemblances between different games do not help us understand the specific character of discourse. The game analogy, Rhees claims, remains only an analogy. And, like any other analogy, when pushed too far, it may mislead us and, by consequence, stand in the way of our coming to understand the subject, i.e. language. As Rhees suggests, Wittgenstein himself succumbed to the charm of the analogy of language as a family of games in his later work (see Rhees 2006, p. 151).

What seems to be surprising in Rhees' account of Wittgenstein is that he does not attach a lot of weight to the concept of "form of life", which first appears in § 19 of *Philosophical Investigations* —"And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (*PI*, § 19) —and later several times more. He seems to suggest that Wittgenstein remained seduced by the vision of language as a set of games of rather formal rules, such as chess. Accordingly, in Rhees' account, Wittgenstein's further comparisons of language to "institutions", "customs" (*PI*, §§ 199, 337, 380), or "forms of life" (*PI*, §§ 23, 241) aim mainly at his making these rules more pliant, context–dependent, and less strict (Rhees 2006, p. 176). Then, despite Wittgenstein's introducing these new concepts, the basic understanding of language as a family of games, as Rhees insists, predominates throughout his whole later work.

§ 2.1. Rhees' criticism of the language–game analogy

What then is wrong with treating language as a family of games? Rhees' main strategy for coming up with an answer lies in analysing what we do, particularly what a child does, when we learn a language. What he has in mind is speaking, particularly speaking one's first language, which means one's saying something in this language as well as understanding what is said. Does a child simply learn language games?

What would they learn then, if they learned different language games? The first tentative answer would be: they learn to follow rules. Saying something would consist here in one's making a correct move in a particular game, for example in putting the right card in a card game, or a game of patience, or giving a correct number in a mathematical series, or correctly moving a piece in chess, etc. Understanding what is said would come down to one's right reactions to the other player's movements, and in such games as patience or a series —to one's following a game, making possible conjectures about next moves, etc. This analogy, however, is insufficient (Rhees 2006, pp. 78–80). Speaking, saying something is not only applying rules. Rules – syntactical, for instance – are indeed necessary to correctly build the

expressions and acquire understanding. Still, the mere acquaintance with rules does not ensure that one will be able to say something that makes sense and to engage in a conversation. It only guarantees that one will be able to construct a correct linguistic item, and perhaps recognise other correct utterances, but it does not ensure the ability to follow the discourse and to set the direction of a conversation. Rules can also be successfully applied by a machine or a computer, which does not mean that a machine takes part meaningfully in a conversation.

Another tentative answer would state that by learning a language, a child learns *vocabulary* and many expressions of different kinds which can appear in conversation, together with the proper context of their use. Various language games comprise different kinds of expressions and cover different lexis and the one who knows a required number of expressions is expected to be able to take part in a discussion actively. In Rhees' perspective, however, such an answer also fails in its aim (Rhees 2006, pp. 122–123, 158–159). For, firstly, saying something does not only rely on selecting words and composing them in some bigger wholes, and having a repertoire of words is not enough to take part in a meaningful conversation. Secondly, it is also not enough to understand sentences. Suffice it to mention metaphorical, poetic, or idiomatic language. However, even on the level of simple everyday discourse, it often happens that despite our understanding all the words in a sentence, and understanding the whole sentence, we still do not know what is behind it, or to what consequences it may lead. For someone to understand, one needs something more than knowing lexis. Moreover, in a discussion one usually does not only use their available set of words and structures but does more: through them, one brings to conversation something new and personal. For example, by using the expressions "In my opinion…" one says what they think (Rhees 2006, p. 126). This also weighs against our tentative claim that learning a language, learning to formulate thoughts, to take part in conversation cannot come down to one's mastering a particular repertoire of language expressions.

Another attempt of answering the question would focus mainly on the question of proper *use* of particular words and expressions. As in learning to play games one learns proper moves in certain situations, similarly, in learning a language, one is trained to use language in specific contexts and for certain aims properly. One's ability to speak would here rely on commanding some *techniques* of the correct use of language. Again, Rhees would reply, however, that understanding someone's words do not come down to recognising that one's interlocutor has correctly used linguistic expressions; nor does saying something meaningful consist only in the correct use of words. If that were so, it would not be possible to distinguish between

an actual, genuine conversation and an artificially constructed dialogue (Rhees 2006, p. 81). Rhees also points out another difference between a real and an artificial conversation, notably that a game is by nature something repeatable. If we like, we can play it many times. But a conversation is not repeatable in this sense. Collocutors can at best stop and return to the theme begun last time, or develop it from a different perspective, but they cannot simply repeat the discussion. If it were so, the conversation would lose its genuineness and importance (Phillips 2006, p. xxxi). (Obviously, repetitiveness and practising artificial dialogues is an important element in learning a foreign language, the learner being able to speak his or her mother tongue already. Then, learning a new language may be treated as practising techniques of correctly reacting and using certain expressions at certain circumstances. However, it does not apply when it comes to learning one's first language.

> If someone learns to speak, he does not just learn to make sentences and utter them, nor to react to orders either. He learns to say something. He learns what can be said; he learns — however fumblingly —what it makes sense to say. This is an accomplishment over and above being able to work together. It is not just an addition to the technique, as you might learn to operate a new tool. And to do this, he must learn how remarks hang together, how they may bear on one another. This is something different from learning general rules or general principles —even though it does not go without that.
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> And because he learns to speak, and he learns what can be said, he can go on speaking and go on learning (…). And the being able to go on is not like being able to continue a series, say, or being able to do further multiplications. This is not the same as learning the meaning of particular expressions, although it is impossible without that (Rhees 2006, p. 29).

From the quoted passage one can infer that speaking a language assumes a sort of unity that exceeds the family resemblances between different language games, and, therefore, conclude that language cannot be aptly described as a family of games. Moreover, because Rhees stresses the importance of what he keeps calling "conversation", or "discourse", and emphasizes the fact that saying something goes closely with understanding what is being said, one may claim that according to Rhees, *contra* Wittgenstein, language does have an essence: such an essence is termed "conversation" or, a little more broadly, "discourse"[5]. He states this explicitly in a

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5   "Discourse" is a wider concept, i.e. wider than "conversation" in the sense that, for example, discourse may also exist in one's solitary writing, monologues etc. Therefore, It does have to assume the form of conversation, but it certainly presupposes the very possibility of taking part in a conversation, asking questions, developing the sense of what is said, agreeing or disagreeing with it.

passage from "Wittgenstein's Builders —Recapitulation":

> Not all discourse is conversation, but I do not think there would be speech or language without it. And if there were someone who could not carry on any conversation —who had no idea of answering questions or of making any comment —I do not think we should say he could speak (Rhees 2006, p. 161).

Then, although Rhees is aware of many different functions, or games, of language, he singles out one of them, i.e. the conversation, which can be regarded as a centre (to recall Wittgenstein's simile of § 18 of *Philosophical Investigations*) that other language games and functions are adjacent to, and dependent on, similar to the way in which the quarters of a city are built on the downtown, are connected to, and dependent on it.

§ 2.2. Rhees on the "language" of Wittgenstein's builders.

Rhees' considerations may be placed in the context of the opening sections of *Philosophical Investigations*, particularly §§ 2–8, in which Wittgenstein induces us to picture two builders, a contractor and a helper, communicating by means of a language that consists of only four words. The words are the names of building materials used by builders, but, in the context in question, they function as imperatives or orders for a helper to bring a specific material. Wittgenstein writes in § 2:

> [T]he language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass him the stones and to do so in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they make use of a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such–and–such a call. —Conceive this as a complete primitive language. (*PI*, § 2)

Apart from that, in § 6, Wittgenstein passes a remark that "[w]e could imagine that the language of § 2 was the *whole* language of A and B, even the whole language of a tribe" (*PI*, § 6). While Wittgenstein, in this thought experiment, seems to believe that the builders' language game, "the language (2)", could constitute a whole, albeit primitive, language, according to Rhees, such a conviction is quite illegitimate.

In Rhees' view, the situation depicted in § 2 seems, at first sight, to imply that the builders A and B use not words, but rather signals (Rhees 2006, p. 97) —resembling

the case of giving orders to trained animals. Like a behavioural expression of "understanding" in an animal would be its expected reaction to a given signal, in the same vein, in the case of builders, a sign of their understanding the command "beam" or "slab" would be the helper's bringing a particular beam or slab. However, as Rhees claims, after closer examination of the builder's activity, one is to conclude that the situation in § 2 is different. Firstly, person A and B could, in principle, change roles so that B would give orders and A —carry them out. People, even in such a simple situation as sketched by Wittgenstein, not only react to signals but also understand them and know what they mean. Secondly, if the words of "language (2)" functioned in accordance with signal and reaction pattern, then, in case of some unexpected difficulties, the completion of a job, e.g. constructing a building, would be practically impossible. Facing a new, so far unknown trouble, the workers, trained to react to the commands in one way only, would not be able to solve the problem, to ask questions and try to find some solution. For signals can be used only in one, particular and trained, way (Rhees 2006, p. 155–156). Thirdly, Rhees claims that if the builders learned only the four words, i.e. the four exclamations and relevant reactions to them, they would not know the distinction between sense and nonsense. "They would be nonplussed if there were a shout to which they had not been trained" or "if someone moved a stone in a way that was not part of the routine in which they have been drilled" (Rhees 2006, 156). He admits that Wittgenstein might have possibly replied that, in his description of A and B's activity, that something makes no sense would simply mean that it is not the thing that they generally do. Yet Rhees finds such a presumed explanation unsatisfactory because this would equate nonsensical utterances with everything which is not part of our routine. "Unless there were a difference between learning to move the stones in the way people always do and learning what makes sense, then I do not think we should say that they were learning to speak" (Rhees 2006, p. 156)[6]. And, fourthly, if one were to name "the language (2)" language, not only signals, one would have to assume that A and B could use it not only in building but also in many different situations[7]:

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[6]   Here, it seems that Rhees does not discern another possibility of making a distinction between sense and nonsense, notably that nonsense in "language (2)" might also consist in uttering the names of these building materials which the builders lacked (see: Baker and Hacker 2005, p. 56).

[7]   Johanessen, when commenting on this issue, emphasizes that if the builders of § 2 of *Philosophical Investigations* used their language also in other circumstances, then the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam" would mean completely different things, depending on particular situations. "is it possible that when the lads knock off from work and come home, "slab" means: what is for dinner? And later, in bed,

It is not that I cannot imagine a people whose language had such a limited vocabulary. The trouble is to imagine a people who had a language at all and yet *never* spoke apart from the times when they happened to be on this kind of building job. I do not think it could be speaking a language (Rhees 2006, p. 155).

Thus, Rhees assumes here that there are in principle no such expressions in language that would belong only to one particular and restricted activity, and that could not be used in some other, even similar, situations. Therefore, he seems to implicitly claim that the use of a word in different contexts has an influence on the meaning of what is said (Rhees 2006, p. 157, also p. 104 *et passim*). For such a use contributes to establishing "connexions of meaning" (idem, p. 161) between different remarks, and, as a result, makes conversation possible: it enables one's asking a question about the appropriate sense, expressing one's doubts as to some consequences of a given remark, drawing conclusions from it, requesting to stipulate an opinion from one's interlocutor, etc.

It seems that the exemplary language of § 2 of *Philosophical Investigation* does not allow the builders to use their four words in different contexts (even in the case of dismantling the constructions that they built or in the case of solving eventual problems that appear during their work). On that basis, "the language (2)" makes it impossible for the "connexions of meaning" to be established, and, in the last resort, it thwarts any discussion between the workers. And because conversation is, in Rhees' view, the most essential activity in one's speaking a language, therefore "the language (2)" cannot be called language *sensu stricto*. It cannot constitute a complete, though primitive, speech of a tribe, all the more.

Rhees' final conclusion on the opening sections of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is that the builder's "language" of § 2 is not a "language game" that can be played out while no other language game is being played. Strictly speaking, it is not an example of language at all. It can at best constitute a kind of game that some people who already speak a language —who are able to communicate and converse with each other, and who grasp the sense of the activity they take part in — have decided to play for fun. The people can, for example, wait for a command and be surprised if it is not issued or when the order is different from expected. They can, before the game, ask "How shall I know what to do", say "I'll tell you when I'm ready", or, after the game, inquire, "Well what did you give that signal for, if you did not want us to…?" etc. (Rhees 2006, p. 99). Only in that wider context could the

"slab" means: not tonight dear, I have a headache?" (Johanessen 2008, 69).

orders from „the language (2)" be understood. Yet, according to Rhees, they can by no means constitute a complete, not even primitive, language.

§ 2.3. Rhees on the unity of discourse.

When speaking about conversation as the essence of language, one can go further and ask on what basis the unity of discourse or the whole of language, is secured. And it seems that this basis can only be revealed through an analysis of the conditions of the very possibility of discourse, or conversation, i.e. through a closer examination of what makes conversation possible, authentic or real[8] (Rhees 2006, pp. 33–62).

There can be little doubt, as Rhees claims, that the unity in question can be ensured neither by formal, logical connections between sentences nor by "external relations" between expressions —analogically to the rules that are in effect in a game. Rather, such a unity is secured by "internal relations of remarks people make to one another in a conversation" (Rhees 2006, p. 161), which should be understood as "connexions of meaning" (ibid.) of remarks that "hang together" and "bear on one another" (idem, p. 29).

In another passage (in the essay "Signals and Saying Something"), Rhees makes one more interesting observation about meaning:

> Where you talk of meaning, you can talk of other things that might be meant or might be said. And this belongs to understanding, somehow. Not that you need think of any alternatives; generally you do not. But understanding what is meant, or knowing what is meant: if you are said to "know something" then it is "something" which allows for such alternatives (Rhees 2006, p. 100).

Therefore, an utterance or a sentence means something only in the context of something else, namely, of another sentence. It makes sense only in possible, alternative connections with some other things that might be said.

Furthermore, Rhees seems to implicitly assume that participants in a conversation have to make inferences —in relating different remarks to one another, in grasping the consequences of particular sayings and reasons for them. However,

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[8] Obviously, when Rhees speaks here about „authenticity" or "reality" of conversation, he does not refer to the philosophy of dialogue, nor does he have in mind any psychological aspects of fruitful communication, but is rather interested in the analytic problem of how the meaning can be — "authentically", "really"— exchanged between discourse partakers.

he resists speaking explicitly of inferences, presumably on the grounds that by talking of inferences he mostly meant only formal, logical ones —which is understandable allowing for the fact that Rhees himself gainsaid Wittgenstein's Tractarian view that the unity of language might come down to the logical form of its propositions and formal relations between them. And, probably for that reason, he usually avoids using the term "inference" in his own reflections. Thus, one can justifiably assume that Rhees did not know —and, of course, did not use, the term "informal inference", and particularly "material inference"[9] —the latter being the main concept of Brandom's inferentialism. To repeat, he implicitly uses them, however, which seems to be noticeable in the passage below (from "Wittgenstein's Builders — Recapitulation"):

> If people are speaking together, then the significance of this or that remark is not like the significance of a logical conclusion. But the remarks they make have something to do with one another; otherwise they are not talking at all, even if they are uttering sentences. And their remarks could have no bearing on one another unless the expressions they used were used in other connexions as well (Rhees 2006, p. 158).

In view of that, supposing that the participants in conversation relate different remarks or expressions to one another, and that they use these expressions in connections with many other expressions, they must at the same time also make inferences, albeit not the formal (based on their logical form), but the material ones —based only on their conceptual content.

From these considerations Rhees' above, it would seem that four particular views may be ascribed to his philosophical stance: first, *essentialism* —the view that language has an essence; for Rhees, such an essence is conversation or discourse. Although language has various functions and plays many different roles, is also has the function that is constitutive of it, the one on which all other language games depend. Thus, partaking in conversation is just this function that is indispensable for one's being able to speak a language, to say something. The second view is *propositionalism* —the semantic position which claims that the basic items, or

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[9]   In inferentialism, it is assumed that inferences can be based on the content of expressions used in discourse: e.g. from "Pittsburgh is to the west of Princeton" to "Princeton is to the east of Pittsburgh", from "Lightning is seen now" to "Thunder will be heard soon" and plenty of others. These inferences are believed to be good as they stand, irrespective of the possible enthymematic premises that they might be supplemented with, and independently of any logical form which they might be afterwards arranged in (Cf. Brandom 2001, pp. 52–55).

bearers, of meaning, are whole sentences, not *sub*sentential entities (for example, names). Since the essential function of language is conversation —which consists among other things of commenting on something, answering questions, asking further questions, disagreeing with what is being said, etc. —one can infer that the elements regarded as playing the most fundamental role are propositions, claims or sentences. In Rhees, these propositions are essential in the sense that they constitute a minimum of elements that one needs in order to converse; names cannot be such elements. The third view is *semantic holism*: The standpoint that there are no separate and independent items of meaning which "stand on their own feet", but, conversely, each item is tied together with some others. Each remark in a discussion is by some means semantically connected with some others, in the sense of "internal" relations between its content and the content of other utterances. When Rhees says that in making a sentence, some other possible alternatives are always available (Rhees 2006, p. 100), he actually manifests a holistic stand in semantics. Finally, the fourth view is *inferentialism* —the position claiming that meaning is conferred on linguistic expressions on account of their use in actual or possible inferences; wherein the inferences in question are not principally based on formal logical schemas, but depend primarily on the content of expressions deployed in them. In other words, these inferences are not formal, but rather material.

§ 3. Brandom on the essence of language.

The four general postures just mentioned may also be seen as essential characteristics present in the inferentialist[10] philosophy of language proposed in our days by Robert B. Brandom (Brandom 1994; Brandom 2001). The conclusion that flows from our analysis is that Rhees' essentialist critique of Wittgenstein, aimed at his declared analogy between language and games, can be interpreted in an inferentialist spirit in Brandom's sense. The very title of Brandom's opus magnum, *Making it Explicit* (Brandom 1994) implies that the basic problem with which he deals is similar to that of Rhees: how it is possible to say something. Although Brandom's formulation of the issue —how it is possible to make something explicit, to make "explicit what is implicit" (Brandom 2001, p. 8)— suggests his focusing more on what he called expressivism. Still, at the core of Brandom's philosophical project is also discourse or conversation. For him, however, it is not exactly discourse that constitutes the essence of language, but, more precisely, "the game of giving and

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[10]   But one has to remember that inferentialism comprises many more themes, elaborated in detail, than what is present in Rhees' reflections.

asking for reasons" [11] (Brandom 1994, pp. 41–98, chapter III), or making assertions and inferences.

Why is this Brandom's choice? Maybe because, one may presume, from Brandom's perspective conversation is still a complex phenomenon, from which some more and less essential functions can be singled out. In this vein, Brandom might say that conversation is not possible if there is no conceptual content, and conceptual content is constituted through inferences. Hence one can conclude that the most important aspect of speaking a language —i.e. the essence of language —is therefore *inference*. It must be emphasised that, in Brandom, the notion of inference is closely related to that of assertion, which is actually an element of equal importance. For, to make an inference, one needs to have expressions that would serve as a premise and a conclusion of it. And what can serve as a conclusion or a premise in inferences is a declarative sentence, the one stating a state of affairs, or *an assertion*. According to Brandom, the notion of an assertion is, in turn, closely tied to that of inference by virtue of its pragmatical sense: by advancing an inference, one undertakes a *commitment* to give some reasons for it, or, to display their *entitlement* to that assertion (commitment). Thus, making both assertions and inferences is an interrelated process, and both "categories" constitute the game of giving and asking for reasons.

It may also be added that, in the game of giving and asking for reasons, one employs sentences (paradigmatically, assertions), which is a posture of *semantic propositionalism*[12] explicitly declared by Brandom (e.g. 1994, pp. 79–80). The notion of an assertion, it should be emphasised, is more fundamental than the other speech acts (or language games) in that other speech acts —such as asking questions, giving orders etc.— are intelligible only in the context of assertion. Thus, the question "Is the window closed?" or the order "Close the window!" are both intelligible only in the context of the assertion "The window is closed". That is why it is more fundamental. In Brandom's view, all other speech acts are built on the game of giving and asking for reasons. And this game is a game that may be played, even if no other

[11] Brandom has taken up the term „game of giving and asking for reasons" from Wilfrid Sellars (obviously Wittgenstein did not use it at all). It seems that Rhees' arguments against the language–game analogy do not apply to this concept. Regardless whether they do or not, Brandom himself does not see it to be any problem to use the concept „language game", yet he lays emphasis on the thesis that the constitutive, *essential* language game is the game of exchanging reasons.

[12] The meaning of subsentential items is determined by means of the analysis of their contribution to the meaning of the whole propositional, assertive item, in the context of possible inferences which the latter may occur in.

game is played. It is both indispensable and sufficient for establishing meaning. That is why Brandom believes it to be the essence of language.

Against the above background, one may claim that Wittgenstein's builders of § 2 of *Philosophical Investigations* do not speak a language, because they do not make inferences or use reasons. Brandom claims that:

> Practices that do not involve reasoning are not linguistic or (therefore) discursive practices. Thus the 'Slab' *Sprachspiel* that Wittgenstein introduces in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* should not, by these standards of demarcation, count as a genuine *Sprach*spiel. It is a *vocal* but not yet a *verbal* practice. By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language (discursive practice) has a *center;* it is not motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming *reasons* are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it. Claiming, being able to justify one's claims, and using one's claims to justify other claims and actions are not just one among other sets of things one can do with language. They are not on a par with other 'games' one can play. They are what in the first place make possible talking, and therefore thinking: sapience in general. (Brandom 2000, pp. 14–15).

Brandom's semantic holism is also connected with the game of giving and asking for reasons. In Brandomian terms, to make assertions and inferences, more than one concept (inferentially related to each other) has to be involved.

On an inferentialist account of conceptual content, one cannot have *any* concepts unless one has *many* concepts.

> For the content of each concept is articulated by its inferential relations to *other* concepts. Concepts, then, must come in packages (though it does not yet follow that they must come in just one great big one). (Brandom 2000, pp. 15–16).

However, Brandom's holism concerns not only individual concepts but, first of all, relations between different sentences, wherein one may be a consequence of the other, or may be a reason for the other, or also may be compatible or incompatible with some other remark.

Finally, *inferentialism*, in Brandom's sense, is independent of the logical form of expressions and is, in the first place, based upon *material* inferences. The simplest exemplification of such inferences can be the situation in which one has a certain minimal package of concepts: "a dog", "a cat" and "a mammal", meaningfully embedded in simple assertions; in that case one can infer moving from "This is a dog"

to "This is not a cat" or to "This is a mammal". Here the inference depends not on the logical form in which it may be arranged afterwards but is good as it stands and is based only on the contents of particular concepts. Obviously, a logician can defend formalism by replying that such inferences can be, indeed, treated as enthymematic, i.e. as if they actually have a hidden general premise to be revealed: respectively, "If something is a dog, then it is not a cat" and "If something is a dog, then it is a mammal". Then, what we will get are formally valid inferences. The difference between Brandom and a partisan of formalism would lie in placing stress on different things, which, however, has far–reaching consequences. Whereas a formalist would say that the inferences, as Brandom uses the term, are valid by virtue of the fact that they fall under a relevant logical law, Brandom emphasises that they are sound independently of their possible hidden premises —only on account of their conceptual content. He argues that the primary phenomenon is material inference, while logical constants, and therefore more complex logical formulae, are a secondary phenomenon and are conceptually definable through material inferences. Thus, even though logical laws are indeed important constituents of rationality, they are not its source or basis (see Brandom 2000, pp. 52–55). It would seem that what Rhees lacked, though implicitly relied on in his considerations, was the concept of "material inference".

In the end, it is worth asking about the unity of language in Brandom's conception. It seems to be legitimate to claim that such unity is secured by the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is guaranteed by one's ability to actively take part in this game, even on a minimal, limited level[13]. Even if the mutual understanding is limited, the mere possibility of drawing conclusions from an interlocutor's remarks, of ascribing them certain commitments or entitlements, of inquiring about incompatibilities in what has been said, ensures what Rhees referred to as the unity of language.

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[13]   Even in the case of very different perspectives of discourse partakers (what Wittgenstein would call belonging to different "forms of life"), such linguistic mechanisms as ascriptions of propositional attitudes *de dicto* and *de re* make it possible to lead inferential normative practices from diverse and distant theoretical and practical perspectives (Brandom 1994, pp. 499–520).

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Does Language Have an Essence? From Wittgenstein via Rhees to Brandom

Ludwig Wittgenstein is widely known to have held the view that language has no essence (Wittgenstein 2009, § 65), i.e. that no particular language game is more constitutive of our ability to speak than others. One of the first critical discussions opposing the stance that Wittgenstein had taken, was delivered by Rush Rhees in his "Wittgenstein's Builders" (Rhees 1959; Rhees 2006). Rhees warns us against letting the metaphor of language as a game go too far, and thus "seduce" us —which supposedly happened to Wittgenstein. Instead, he argues that apart from different particular functions that language may serve, it has to have something that secures the unity of discourse and that can be called its essence. He sees this crucial element in "discourse" or "conversation". In his justification of such a view, Rhees advances some hints, though not developed into a thorough elaboration, which may be read in an inferentialist spirit. Displaying such features as semantic holism, propositionalism, essentialism and —as the present paper suggests— a rudimentary version of inferentialism, Rhees' deliberations tally with Brandom's philosophical project. Thus, the paper is intended to analyse these features as a background for Brandom's wider conception.

Keywords: Philosophy of Language · Inferentialism · Wittgenstein's Builders.

¿El lenguaje tiene una esencia? De Wittgenstein vía Rhees a Brandom

Es bien sabido que Ludwig Wittgenstein tenía el punto de vista de que el lenguaje no tiene esencia (Wittgenstein 2009, § 65), es decir, que ningún juego de lenguaje en particular es más constitutivo de nuestra capacidad de hablar que otros. Una de las primeras discusiones críticas oponiendo la postura que Wittgenstein había adoptado fue suministrada por Rush Rhees en su ensayo "Wittgenstein's Builders" (Rhees 1959; Rhees 2006). Rhees nos advierte contra dejar que la metáfora del juego de lenguaje llegue demasiado lejos y que de esta manera nos "seduzca" —cosa que supuestamente sucedió a Wittgenstein. El arguye que, además de las diferentes funciones particulares que el lenguaje puede tener, también tiene que tener algo que asegura la unidad del discurso, y esto se puede llamar su esencia. Él ve este elemento crucial en el "discurso" o en la "conversación". Al justificar dicho punto de vista, Rhees avanza algunos atisbos —aunque no desarrollados a elaboración detallada— que se pueden interpretar con un espíritu inferencialista. Exhibiendo características como un holismo semántico, proposicionalismo, esencialismo y —según sugiere este trabajo— una versión rudimentaria de inferencialismo, hay coincidencia entre las reflexiones de Rhees y el proyecto filosófico de Brandom. El objetivo del presente trabajo es analizar estas características como trasfondo para la concepción más amplia de Brandom.

Palabras Clave: Filosofía de lenguaje · Inferencialismo · Los constructores de Wittgenstein.

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