A reconstrução da linguagem: alguns poréns

The reconstruction of language: some drawbacks

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Resumo

O fato de que se pode elaborar artificialmente uma linguagem manipulável pelo cálculo lógico a partir das estruturas da linguagem natural dá provas de que a linguagem pode ser reescrita por inteiro formalmente? Ou melhor: até que ponto a linguagem natural pode ser reescrita apropriadamente e *sem prejuízos quanto ao significado* através de sistemas formais de simbolização? A partir do livre desenvolvimento de algumas intuições da filosofia tardia de Wittgenstein, o presente texto aponta algumas dificuldades para quem pensa poder dar uma resposta otimista a essas indagações.

Palavras-chave: linguagem; análise lógica; linguagem figurada; Wittgenstein.

Abstract

Does the fact that a language can be artificially constructed using logical calculus from the structures of natural language provide evidence that language can be entirety rewritten formally? Or rather: to what extent can natural language be rewritten appropriately and without prejudice to its meaning through systems of formal symbolization? Based on the free consideration of some intuitions from Wittgenstein's late philosophy, this text points out some difficulties for those who think they can give an optimistic answer to these questions.

Keywords: *language; logical analysis; figurative speech; Wittgenstein.*

INTRODUCTION

Consider an old problem: how do linguistic symbols and the content they express, the proposition, relate? Or, put another way: by virtue of what does a symbol mean what it means? Gottlob Frege can be considered the father of a type of answer that has become a paradigm of so-called analytical philosophy: a symbol means what it means by virtue of something like an underlying logical-conceptual structure that lies beyond, or cannot be identified by looking only at the grammar of natural language[1].1 Strictly speaking, one could say that the philosophical program suggested in this answer is already contained in the very idea of analysis: the suggestion is that, if a symbol means what it means by virtue of a logical-conceptual structure underlying the grammar of language, then it is necessary to analyze the structures of natural language in order to establish a kind of complete cartography of meaningful sentences.

Despite the particularities of each project, not only a representative portion of philosophers who like to proclaim themselves analytical, but also a considerable number of linguists and cognitive psychologists maintain that linguistic meaning can be explained precisely in this way, that is, formally, by finding and elucidating the structures and rules that govern the formation and combination of sentences. Faced with a philosophical program of such ambition and scope, it is legitimate, however, to ask: does the fact that one can artificially elaborate a language manipulable by logical calculation from the structures of natural language really show that natural language can be rewritten in its entirety in this way? Or rather: to what extent can natural language be appropriately rewritten *without prejudice to meaning* through formal systems of symbolization? Based on the free development of some intuitions from Wittgenstein's later philosophy, this text points out some difficulties for those who think they can give an optimistic answer to these questions. The idea is that linguistic meaning, in addition to logical-conceptual aspects, also possesses analogical, metaphorical, and pragmatic aspects that escape logical analysis and that can hardly be addressed within the scope of a systematic theory.

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[1] I am referring here to interpretations that view Frege as a philosopher of language whose contributions fall within the context of what is now known as the theory of meaning. Although controversy persists, it is a recognized historiographical fact that such an interpretation, regardless of whether or not it is the correct way to interpret his writings, was the decisive interpretation for the emergence of the philosophical agenda that is now recognized as being at the origins of so-called analytical philosophy. Cf. Hacker, 1996; see also Gabriel & Schlotter, 2016.

1.

To begin, it is important to recognize that it is not the privilege of one philosophical program or another to consider that meaning comes from a logical or conceptual structure that differs from the grammatical structure of a sentence. Common language itself also leads us to make this distinction, as evidenced by cases in which the same grammatical structure expresses distinct logical relationships in Portuguese[2].

O jovem médico foi encontrado morto. (The young doctor was found dead.)

O suposto médico foi encontrado morto. (The supposed doctor was found dead.)

While in the first case the sentence speaks of a doctor who possesses the property of being young, in the second case the subject does not even possess the property of being a doctor, but rather the property of being the object of a supposition. That is, despite sharing the same grammatical structure, both sentences carry an important semantic difference. From there it is a step to the idea that this difference is explained by a logical or conceptual structure that exists behind or at the heart of natural language. Now, the concept of "analysis," as understood within the analytical philosophical agenda, means nothing other than to make explicit or bring to light, through meticulous dissection and elucidation, the hidden structures in natural language (considered equivocal and ambiguous) and, through the univocity provided by logical calculus, to establish the field of meaningful sentences. To dissect the logical properties of language in search of fixed structures that govern the meaning of sentences is, in this sense, an undertaking with a clear epistemic motivation: to separate the wheat from the chaff, that is, what can be said meaningfully and what does not even have truth value (and therefore does not have proper meaning).

2.

Not infrequently, philosophers engaged in the analysis of language follow in the wake of a philosophical program that bears features such as those described above: first, they imagine a logical language as if behind natural language and, then, they believe that this language reveals objective conceptual relations, universally valid or that mirror the very reality of thought, and that remain hidden in the confusion of natural language.[3] Philosophical programs such as those led by Frege, Carnap, and Wittgenstein of the

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[2] I borrow, with minor modifications, an example from Hans Julius Schneider (1999), whose ideas I consider highly fruitful and which are therefore a pervasive reference in this text.

[3] The simile used by Frege when presenting the ideal language he invented (conceptography) is quite suggestive: "I believe that the best way to elucidate the relationship between my conceptualization and everyday language would be to compare it with the relationship between the microscope and the eye. The latter, due to the extent of its applicability and the versatility of

Tractatus, these are, to a greater or lesser extent, examples of programs of this kind. On the other hand, Wittgenstein himself, in his later phase, emerges as one of the main figures who, against a philosophical program conceived in this mold, strives to understand language according to an anthropological or pragmatic conception that understands linguistic meaning, in most cases, as use.

In the Philosophical Investigations, speaking about the way in which the analytical program that he himself subscribed to at the time of the Tractatus views language, Wittgenstein writes:

> one might get the impression that there would be something like an ultimate analysis of our forms of language, therefore, a completely decomposed form of expression […] (IF 91).
>
> This is expressed in the question about the *essence* of language, of proposition, of thought. […] For, in essence, it [the question] does not see something that is already exposed to the light of day […]. But rather something that lies beneath the surface. Something that resides within, that we see if we look through something, and that an analysis must unearth (IF 92).

That is, in the context of the logical analysis program, the assumption is immediately made that there is something like a logical skeleton beneath language. Hence the programmatic idea that it is up to logical analysis to unearth it and bring to light the structure of thought. Following the quoted passage, this characterization is reaffirmed: "the clear and strict rules of the logical structure of the proposition appear to us as something that is in the background, — something hidden in the *medium* of understanding […]" (IF 102). Then, in the following paragraph, Wittgenstein does not hesitate to characterize the program now described as an *ideal*, even more, an *ideal* of enormous recalcitrance, almost unshakable, "which rests like a pair of spectacles on our nose" (IF 103) — which explains the almost irresistible inclination with which several philosophers have set out to excavate language in search of a definitive logical form. It turns out that, in Wittgenstein's view, the metaphor of a logical structure behind natural language is considered to be nothing more than that: a metaphor employed to project one language onto another for the purpose of comparative analysis. Consider another well-known passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> The more precisely we consider language, the greater the conflict becomes between it and our demands. (The crystalline purity of logic was not given to me as a result, it was a requirement) (IF 109).

The "crystalline purity" made possible by logical analysis is not, strictly speaking, a result (in the sense of being a discovery of the real structure of language): it is, instead, nothing more than a

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its adaptation to the most diverse circumstances, is far superior to the microscope. However, as an optical instrument, the eye certainly has many drawbacks, which commonly go unnoticed because of its close relationship with our mental life. In fact, if a scientific objective requires great acuity of resolution, the eye proves insufficient. On the other hand, the microscope appears perfectly adequate for such purposes, although it is therefore inadequate for others" (Frege, 2018, Preface). In short: it is worth noting that, despite the suggestion that logical language is capable of capturing certain aspects of reality with greater precision, Frege, at least at this point in his thought, simultaneously considers it an instrument.

requirement of logical analysis. That is, the system of logical symbols used to express the conceptual relations of natural languages is, from Wittgenstein's perspective, just one language among many others, and not a reflection of an extralinguistic reality. Naturally, this by no means means that the formulation of a logical symbolization for the analysis of natural language is simply out of the question; It is merely a matter of emphasizing that such a formulation, instead of reflecting a reality beyond language, serves a rather specific practical purpose: to resolve certain ambiguities, to highlight logical relationships between terms, to elucidate which inferences are or are not valid in a given field of discourse, among other various possible purposes (Schneider, 1999).

From the fact that sometimes it is not only possible, but, in certain endeavors, it is even desirable to (re)construct the logical skeleton of language in order to carry out a rigorous investigation (as is the case with the investigation into the foundations of arithmetic, for example), it does not follow, however, that human language can be entirely understood in these same terms: such an idea would be as arbitrary as a theory that proposed to rewrite language only through metaphorical elements.

3.

Although this problem (conceiving of logical language as a structure underlying natural languages) apparently only affects those theories that carry, so to speak, more metaphysical pretensions and, consequently, this may seem like a problem long since overcome, there are reasons to think that it still survives: consider, for example, the way language is currently conceived in some branches of cognitive science (an example that speaks for itself is the widely held idea that there is a language of thought that structures natural languages). In any case, there is another problem, possibly more serious, in the conception of language presupposed in the aforementioned philosophical program of analysis. For even if one renounces the metaphysical inclinations aroused by the metaphor of the logical structure hidden in language, the possibility remains open of rewriting the conceptual structures of natural language by means of a system of precise logical rules, and this, as stated above, in order to map its most relevant conceptual and epistemic relations. The question to be asked then is: would it really be possible to carry out something like a complete characterization of the conceptual relations of language, so as to be able to indicate the register of what can be meaningfully said?

From Wittgenstein's perspective, the answer is certainly a resounding "no". And the reason for this negation is none other than this: language, Wittgenstein's point is, always goes back to a certain context of use and its particular pragmatic purposes (in the philosopher's now consummate expression, what exists is not language, in the singular, but a tangle of "language games," in the plural). In this conception, pragmatic consideration is not a kind of supplement to semantics and

syntax, but rather, the latter are anchored in and derived from pragmatic consideration, which is considered more elementary. Thus, although it is perfectly conceivable and, in certain contexts, even reasonable to want to bring to light the logical-conceptual relations of some region of discourse, it is difficult to believe that such a program can be expanded to the whole of language, since part of what words and sentences mean depends on usage, and is therefore rooted in a way of life—that is, meaning has to do with what we do when using language and, for that very reason, resists any definitive systematization.

Put in one breath: the idea is that language brings together systematic-formal aspects (those subject to codification in logical language) and creative aspects, the latter of which can hardly be systematized; that is, language, from Wittgenstein's perspective, although it also harbors logical structures, cannot be considered a closed system that functions only linearly (that would be more like a computer processing information, not coincidentally the paradigm of several systematization projects). In this sense, while it is true that when using language we often follow the tracks of fixed logical structures, it is also true that in the daily and pragmatic exercise of language we constantly perform all sorts of analogies, projections, and improvisations that are incorporated into language and expand the notion of meaning beyond known logical structures. This is the creative side of language.

4.

What is being called the creative aspect of language is most directly exemplified by so-called figurative language. In contrast to using a word in its proper or literal sense, figurative language is commonly characterized as a way of using a word in an improper sense: when speaking figuratively, a word is taken from a sentence or context in which it is used literally and transposed into a sentence or context in which it expresses something different from its original meaning. Consider the following sentences in Portuguese:

> *O carro atropelou o pedestre*. (The car ran over the pedestrian.)
>
> *O diretor atropelou a discussão*. (The director ignored the discussion.)

The verb 'atropelar' (to run over), whose literal meaning is related to the physical act of colliding and passing over, is used literally in the first sentence. In this case, we are talking about a hit-and-run. In the second sentence, the verb is used figuratively or metaphorically: the verb 'atropelar' is borrowed from the literal context to express something similar, but not identical: the director also "runs over" the discussion, but not literally; 'atropelar' here means to pass over in the sense of making light of, belittling, ignoring. Although many cases of metaphorical meaning can be reduced to literalness, it is not difficult to perceive—especially

if one takes into account more complex linguistic expressions, and not only trivial metaphors—that figurative language represents a part of language whose expression is averse to the idea of a complete systematization.

Just to provide an example, consider classic cases of catachresis: "the leg of the angle," "the tail of the comet," or even the word "orange" applied to the color orange. In these cases, it is precisely the improper use — the use of certain words outside their original context of application, that is, the non-literal use — that ends up creating an expression with a literal meaning. The sentence: "the orange is orange" means something literally true, namely, that a fruit (the orange) is of a certain color (orange). And yet, the word 'orange,' used to denote a color, originates from catachresis: In other words, here, what is considered literal originates from a figurative projection of language. It is in this sense that figurative language seems to resist projects of formal systematization, since figurative speech does not always follow clearly specifiable rules beforehand — instead, precisely because it contains expressions whose exact meaning is only established after the words are used figuratively in an expression (Black, 1955), figurative language reveals what could be called the plasticity of language, that is, precisely that creative and permanently unfinished aspect that restricts any project of definitive codification.

Although the so-called creative aspect of language finds copious examples in figurative discourse (metaphors, metonymies, catachreses, and the particular use of certain words outside their usual semantic field), according to the conception being outlined, the logical structures of language can also be the object (and often are the product) of certain metaphorical projections; that is to say, in an effort to express something, someone can make use of a known conceptual structure, typical of a particular language game, and project it into an entirely new context. Compare, for example, the conceptual structure of the following Portuguese expressions:

> "*a lança de Sepé Tiarajú*" ("the spear of Sepé Tiarajú")
>
> "*a alma de Sepé Tiarajú*" ("the soul of Sepé Tiarajú")

Here, the conceptual structure that expresses possession, "the A of B" (in languages with grammatical case declension, frequently expressed through the genitive case) is notoriously projected into an initially foreign context in order to produce a meaningful sentence: The soul of Sepé Tiarajú is spoken of in a manner analogous to the way his spear is spoken of, that is, as if one were speaking, in both cases, of a thing or object in his possession. The same is true of the sentences concerning the young/supposed doctor mentioned at the beginning. Instead of two conceptual structures expressed in the same grammatical form, the semantic difference in the sentences can be explained by assuming only a known structure ('the A of B') combined with an understanding of its projection in a new context. In other words, syntax itself, the aspect of language most easily subject to formalization, is subject

to variations that it would not be unreasonable to call metaphorical (Schneider, 1999; 2014, chapters 6 and 12).

So...

There are plenty of reasons to distrust the claims of any theory that, in pursuit of a philosophical agenda such as the one outlined here, arrogates to itself the pretension of establishing logical-formal rules that fulfill the illusory task of completely unearthing the logical skeleton of language and claim to be able to explain it in its entirety.

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