

## Remarks on Sprachgefühl

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Strange things can happen when noun is wed to noun: *Schadenfreude*, for example, is a very special kind of *Freude*, and cupboard-love is not at all what you would normally call 'love'. Bearing this in mind we may wonder whether similarly strange things result from combining 'Sprache' and 'Gefühl' by speaking of 'Sprachgefühl', an expression which, after all, has a certain currency in ordinary and less ordinary German. And, as we shall immediately realise, 'Gefühl' in 'Sprachgefühl' does not indicate a *Gefühl* in its most common or garden sense, i.e. it does not allude to feelings, or emotions, such as anger or indignation, jealousy or sadness; it is a kind of *Gefühl* which, as the dictionary warns us, lacks the possibility of being spoken of in the plural. Thus, while anger, jealousy, etc. can be said to be *Gefühle* (in the plural), there is nothing of which it could be claimed that it is one of various *Sprachgeföhle*. The reason for this is not that there are no instances of *Sprachgefühl*, but rather that the *Gefühl* in 'Sprachgefühl' is not of the same kind as, say, anger or sadness. There are no stabs or pangs of *Sprachgefühl*, and we cannot say that we are overwhelmed by *Sprachgefühl* or that we have a *Sprachgefühl* which makes us shiver. What we can say, however, is that we are overwhelmed or amazed by the *Sprachgefühl* exhibited by Stefan George's translations, or that the lack of *Sprachgefühl* manifested by Hermann Lotze's prose makes

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us shiver. But, of course, this does not mean that there is any internal relation between *Sprachgefühl* and amazement, dismay, or any other emotion in the proper sense.

These last examples indicate some of the typical things we tend to say when speaking of *Sprachgefühl* or attributing *Sprachgefühl* to a certain person. *Sprachgefühl* is something a person has or lacks; it is something he may possess to a higher or lower degree, something he may have developed to an impressive degree of excellence or hardly at all. In this respect *Sprachgefühl* resembles some of our natural faculties, at least to a certain extent. A man either has or lacks the sense of smell; he either has or lacks the faculty of taste. He may be able to smell or taste more or less well, and he may have developed his senses of smell and taste to a higher or lower degree.

But there is an obvious difference between these natural faculties on the one hand and *Sprachgefühl* on the other. The senses of smell and taste are faculties we are endowed with by nature, and if a man has no sense of smell it is not his or any other person's fault; he simply is an unfortunate fellow (even though there are certain circumstances in which he may jolly well be considered more fortunate than the rest of us). The presence or absence of *Sprachgefühl*, on the other hand, does to some extent depend on an individual's efforts and on his environment; there are situations in which it is natural to say that somebody's lack of *Sprachgefühl* is his own fault or the fault of his education. However, it cannot be denied that even here nature plays an important part; there are people who simply are naturally clever at using words in surprisingly suitable or subtle ways; it does not cost them any effort to find the most adequate turn of phrase in the right situation; that is, they display a certain form of *Mutterwitz*, a gift or talent which we may envy but cannot acquire or imitate.

But now we must ask, what is this capacity called *Sprachgefühl* so effortlessly exercised by the naturally gifted and less easily or not at all displayed by the less talented? Is the *Sprachgefühl* of the gifted man the same ability, or sensibility, as the *Sprachgefühl* exhibited by the man who has to toil in order to reach similar results? Can we make any helpful distinctions between kinds or

types of *Sprachgefühl*, or does this expression indicate a conglomerate of capacities, tendencies, and responses which will ultimately resist analysis?

Now, I think that there are at least two main types of uses of the expression '*Sprachgefühl*' that can be distinguished. The first type comprises those cases in which we *appeal* or *point to* our *Sprachgefühl* in order to justify or account for a certain choice of words, a certain grammatical construction, etc. The second type is exemplified by those cases in which we *exercise* or *apply* our *Sprachgefühl* in order to find the appropriate expression or choose the most suitable construction. To be sure, this rough and ready distinction between appealing or pointing to and exercising or applying one's *Sprachgefühl* is by no means completely satisfactory. But it will help me to give a brief outline of the first type of case in order to get it out of the way and then to get down to the second type, which is the one that seems not only more interesting but also more puzzling.

The first type of case, i.e. the type of case where I appeal to my *Sprachgefühl*, or linguistic intuitions, comprises a number of last ditch moves, that is, answers or justifications given in situations where I know of no further possibility to which I could have recourse. Asked why I use a certain expression in a certain way I may answer that this is the way I have heard it used by others, that this is the way I have seen it used in books by eminent writers, that this is the way I have been taught to use it, that this is the way it is used in my dialect, and so on. What *these* answers have in common is that they give a reason and implicitly admit the possibility of my having got something wrong. If however I reply that I have used a given expression in a given way because that is how it ought to be used according to my *Sprachgefühl*, I refuse to give a good reason and may also be suggesting that the question of right or wrong does not arise. This does not mean that no conceivable reason could be given — on the contrary, it may mean that I could cite so many examples or precedents that it would simply not be worth my bothering to do so. In short, this way of appealing to my *Sprachgefühl* is a means of telling my interlocutor that I do not intend to give any further justification for my usage, pos-

sibly because I am absolutely sure of its appropriateness, or possibly because I fail to see that there is anything at issue in the case in question.

These two cases, however, are importantly different. I may be absolutely sure, for example, that the word 'contingent' means something like 'arbitrary' and I may have used the word in this sense all my life; but still, I am mistaken, and by various means my interlocutor will succeed in pointing this out to me. And then I may say that my *Sprachgefühl* has misled me, which, however, is not much more than a fancy way of admitting that I have made a mistake. But the second case (where according to my *Sprachgefühl* there simply is nothing to be discussed) is generally of a different nature. Let us take a German example. The weather is hot, I have been walking for three hours, and now I feel thirsty. I say, 'Ich will ein Glas Bier' but my interlocutor suggests that it would be more appropriate to say, 'Ich *möchte* ein Glas Bier'. Being a polite person I shall not tell him to go to hell but say that according to my *Sprachgefühl* (and to present intents and purposes) my sentence is perfectly appropriate. And that amounts to saying that (besides my considering it rather cheeky of my companion that he tries to correct my German) I simply do not think that it matters a straw whether I say '*will*' or '*möchte*'; according to my *Sprachgefühl* the question of appropriateness or inappropriateness, of correctness or incorrectness, just does not arise in this context.

But there are situations of a different kind, where it does matter whether, e.g., '*will*' or '*möchte*' is used, and these are cases where we *exercise* or *apply* our *Sprachgefühl*. An obvious — and probably oversimplified — case is that in which I am writing a story and trying to put the appropriate words into the mouth of a certain character. If this character were a hard-boiled ruffian, for example, it would go against my *Sprachgefühl* to choose the words 'Ich *möchte* ein Glas Bier', whereas, if the character in my story were a cultivated, sweet-tempered person, I could not, according to my *Sprachgefühl*, make him say 'Ich *will* ein Glas Bier'. Similarly, if in reading a story we encountered the ruffian saying 'ich *möchte*', we should say that the author showed a deplorable lack of *Sprachgefühl*; and if a reader of that

passage did not react in the same way as us we should judge that his *Sprachgefühl* was insufficiently developed.

Thus an example of what I mean by 'exercising' or 'applying' one's *Sprachgefühl* is this activity of finding the appropriate word or appreciating that the appropriate, or else an inappropriate, word has been chosen. There are, to be sure, many different ways of looking for or appreciating the appropriate word, many different types of situation where we apply our *Sprachgefühl* in one of these ways, and I do not know if there is, or can be, a useful principle of distinguishing these ways and situations. I shall none the less mention two types of case of what seem to me different applications of *Sprachgefühl* and see whether anything instructive can be gleaned from them. For convenience I shall label them. The first one will be called a case of *choosing words* and the second one a case of *radical formulation*. About choosing words the following can be said:

The fact that one speaks of the *appropriate word* does not show the existence of a something that [comes before our mind, and which is, as it were, the exact picture we want to use here]. One is inclined, rather, to speak of this picture-like something just because one can find a word appropriate; because one often chooses between words as between similar but not identical pictures; because pictures are often used instead of words; or to illustrate words; and so on.

And now I shall give a quotation apropos of radical formulation:

What happens . . . when we have something we want to say and cannot, and then find the words for? What does formulation bring off? . . . To find a description in this case is to identify a feature of the matter at hand and thereby to grasp its contour, to get a proper view of it . . . contrast [this] with another kind of case where I am looking for words: for instance, where I seek the word in a foreign language, already having it in English; or where I seek the technical term for a feature of some engine or plant, or the terrain, which I can quite

well identify with some adequate description . . . These are very different from the cases where I am seeking a language to identify how I feel, or to make clear just how it looks, or to define just what it was that was peculiar about her behaviour. Finding language in these latter cases is a matter of articulating what I sense, and therefore of getting a more articulated view of the matter. It is success in this effort . . . that I want to call formulation. In the translation or technical term case, it is not true to say that I do not know what I am looking for until I find it. But in cases of genuine formulation, we only know afterwards what we are trying to identify.

Now, if your *Sprachgefühl* has not been misled by the translation, you will no doubt have recognised the first of these quotations (the one concerning the case of choosing words) as coming from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>1</sup> The second quotation (the case of radical formulation) is taken from a piece by Charles Taylor entitled "Theories of Meaning".<sup>2</sup>

The case of choosing words is familiar and not difficult to illustrate. For example, I wish to characterise a certain person (it does not matter whether real or fictitious). I want to find the most characteristic adjective, and what comes to my mind are the words 'imposing', 'dignified', 'proud', 'venerable'.<sup>3</sup> My choice will depend on what has already been said — and possibly on what will be said — about the person in question. If I choose the word 'venerable' and the person characterised does not really turn out to be venerable or does not in the context supplied appear to be venerable, then I have chosen the wrong or an inappropriate word. This need not be like the case where from a number of photographs I choose the picture of a person who is not the one I intended. More likely it is similar to choosing a picture which is not characteristic, such as picking out a photograph of a notoriously solemn-looking person which happens to show him wearing an ironic sneer. Here this is not a fitting picture; it does not agree with the other things we know about the person portrayed. The man whose *Sprachgefühl* fails him in an analogous manner could be compared to a bespoke tailor

who produces a suit which looks as if it were made for a man slightly different from the one it was intended for. And just as we can tell the tailor where he went wrong, so we can point out to the speaker who has chosen the wrong word that his description does not fit the subject of his portrait, that his characterisation is somehow incongruous, even if we ourselves are not in a position to supply the right word.

Now, is it possible in a similar fashion to correct the man who finds the words for something which he is at first not able to express? Can we criticise a person who succeeds in radically formulating a previously nameless experience, feeling, or sensation? One difficulty here is that Taylor's description of this case is too general and that he does not give a well-described example of what he intends. Wittgenstein, in one of his discussions of looking for and finding '*das treffende Wort*' mentions a case in point. He says that there are conditions under which one might speak of a 'feeling of the unreality of one's surroundings', and he continues:

This feeling I have had once, and many have it before the onset of mental illness. Everything seems somehow not *real*: but not as if one *saw* things unclear or blurred; everything looks quite as usual. And how do I know that another has felt what I have? Because he uses the same words as I find appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

It is, incidentally, interesting that Wittgenstein here proposes our agreement about the appropriateness of an unusual expression as a criterion of the presence of a certain feeling or mental state. This, however, does not concern our present problem. We must ask why Wittgenstein employs the word 'unreality', and he explains:

I choose it because of its meaning. But I surely did not learn to use the word to mean: *a feeling*. No; but I learned to use it with a particular meaning and now I use it spontaneously like *this*. One might say — though it may mislead — : When I have learnt the word in its ordinary meaning, then I choose *that* meaning as a simile for my feeling. But of course what is in question

here is not a simile, not a comparison of the feeling with something else.<sup>5</sup>

One way in which the idea of the simile may be misleading is this: that it suggests the possibility of a comparison, either between an original and its portrait or between various possible characterisations in order to find out whether one of them agrees with or fits a given item better than the others. The case of radical formulation — this very peculiar exercise of our *Sprachgefühl* — is of a different nature, and I think that Wittgenstein indicates wherein its peculiarity lies:

The fact is simply that I use a word, the bearer of another technique, as the expression of a feeling. I use it in a new way. And wherein consists this new use? Well, one thing is that I *say*: I have a 'feeling of unreality' — after I have, of course, learnt the use of the word 'feeling' in the ordinary way.<sup>6</sup>

Radical formulation is not simply a matter of coining a new term for an independently identifiable kind of entity, nor is it a matter of employing an old term in an unusual way so as to create a striking image or simile. Radical formulation involves establishing a new use in its full (Wittgensteinian) sense, and to succeed in this does not merely depend on whether other people find my expression adequate. Radical formulation is bound up with changes — e.g. extensions or corrections — of some of our previous practices, and these practices are not necessarily just linguistic ones. It is this practical aspect of radical formulation which is entirely overlooked by Charles Taylor, who makes it appear as if it were all a matter of identifying the right sort of entity by means of the right expression and who by stressing the subjective side of exercising *Sprachgefühl* and neglecting its practical context and consequences runs the risk of thinking in terms of the misleading analogy (censured by Wittgenstein) according to which 'searching for the appropriate expression' is comparable 'to the efforts of someone who is trying to make an exact copy of a line that only he can see'.<sup>7</sup>

Radical formulation needs *practical* success if it is to succeed at all. For this reason genuine cases of radical formulation will not be frequent, nor will a radical formulation be corrigible or criticisable in the same way as a particular choice of words. If you think of striking or ingenious formulations such as Trollope's speaking of 'the tenth Muse, who now governs the periodical press' or Oscar Wilde's definition of the fox-hunting English gentleman as 'the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable' or Frank Sinatra's 'I mortgaged all my castles in the air', you are still merely confronted with clever choices of words, even though they have, or could have, become as proverbial as Wittgenstein's fly in the fly-bottle. Paradigmatic examples of radical formulation are, for instance, many of Freud's often rather mechanistic images, such as '*Verdrängung*', '*Traumarbeit*', '*Verdichtung*', or Wittgenstein's notion of '*Sprachspiel*'. These are expressions whose use is bound up with a determinate practice of classifying, identifying, and treating certain phenomena, and in these cases one could say, as Taylor does, that only when the formulation has been found do we know what we have been trying to identify.

In cases of radical formulation it makes little sense to criticise or try to correct the words chosen; if for some reason I do not find these expressions apt or useful I can abstain from using them, but there is no point in proposing a 'more appropriate' word. The examples alluded to by Taylor, on the other hand, do not seem to be of this kind. He mentions 'cases where I am seeking a language to identify how I feel, or to make clear just how it looks, or to define just what it was that was peculiar about her behaviour'. But surely those are not situations where we 'only know afterwards what we are trying to identify'. Maybe we do not immediately know what to say and hesitate because we are going through our repertoire of expressions trying to find the most appropriate one; and in all likelihood we shall come up with something pretty hackneyed or, at best, with rather laboured similes, such as 'She was as cute as a washtub', 'She had a mouth like wilted lettuce', 'He was high enough to have snow on him'.<sup>8</sup> Formulations of this type can be criticised and improved, and a man can show the excellence of his

*Sprachgefühl* by choosing words that are difficult or practically impossible to improve on.

Of course, also the ability to choose the appropriate word is connected with our practices. A word is, as Wittgenstein says in a passage quoted above, a bearer of a certain technique. And our ability to choose the appropriate word hinges on our having mastered the techniques connected with a wide range of words. Choosing the appropriate word is itself a technique which can to some extent be taught and learned by extending our repertoire of expressions, images, comparisons and improving our skill in choosing the right item from this repertoire. But as I have said, some people are more talented than others, and this means that, however hard we try, not all of us will often succeed in finding an expression which hits the nail on the head. We can train our *Sprachgefühl* but it may still be dull or mislead us. In this respect *Sprachgefühl* is like the sense of taste for instance. Virtually all of us are able to distinguish sweet wine from sour wine, but in order to tell the difference between two vintages of the same wine or between two wines from neighbouring vineyards you may need a good palate and a lot of practice. However, in order to *describe* these differences you will also need a good deal of *Sprachgefühl*.

#### Notes

1. Anscombe's translation (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), p. 54.
2. Reprinted in *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 257f.
3. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*

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4. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 1, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, sec. 125.

5. Ibid.

6. Sec. 126. This passage is, up to a point, strikingly reminiscent of Davidson's discussion of what metaphors mean (*Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 245ff.). Davidson argues that it is a novel or surprising *use* of certain words with their ordinary, literal, meanings which can make us see things in a new light. This similarity, however, cannot obliterate the fundamental difference between Wittgenstein's and Davidson's conceptions of meaning proper: while Davidson would not countenance Wittgenstein's notion of a word as bearer of a certain technique, Davidson's idea of meaning as completely severed from use is of course totally incompatible with Wittgenstein's conception of meaning.

7. Sec. 580.

8. From *The Notebooks of Raymond Chandler*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976, p. 64.

## Poetry and Nationalism

### Johan Wrede

#### 1. Introduction

Poetry could perhaps be described as a qualified presentation,<sup>1</sup> by means of language, of fictitious or real events or objects intended to bring about imaginative experience. This description applies, I would think, also to literary art in general. Poetry is in addition characterised by more obvious formal, quasimusical qualities, such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, etc., which directly influence our perception or experiencing of the text. This is what is often meant when poetry is said to have a texture tighter than that of prose.

I do not intend to produce any arguments for the correctness of this description, but I would in any case consider it a good approximation, in many ways reasonably close to a tradition of aesthetic definitions of literary art. My main reason for making experience — '*Erlebnis*' in Moritz Schlick's sense — so prominent in my description of literary art and poetry, is that we seem to regard the first hand experience of poetry, and of literary works of art in general, as a *sine qua non* of any informed discussion of a particular piece of poetry or literature. Anybody who would venture to discuss a literary work, and poetry in