

Deep Jokes

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Abstract

In this paper I draw attention to the grammatical “deep joke”. Wittgenstein refers to this type of joke in PI §111, comparing its depth to the depth of philosophy. I start with a brief review of Wittgenstein’s notions of “grammar” and “depth”. Building on these ideas, I first offer some general considerations regarding jokes and then present descriptive remarks about deep jokes. I evaluate possible examples of deep jokes, including primary examples provided by Wittgenstein, which appear in preliminary versions (1936-46) of the *Philosophical Investigations* but were cut later. I attempt to capture the distinctive qualities of deep jokes and seek to elucidate their philosophical potential. The results of the investigation of deep jokes provide an original reflection on our (mis-)understanding of linguistic practices.

Introduction

Malcolm’s memoir includes a remark on how Wittgenstein once declared that a serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes. (Malcolm 1984: 27f.) In his *Philosophical Investigations* (PI; I will refer to the English translation of 2009) Wittgenstein raises the issue of “depth”. He ascribes depth to problems that stem from a misinterpretation of forms of language.

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; they are as deeply rooted in us as the forms of our language, and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. — Let’s ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (PI 2009: §111)

What Is Grammar?

The way Wittgenstein uses the term “grammar” differs from common usage. His notion of grammar omits school grammar (declension, conjugation, tense, gender, word order); it rather has to do with a philosophical investigation of language that is concerned with the description of word meaning and use.

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human

beings. It only describes, and in no way explains, the use of signs. (PI 2009: §496)

Thus, instead of prescriptive rules *defining* the grammatical correctness of language, Wittgenstein assumes descriptive grammatical rules *describing* the established uses of terms. These rules constitute our conceptual scheme. Philosophy may explicate that scheme by describing our linguistic practices. (Glock 2017: 237) In this sense, philosophy itself is “grammatical investigation”, similar to conceptual analysis. The aim of such an investigation is to provide an overview of our language use. As, for Wittgenstein, it is precisely the lack of overview that often hinders understanding.

The task of philosophy, for Wittgenstein, is not to explain *how things really are*, but rather to make conscious and critically reflect on the participatory knowledge that speakers of a natural language automatically acquire by speaking a certain language and living a certain form of life. The philosophical investigation of language does not emphasise language’s sufficiency. On the contrary, it shows that the speakers of a language are *deeply embedded* in the language’s system, *deeply entangled* in its rules and in the confusions that stem from its use. This is not to suggest an attempt at a reformed, improved language, as it is not an ideal state of surveyable order that is relevant here, but the *activity* of constantly emphasising distinctions, (PI 2009: §132) of re-ordering and regrouping language.

What Is *Depth*?

Wittgenstein's notion of “depth” comprises structural as well as affective components; both closely linked to language. Deep problems result from grammatical confusions. It seems as if such confusions stem from the inability to distinguish between a word’s grammatical possibilities; in particular between its “surface” and “depth” grammar. The reason why we confuse surface grammar with depth grammar is that we have learned to identify language with words, instead of understanding it in terms of the practices that *confer* meaning upon those words. Words do not denote prescriptively; thus, perceiving them superficially undermines any form of comprehensive understanding. We provide words with depth in our practices of language games, of communication. If words denote variably, then their intended

meaning depends on expression, context, sentence structure, etc. Grasping words comprehensively, which means grasping their intention and their depths, is a prerequisite for successful communication.

Depth also contains psychological, or emotional significance, where a felt uneasiness that stems from language is “deep”. (Ts 302: 29) Wittgenstein speaks of “deep disquietudes”, (PI 2009: §111) caused by misinterpretations of our forms of language. These are not only formal problems, but they have affective consequences. Wittgenstein rejects the strategy of simply eliminating such deep problems from the world, as trivial philosophy does. (see Ts 211: 593) It is necessary to acknowledge the feeling of language-induced disquietude and to apply meaningful methods of “therapy”. Such methods would aim at raising awareness of our conceptual scheme and our language use.

What Are Deep Jokes?

Let us now try to apply the previous considerations to our common concept of a joke, in order to get an idea of what a deep joke could be. Joking is a social practice. The form of the practice is determined and familiar to most people. A person tells a joke and tries her best in telling it correctly. The recipient listens and tries her best to understand; a possible answer to a successful joke practice is laughter. The motives for telling a joke may vary, so do the situations in which jokes are told. It seems generally fair to claim that in many cases jokes are told to amuse and perhaps to illustrate a particular point. There are different theories regarding the mechanisms of humour and jokes. The predominant theories are the theories of relief, superiority, and incongruity. For a comprehensive introduction to the philosophy of humour, one may consult, e.g., Morreall. (see 2009, 2020) The theory of incongruity in particular illustrates how jokes thwart our expectations by bringing together apparently incongruous schemes. While the set-up creates certain expectations, these may be violated within the punchline. According to such an account, expectation, irritation, and surprise are fundamental elements that serve the pattern of joke narratives.

Wittgenstein urges that the conventional philosophical form of explanation must be replaced by description; however, Wittgenstein’s writings do not

contain clear descriptions; they rather consist in thought experiments, questions, aphorisms, fictional dialogues, and the like. These, in a way similar to jokes, seem to serve the aim of irritating or surprising the reader, forcing them to look at things in a different way; (Janik 2001: 193f.) forcing them to perceive familiar things in a way that may not be the most familiar.

Having sketched some of the joke's general features we now may ask about the deep joke's distinctive qualities. Deep jokes may share the structural and formal qualities of a more general type of joke, they cannot be distinguished in concerns of style or form. What seems to be the idea is that deep jokes bring our grammatical confusions to display. They corrupt conventional ways of thinking and speaking in order to initiate a reflection on meaning. In this way they incorporate both the problem and the solution; not the shallow solution of reduction, rather the active solution that aims at surveyability of our use of language. Deep joking may be an activity of re-ordering in a humorous mode. The punchline of a deep joke tears the recipient out of her ordinary forms of language. It brings unspoken assumptions to light that are presupposed in the way we think and talk, (Yablo 2019: 3) or emphasises distinctions which our ordinary forms of language make us overlook. The effect of such an eruption may be *disquieting*, to use Wittgenstein's term. Or, to remain within Wittgenstein's images, we may say that the punchline leads to concussions, such as those we get from running up against the limits of language. (see PI 2009: §119)

Voltolini (in an online discussion with Yablo, 2020) sees an example for a possible deep joke in Wittgenstein's PI §246:

It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I'm in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain? (PI 2009: §246)

In this sense, a deep joke could originate from a senseless sentence that arises out of a misunderstanding of the rules of grammar for the expressions they contain. Though not amusing in a conventional sense, one may concede that in fact it is a funny thing to claim that one possesses knowledge of one's pain. One may argue that knowledge must be open to doubt and that is not feasible in the case of one's own pain. One can have pain, be in pain; knowledge may be

irrelevant here and wrongly referred to. The joke thus arises out of the misunderstanding of the grammar of “know” and of “pain” (or of expressions of sensations more generally).

Fortunately though, we are not restricted to assumptions since primary examples of deep jokes can indeed be found within Wittgenstein’s writings. Preliminary versions of the *Philosophical Investigations*, beginning with Ms 142 (1936-37), feature a separate remark, following §111, entirely on the deep joke. This remark was cut in Ts 227a, 227b, §111, p. 85 (1944-46); only the first sentences remained. Since its content is of high relevance to an investigation of the deep joke, I am quoting it at full length:

Fragen wir uns: Warum empfinden wir einen grammatischen Witz in gewissem Sinne als tief? (Und das ist ja natürlich die philosophische Tiefe.) (Worin liegt die Tiefe des Witzes: “We called him tortoise because he taught us”?)

Wir werden plötzlich aufmerksam darauf, daß eine solche Ableitung des Substantivs unmöglich ist. – Warum sollte sie aber so unmöglich sein? Sie ließe sich auch sehr wohl denken (Zzechische Zunamen die ein Imperfectum sind). Und nun scheint der Witz seine Tiefe verloren zu haben. Dies kommt aber daher, daß wir unsere Aufmerksamkeit verschoben haben. – Betrachte ein andres Beispiel: Lichtenberg läßt eine Magd in einem Brief über Literatur die Zahl Hundert so schreiben: 001. Wenn man sich sagt: „nun, es könnte ja auch in der andern Richtung geschrieben werden“ – so fühlt man die Tiefe der Komik nicht. Diese liegt, glaube ich, in dem Zusammenhang unseres Dezimalsystems, in welchem das Zeichen “001” eine gewisse Stelle hat. Die Tiefe der Absurdität des “001” erscheint erst für den, der, sozusagen, die mathematischen Konsequenzen aus diesem Schreibfehler ziehen kann. Nicht für den, der nur weiß, daß man so nicht ‘hundert’ schreibt. – Man kann, das ‘taught us’ betreffend sagen: Ein Verbum hat für uns, eine Grundstellung (wie man bei Turnübungen sagt) & dann verschiedene Stellungen verschiedenen Verrichtungen gemäß. Eine beliebige dieser Stellungen als Bezeichnung dessen nehmen, der (z.B.) lehrt, ist so, als nähme man für das Standbild eines Menschen irgend eine Stellung, in der er sich auch einmal befinden kann. Die Grundstellung, könnte man sagen, repräsentiert den Menschen

& der Infinitiv das Verbum. Es hätte so für uns nicht das Komische des Substantivs “taught us”, wenn man statt dessen den Infinitiv des Verbs zur Bezeichnung des Lehrenden verwendet hätte. – Die Tiefe der Absurdität liegt hier wieder in Verhältnissen, die einer längeren Erklärung bedürfen; weil sie den eigentümlichen Bau unserer Sprache betreffen.– Wenn wir auf das System unserer Sprache sehen, dann haben wir das Gefühl der Tiefe. Es ist, als sähen wir durch ihr Netz die ganze Welt.) (Ms 142: §112)

The “tortoise-joke” Wittgenstein is referring to is out of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice*:

“Once”, said the Mock Turtle at last, with a deep sigh, “I was a real Turtle.”

(...) “When we were little”, the Mock Turtle went on at last, more calmly, though still sobbing a little now and then, “we went to school in the sea. The master was an old Turtle — we used to call him Tortoise — ”

“Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn’t one?” Alice asked.

“We called him Tortoise because he taught us,” said the Mock Turtle angrily: “really you are very dull!” (Carroll 1865: 135f.)

It is the last sentence of the dialogue, the “Tortoise/taught us”-pun, which reveals itself more directly when read out aloud, that features the “depth” in question. If we follow Wittgenstein’s idea, then we notice how the fictional character Mock Turtle illustrates the grammatical error of a faulty derivation. The Turtle who *teaches* became the “Tortoise”; drawing on the phonetic proximity of “tortoise” /tɔːr.təs/ and “taught us” /tɔːt/ /əs/.

A handwritten marginal note was added to the remark in Ts 239 (1937), wherein Wittgenstein explains vividly why the above joke may be perceived as deep:

„Wir empfanden ihn als tief, weil er ein grelles Licht auf das System unserer Sprache zu werfen schien.“/ “We perceived it as deep because it seemed to shed a glaring light on the system of our language.” (my translation; second marginal note Ts 239: §117)

The depth of a joke appears only when one draws the consequences from it. And that is the reason why such deep jokes may also cause disquietude. A joke that sheds light on the operating modes of language, shows, above all, the

possibilities of confusion, problems, dysfunctionalities that have formed in the evolution of language. A recipient who takes these possibilities seriously may begin to doubt their own use of language, their own communicative competence, their own linguistic knowledge. Such doubt may initiate a process of reflection on the linguistic establishment and interpretation of meaning.

Let me propose another candidate for a deep joke that I regard as a revelatory example. There are actually two versions of this joke, aiming for opposing but equally original punchlines:

A group of salespeople had been travelling the country for many years, always sharing the same carriage in the train and always telling one another jokes. Over the years, they had become so familiar with their jokes that they just used numbers to indicate them. One of them would say “23” and they’d all laugh. Or “89!” A young person joined them and after a few journeys decided she’d take part. In a moment of silence, she exclaimed “97!” But nobody laughed. The young person wondered where she could have gone wrong. Had she chosen the wrong number? She got the answer from one of the salespeople “One must also know *how to tell a joke*.”

The alternative, positive punchline, instead, goes as follows:

There was a lot of laughter and one of the salespeople turned to her and said: “That’s a good one! – We hadn’t heard that one before.”

This joke may not be entirely in line with Wittgenstein’s examples. For the joke itself does not really illustrate misunderstandings that stem from grammatical confusions, but it rather illustrates the very process of linguistic establishment of meaning and its limitations. Conferring or reducing fictional content to a number might strike us as an unusual practice. However, abbreviations are a common form of meaning conferment in most languages. This legitimates the depth of the joke-story and allows to draw conclusions that are relevant for our actual linguistic practices.

The salespeople in the joke have actively and consciously conferred meaning to the numbers they utter, and they seem to be very aware of the grammatical rules of their practice. However, as a new person joins their practice it

becomes apparent how easily these rules are called into question. Of course, the new person was not present when the rules were established; nobody told her: “See, this joke (telling of the joke story ‘1’) is denoted by ‘1’, etc.” The person had no possibility of *learning* the game. Cavell puts it this way:

(...) we do not learn words in *all* the contexts in which they could be used (what, indeed, would that mean?) and (...) not every context in which a word is used is one in which the word *can* be learned (e.g., contexts in which the word is used metaphorically). And after a while we are expected to know when the words are appropriately used in further contexts. (Cavell 1979: 168)

A consideration of the ways we learn words is important, however the point crucial to the punchline is yet another: the salespeople themselves do not seem to be fully aware of their utterances’ meanings. The joke also succeeds in illustrating the psychological or emotional consequences of linguistic disquietudes. The negative punchline articulates a response of uneasiness that stems from the corruption of a language game. The positive punchline instead, evokes a feeling of uneasiness that stems from the realization of the practice’s arbitrariness.

Conclusion

I have shown how our grammatical confusions and the communicative difficulties we meet in our linguistic practices are reflected within jokes that feature a quality of depth. The investigation of grammar via deep jokes is an activity that emphasises distinctions, re-orders and regroups language. As the fictional characters displayed in the joke-stories are torn out of their linguistic entanglement, so are the recipients of a deep joke who reflect on its consequences. In such a way, deep joking may serve as a form of philosophical investigation.

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