

Family Resemblance and Context

Paul Hasselkuß

Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

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ABSTRACT When Wittgenstein introduces the notion of family resemblance in the *PI*, he claims that family expressions like ‘games’ are applied to things in a very particular way. Speakers do not point to some characteristics found in all games, but, instead, call a thing ‘game’ because it shares some characteristics with some other things already called ‘game’. Contextualists like Charles Travis argue that this supports a contextual theory of meaning. According to Travis, when speakers point to different characteristics for calling some thing ‘game’, the meaning of ‘game’ varies in relation to the context it is used in (in relation to the different criteria used in different contexts). I argue against this interpretation. To do so, I introduce a distinction between the *static* meaning of a family expression at a fixed point in time and the *dynamic* extension of its meaning over time. The context of utterance is only relevant for the latter and not, like Travis needs to claim, for the former.

1. Contextualism and Family Resemblance

Contextualism may be characterised as the view that the meaning (i.e. the content) of any sentence depends fundamentally upon the context in which it is uttered. The same sentence can express different meanings in different contexts, that is if uttered by a speaker in different situations. Formally speaking, if the semantic properties of a sentence are those that remain stable across all utterances, then, according to contextualism, for any sentence, semantic properties alone are insufficient to determine its meaning (cf. Recanati 2004, 90-91). (Note that sentences that contain indexicals such as ‘I’ or ‘here’ are context-relative even for non-contextualists. Contextualists, however, claim that all sentences, even those that do not contain any such indexicals, are context-relative.)

Some contextualists take the late Wittgenstein to hold a similar view, arguing that certain arguments in the *PI* support contextualism (see in particular Travis 2006, for a critical discussion see Bridges 2010). For the present purpose, I shall focus on their interpretation of family resemblance. To understand how family resemblance may support a contextualist theo-

ry of meaning, let me briefly recapitulate the context in which Wittgenstein discusses family resemblances in the PI.

The notion of ‘family resemblance’ is introduced in order to explain the claim that the things we call ‘language’ have no one thing in common but bear many different kinds of affinities, and that we use the same term for all these phenomena due to these affinities (cf. PI 2009: §65). Family resemblance, in the context of the PI, is thus foremost an “attack” (Glock 2017, 120) on essentialism, insofar there is, so one may interpret Wittgenstein, no simple set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the term ‘language’. By means of an explanation, Wittgenstein asks the reader to look at the various things we call ‘game’, where one does not “see something that is common to all, but similarities, affinities and a whole series of them” (PI 2009: §66). For instance, some games are said to be played by multiple players (like chess), while others are not (like patience). Some, like competitive ball games, can be won or lost, while in others there is no winning and losing (like a child playing with a ball). These similarities are subsequently characterised as ‘family resemblances’, for the “various resemblances between members of a family — build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth — overlap and criss-cross in the same way” (PI 2009: §67). (Notably, both aspects, the family ‘members’ not all having one thing in common and the various resemblances between them, are already present in the Blue Book, although here Wittgenstein explicitly discusses family resemblance as a counterpoint to a “craving for generality”, cf. BBB 17.)

Travis and fellow contextualists take this passage to indicate that family expressions like ‘game’ (or ‘language’) take a different meaning in different contexts. It is claimed that, as long as speakers resort to different criteria (i.e., characteristics) for the same term in different contexts, the term is used to express a different meaning: “The idea of family resemblance ... is that different things would so count on different occasions for the counting [i.e. for game, language, etc.]” (Travis 2006, 59). The first part of this claim can be inferred easily from the examples given above: A speaker may resort to different criteria for calling a thing ‘game’, e.g. being played by multiple players, being entertaining, winning and losing, etc. (Note that in PI 2009: §164 Wittgenstein is also explicitly claiming that one resorts to different “criteria” when using the word ‘read’.) It may even be the case that some things are called ‘game’ due to some characteristics that are incompatible with those of other games: chess is always played by more than a single player, whereas patience can only be played by a single player.

The problem with the contextualist interpretation consists of the second half of its claim. Using different criteria for the same term does not necessarily entail that the term's meaning has changed. To make this point, let me introduce a distinction between the static meaning of a family expression at one point in time and the dynamic extension of its meaning over time.

2. Family Resemblance: Statics

When Wittgenstein tells the reader “don't think but look!” (PI 2009: §66) at the various activities called ‘game’, he is asking for a static perspective (so to speak), in that he asks the reader to consider the various things that are currently (at time t) called ‘game’. In doing so, one becomes aware of the various overlapping and criss-crossing similarities. Shortly after the remark quoted above, Wittgenstein hints at the conceptual structure he has in mind:

“Why do we call something a ‘number’? Well, perhaps because it has a — direct — affinity with several things that have hitherto been called ‘number’; and this can be said to give it an indirect affinity with other things that we also call “numbers”. And we extend our concept of number, as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre.” (PI 2009: §67)

While it is difficult to spell out what exactly the relevant resemblances, similarities and/or affinities are, we may, for the present purpose simply accept ‘resemblance’ as a primitive notion (see, however, Bambrough 1960 and Campbell 1965 for attempts to define resemblances by means of shared properties or predicates, see Goodman 1972 for some critical comments). On a minimal interpretation, then, on the static perspective, we see a ‘thread’ of overlapping resemblances when looking at the things called ‘game’. While not any two games directly resemble each other, they indirectly resemble each other via direct resemblances to other games (Baker and Hacker 2005, 212). For example, we may see that chess is played by multiple players just like handball. And handball is played with a ball, just like the child who is kicking a ball against a wall. And while the playing child has no direct resemblances to chess (say), both are indirectly connected by the direct resemblances to handball. (See Wennerberg 1967 for thoughts on direct and indirect resemblances.)

The upshot, now, is this: If we see this complex ‘thread’ of resemblances when looking at the things called ‘game’, we can say that ‘game’ also expresses this complex structure when applied to chess, handball, the playing child and so on. After all, Wittgenstein introduced family resemblance to

explain the negative claim that ‘language’ has no simple essence that could be made explicit by a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. He does not claim that ‘language’ does not express any other, more complex structure.

If, as the contextualists have it, the term ‘game’ were to express a different meaning in relation to its context of utterance, the complex structure of overlapping resemblance would also need to be different. In the examples that Wittgenstein discusses, this is not the case. If one calls chess ‘game’ due to it being played by two players and goes on to call patience ‘game’ due to it involving winning and losing, in both usages (i.e., in both contexts) the same underlying structure of overlapping resemblances can be found. This is even the case if the characteristics of the relevant things stand in stark contrast to each other. Consider ancient gladiator games. We may suppose that they were hardly entertaining for those forced to ‘play’, but still there are some resemblances to the child who is entertaining herself by kicking a ball around. Both may be said to be entertaining for those watching the players, for instance.

To summarise, if we follow Wittgenstein’s suggestion to look at the resemblances between the things a family expression is applied to, we see a complex structure of overlapping resemblances. While speakers may at different times and in different contexts point to different parts of this structure by using different criteria for the same term, this does not imply that the term is used to express a different meaning. It can still be said to express the same, although complex, meaning.

3. Family Resemblance: Dynamics

The context of utterance may, however, be relevant when looking at the things called ‘game’ from a dynamic perspective, that is when investigating the conditions of calling some thing ‘game’ (or ‘language’, or ‘number’) that was not previously subsumed under this term. Wittgenstein already moves to this perspective at the end of the quote above when he talks about us “extend[ing] our concept of number, as in spinning a thread” (PI 2009: §67).

Such an extension should be possible along the lines of the complex structure of resemblances discussed above. Concepts with such a structure do not have any clear boundaries, so Wittgenstein (cf. PI 2009: §68). And we can deal with these unbounded structures fairly easily when giving explanations. For example, when explaining the meaning of ‘game’, we may de-

scribe some games and add “This and similar things are called ‘games’.” (PI 2009: §69, my emphasis).

However, although there are no clear boundaries, these concepts cannot be extended to anything. Calling an ordinary table ‘game’ would still be mistaken. Extending a family expression F to a new thing a requires that a somehow fits into the existing structure of F, i.e. that there are some overlapping resemblances between the things already called F and a. However, resemblances are clearly not sufficient to extend a family expression. Consider cases of violent street fighting. There may be some resemblances to games, say to competitive boxing, to running or to the things Wittgenstein calls “Kampfspiele” (cf. PI 2009: §66). Yet, we do not in our ordinary discourse call street fighting ‘game’. (This is known as the problem of wide open texture, cf. Pompa 1967, 66 and Griffin 1974, 644-45.) To extend a family expression to new cases, the underlying resemblances, thus, need to be relevant or recognised. But this is more complex than it may initially seem.

In some cases, speakers may be able to choose between multiple competing family expressions to extend (e.g. ‘game’ and ‘artwork’) (Prien 2004, 18). In doing so, one may also point to dis-resemblances between the things already subsumed under a term (Williamson 1996, 87). The overall situation and background knowledge of the speaker may also be relevant (seeing the same painting in a gallery or in a kindergarten may have a great influence on calling it ‘artwork’, for example.) In any case, the decision is not only with the speaker, but their linguistic community also has a say in what use of a term becomes admissible (say, what extension is useful or practical) (Pelczar 2000, 501-08). I do not want to suggest that this list is in any way extensive. What I want to suggest is that, when looking at the dynamic development of family expressions, many things are to be considered (specific resemblances, speaker’s knowledge and intention, her linguistic community, and so on). Since contextualists already subsume many of these considerations under the term ‘context’, one may claim that the dynamic extension of family terms is, in some broad way, influenced by its context. Yet, this does not imply that the static meaning of a family expression is relative to context. (Gert 1995 and Llewelyn 1968 claim that, on Wittgenstein’s view, the overlapping resemblances between the things called by the same expression are a consequence of, and not a reason for, subsuming a thing under the term. I cannot discuss this point in detail here, but I take it that the argument above would be compatible with these interpretations.)

4. Conclusion

Contextualists take family expressions to express a context-relative meaning and point to Wittgenstein's remarks that suggest speakers may resort to different criteria, although they use the same term. I have argued against this interpretation. Wittgenstein can be taken to distinguish between a static and a dynamic view on family expressions. On the static view, one becomes aware of overlapping and criss-crossing resemblances between the things subsumed under a family expression. If the expression is applied to any of these things, even if due to different criteria, it can always be said to express the same, yet complex thread of resemblances (contra the contextualist's interpretation). On the dynamic view, one asks for the conditions to extend a family expression to things not already subsumed under it. Here, resemblances are not sufficient. Instead, I have suggested to consider the (broad) context of utterance as informative for the decision if and how family expressions are extended.

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