

The Meaning of Words

Linguistic Summary 01

In order to understand how words should be defined, it is first necessary to understand how words function and develop.

Language is not simply made up by a collection of words in a dictionary. Language is an expression of a culture, a society, and a set of beliefs about the meaning of the world and how people value things. The primary difficulty we face today is that our culture seems to lack any unified system of value, and so the meaning of words--especially the "important" words we use, seem to be falling apart.

Grammar and syntax explain the mechanics of words, but neither grammar nor syntax on their own (at least, not in the way we understand these disciplines today) can explain *meaning*. Meaning is studied in two related disciplines: philology and linguistics. (Linguistics is the general, philosophical study of language as an abstract. Philology studies a particular language from the point of view of its development and history.)

The Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), spent his career thinking about the meaning of words, and how we come to understand language. He is considered one of the most important philosophers of linguistics and philology.

Wittgenstein's key observations:

1. The origin of language is unknown and mysterious, and not "ostensive";
2. There is no such thing as a "private language": all language is social.
3. Language is not simply a collection of words, but born out of a "form of life".
4. Originally, Wittgenstein adopted a "picture theory" of language, but then modified it to be expressed in terms of "language games".

The context in which a language functions of the micro language game (families, friends) requires a shared value system; in order for macro communities to communicate meaningfully, there needs to be a shared micro-system of value and belief in order for these words to function properly in society.