Lost in the City: Lessons in Co-ordination

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Abstract

This short essay offers a Wittgensteinian reflection on the problem of knowing and learning one's way about in language, in the city, in technology. What a philosophy of the city, the philosophy of technology, and the philosophy of multilingualism have in common is that they might fruitfully start from a position of illiteracy. The paper makes some programmatic suggestions on how to assume this position.

Keywords: Ludwig Wittgenstein; philosophy of technology; philosophy of language; philosophy of multilingualism; illiteracy

1. Introduction

Not all of Ludwig Wittgenstein's similes are compelling. They can be a bit labored, even confusing, and yet prove instructive in surprising ways. Consider the famous passage in which Wittgenstein compares language to the layout of a city.

> Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. (PI, 18)[1]

By showing that in the city the depth of time is flatly spread out in space, Wittgenstein is not so much speaking about language but about the philosophy of language. The most recent suburbs are logically built up on the model of scientific language as conceived by Rudolf Carnap and others. Terms are operationally defined and fit a conceptual grid. The old town, in contrast, resembles a Heideggerian medieval maze that has not been tidied up by the logicians of his day but, at best, has been subject to patchwork renovations.

That cities do not actually develop along this pattern of medieval and modern is one reason why this is a somewhat labored comparison. The writing or composition of the city does not simply

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[1] Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* (1958) are here referenced by citing the numbered remark. "Unsere Sprache kann man ansehen als eine alte Stadt: Ein Gewinkel von Gäßchen und Plätzen, alten und neuen Häusern mit Zubauten aus verschiedenen Zeiten; und dies umgeben von einer Menge neuer Vororte mit gerade und regelmäßigen Straßen und mit einförmigen Häusern."

move outwards from its historical center but involves constant rewriting and overlaying, extrapolation and revisioning, fusing and joining with centers here and there, as village structures become incorporated or reinvented, as topographic features and existing infrastructure need to be negotiated.

If this is nevertheless a most instructive remark, there are at least three reasons for this, with the third one offering a surprising twist to the story. Firstly, Wittgenstein invites us to turn the comparison around: We might compare not language to a city but cities to languages—an invitation to view them as compositions with a peculiar grammar. Cities then need to be read, interpreted, and understood in terms of their elementary units threaded together by way of streets, electric grids, sewage systems, and transportation infrastructures. This suggestion, to be sure, has been taken up implicitly and explicitly by urban planners and theorists alike, and it works with a received view of what a language is and how it can afford clarity of understanding (for example Christopher Alexander et al. 1977, Roland Barthes 1986, Ben Hillier 1999, or Amos Rapoport 1982, but compare Barry Shelton 2012).

Secondly, the remark is instructive in regard to Wittgenstein's own punchline which grants it a peculiar place of prominence: This punchline comes with his conception of what is a philosophical problem and how it manifests itself, namely that philosophical problems take the form, "I don't know my way about" (PI, 123).[2] Lost in the city, needing orientation—this is how Wittgenstein's problems of philosophy present themselves. The challenge is not one of solving the problem as in a puzzle or mathematical homework assignment but of finding for oneself or showing others the way out of the problem, a way of steering clear from it, and "To shew the fly the way out of the flybottle" (PI, 309).[3] We get lost, sometimes trapped even in the world of our own making because, like our cities, what we make is not therefore made according to plan—even the built world is not a world of our design.

Thirdly, the remark becomes instructive when one more closely considers how we get lost in a city and when we come to acknowledge that we do not know our way about. Clearly, this does not happen in our own neighborhood where we share a language and thus a form of life (PI 241 and Winner 1989). It happens when we encounter the city as a strange place with many crisscrossing, overlapping forms of life, where the city is a multilingual place with Chinatown bordering on Little Italy, when cleaning crews do not share in the lives of house-owners or office-buildings, when tourists locate themselves on subway maps, where some street-names are in Cyrillic letters only, others transliterated in the Roman alphabet, where one cannot ask a person on the street but latches on to church steeples and memorized street-corners, golden arches, and other landmarks. If one thus takes Wittgenstein's comparison seriously, it leads us from a philosophy of language to the philosophy of multilingualism (Aronin 2017, 2018, 2020, Nordmann 2023a), leads from grasping determinate meaning to the negotiation of a bewildering cacophony of signs.

2. Illiterate Perspectives

The philosophy of the city can benefit from Wittgenstein's simile when it is concerned with a multilingual assemblage of codes and signs, a layering of forms of life and socio-technical systems. This would be the most salient aspect of Wittgenstein's critique of the philosophy of language. While the received view and his own earlier view begin mono-lingually from the vantage point of literacy,

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[2] "Ein philosophisches Problem hat die Form: ‚Ich kenne mich nicht aus.' "
[3] "Was ist dein Ziel in der Philosophie?—Der Fliege den Ausweg aus dem Fliegenglas zeigen."

fluency, or mastery ("new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses"), one must begin from illiteracy instead, that is, without a map that tells us how the relation of signs on the map provides a picture of reality. The idea of such picturing "held us captive" writes the philosopher. "[I]t lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (PI 115).[4] So, even when philosophers write about language, they do so supposing that speaking and writing are always about something, that they represent thoughts by expressing them or situations by depicting them. This position of "aboutness" is one of critical distance, knowledge and power, fluency and mastery—held captive in this position, philosophers of language could do nothing but reaffirm it. Simply by virtue of speaking a language together and sharing in a form of life, we seem to be in possession of German, French, and Japanese maps where each tells us how the relation of signs on the map provides a picture of reality—and of course, these various maps can be compared. However, in the later work of his *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein has many reasons to doubt that such maps are sufficient to provide orientation, and begins anew, abandoning his picture theory of language, begins illiterate in the city, in the multilingual condition, in the built environment with its machines and technical routines: "I do not know my way about."[5]

Most cities bear the imprint of urban planning; they adopt an international system of signage, and every effort is made to render them readable with intuitive interfaces, designed affordances paving the way. And yet, if only heuristically, it makes sense to begin from the position of illiteracy, that is, with the challenge of making sense and rendering the city readable by any means necessary. No matter how well-equipped, the strangers who enter the city find themselves in the middle of things—they lack what Wittgenstein was seeking and what maps promise to provide: a synoptic view, a place from which to survey the situation. At best, with a printed or digital map in hand, a stranger might try with considerable effort to relate the synoptic view of the map to the experience on the ground. The strangers cannot survey from above, nor can they look straight ahead and claim a horizon of action in which they confidently forge a path. Typically, strangers look down or decipher close-up—down to the ground like Hänsel and Gretel, who seek to retrace their steps, and down at their smartphones to which they entrust themselves as they are located and nudged along so many meters straight ahead, then a right, finally left—by this method they reach their destination. By reading signs close-up, mediated by devices and experiences, one can build a sense of familiarity through habituation, participation, and repetition. Illiterates thus learn to orient themselves quite successfully without understanding urban design principles, the master plan, or the layout of a city.

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[4] "Ein *Bild* hielt uns gefangen. Und heraus kommen wir nicht, denn es lag in unsrer Sprache, und sie schien es uns nur unerbittlich zu wiederholen." PI 115 follows immediately upon a remark that evokes the captivating power of Wittgensteins earlier picture theory of language which epitomizes like none other the representational significance of mapping relations between propositions and states of affairs.

[5] Wittgenstein himself, to be sure, did not philosophically address the city or technology or questions of multilingualism. But he offered a broad notion of grammar that may have been grounded in engineering science and that extends far beyond natural language, allowing us to consider the grammar of things, the working orders of people and things, social and technical routines, different ways of worldmaking (Nordmann 2018, Pezzica 2023). Some take this as an invitation simply to extend the monolingual paradigm of understanding the world through understanding a language: There are many "languages" but what they have in common is that each can be mastered and translated into the others under the perhaps unattainable ideal, but ideal nonetheless, of the preservation of meaning. By choosing a different vantage point, Wittgenstein no longer insists that we must mean what we say, or that there are meanings which somehow attach to signs and somehow become expressed through speech acts, broadly conceived. Sense-making as learning to find one's way about even in mono-lingual language games need not presuppose this conception of meaning.

This is an achievement of co-ordination and not of representation—co-ordinating the body with the trodden paths, rituals, and signposts that provide orientation without requiring knowledge of plans and designs or historical meaning.

Similarly, if the philosophy of language is concerned with questions of representation and how the world becomes intelligible to the speaker of a language, the philosophy of multilingualism does not privilege the potent speaker but foregrounds the illiterates who gain orientation through co-ordination. Even pluri-lingual individuals who speak three or more languages will find themselves in the position of illiteracy in a multilingual condition—which is characterized by the confluence not only of many natural languages, pidgins, dialects but also by the formal codes, signage, beeping sounds, emojis, professional jargon, sequences of keys that need to be entered to purchase a subway ticket, etc. This consideration of the multilingual condition highlights the peculiar form of intelligence that is required to navigate the world by way of co-ordination rather than representation. This is the intelligence of the person who cannot read or write and still manages to blend in, to compensate and cover up what is commonly regarded as a humiliating form of ignorance.

In quite another sphere, this form of ignorance and its compensation is generally accepted as normal. We can pretend to be computer-savvy without understanding anything at all about how computers work, merely by virtue of being habituated to input-output patterns in normal use and occasional break-downs—that is, by co-ordination and participation in the working order of things. To be sure, there is engineering science and engineers acquire representational knowledge of what the world is like, including theories and laws of nature. And yet, what engineers and users, the fine and the mechanical arts, have in common is a kind of cohabitation with the things, a feeling for the organism, the mechanism, the algorithm. In virtue of participating haptically and mentally in different working orders, we learn something about the interplay of things and the effects that can be produced by configuring or composing things in this way or that. Here, participation conditions attunement to the world of things and our ways of learning how things can work together.

Participating in the world of things, of symbols and codes—this is the core of urban experience and of living in the city. It signifies the immediate connection between urban experience, the multilingual condition, our technologically constructed environment. Participants are initially illiterate, and from this position acquire orientation and the capacity to read or anticipate through habituation, repetition, or socialization.

3. Attunement Through Participation

Wittgenstein's comparison of language and a city led us from one idea to quite another of how to orient oneself in the city, in the technosphere, in language. From literate concepts, categories, and propositions, or plans, maps, and designs that are somehow in our possession, we shifted to initially illiterate participation that affords knowledge as one learns to navigate and to discern how things work. The move from veridical representation to reliable co-ordination comes with an epistemic challenge. Can a philosophy of the city or a philosophy of multilingualism retrace and reconstruct the the attainment of knowledge strictly on the surface of things, that is, without relying on depth, without referring to underlying structures or meaningful intentions?

> In the use of words, one might distinguish 'surface grammar' from 'depth grammar.' What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the sentence structure, the part of its use—one might say—that can be taken

in by the ear.—And now compare the depth grammar, say of the verb "to mean," with what its surface grammar would lead us to presume. No wonder one finds it difficult to know one's way about. (Wittgenstein PI, 664)[6]

There are interestingly different ways of working with this remark (Pezzica 2023). I here read it as a rejection of depth grammar which considers the use of a verb like "to mean" with respect to a (literally) obscure picture of mental acts that occasion utterances or else to the structuring function of concepts that serve as conditions of possibility—either way, hidden from view and detached from what is taken in by the ear. One will never gain a synoptic view of the lay of the land by following words into a lexical depth where they are rooted in intentions or meanings., we miss what "immediately impresses itself upon us" if we insist on tracing an utterance or string of signs to a referenced thing or pictured state of affairs. If orientation requires a synoptic presentation [*übersichtliche Darstellung*] of surface topography, this overview must not require a vertical ordering of above and below: If I want to find the *Centre Beaubourg* I will succeed neither by climbing up the Eiffel Tower nor by digging down and understanding on a mental map the meaning and former location of "*Les Halles.*" Knowing how to find it is to know that one takes the RER train to the station *Châtelet Les Halles,* or the metro to *Rambuteau*—but only if one finds signs to the correct exit, for otherwise one might still wander about, lost (and beware that the *Centre Beaubourg* might go by the name of *Centre Pompidou*). So here again is the epistemic or programmatic challenge for a philosophy of the city: If orientation does not require a view from above, how do we build up a synoptic view through participation, that is, through living and moving in a city, our eyes and ears immediately impressed, gaining peace-meal glimpses from multiple vantage points. One way of pursuing this challenge is to take up Walter Benjamin's interest in a cinematically dispersed or distributed mode of beholding—a form of scrutinizing the world cursorily, critically but without set criteria, dispassionately but with an ever better-developed sense of what fits or does not fit, what works and does not work, what is jarring and what goes unnoticed (Benjamin 1969).

Historically and phenomenologically, cinematic gaze and urban experience belong together, condition each other. But are we to assume that the scattered movement of light on the one hand, the distracted glance (*zerstreuter Blick*) of the beholder on the other hand, give rise to casual judgments of right and wrong, sedimenting finally as knowledge of co-ordinations in a working order of people and things? This would imply that a synoptic view arises gradually as one ascends to a partial perspective here and there, achieved by way of habit formation. Moreover, are we to assume that this form of knowledge-production can be accounted for in a non-mentalistic fashion without reference to beliefs, meanings, representation, or intentions? This programmatic paper suggests as much, fully realizing that the work only begins here: What does mere participation, and what does living in the city, afford epistemically? And how does the comparison of city and language work if one does not derive an urban grammar of things from the mono-lingual paradigm but takes language as it impresses eyes and ears in the multilingual condition (Shelton 2012)?[7]

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[6] "Man könnte im Gebrauch eines Worts eine ‚Oberflächengrammatik' von einer ‚Tiefengrammatik' unterscheiden. Das, was sich uns am Gebrauch eines Worts unmittelbar einprägt, ist seine Verwendungsweise im *Satzbau*, der Teil seines Gebrauches—könnte man sagen—den man mit dem Ohr erfassen kann. — Und nun vergleiche die Tiefengrammatik, des Wortes ‚meinen' etwa, mit dem, was seine Oberflächengrammatik uns würde vermuten lassen. Kein Wunder, wenn man es schwer findet, sich auszukennen."

[7] And if, say, Henri Lefebvre's conception of inhabiting a social space implies a critique of a reified syntactical view of the city as an organization of powerful referents or system of signification, does his critique equally apply to the city as it appears from the perspective of multilingualism? (See Lefebvre 1996, 147–154.)

4. Conclusion

And so, to a series of literary vignettes that characterize the multilingual condition (Nordmann 2023b), this Wittgensteinian story can now be added:

> Getting to know the city by subway is a bit like a mole sticking out its head here and there: Leaving this or that subway station and finding one's destination from there, slowly piecing together the layout of the city, discovering only after a while that two apparently different streets are actually the same, sometimes walked in this direction, and sometimes from the opposite end. Walking past a playground, a football stadium, a betting parlor, toddlers frolicking in a water fountain, chessplayers by the roadside, teenagers in cosplay outfits, a pub with slot machines—we wouldn't learn what a game is, were it not for occasional shouts of "let's play," "stop playing," and the many different uses of "game" in our native tongue. But then in our housing development, we sit in the courtyard by an improvised soccer field and soon learn that "Tor!" is another word for "goal!", that the word "foul" is shared by all the players, that the curses and insults all sound different but are clearly just that, curses and insults. Next time our computer freezes up, we will use some of these expressions before we unplug and reboot it, because this is the only language the computer seems to understand.

All of these are lessons in attunement—to the city, to a multilingual world, to socio-technical systems.[8]

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