

Questioning the Bounds of Language
Language as an Assemblage

Eva Perez de Vega

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EXTERIORIZING LANGUAGE, WITTGENSTEIN AND DELEUZE

This paper takes a look at Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as a means to explore and ultimately support the notion of boundlessness of language, or extended theory of language. In this view, language is extended beyond the confines of the brain and can be conceived as part of a much larger system -an *assemblage*- that encompasses the brain, body and environment as well as the larger social context in which it is being used. To support this view, and allow an expansion of Wittgenstein's social conception of language, the paper will explore *assemblage theory* as first put forth by Deleuze and further developed by DeLanda, to illustrate that what is important in the conception of language as boundless and social is the connections and relations between the parts, not the parts themselves.

1.1 Bounds of Language

In many ways Gilles Deleuze and Ludwig Wittgenstein can be seen as two of the most irreconcilable thinkers, and there would initially seem to be no point of contact between the two philosophers. Deleuze famously expressed strong distaste for the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers.¹ And Wittgenstein is mysteriously absent in Deleuze's large collection of philosophical writing. Similarly, it is not altogether unimaginable that Wittgenstein would not have had much patience with Deleuze's approach to metaphysics and his creation of seemingly slippery terms. However, the overlap between Deleuze and Wittgenstein is pursued here in an examination of the questions of the boundlessness of language; its conception as extended beyond the confined of the brain and emerging instead from the larger social context. As such Deleuze's concept of *assemblage* helps anchor Wittgenstein's thoughts on language within a looser framework and, to some degree, illustrates that there is a deeper connection between the two thinkers than Deleuze would have cared to confess.

The aim in the section that follows is to explore how Wittgenstein and Deleuze-

¹ In the televised interview he gave with journalist Claire Parnet, *L'Abécédaire*, he refers to Wittgenstein and his school of thought as destructive and dangerous for philosophy. He also writes: "*Wittgenstein's disciples spread their misty confusion, sufficiency and terror*" in his book of that same year: *The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque*, p76.

Guattari², philosophers who are seldom mentioned in the same breath, both aimed to exteriorize language by rejecting the possibility of considering problems of meaning without also considering specific uses and social practices within which these are embedded. Indeed, in their very different philosophical styles, they both rejected the notion that language is brain-bound and instead supported the conception of language as inherently social and tied to the use which is made of it.

1.2 Wittgenstein's Shift in Conception of Language

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, we see a very different Wittgenstein from the young man who aimed to find a systematic categorization of language, conceiving of it as a mental system of representation bound by logical rules and describable almost as if a scientific entity.³ In his later philosophy he seems to be giving significance to language precisely for opposite reasons; because it is embedded with the unpredictability characteristic of our *humanness*, and as such it is imperfect and messy, yet rich and empowering, giving us the ability to communicate an infinite amount of possible things.

While he is deeply engaged with investigating the nature of language, its structure and function, he questions and ultimately rejects the existence of an *essence* of language⁴. He criticizes the notion that there is an essence which lies beneath the surface of the words employed in language, arguing instead for what already lies open to view and is *surveyable*.⁵

"We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigations resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a super-order between—so to speak—super-concepts. Whereas, of course, if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door"”⁶

Thus, to understand the concepts of table, lamp, or door, we need not investigate the essence of *tableness*, *lampness*, or *doorness* -there is no such thing- but rather comprehend the

² Most of the work on language is developed in the book that Deleuze wrote with Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*.

³ Gary Haggard suggests it is Wittgenstein's background as an engineer that made him interested in logic, and informed his early scientific approach to the language problem

⁴ As with many topics raised in the *Investigations*, this is not an issue agreed on by all readers of Wittgenstein

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §92

⁶ *Ibid.*, §97

situation where there is a *use* for something like a table, lamp or door. We are not to look at the logical form of language, as Wittgenstein was doing in his earlier philosophy, because essentially there isn't one. Words do not stand for objects as mere representations, what gives words -abstract signs on a paper or mere sounds from vocal chords- any life is the *use* we make of them; *meaning is use*.

“For a large class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” –though not for all – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language”⁷

Further, Wittgenstein urges us not to just think about what something can mean, but rather to look around at the context in which the words and sentences are being deployed. He urges us to investigate meaning by ‘*looking and seeing*’ the variety of uses a word or sentence is being given, and to do so not in generalizing thoughts but by looking at the particular context of use of the particular instance.⁸

“look and see whether there is anything common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them as that. To repeat: don't think, but look!”⁹

It is this Wittgensteinian perspective on language as context-sensitive that this paper will focus on. Indeed, this paper supports the claim that far from being introspective in his conception of language, for Wittgenstein the public is prior to the private, the social context is what gives language its meaning. If we read Wittgenstein this way we can see that it is unnecessary to have mental pictures of words, instead language requires one to have sensitivity towards how things actually are in the world- an understanding of the context in which language is being used.

To exemplify this point is Wittgenstein's introduction of the concept of private language.¹⁰ He explains that it can be seen as something that is internal to the speaker because it describes sensations, such as pain, that are internal to only the speaker. The sensation is prior to language; prior to being able to articulate it to others with words and sentences. We may

⁷ Ibid., §43

⁸ This approach is most often referred to as *language-games*

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §243

have physical manifestations of pain through groans and grimaces, but still be unable to describe the sensation with words. If we invented a word or sign to articulate it, this would be unintelligible to others, or our memory might fail us in trying to recall the sensation as associated with that sign. Thus such a private language cannot really exist as something intelligible.¹¹ Instead, we know the contents of our thoughts because we are part of a community and have the language of that community in order to be able to express them. As such, language is external to our mind, and intimately tied to the social fabric we are surrounded by. In Wittgenstein's terms, language is first public rather than private. It emerges and is affected by the social context in which it is used.

For instance, *knowing how* versus *knowing that* means that there is something practical about all theoretical knowledge and that *learning how* is prior to *learning that*.

*"If someone says, 'I know that that's a tree' I may answer: 'Yes that is a sentence. An English sentence. And what is it supposed to be doing?'"*¹²

Here we see that he envisioned language not as mere representation of reality, but as actually *doing* something; communicating and expressing something that is intelligible in the context of the material world it engages. There can be a myriad diverse uses of a single word, and depending on the context of use, its meaning can be quite different. Language is not monolithic; even the English language per se doesn't really exist, as it is different depending on originating ethnicity, class structure, etc., there is no '*English language*' but rather many '*Englishes*'.¹³ It is constantly in flux and absorbing the different ways in which it is used by different social groups. This, as we will see, ties into Deleuzian assemblage theory which we will turn to shortly.

1.3 Deleuze-Guattari's Conception of Language

*"Language is an essentially heterogeneous reality. [...] It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil."*¹⁴

¹¹ Naturally there are views that support and reject this interpretation of Wittgenstein's account of private language, but in this paper we support the 'community view' whereby language for Wittgenstein's later philosophy is a social practice.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §352

¹³ This is the term used by DeLanda in his 2011 lecture at the European Graduate School "*A Materialist Approach to Language*"

¹⁴ Deleuze- Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus*, p.7. quoting Weinreich in *Empirical foundations for a theory of language change*

With this Deleuze and Guattari introduce us to their conception of language, which is strikingly close to that we have seen by Wittgenstein. The metaphor of spreading like a patch of oil vividly illustrates the notion of boundlessness of language; the impossibility of constraining it to a centralized theory, just as it is impossible to contain a patch of oil from spreading. They suggest that while it is always possible to break a language down into internal structural elements, there is a different system (which they call *the rhizome*) that allows us to: “*analyse language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself*”¹⁵

Wittgenstein focused mainly on human language, and it was indeed a reflection of this humanness that made him contend language as messy and inherently unbound. Deleuze-Guattari have a broader understanding of language as a material practice that can encompass other heterogeneous systems -other than semantics and linguistics- it can bring into play other forms of coding such as biological, political, economic. Nonetheless in examining Deleuze-Guattari’s conception of language, the seeds of Wittgensteinian thought on language as are quite vividly present. Wittgenstein, as did Deleuze, rejected the concept of an unchanging, homogeneous core of language. His later philosophy focused on language as dynamic and changing, informed by the context and social environment in which it was situated. Framed this way, language *emerges*- almost creatively -as a myriad network of possible and actual actions that take place in particularized contexts, with interconnected relations that emerge and reside within those contexts. It is these relations that constitute the meanings of our words, and constitute the preconditions of our verbal actions.

Both Wittgenstein and Deleuze-Guattari rejected the possibility of considering problems of meaning without also considering specific uses and contexts within which that meaning was being applied. Although their approach to this problem was different in style and manner, they were both involved in exteriorizing language and in re-conceptualizing it as a decentralized system intimately tied to its social environment.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.8

LANGUAGE AS AN ASSEMBLAGE

2.1 Machines of Language

Most linguists of the twentieth century did not conceive of language as social.¹⁶ And while not all would agree that Wittgenstein's Philosophy is in line with this conception, this paper aims to illustrate that in fact his philosophy was closer to this conception of language than to one where language is thought of as an internal, individual and brain-bound system. Curiously, it is the work of Deleuze-Guattari on language that will help anchor this perspective, as well as provide certain openings for further exploration.

Deleuze-Guattari were strong advocates of a social conception of language which made their work highly critical of the dominant philosophies of language of their time. One such philosophy was headed by Chomsky whose linguistic model conceived of language as being made up of two components; a reservoir of words or dictionary, and a set of rules determining how those rules are combined. In this model there is an *abstract robot* that is embedded in each individual's brain in charge of bringing these two components together to form a language.¹⁷ This is a completely internal and context-free linguistic model, which Deleuze-Guattari criticized openly for being highly reductive and far removed from how language was actually being used, with all its dialects and slangs, and variants of use. We believe Wittgenstein would have been equally critical of this model, as it is in complete denial of any social dimension to language.

Paradoxically though, while Deleuze-Guattari claimed that models such as this were too far removed from material reality, they also insisted that these models were not *abstract enough*, because they *"do not reach the abstract machine that connects language to the semantic and pragmatic contents of statements, to collective assemblages of enunciation, to a whole micropolitics of the social field"*¹⁸ Therefore one might ask: what is an *"abstract enough"* machine that connects language to the social realm? What is this abstract machine that allows us to output an infinite number of sentences from a finite number of words and combinatorial

¹⁶ William Labov, who Deleuze references often in opposition to Chomsky, was an exception; one of the first linguist to actually go out to collect data from different social environments, in order to research and explore the problem of language.

¹⁷ Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, p.217

¹⁸ Deleuze-Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.7

possibilities? We could go further and ask if there even is an abstract machine that is specific to language.¹⁹

Wittgenstein's machine

In his characteristic style of self-questioning, Wittgenstein gives us his own account of a machine, which he seemingly uses for the same purpose of questioning the function and structure of language.²⁰ Initially he describes the machine, a non-abstract one in this case, as appearing to have a predetermined way in which all the parts come into relation to produce certain expected outcomes; everything in its functioning seems to be *completely determined*. But he asks us to question this assumption: “*We use a machine, or a picture of a machine, as a symbol of a particular mode of operation*” forgetting the possibility of it breaking and thus moving, bending, functioning quite differently from the expected. This machine is far from being predictable. Wittgenstein is making a parallel with a conception of language that he no longer supports; it is no longer a system of predetermined outcomes, even though the parts that make up the system are well-known, there are no determined rules which govern all the possible workings and combinatorial possibilities of language, in the same way that a machine - while designed to function a specific way- can end up being used or producing very different outcomes.

As explained quite clearly by Manuel DeLanda in his book *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, what Deleuze and Guattari propose is an *abstract machine of language* not as an automatic mechanism inside the individuals brain but instead “*a diagram governing the dynamics of collective human interaction.*”²¹ What is at stake in trying to implement this proposal is finding a valid means of transferring the ability to produce an infinite number of sentences out of a finite stock of words and combination rules, to patterns of behavior generated by different social dynamics. One possible solution is to say that grammatical rules do not exist in our brains but instead lie within the social structure itself. The problem with this,

¹⁹ Manuel Delanda in *A Thousand Years of Non-linear History*, p. 216, asks: “*do the processes responsible for the generation of phrases and sentences embody an engineering diagram that distinguishes the structure of language from the structure of rocks, plants, and animals?*”

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §193.

²¹ Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Non-linear History*, p. 218

as DeLanda points out, is that human beings do not learn languages by first learning the rules of a language, independently of where those rules lie. It is a well-documented ability of children to learn languages by being exposed to the language rather than learning a set of rules underlying the use of that particular language. Thus if a set of rules is not the source of all the possible combinations that produce a language, then what is? What is the *abstract machine* that produces language?

The theory of assemblages as first put forth by Deleuze-Guattari, and developed further by DeLanda can give us a possible answer to this query.

2.2 Theory of Assemblages

“The abstract machine as it relates to the diagram of the assemblage is never purely a matter of language, except for lack of sufficient abstraction. It is language that depends on the abstract machine, not the reverse”²²

What Deleuze calls *assemblages*²³ are wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*. These relations imply that the component parts of the whole - of the assemblage- may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which the interactions are different. Thus the component parts of an assemblage are self-subsistent and have certain autonomy to form relations that can change. In other words, relations of exteriority imply that the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute the whole.

Another important characteristic of assemblages is the heterogeneity of the component parts. In Deleuze’s words:

“What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns--different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning”²⁴

The reason why the whole cannot be reduced to its parts is because the properties of the whole are not made up of the aggregation of properties of its parts. Rather, the whole *emerges* from

²² Deleuze- Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus*, p.91

²³ Here we will be supported by Manuel DeLanda’s broader understanding of assemblages, that allows to consider entities (such as species and biological organisms) that Deleuze would consider too homogeneous, and introduces other terms (strata) to deal with them.

²⁴ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, p. 69

exercising the *capacity* of each part, and this capacity, while dependent on its properties, is not reducible to them. In other words, language as an assemblage means that relations between components of the language are only contingent, not constitutive.

To clarify the distinction between a *property* and a *capacity*, we can look at the example of a knife.²⁵ A knife has a series of listable properties, such as being sharp, shiny, heavy etc., which are fairly easy to describe. On the other hand, the knife also has capacities that need to be exercised in order to become *actualized*. So the capacity a knife has to cut things only becomes actualized when it enters into relation with another body, say a loaf of bread, which in turn has the capacity of being cut. And there is an open-ended amount of possibilities for that knife to exercise that capacity; it is not finite like its properties. Thus, capacities are always relational and imply a coupled system: the capacity to affect (cut) must always be coupled with a capacity to be affected (being cut). In other words, a property is a *state* that is characterized by finite relations of interiority; whereas a capacity is an *event* that implies interaction between agents characterized by relations of exteriority.

2.2 Language as an Assemblage

Language comprehension requires more than just understanding words and sentences in isolation. To generate a coherent dialogue, to communicate information, or to articulate a story, processes other than purely linguistic ones are necessary. It is crucial to bring in general world knowledge and to integrate the language being articulated with the life context in which it resides: *'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life'*²⁶

With this quote Wittgenstein seems to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, a form of life; what he called a *language game*.²⁷

As we have seen, an assemblage cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. Thus all the different combinatorial possibilities that make up a language cannot be reduced to the sum of the finite words and combination rules that help produce it. Just as an assemblage has

²⁵ Manuel DeLanda provides this example in "*Material Evolvability and Variability*"

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §19

²⁷ The exact quote is as follows: "*The word 'language-game' is used here to emphasize the act that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.*" Ibid., §23

emergent properties, *language-as-an-semblage* also has emergent, creative and unpredictable qualities. This seems to be just what Wittgenstein had intuited in his later conceptualization of language as unpredictable and impossible to fully categorize in a centralized rule-system.

Emergent entities: Language and society

Assemblages are *emergent* entities that have the potential to combine with others to produce even larger assemblages. Both assemblages, and their component parts, are thus characterized by reciprocal relations of exteriority. For an entity to be an assemblage it must have properties that are not reducible to its parts and those properties must have an explanation in terms of the interaction of its part. Language and Society can be conceived as one such assemblage.

In a similar way to how words and their dynamics of interaction are a bit of a mystery to us (we don't have complete insight into the mechanisms that produce all the variants of language), the interaction of social entities (persons, communities, cities,...) are also a bit of a mystery. These entities have *emergent* properties: properties that cannot be explained by just looking at the entities themselves. In this model, language and social entities exist independently of the content of our thoughts; they have a *being* but we can be wrong about the nature and the process that make up that being. And even though individuals are an important component within a language and within a society, the society has emergent properties that cannot be explained by merely looking at the individuals that are part of it, and language has emergent properties that cannot be explained by merely looking at the individual words and grammar that are part of it.

In the model of assemblages, language is a component part of a social assemblage, but it does not play a constituent role in social assemblages, it is simply one amongst several primary expressive modes. There are also important non-linguistic practices that make up society, as well as of course non-human elements that also shape society (viruses, bacteria, weeds or non-organic energy and material flows like wind and ocean currents). In this model language itself becomes just another component part of a much larger system.

CONCLUSION

3.1 Objections to Language as an Assemblage Model

There is a long tradition of linguists who exhibit a clear preoccupation with coming up with unvarying, static rules to define and provide a framework for language. Their concern stems from a fixed idea of what language is and how it must fit within existing models of thought. For them it is enough to see that language exhibits law-like regularities to believe that they must be classifiable within a given framework.

In his early philosophy Wittgenstein set out to do just that; to find a totalizing theory of language that could help us understand its structure and its function in a purely logical and almost scientific way. This paper has held the view that his later philosophy, as exemplified by his *Philosophical Investigations*, holds the opposite to be true: that what he is ultimately after is a social understanding of language where use and context are primary. Language in Wittgenstein's later philosophy is no longer a purely mental activity, but rather it is external to our minds, it engages with our context and as such there can be nothing totally internal about it. Our thinking, feeling and acting cannot be in isolation from the world in which they emerge - from *language games*.

However, commentators on Wittgenstein are divided on this matter.²⁸ The dispute is partly explained by the fact that the original texts, including some from Wittgenstein's manuscripts, seem to point to two apparently conflicting claims; one supporting the account given in this paper of language as essentially social; and the other supporting the claim that it is conceptually possible for a human being isolated from birth to employ some kind of linguistic system and follow rules in so doing²⁹.

It is possible that this conflict may be a genuine one. On the other hand, it is also possible that Wittgenstein can claim that language is essentially social, but still allow for the possibility of exceptions, provided these exceptions are merely peripheral cases. For instance, in Wittgenstein's view, while chess is essentially a game for two players, this does not exclude the possibility of playing it against oneself, provided chess is not regarded as a solitary game but

²⁸ for example, Malcolm for the community view, and Baker and Hacker against it

²⁹ According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, under "Private Language"

rather one that in most instances requires two players. The issue is nuanced and complex, and moves us beyond the intent of this paper, but it is worth acknowledging it as a point of contention to the very premise of the paper.

From a different perspective, there may be objections to the idea of language as an assemblage as put forth in this paper, because it implies the absorption of such huge range and diversity that it will no longer be possible to find law-like regularities that govern each of these external systems. These objections fall back on the attempt to fit language into a universal framework with fixed categories and obsessed with positioning everything in relation to a scientific structure that is already known. This view will invariably make us fall back onto outmoded models that cannot provide a way forward. The theory of assemblages, particularly as developed by DeLanda³⁰ provides a way forward in the debate. It does require, however, a distancing from these known frameworks and an openness to models that are encompassing of much more than linguistics and semantics; models that are “*abstract enough*” to connect language to our social environment.

3.2 Final Remarks

This paper set out to question the foundations on which language as a predictable and brain-bound system is built, mainly by looking at Wittgenstein’s later conception of language. It also set out to explore a different model for language that does not try to find totalizing rules and fixed frameworks, but rather points a way forward in the debate. This new model, as we have seen, has been provided by exploring the philosophy of language of Deleuze-Guattari, and their theory of assemblages.

Within their large body of work, however, the theory of language only takes up little more than a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, leaving opportunities for further development by later philosophers. This is what DeLanda has done by expanding their theory of assemblages and filling certain gaps left open, by making connections to the work of sociolinguists and anthropologists³¹ in order to sketch out an “*abstract enough*” model for language that can connect it to its social fabric. Though going into the details of this work exceeds the premise of

³⁰ DeLanda doesn’t introduce other terminology to explain the assemblage-quality of smaller entities as does Deleuze, he allows assemblage theory to encompass those smaller instances of assemblage behavior

³¹ such as Zellig Harris and Mary Douglas respectively

this paper, it is nonetheless important to point to the theory of assemblages as a work in development, or as Deleuze would put it, something in *continuous process of becoming*.

Nonetheless, this new model of *language as an assemblage* is consistent with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and eliminates the need to contend with flawed assumptions that lead to a conception of language as having an essence to be discovered by thought alone. In this model, language emerges from components characterized by *relations of exteriority* (social interactions); where the whole (language) is *emergent* and as such cannot be explained by looking at its component parts (words and its possible combinations). Assemblage theory has helped us conclude that what is important in this conception of language is the connections between the parts, not the parts themselves, and that these connections emerge from interactions within a larger social context.

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