

On explaining what symbols mean

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Verbal definition

Often we give verbal definitions, but this only takes from words to other words. Symbols to other symbols.

Ostensive definition

We sometimes make ostensive definitions. See [Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 28-32](#). We learn how to understand them as part of learning language. Any one can be misunderstood. They can also be partially supplemented verbally with the type of symbol (for color, shape, etc.) being defined but this to must, at some point come to an end.

Training

We are trained to use language, but once trained to some point, learning takes off; we become able to understand ostensive and verbal definitions. Also we come to know how to use the symbols in many ways in conjunction with objects. There are also words which may not stand for objects at all. These words, although they may have uses, are not needed to represent facts.

Going on the same way

We may use a version of [Wittgenstein's](#) – adding one.

- $1 + 1 = 2$
- $2 + 1 = 3$
- $3 + 1 = 4$
- Etc.

Now when we get to 100, how are we to know how to go on

- $100 + 1 = 101$

And not

- $100 + 1 = 105$

This cannot be verbally justified, any more than we can justify that from

- P
- And $p \Rightarrow q$
- That q

Because we also then need ‘

- $(p \ \& \ p \Rightarrow q) \Rightarrow q$

But that still isn't enough! We then need

- $(p \ \& \ p \Rightarrow q \ \& \ (p \ \& \ p \Rightarrow q) \Rightarrow q) \Rightarrow q$

This is from [Lewis Carroll](#) but I don't have it handy. And so on. We can do these things, we learn and can do them, but they can NEVER be verbally justified!

So with all symbols, that we are using them correctly, and the same as others, cannot be verbally explained, but almost no one has trouble doing it

Language Games

Understanding a symbolic relation is connected with being able to use a symbol in relation to the object it represents and usually also in relation to other symbols for other related objects in what [Wittgenstein](#) calls a “Language game”.

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