

# Depth Grammar and Surface Grammar of Religious Belief

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In his book *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein demonstrates a methodology by which language can be observed and investigated. The investigation's focus is on grammar since "essence is expressed in grammar" and "grammar tells what kind of object anything is" (Wittgenstein 2001, §371, §373). Yet, what does the concept 'grammar' mean? Terms such as Depth Grammar and Surface Grammar that Wittgenstein uses may be hinting to the fact that there are (at least) two grammar levels, however, in fact, he does not provide us with a full and clear definition of these terms.

Wittgenstein repeatedly warns against the tendency to formulate theories whose goal is to explain the linguistic operation. Instead, he suggests focusing on the description.<sup>1</sup> However, while closely examining the *Investigations*, one can point to a central tension revealed throughout the investigation between refraining to define and moral judgment on the one hand, and the very existence of human communication within which people agree upon definitions and judgments. A person chooses his words, and sometimes does not even know how to do it because "it is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly prescribed; we know, are in no doubt, what to say in this or that case. The more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say" (Wittgenstein 2001, §142). Despite the fact that "every sentence in our language 'is in order as it is'" (Wittgenstein 2001, §98), Nevertheless, there is room for doubt and error: "so you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? It is what human beings say that is true and false and they agree in the *language* they use" (Wittgenstein 2001, §241-242).

When language is actually used we apply, in fact, double judgment: The person 'decides' what to say under certain circumstances and the people he converses with judge whether what has been said is 'true' or 'false': "the sense of a sentence... may, of course, leave this or that open, but the sentence must nevertheless have a definite sense. An indefinite sense, that would really not be a sense *at all*. This is like: an indefinite boundary is not really a boundary *at all*" (Wittgenstein 2001, §99). This double judgment is done based on a mutual agreement on a certain form of life. There is no book in which the agreed upon rules of definitions and judgments are included (unlike grammar book). Living within a certain form of life provides the background needed for communication and for judging the linguistic use.

This instruction raises two questions that may be answered by distinguishing between DG and SG. The first question is: what can be defined as grammatical characteristics? The second question is: How does Wittgenstein's distinction between the two types of grammar assist when one needs to clarify and describe a state of mind as religious belief? Such a state of mind is a distinct test-case of 'language work' in two ways: First, translating the state of mind into words; the other refers to the unique characteristic a believer pours into the religious linguistic game: "the way you use the word 'God' does not show *whom* you mean, but what you mean" (Wittgenstein 1998, p.58).

The following process is two-fold. First, it follows Wittgenstein's statements that can clarify and shed light on his distinction between Depth Grammar and Surface Grammar. Later on, in the second stage, it introduces Wittgenstein's religious perception's major characteristics from their Depth Grammar perspective. The major claim is that Wittgenstein actually formulates a grammatical method to be used when investigating religious belief, yet it includes an inner contradiction: On the one hand, he formulates certain religious belief criteria while negating others; on the other hand, he formulates an investigation method based upon tolerance and pluralism. However, his method stipulates that a certain linguistic term can be understood when one understands the specific form of life in which it has been created although it should not be adapted to existing grammatical rules (in complete opposition to the scientific discourse). It seems to me that the tension between the two forms of reference to religious belief is actually the existing tension between Depth Grammar and Surface Grammar, the one that exists between an external observation of a language and a deep one that tries to comprehend what words are trying to say, what words 'mean'.

Wittgenstein described how frustrating can the grammatical investigation be when trying to distinguish between surface and depth since "the *deep* aspect of this matter readily eludes us" (Wittgenstein 2001, §387). Man is bothered by the difficulty to understand language's depth: "the problems arising though a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language" (Wittgenstein 2001, §111). Wittgenstein compares the significant of the worries to the importance of language since the need to fully understand how a language functions is central and important as much as the need for the language's existence.

Wittgenstein points out a number of the grammatical study characteristics. First, it derives from the wish to understand the basis upon which language is founded; second, the study is carried out by examining analogies between words that sometimes results in exchanging one word for the other, a process that best clarifies the difficulty we are facing. The third point is that grammatical analysis entails simultaneously taking apart the grammatical unit and the anxiety it arises.

Wittgenstein refers directly to the 'depth grammar' only in two articles, yet they are invaluable: "but the words, significantly uttered, have after all not only a surface, but also the dimension of depth! After all, it just is the case that something different takes place when they are uttered significantly from when they are merely uttered. How do I express this is not the point. Whether I say that in the first case they have depth; or that something goes on in me, inside my mind, as I utter them; or that they have an atmosphere, it always come to the same thing. 'well, if we all agree about it, won't it be true?'" (Wittgenstein 2001, §594). "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 construction of the sentence, the part

<sup>1</sup> See for example Wittgenstein 2001, & 91, &109, & 299, &436, &296.

of its use... that can be taken in by the ear. And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word 'to mean', with what its surface grammar lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about" (Wittgenstein 2001, §664).

The distinction between depth Grammar and Surface Grammar is not necessarily one perceived by the eye or by one's ear. Gordon P. Baker referred in the most comprehensive article regarding Depth Grammar claims that we are actually investigating the language game in which someone uses a certain word but in fact refers to a wider definition of language game. Following Wittgenstein 2001, §7 Baker emphasizes that we should clarify the circumstances in which a certain sentence is created rather than the grammatical principles upon which it is structured (Baker 2001). It is the investigator's task to examine whether the word has a meaning that plays a role in human activity and in light of the results examine the various ways the given word integrates in such an activity. Such an investigation can be carried out by studying the created picture or the picture that accompanies a certain word and the depth grammar can then be used to emphasize the word's use in its various shapes. The goal is not to offer a certain interpretation to a given sentence the way 'depth grammar' does since according to Wittgenstein one cannot even define what a sentence is (Wittgenstein 2001, §135). This is why such an investigation is open to discussion and to different readings that are dependent upon the interpreter's life experience and form of life.<sup>2</sup> Although what Baker suggests can be referred to as the main road of the Wittgenstein's investigation it does not contribute enough to understanding the distinction between the two grammars since he ignores the reason of use (the meaning) and focuses on result (the variety of use). Wittgenstein does not exemplify the meaning of depth Grammar by using the verb 'mean' accidentally: according to him the context each speaker pours into the 'meaning' of his expression actually is depth Grammar. Thus, I would like to follow a number of descriptions in the *Investigations* that are significant to the clarification of the term 'meaning'. Later, I would like to exemplify how Wittgenstein uses this term when talking about religious belief. As has already been mentioned, Wittgenstein tried to investigate the term 'meaning' from different directions by examining the similarities and detecting family resemblance between 'meaning' and similar concepts: "meaning something is like going up to someone" (Wittgenstein 2001, §457); or "I am not merely saying this, I mean something by it' when we consider what is going on in us when we *mean* (and don't merely say) words, it seems to us as if there were something coupled to these words, which otherwise would run idle. As if they, so to speak, connected with something in us" (Wittgenstein 2001, §507). Depth Grammar expresses all that accompanies words when a certain person 'approaches' them and uses them. The subjective-human aspect of the speaker is embodied in 'meaning' and the identification of meaning enables us to point out the 'deep meaning' of whatever has been said. Meaning is not the fruit of an unconscious

instinct of using grammatical rules but rather expresses the ties that exist between a person's soul, personality and his action: "why do you want to tell him about an intention too, as well as telling him what I did? Not because the intention was also something which was going on at that time. But because I want to tell him something about *myself*, which goes beyond what happened at that time" (Wittgenstein 2001, §659). Deep meaning is understood based upon a whole set of activities into which language is woven and receives its unique design from the speaker's intention: "what is happening now has significance in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance... (A smiling mouth *smiles* only in a human face)" (Wittgenstein 2001, §583). 'Surrounding' and 'face' are not created at random but actually are the 'form of life' from which language use and understanding derive: "By Surface Grammar we actually refer to all the formal grammatical rules while by Depth Grammar we refer to the circumstances and relationships that dictate language use" (Kripke 1982, p. 96). This definition stresses the fact that there are early assumptions and applications of use that need to be taken into account when analyzing use (Ibid, p. 120)

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Thus, religious belief should be examined in context of the form of life in which it is expressed. To that analysis one must add religion's subjective design that is embedded in 'meaning' and that can be defined as 'the deference that dictates use'. Such deference creates the Depth Grammar that can be analyzed only when compared to the Surface Grammar.

In *Lectures on Esthetics, Psychology and Religious belief*, Wittgenstein compares the use of the word 'God' to other expressions of religious belief. He claims that: "the word 'God' is amongst the earliest learnt... the word is used like a word representing a person. God sees, rewards, etc. being shown all these things, did you understand what this word meant? I'd say: yes and no" (Wittgenstein 1966, p. 59). According to Wittgenstein, that one can understand what the word does not stand for and what the different ways to use it are. But understanding how to use the word cannot answer questions regarding religious foundation: Thus, one cannot examine a person's belief in God or invent devices that could assist in such an examination. Even people who claim that their religious belief is based on proof will not be able to see the committing connection between proof and their religious belief. The only common characteristic among all religious beliefs is that they direct and design the believer's way of life. In other words, the use and application of religious belief in one's 'form of life'. However, what does a certain religious unique compared to another? This is where I would like to integrate the term Depth Grammar. In *Culture and Value* there are many of Wittgenstein's statements regarding religious belief according to which it is possible to characterize religious belief's Depth Grammar as he sees it (Wittgenstein 1998). According to Wittgenstein, religious belief includes security (Ibid. p.82), love (Ibid. p. 39), passion (Ibid. p. 61) and goodness (Ibid. p.5). Wittgenstein points out the difference between science and religious belief and stresses the fact that rational doctrines lack the kind of influential power that is capable of designing human's life since they work only on the human-rational domain; they do not have any power on the emotional or the supernatural domains (Ibid. p. 5). Nevertheless, although it seems from what has been

<sup>2</sup>This is the direction that is preferred by Hacker as well. According to Hacker, the clarification of Depth Grammar done by describing the overall use of a relevant expression is done after examining all the possible variations the relevant expression can have, the circumstances in which it is used, and the results of such use. It is important to note that Hacker criticizes the depth metaphor and claims that it suits a Tractatus (in which there is seemingly a distinction between what can be seen externally – suiting the depth grammar definition – and what comes out in the investigation. However, in philosophical investigations, Wittgenstein emphasizes time and again that we can see everything and that nothing has a 'concealed essence' that needs to be uncovered. Thus, the contrast is not between 'surface' and 'geology' but rather between 'local space' and 'topographic space'.

written above that Wittgenstein defines religious belief's characteristics that can apply to any human being, it is necessary to point out that his personal attitude towards religious belief that sharpens the definition of Depth Grammar of religious belief cannot be defined only by the characteristics above mentioned. According to Wittgenstein Depth Grammar of religious belief is each individual's personal mission and has no connection whatsoever that relates to one's collective religious life. Wittgenstein is walking here the same path taken by two famous theologians whom he admired the most: Augustine and Kierkegaard. Wittgenstein claims that *Confessions* is the most serious book ever written and that Kierkegaard was the profound philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each of these theologians described in his writings the personal process he underwent on the journey to discovering his unique personal religious belief. Despite the fact that Augustine eventually became a monk and Kierkegaard a Protestant believer, they both emphasized the centrality of their personal identification with the religious way of life and their personal position against God and His Will. Augustine is far from trying to convince others or from trying to impart others with his belief. Nevertheless, he distinguishes between one who is reacting to Creation in a religious way to someone who is completely indifferent to it. Such a distinction resembles Wittgenstein's words concerning what he calls 'aspect blindness' (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 182). This concept can be applied to when reading what Augustine wrote: "surely this beauty should be self-evident to all who are of sound mind. Then why does it not speak to everyone in the same way?... if one person sees while another sees and questions, it is not that they appear one way to the first and another way to the second. It is rather that the created order speaks to all, but it understood by those who hear its outward voice and compare it with the truth within themselves" (Augustine 1991, 10, §10). While observing reality, there are people who confront their inner self with the impressions of the world. Such people, claims Augustine, will follow the path of religious belief. On the other hand, those people for reality means nothing or for those who do not compare it to their soul can be defined as 'aspect blind'.<sup>3</sup>

Wittgenstein too, as well as Augustine and Kierkegaard, demonstrates a process of observing the world that brings about a recognition of God and religious belief. Such examples can be found in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* and can be recognized in the *Tractatus* as well.

In conclusion, an understanding and analysis of Depth Grammar of religious belief depend upon our acquaintance with the style of life that gave birth to a certain expression and upon the ability to see the aspect that is brought out in one's personal design of religious belief. Thus, general criteria and personal criteria are tied together when trying to define the term Depth Grammar.

## Literature

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<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard made a similar comparison in his book *Two Ages* that describes the period of time he was living in as passionless and in which people lacked the ability to look into their souls.