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“The fitting word”

Abstract

In his post-war writings, Wittgenstein makes several comments about particularly “fitting” (treffende) words. However, the nature of this quality remains unclear and elusive. In this paper, I present some suggestions about what one might learn from Wittgenstein’s comments, though my purpose is not primarily exegetical but rather simply to reflect upon when or under what circumstances a word strikes us as “fitting”. I discuss several options; first, I proceed by asking what it is that makes a word fitting, and discuss whether it can be its context, then whether it is an “imponderable” quality that it or the fitted object has. Finding no convincing answer to these questions (essentially the first person’s reflective questions), I proceed towards a more indirect, perspective of describing what our encounters with fitting words are like, especially in conversational interactions, to a (third person) observer’s eyes. I consider the importance of the enthusiastic feeling to which the word can give rise. This feeling should not be construed as a mental event of a private kind, though; rather, we can describe in these terms the dynamics of conversational situations that feature “fitting” words. In such cases, this feeling is something that commonly unfolds as a joint experience.

The *fitting* word. How do we find it? Describe this! In contrast to this: I find the right term for a curve, after I have made particular measurements of it. (RPP I, § 72)

[T]he [misleading] comparison of searching for the fitting expression to the efforts of someone who is trying to make an exact copy of a line that only he can see. (§ 580)

These are two of the few places in which Wittgenstein touches on the question of “fitting” words and of what makes them “fitting”. His writings contain less systematic discussion of this than of aspect seeing, for instance, and most remarks of this kind stand apparently alone. Yet Wittgenstein does not work with the concept as something given and clear.

Typically, as in the above quotations, he indeed refers to the fitting word in his attempts to illuminate important differences inherent to particular kinds of situations. However, as the examples make clear, his suggestions mainly proceed in *negative* terms: whatever the fitting word is, the endeavour to get to it is nothing like the endeavour to see a thing temporarily hidden from our sight behind another thing. When he tries to elaborate further, it usually ends in another observation of what is *not*¹ the case when it comes to the fitting word:

The feeling of the unreality of one's surroundings. This feeling I have had once, and many have it before the onset of mental illness. Everything seems somehow not real; but not as if one saw things unclear or blurred; everything looks quite as usual. And how do I know that another has felt what I have? Because he uses the same words as I find fitting.

But why do I choose precisely the word “unreality” to express it? Surely not because of its sound. (A word of very like sound but different meaning would not do.) I choose it because of its meaning. But I surely did not learn to use the word to mean: a feeling. No; but I learned to use it with a particular meaning and now I use it spontaneously like this. One might say – though it may mislead –: When I have learnt the word in its ordinary meaning, then I choose that meaning as a simile for my feeling. But of course what is in question here is not a simile, not a comparison of the feeling with something else. (*RPP* I, § 125)

In this example, we can see where the intuitive direction of such a discussion ends. One might think that what makes an expression fitting is the fact that it simply is a fitting expression of its *object*. Here, though, Wittgenstein remains reserved about the idea that “fittingness” has to do with, or can be established based on, a comparison between the word and something else that the word would strikingly match.

Yet this idea retains its persuasiveness and natural appeal. A part of this appeal is reflected by the term itself: *das (zu)treffende Wort*. The Luckhardt-Aue translations of *RPP* and *LWPP* mostly (not always) use the term “appropriate”, but I think it better to translate *(zu)treffend* as “fitting”, in order to capture the strong associative suggestion of a clinging

¹ Neumer (2013: 68f) suggests that for Wittgenstein, the fitting word is one which *just is* the fitting word and nothing further cannot be said to justify or explain the status. I feel less resolute; the aim of this paper is to explore what *can* be said about fitting words, also with the help of Wittgenstein's remarks.

relationship to an object that the word *fits*.² (At least, this is something that I, not being a native speaker of either German or English, perceive as an important feature of both “*treffend*” and “fitting”.)

In what follows, I will consider what one might learn, for one’s own reflections, from Wittgenstein’s comments about the fitting word. I do not attempt to reconstruct a coherent picture of Wittgenstein’s own position, partly because Wittgenstein often focuses on the more specific issue of *finding* fitting words. My main point of interest will, eventually, be understanding those aspects of human conversational encounters where the fitting word plays a role, and how Wittgenstein’s comments can help us here. We talk to each other to tell one another something important and we come to understand each other or miss one another’s point following what we have made of what the other wanted to say.³ How does the fitting word enter these transactions?

In sections 1 and 2, I touch upon the question of what can be seen, by the person who perceives a word as fitting, as that which makes the fitting word fitting: first, I suggest the interaction of the word with the context of its appearance, then the speaker’s or listener’s capacity to spot something “imponderable” in the word or in the situation of its use (that the word fits). Several of my observations here end in trivial-looking impasses; the speaker’s incapacity to find any further explanation may in itself be characteristic. This is the reason I then turn to the description of some important aspects of the nature of our conversational encounters in which a fitting word features saliently. This offers an indirect, oblique, third-person contribution to the question of what makes a fitting word fitting. In sections 3 and 4, I offer reflections on the enthusiastic feeling that accompanies these encounters, specifying this not as a private event of consciousness but rather as a marker of developments (openings or closures) in conversation with others. In the concluding section 5, I tentatively propose that cases of having or losing a fitting word may be those in which we become explicitly aware of the movements of understanding or failing to understand each other – movements are inherent to language.

² All the quotations from *RPP*, *LWPP* and *PI* that appear in this text and that mention “the fitting word” are my altered versions of the original translations (Luckhardt-Aue, and Anscombe-Hacker-Schulte, respectively). These work with different terms: “appropriate”, “apt”, a word that “hits it off”, even “*not juste*”.

³ One thing we can thereby produce is a blunder, which has nothing to do with following rules – cf. Rhees (2006: 42).

1. Context

What is it that makes an expression fitting? Can it be a particular quality that the word *itself* has? Words as such may have qualities like “trissyllabic” or “melodious”, but “fitting”? We tend to think of fitting words as those that fit not simply an object or a case but do it in a particularly apt manner that coincides smoothly with how we “feel” about it, rather than in a lacklustre or even friction-inducing manner. This brings to mind the idea of the word’s working in the interplay with the *context* of our encounter with it; because much of the details of how we “feel” about a word come in terms directly relating to the context. However: when do we know enough (or the right details) about the context in order to trace the workings of fittingness?

Imagine this example: the COVID-19 restrictions only allow you a fraction of the working day you would normally need. A great part of your time today was spent on depressing administrative meetings and replying to emails from people whom you feel you hate or think that their emails betray their hatred for you. Throughout the day, you only managed a few painful twenty-minute chunks of fruitlessly staring at the manuscript of your paper. When you return home in the evening, your head and eyes are aching, more so because you know the pain is not the necessary price paid for good work done and something worthwhile achieved. You achieved nothing. The mere thought of someone talking to you intensifies the pain. You don’t feel like talking to anybody or looking at anybody, but that is not a luxury you have. When you later watch your automated movements in the capacity of a family member, it brings to your mind, for some reason, the image of a decapitated hen still running around the backyard. At that moment, you feel like the hen is a kindred spirit. Only you cannot tell anybody – they would not understand – that you are not really alive anymore. At that moment, the parallel with the hen strikes you as *fitting* your situation.

The metaphor of a decapitated hen does not seem inherently suited to “fit” a borderline case of burnout. The strange idea of the duty to hide one’s inner death from others is idiosyncratic at best. One might think that it is the interplay of all the peculiar features of the day, of the protagonist’s personality, etc., that contributes to the perceived fittingness of these images. But, then again, the example can continue: after a night of unusually sound sleep (you managed, exceptionally, to abstain from alcohol in the evening), you do not feel like a disguised cadaver anymore.

You also cannot understand why you considered those preposterous terms as fitting your state yesterday, much as you remember that you were not in your best shape. You now see clearly that there are reasons why you haven't opted out of your life. You may not have had these reasons clearly before your eyes yesterday, but your behaviour, even yesterday, testified to their implicit acknowledgement. Now the yesterday parallel doesn't seem fitting, and it even seems that it might not have been fitting yesterday either; and the reasons, again, have to do with the context. The context is largely unchanged, though: you are still the same person with the same work and the same family. How could you feel so different about/in connection to the same context on the two occasions?

Thus, reliance on context faces some problems. First, it is almost impossible to determine the extent of the context. Where do the boundaries of the context that contributed to the fittingness (fitting_{yesterday}) of yesterday's use lie? We can safely say that neither the protagonist (and "all that she involves" – moods? states of mind? imagination? inclinations and dispositions?) nor the other persons involved (and "all that they involve") nor the immediate time frame (the day? the "evening"?) may be discounted. At the same time, the particular significance of *each* of these components in a particular case can be overwhelming, as well as negligible. There is, at least, no clear relation of determination between particular components of the context and the fitting word.

Second, and more importantly, the fitting word comes to us either by itself or because we search for it; in neither case do we see a link to the context. When we search for a fitting word, we do not scrutinise the minutiae of the context, including our feelings, mental states, etc., at the moment. We look for words. And when the word comes by itself, it seems not occasioned by the circumstances: to the same person on two distinct similar occasions (or to two different but very similar people on the same occasion), a word might first appear as fitting, and then not. The context is not enough to "cause" or explain – through a mechanism one could see – the occurrence. The burnt-out protagonist's answer to a question about why she considered the decapitated hen metaphor fitting would not be that it was because of the context. Much rather something along the lines that the word has struck a chord in her.

Notably, though, paying attention to the context may help an *observer* (it may be the same person later) understand why the word strikes the experiencer as fitting. Context does play an important role in moves of

retrospective understanding (cf. Rhees 2006: 254ff). This only suggests that the process of searching for the fitting word, or finding one spontaneously, is different from the growth of understanding. (I will make use of this change of perspective in sections 3 to 5.)

I am aware that other examples may point in different directions. However, I hope that this example is enough to show how unclear it is to say that it is the context that makes a fitting word fitting. A part of this relates to the ambiguity of the word “makes”.

2. The imponderable

Perhaps we could ask ourselves: all right, what is it then that we do when we try to find the fitting word? We do *not* follow a repeatable step-by-step procedure – such as what we could learn from a mathematics textbook. In the above case, the protagonist is struck by words that occur by themselves in her mind, and she finds them fitting. Imagine a different situation, though: she returns home in the state described above, and, instead of appreciating the fittingness of the words that occur to her spontaneously, she tries to find a phrase that would fit her situation and state of mind. Perhaps she wants to write her experiences down in her diary later in the evening. What could she do? She might sift through the default words used in such situations, for instance, “tired”, “depressed” or “burnout”. However, exactly because we use these words commonly, as neutral, general, descriptive terms, they are unlikely to strike us as fitting. Imagine a dialogue when you are exhausted and fumble for the right word: “I feel so... so...” “Tired?” “I guess so. But that’s not what I wanted to... I don’t know... Never mind.” “Tired” is *normally* not a word whose *fittingness* strikes us when we are dead tired.

Yet fitting words do not appear just randomly. After all, some people find them more easily than others and even have the capacity to say things that make the audience feel like their eyes have been opened. Such epiphanies can be relatively small and mundane (not necessarily “mystical”; cf. *OC* § 578); after all, sometimes we don’t much care about the difference between an especially fitting word and one that “would do, too” (cf. *RPP* II, § 509). How do these people find the words? Consider the fact that while speaking to their audience in a fitting manner may be intentional (the word would not occur “by itself”, as it does to the burnt-out protagonist above), it may also be spontaneous and improvised. The capacity of finding fitting words then works with resources that may not

be equally readily accessible to everyone present but that would not have to be deliberately utilised following a step-by-step procedure. (Some people simply have a talent with words, which others lack.) Could the discipline of finding the fitting word be as follows?

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through ‘*experience*’. Can someone else be a man’s teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*. – This is what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ are like here. – What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them rightly. Unlike calculating rules. (*PI* II, § 355)⁴

Elsewhere, about the grounds that motivate such judgements, Wittgenstein has the following to say:

But then [the learner] looked at a picture and made a judgment about it. In most cases he was able to list reasons for his judgment, but *these* generally weren’t convincing. (*LWPP* I, § 925)

It is difficult to tell what a judgement relies on; the reasons listed may or may not be what helped the one who judges to pass the judgement. And this list certainly does not help everybody to acquire this capacity; that is, not the list as such, as a manual, though it may prove instrumental at some stage of teaching. When I describe what brought me, in a particular case, to find the word I saw as fitting, it may turn out that I have inadvertently paid attention to a particular structural aspect of the experience. Perhaps it was the first word that sprang to mind after I crossed the boundary between different “settings”. Such as when you (the “you” of the above example) first realised that you were no longer staring at the door but into your spouse’s face after your return from work. But even if this observation proves illuminating *in that particular case*, it offers no real instruction, no user’s guide.

Could it be that the ability to find the fitting word relies on what Wittgenstein calls “imponderable” evidence? That only those who are capable of spotting this evidence can come up with the word? Or does spotting this evidence enable you to perceive another’s words as fitting, whether or not the speaker herself perceives them so? Or both?

⁴ My way of quoting *PI* combines retaining the “Part II” with the use of the numbered paragraphs added by the 4th revised edition into the “Fragment” part. The numbered paragraphs are helpful, but Hugh Knott (2017) makes a persuasive case in favour of keeping the title “Part II”.

Imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone.

I may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one (and here there can, of course, be a ‘ponderable’ confirmation of my judgement). But I may be quite incapable of describing the difference. And this not because the languages I know have no words for it. (*PI II*, § 360)

What one who can spot imponderable evidence sees is not a nothing but, at the same time, something that, probably, only those who have an “eye” for it can see (*PI II*, § 361). Such a person can reliably navigate the domain of the “imponderable” even when words are missing. But what difference would it make when it comes to finding the fitting word? Or when it comes to recognising it?

Consider Wittgenstein’s example of the capacity to judge another’s character. This is a capacity that everybody exercises for themselves and cannot simply give, via a user’s-guide-like instruction, to another. It also finds expression in a variety of ways of relating to the other whose character one recognises; it is even possible that the *Urteilkraft* never – or rarely – manifests itself in being able to *explicitly* describe the other’s character in an illuminating, “fitting” manner. At the same time, such a capacity is not a nothing. If there is such a thing as actually understanding people’s characters, more than one person can grow into this understanding, and they will then likely not contradict each other dramatically⁵ in their assessment of, and responses to, the person judged. One reason is that this is, despite all the unpredictability, a response to what is understood as something other than oneself, something real and independent; the characters judged are observable qualities of the observed people, not the private feelings of the observers. Also, even though two profound and experienced judges of others’ characters may disagree with each other, they still may not come into conflict. Humility and an acknowledgement that one can always learn more accompany at least some culturally important forms of character-judging skill.

There is no comparable degree of agreement about the fitting word. While the fitting word often occurs in the context of a speaker’s enchanting an audience, as indicated above, the cases in which many people agree on the fittingness of words do not rest on the two reasons I suggested with the judging of characters. First of all, a fitting word may not fit any imponderable evidence out there, but it may perhaps create a

⁵ Also, inhabiting the same “culture” limits what one can consent to understand as an admissible difference. Cf. Winch (1997: 202f) on the Escobar case.

bond of shared feeling between the speaker and the audience, a bond that may but may *not* relate to something to which a third person could point. For this reason, the agreement is of a rarer, more precarious but also potentially more suspicious kind than in the case of character judges – keep in mind, again, the speaker enchanting the audience. Relatedly, this agreement does not necessarily presuppose the humility of a commitment to the endeavour of understanding. This possible absence of humility explains some failures to share an acknowledgement of a word as fitting.

An example: if someone characterises, say, Martha Nussbaum the philosopher as a “travelling Martha Nussbaum[®] saleswoman”,⁶ this may strike some as fitting, while the cheap and sexist nastiness will repel others, who will see it as anything but. However, in contrast to the character-judging capacity, each party may be reluctant to cede to the other. No commitment to the endeavour of understanding is needed to come up with, enjoy, or refuse to enjoy, this particular slur. The overcoming of confusion or goodwill are not necessary conditions for agreement on a fitting word, and the agreement may rely on different foundations. After all, it seems misplaced to tell another, “You have a long way to go to see how fitting it is – you need to work on yourself”, in contrast to “You have a long way to go to be able to understand that man’s character – you need to work on yourself.”

Thus, the suggestion that imponderable evidence will play the role I considered, in the previous section, to be played by context and attention to context will probably not work either. Unless one who appreciates a fitting word suggested by another is brought to perceive, suddenly, the same imponderable evidence, the agreement that consists in their shared appreciation of what they perceive as a certain quality must rely on something else. (Consider that when someone agrees with another’s judgement of a third person’s character, she does not need to have the same kind of character insight herself. If the judger’s judgement strikes her as profound, this may respond to any number of other circumstances, such as her already ingrained respect for the judger’s insight.) Again, it needn’t be a particular skill, such as perhaps a talent for poetry, that is exercised here, or a particular capacity, as the fitting word may also come

⁶ This could easily be replaced with “travelling John Searle[®] salesman” (or several other options). After some hesitation, I have decided to retain the Nussbaum version of this example. It is easy to make fun of John Searle without feeling bad about it; but the Nussbaum version makes clear that some “fitting” things one feels good about having come up with can also easily leave a foul aftertaste.

by itself to a person without any recognised literary skill. The word can apparently be searched for *without* exercising any particular capacity or skill, as Wittgenstein suggests:⁷

How do I find the ‘right’ word? How do I choose among words? It is indeed sometimes as if I were comparing them by fine differences of smell: *That* is too..., *that* is too... – *this* is the right one. – But I don’t always have to judge, explain; often I might only say, “It simply isn’t right yet”. I am dissatisfied, I go on looking. At last a word comes: “*That’s* it!” *Sometimes* I can say why. This is simply what searching, that is what finding, is like here.

But doesn’t the word that occurs to you ‘come’ in a somewhat special way? Just pay attention! – Careful attention is no use to me. All it could discover would be what is going on in *me, now*.

And how can I, precisely now, listen out for it at all? I would have to wait until another word occurs to me. But the curious thing is that it seems as though I did not have to wait for the occasion, but could display it to myself, even when it is not actually taking place... How? – I *act* it. – But *what* can I learn in this way? What do I imitate? – Characteristic accompaniments. Primarily: gestures, faces, tones of voice. (*PI* II, §§ 295–296; cf. also § 265)

As it were, we can *find* the fitting word simply by virtue of *looking for* it. However, this is not a procedure, an instruction to follow. The important thing may just be that “I go on looking”. What drives us may be the anticipation of relief from almost neurotic tension (cf. *TBT*: 302 [3.157.1.1]), but I would not identify finding a fitting word with a therapeutic project. We may also be searching for it in the anticipation of finding something worthwhile that can be exciting, exhilarating, or enjoyable. Many of our dealings with fitting words seem to involve this implicit promise.

Let us consider again the “travelling saleswoman” example. For one who enjoys it as fitting, there is something infatuating and precious about the encounter, and one does not want to lose it. It has not been achieved through a serious *endeavour*, though. Unlike Wittgenstein’s work in philosophy, the search for a fitting word may have just about nothing to do with working on oneself; “growing”⁸ in work on oneself is neither promoted nor undermined by a successful/failed encounter with any

⁷ Though he seems to principally have in mind less tangled examples of the fitting word than I, rather mundane ones (cf. *RPP* I, § 113).

⁸ Even considering the different kinds of the “growth of understanding” (cf. Rhee 2006: 180).

fitting word. After all, people “philosophically energised” by the perceived fitting philosophical slur may eventually prove to be deluded in their philosophical pursuits that the word motivated. Understanding should not be confused with enjoying a slur, even if witty.⁹

We thus have some negative and some positive observations about the search for a fitting word. On the negative side, the search need not respond to particulars of the context, to imponderable evidence, and it need not require the exercise of a particular skill. On the positive side, the cases of finding a fitting word often seem to be brought about by mere “keeping on looking”, driven by the prospect of something enjoyable, or at least a relief. Something enjoyable is often present also when we appreciate a word offered by another or occurring “by itself” as fitting. From this short summary, it seems that it may be impossible to find a particular characteristic that *makes* a word fitting. At any rate, to the person who perceives the word as fitting, nothing particular would look like the factor that has made the word fitting or explained its fittingness: it simply was, and then perhaps later ceased to be, fitting. Oddly enough, analysing it in search of further explanations may even weaken its force, and spoil the charm. It is this lack of having any decisive answer to the question “what was it that has made the word so fitting *to me?*” that these experiences share with the therapeutical experiences of getting rid of a problem: nothing positive is left afterwards. However, these two cannot be equated; this lack of any further answer shows that finding a fitting word is *not* a cognitive or intellectual achievement with any more necessity than it may consist in a delusion or self-deception. Simply saying that there is nothing more to say about fitting words is too easy.

Therefore I believe that there is still room for worthwhile descriptive explorations of encounters with fitting words, marked by their perceived

⁹ Somavilla (2019: 271f) equates the fitting word with the “liberating”, or releasing (*erlösende*), word, which, once found, releases us from the grip of a perceived philosophical problem (e.g. *TBT*: 302). For Somavilla, finding such a word is connected to the culmination of a personal perfectionist project (p., 267). I am less sure. This is a literal reading of the therapeutic notion of philosophy – in one move unmasking a problem as vacuous, letting it disappear, and thereby getting rid of philosophical difficulties. Things are not as clear-cut here. Whatever the fitting word is, it does not take away from you the labour of philosophical thinking (even when it is about philosophy, which it mostly isn’t). It can play various roles – positive or negative, central or peripheral, or none at all – in personal perfectionist strivings. Also, as will be discussed elsewhere in this paper, while the fitting word may have the power to relieve a certain tension, there is no guarantee that the freedom thereby opened is not delusional or suspicious. All in all, Wittgenstein’s comments about fitting words are “directly” descriptive rather than metaphilosophical.

enjoyability, which appears to be a rather typical aspect of them. Indirectly, these explorations may contribute to answering, or better understanding the meaning of, the question of what makes a fitting word fitting; though not in the first-person sense of always perceiving or being aware of any further factors as that which makes fitting the word one perceives as fitting. In what follows, I will focus on these indirect, more third-person-related considerations.

3. An enthusiastic “feeling” in conversation

As the guiding question I will take the following: what is it that one values when one finds or stumbles upon a fitting word? Is that which we enjoy, or cherish and don't want to lose, a “feeling”? If it is, then it is not one that would rely on having an “eye” cultivated by learning, experience, attention or humility. Compare Winch's (1972: 190) suggestion¹⁰ that without being suitably situated – in something like the right “perspective” – with respect to particular uttered words, they “fall flat on one's ears”. But the right kind of standpoint for being struck by a word has nothing to do with learning, experience or attention. Some jokes strike us as disturbing, and yet we cannot stop laughing, even though our sides are aching and the feeling is not pleasant anymore, because we are tired and overwrought. Imagine that you are volunteering in a hospital – hard work for which you haven't really been trained, long hours that bring you to the verge of exhaustion. And imagine that someone – it may be yourself – compares the traces of faeces on your palm to chocolate, the kind with high cocoa content.

This particular example is, incidentally, not necessarily one of a feeling that would be pleasurable in itself, as such. Wherein, then, lies the fitting-word-related *enjoyment*? First of all, as Wittgenstein suggests in a slightly different context, when we are interested in feelings, we need to look elsewhere than inside our heads (cf. *PI* § 656). Thus, the “feeling” I am concerned with is not how I “feel about” a particular word, in the sense of something private, possibly incommunicable. Wittgenstein himself steers the discussion of the fitting word *away from* this direction by pointing out a parallel with something notoriously troublesome: “The experience of the ‘fitting word’. Is this the same as the experience of ‘meaning’?” (*LWPP* § 62). The answer would inevitably be “perhaps”, but, if so,

¹⁰ Later questioned by himself (Winch 1996: 170).

anything philosophically interesting that we might say about the fitting word would have to focus, just like in the case of the “experience of ‘meaning’”, elsewhere than on the private domain.

This suggests some options. Wittgenstein is, of course, reserved about the possibility of speaking meaningfully about a distinct “internal process” that accompanies the utterance of a word when we “mean” it, which would then be, by virtue of this company, meaningful. However, the experience of “meaning” is not simply a grammatical fiction haunting metaphysically minded philosophers. We use these words to describe conversational moments or situations; these ways of expressing oneself elaborate on previous moves; they reflect the previous setting in various ways and point further (cf. comments on the unity of conversation in Rhees 2006: 46). There is a sense of sadness if you have to keep retorting to your conversation partner, “That’s not what I mean” or “The word strikes a particular chord in me – but you just keep taking something else from it, again and again.” This sense characterises the awkward conversational dynamic rather than being an introspective finding.

Thus, it also happens that we cannot just find a fitting enough word or agree with another person on the right word. Yet, while our dealings with the fitting word carry the risk of failure and loss, just as in cases of the “experience of meaning”, I am more interested in the “successful” cases. It happens also that we reply to another’s elaboration on our previous conversation input by saying: “Yes! that’s exactly what I mean!” In a similar way, another can suggest a fitting word for our struggle to express ourselves, and if we acknowledge it as such, the struggle is resolved (cf. MS 136, 137b, on *Anerkennung*), possibly injecting extra fuel into the conversation. There is nothing intrinsically private about it.

In fact, the possibility of *sharing* words that are in *any* sense “special” represents a striking example of such fuel for conversation – that is, for commonplace interpersonal situations rather than for exceptional overlaps of private domains. Fitting words represent only one kind among many that are thus “special”. The possibility of using certain words lovingly in certain situations also sets a foundation for conversational situations. Parents play elaborate games based on their endearing idiosyncratic names for their infant children (“our little pumpkin!”). The importance of this particular term of endearment is not simply functional; the parents dwell on this particular name also because *it is this particular* name (cf. LWPP § 712–3; *PI* II, § 270), and, whether it is a sound or a random association

with a past event or memory, *this* word strikes a chord in their hearts – or so they may say. Yet, “because it is this particular name” need not describe any qualities of the word itself – that any third person could see, too.

Thus, the important experience is that of *meeting* one another over a word that “fits”, rather than just talking past each other.

“Black is the beauty of the brightest day” – Can one say ‘Well, it *seems* as if it were black?’ Have we then an hallucination of something black? – So what makes these words *fitting*? – “We understand them.” We say, e.g. “Yes, I know exactly what that’s like!” and now we can describe our feelings and our behaviour. (RPP I, § 377)

“If I shut my eyes, there he is in front of me.” – One could suppose that such expressions are not learned, but rather poetically formed, spontaneously. That they therefore “seem fitting” to one man and then also to the next one. (RPP II, § 117)

Encountering another person over a word that “fits” *is* an event responding to what has happened before, in this conversation or elsewhere, and it also shapes the further course of the conversation, of what one is saying, in powerful ways: “Yes, that’s the word!” “Yes, I know exactly what it’s like!” The difference between words that are plausible but rather bland and those that not only describe but also *fit* is not one of expressing or failing to tell the other person something profound. One person may choose to elaborate on it in these terms if she wants, but what we witness here is that *first one* person responds to the word as fitting and *then another*. We realise that “we know exactly what it’s like” and then *we proceed to talk further* about our feeling. Here, further talk means, importantly, talking *to the other* person, not stating facts about the topic from the middle of nowhere, as it were. It is a *conversational* situation, and the unity that holds it together is the unity of shared joy, or excitement. “Yes, that’s the word!” – we may say excitedly because the other is, at the same moment, just as excitedly exclaiming the same thing to our face (cf. Schulte 1993: 44, on excitement and enthusiasm).

To cool down the joy a bit, let us consider another example: imagine that you are sitting with a friend of yours in a pub and you are both on your fourth pint of beer. You slide gradually into talking about Karl Ove Knausgård or David Foster Wallace or Michel Houellebecq (or some other mildly obnoxious male writer) and, praising the purity of his honesty, about how illuminating his writing is, by being true to the ugliness of life, including the ugliness of the personalities of his protagonists and probably

somewhat of the author himself. If you – “you”, the characters in this example – are men of a certain age and station in life, you might end up complaining about how lonely and misunderstood your generation is, though a small part of yourselves will perversely enjoy this as exceptionality. The next step might be to voice your concern about your troubled private lives (if you still have such a thing). You try to picture the lack of understanding on the part of your respective spouse/partner to how you feel about your lives by observing that they have settled comfortably into an unimaginative, tiresome and sedate lifestyle. Now, this would not prompt either of you to think *seriously* about cheating on your spouse/partner, but even *that* is used, in this conversation, as another stimulus for being implicitly touched, in unison, by the nobility of your spirit. And so forth. Over and over, the conversation is supported by occasional exchanges of magical words and expressions that just *fit* what you are talking about and are immediately reacted to by: “Yes, yes, exactly!” And, in a way, there *is* something precious about even being able to have such a conversational experience. But, then again... What kind of quality are we really talking about here, if some of its most clear-cut examples are found in maudlin half-drunk chatter of men struck with self-pity? A sobering, corrective view of the (precarious) fittingness of these word exchanges would be to imagine that you attend such a gathering and try to engage in the same kind of relational talk while you, *unlike* your friend, are drinking *non*-alcoholic beer.

It is good to keep in mind such sobering counterexamples, to remember that we can feel the enthusiasm of an encounter over a fitting word in highly questionable settings. When one later disowns one’s previous enthusiastic embrace of a word, one may have good reasons. It may be of moral importance to shrink from it; as in the above example, one does not want to betray one’s spouse by *relishing* the fitting word. The ruminations about unimaginative sedate homebodies would represent a betrayal not because one simply thinks, at the moment, that the expression fits its subject but because this shared observation fills him¹¹ with *enthusiasm*.

As I suggested, talking about this enthusiastic feeling is rather a way of describing the (stimulated) dynamics of conversation than a private mental state. On the other hand, it is not a structurally important and inherently positive or constructive aspect of human speech, on par with rules-

¹¹ It seems to me that this example has a strong tendency for its protagonists to be male.

following, as discussed by Wittgenstein, or with the moves of making ourselves intelligible to each other, as discussed by Rhee.

4. Enthusiasm in conversation and its complications

What is it that this enthusiastic encounter over the fitting word brings to the conversation partners? If we talk about conversational dynamics, the enthusiasm takes the shape of some openings appearing before them to steer the conversation jointly, hand in hand. The continual appearance of fitting words and their acknowledgement as such keeps certain paths of the conversation salient as enjoyable. The above example of self-pity processed in a pub shows them as such a catalyst. No *particular* term of endearment/abuse, such as the “unimaginative tiresome homebody”, needs to appear (every time). Whichever words that funnel the particular stream of conversation do the job. The enthusiasm of merely talking to someone who has the capacity to fit, with their words, something one perceives as important in one’s own life, and vice versa, will remain preserved even without any particular terms vilifying the life partners of the speakers.

Notably, such an encounter over the fitting word may also *preclude* certain options of the conversation. It then shares some features with cases when we realise that some directions of understanding are, in Gaita’s (2000: 160) words, “ruled out of consideration”.¹² I don’t want to overstress the similarity to such “path-blockers”, though. Their power to preclude some directions of understanding often draws from a sense of moral seriousness. Thus, one does not *genuinely* engage in conversations about the possible robotic nature of one’s own children. Not because this would be literally unthinkable (consider sci-fi) but because it would be insulting to your child. Speaking means speaking from a place in life (Gaita 1990: 110), and the act of speaking reflects what that life is like. The place in which one would wholeheartedly discuss the robotic nature of one’s child seems very unlike most kinds of life people can live now.

Fitting words work in somewhat different ways. They do not really rule things out of consideration. How can one react to the comment, perceived as fitting, about the “travelling Martha Nussbaum[®] saleswoman”? Apart from triggering enthusiastic conversational encounters of an abusive kind,

¹² More about such closures in my book about examples (Beran 2021: chapter 2).

it can motivate a lack of enthusiasm over conversational encounters where Martha Nussbaum would be discussed passionately and with admiration. This does not necessarily rule out a thorough engagement with Martha Nussbaum's philosophy. One may just cease to be passionately interested. Or, more simply, the only salient change may be that one's perception of Martha Nussbaum – including everyday readings of her, even those that are professionally profitable and useful – will be forever accompanied by a half-conscious awareness of that derogatory comment. This may even take the shape of constantly reminding you to consider the possible need to work *against* the fitting word. A version of this experience is when you laugh in response to a well-constructed and finely honed racist joke or rape joke. The word may “fit” many different things important to you; some are inherent to you as a person, some show something illuminating about the culture to which you belong, and others may bring back to you something you would like to have left behind. Words that hurt are fitting words, too. Consider the sorts of expressions *fit* for the purpose of body shaming, and the urge to leave behind one's own past as a body shamer or as the body-shamed. Attempted resistance to such fitting words is, again, a particular way in which conversation is shaped: at first, perhaps you cannot help laughing, and then you cannot stop being apologetic. You tiptoe around the topic or, when it reappears, the speakers react with awkward pauses or the introduction of unrelated safe topics – the weather, chocolate cakes, funny stories about pets peeing on a couch, and so forth.

These examples indicate that the encounters with fitting words represent a particular heterogeneous but also tiny fraction of the traffic of language. The kind of “special” mutual understanding that we sometimes experience over the fitting word is not the same as the overall drive and endeavour to make oneself intelligible to others, which seems constitutive of language (Rhees 2006). The encounters with fitting words are fragile, unstable and unwarranted; we often fail to see what another sees in a particular word, which is *not* any foundational lack of understanding of what she wants to tell us. I may understand that the “travelling saleswoman” slur points to a perceived vacuity and self-importance, but I may still see it as cheap, sexist, unjust, generally inaccurate, or showing poor taste.

We should not overlook the importance of the fact that people present during the same encounter with a word may see very different things in it, even when they share the same proficiency in the same language and a

common cultural background. We are sometimes bored during our philosophical seminars because nothing in them speaks to us as living words (cf. Winch 1997: 202, note on Collingwood). Yet it is difficult to imagine a group of people whose background, skills, experiences and repertoire of linguistic “tools” would be more alike. We navigate such settings with skill, even passing as people able to say the right things at the right moment. The disconnection, then, is not one of competence or even of form of life. The words of other seminar participants may be disgustingly bland exactly because those others are so very much like you. You are surrounded by versions of yourself that allow you to notice your tediousness with a degree of clarity that self-observation rarely allows. If fitting words emerge spontaneously, they may be expressions of your disconnectedness: “My God – some people would die for the chance to become a philosopher, and some are actually dead because they have succeeded!” (And you start seeing the faces of the seminar participants as soulless, and the odd brownish spots on the carpet as traces left by someone’s having cut their wrists – with a teaspoon – to stop the pain.)

No amount of shared background can explain encounters over a fitting word in a law-like manner. After all, while people who not only share the same language, culture and education but also the same kind of personality can miss each other, very different kinds of people – in terms of the specifications mentioned – can experience the encounter, for example, if they are friends and know each other well. Eventually, we may not be able to tell more than that they are people capable of jointly appreciating this fitting word, for whatever reason. Saying “Yes, I know exactly what you mean!” should not, then, be considered the expression of inner experiences that are in tune, but rather the attribution of inner experiences that are in tune is considered a peculiar way of commenting on the occurrence of the outburst “Yes, I know exactly what you mean!” Not that this commentary illuminates much.

Yet to describe what the fitting word does in conversation means to focus on exactly such exchanges. Any explanation of what prompts the encounter is always idiosyncratic, situation-specific and even limited to one particular situation, hypothetical at best, partly because the encounter cannot be replicated, and partly because it is unclear what would count as a replication of such an encounter. It is neither like following the same rule of language nor like telling a third person the same thing. If it was, then it could make sense to speculate about cases of more than one person

regularly and independently finding the same fitting word and appreciating it as fitting. For some reason, this does not appear likely. Rather, the quality of fittingness that one person perceives in the “travelling saleswoman” slur might be perceived by another in “She is so full of herself”. The former person may not be at all impressed by the latter word as really fitting, for all sorts of reasons. One of them is simply that it is *not her own* beloved “travelling saleswoman” slur.¹³ As such, it does not – though acknowledged as “adequate” – provide a foundation for an enthusiastically vilifying conversation. Nor does it remain stuck in one’s memory, as something that one needs to laboriously strive to disregard and that features in one’s occasional awkward behaviour in conversation.

Thus, not only do we enthusiastically meet each other over fitting words in conversation, but we also part ways over them or struggle with discomfort.

5. Gain and loss

Let us consider a little more the cases of failing to establish, or to maintain, the connection to a word as fitting. When two people experience the rare joy of meeting each other over a fitting word, they may attribute this to their temporary closeness, or likeness, that they are or rather feel, *at the moment*, very much alike. Sadly, it happens quite often that not even *I* am just like myself. That is why I am not always in awe of my own words, cherished before as particularly fitting. This is not just because I have grown wiser: I may be very much *not* in awe of the words I wrote in an earlier part of this paper the day before I wrote these very lines. The “travelling saleswoman” example is one that I quickly became fed up with, but not because I grew considerably wiser over the span of one day.

Even the less volatile cases of the loss of the fitting word do not necessarily represent genuinely growing wiser or older. Old friends who used to share the experience of being moved by the same novel and its fitting expressions¹⁴ now both experience boredom, or one of them does and the other does not. It is painfully clear that in such cases something

¹³ Neumer (2013: 73) suggests that the impossibility of the fitting word’s being replaced by another, if supposedly fitting as well, seems one of the defining characteristics.

¹⁴ The pool of all that can be perceived – and utilised as such in funnelling and fuelling a conversation – as fitting is quite broad. A novel may be fitting not simply by virtue of any particular of its words being fitting. Music can be fitting, gestures and grimaces as well. This is not without importance. For one thing, one can hardly deliberately search for a fitting grimace one might want to make in the moment.

precious has been lost. The word no longer keeps the promise of a valuable conversational opening. Consider what it is that has been lost. I may, even after many years, still remember the particular words that once struck me like a bolt of lightning. That is, I still remember the word itself; it is just no longer fitting. It no longer “*feels*” fitting. Is *this* what has been lost? Yet it is not that the word has lost a privileged relationship to a piece of reality that it used to be an expression of. *I* lost something: the capacity to be offered something by it, something that was of great value to me. Something has disappeared from my encounters with the word,¹⁵ and the chance of continuing “the same” kind of encounters with another person over this word now seems lost.

From this perspective, that which is valuable about the fitting word is vulnerable to a similar kind of threat that affects other cases: an experience perceived as life-changing, but in hindsight, not so much; a friendship at a fragile point from which in future, if not strengthened, it will wither; a memory of a past event that I used to cherish but now feel increasingly indifferent about.

What these cases have in common is not that the perceived quality was private. A life-changing experience can be understood as such in a way that *can* be shared and communicated, but we may also fail. It is the same with the fitting word. It does not concern an essentially private quality, in the sense attacked by Wittgenstein’s private-language argument. But it *is* precarious. When another person grasps the important part of what makes a particular memory life-changing for me, this belongs among the most intoxicating conversational experiences. Such things do not happen often, but they *can* happen, and often enough to have a generally recognised place among the variety of things that comprise what speaking is about.

The importance of encounters with the fitting word thus seems to concern, in a sense, marginal (cf. *LWPP* § 782) or, rather, “peak” (as opposed to central/ubiquitous) aspects of what lies at the core of speaking language. Rhee (2006: 146f, for example) points out that learning to speak is, deep down, not that much like mastering a technique, as it involves, in the first place, learning to speak *with people* and learning to tell them *things*. These two aspects are what distinguish actual conversations from, for

¹⁵ Cf. Schulte (1993: 44f) on what makes some expressions (with which a musical piece is played or a line in a movie delivered) feel special. Not only are they such that cannot be plausibly replaced by anything even slightly different; there is also the indispensable input of “this context” and “this kind of performance”.

instance, conversational exercises in foreign-language courses. The latter kind of conversation follows much the same rules as the former, but with the difference that one does not strive to tell *a real other anything* about anything.

We may look at the cases of happy encounters over a fitting word, whose glamour implodes in hindsight, as such in which what made us happy was that we managed to tell something important to somebody important, but later we were totally unable to understand *why* or even *that* we thought it was important. And “a Nothing would render the same service as a Something about which nothing could be said” (*PI I*, § 304). The more fortunate cases, when the happy memory and the enthusiastic feeling remain, are not foundational for language as such – for that in virtue of which we can speak to each other. Making ourselves intelligible to each other is not essentially exciting, and no prospect of excitement motivates our striving. Nor does having the feeling make it possible to understand each other better. But the feeling indicates that not only is there more than rules-following at stake when we try to tell each other things, but that even this “telling each other things” involves more than meets the eye – certainly more than letting other people know this or that, if that is something that can be done equally well in several different ways.¹⁶

To me, encounters with fitting words thus highlight, with perhaps unparalleled clarity, that there is an aspect of gain in understanding and an aspect of loss in failing to understand. Where a fitting word is involved we *become aware of this gain* in addition to understanding what the other tells us. Just as we become painfully aware of this loss when the fitting word does not come, becomes not relatable anymore, or is impossible to agree upon by two people who are otherwise close. In our daily encounters, we are mostly not aware of any such gain and loss. This, for one thing, suggests that a heightened awareness of this gain and loss is not central to the situations of understanding/failing to understand. The gain and loss themselves do concern something of central importance, though.

While this is the way in which fitting words can, and often do, feature in our communication, this tentative functional description should not be taken as an analysis of what any fitting word, as fitting, *is*. If the discussion

¹⁶ Cf. Gadamer (1993: 361): “Ein ungestilltes Verlangen nach dem treffenden Wort – das ist es wohl, was das eigentliche Leben und Wesen der Sprache ausmacht.” Striving for the fitting word makes life with language worthwhile.

(in sections 1 and 2) of the first-person-related context of searching for, or identifying, a fitting word has indicated something, then it is perhaps that there is something misguided about the expectation that there would be (much) more to know and tell about the fitting words. Apart from what we might *want* to say about the examples of fitting words – without thinking that there is anything we *must* say about them (to paraphrase Peter Winch’s point) – when we look at them. While my discussion started with exploring the “therapeutic” nature of the impasse of explaining the fitting words, it eventually aimed at helping us to understand better one aspect of why we are driven to search for them.¹⁷

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¹⁷ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped me improve the paper significantly.

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