

Slabs, SMS, and Semantic Dependence

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Abstract. What does it mean for one linguistic expression to be ‘short for’ another? This paper claims that ‘short for’ constitutes a psychological rather than formal relationship. To develop this definition, I will turn to later Wittgenstein, seeking to adjudicate a debate between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor in *Philosophical Investigations*: while the interlocutor claims that a builder’s cry of “Slab!” must be ‘short for’ “Bring me a slab,” Wittgenstein calls this view into question. Their debate puts forth two plausible definitions of the ‘short for’ relationship, one based on formal necessity and the other on mental behavior. We will evaluate these definitions by examining a case study which was not available to Wittgenstein: the variable uses of texting abbreviations. Texters’ use of such abbreviations independently from their parent phrases discredits the logical definition of ‘short for’. Through an examination of how non-texters use the same abbreviations, I propose an alternate definition of ‘short for’ centered around the act of mentally translating between one phrase and another.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues with his interlocutor that the sentence “Slab!” is not ‘short for’ the longer sentence “Bring me a slab.” Wittgenstein’s claims rest on his implicit definition of ‘short for,’ which differs from that of the interlocutor. This paper will seek to evaluate Wittgenstein’s stance through the process of developing a definition of ‘short for’ that does not imply logical dependence between terms. A case study of texting abbreviations as used by texters versus non-texters reveals that Wittgenstein is largely correct in his definition of ‘short for’, though he leaves this definition incomplete. When an abbreviation is short for another expression, a language user must mentally translate from the shorter to the longer to understand the abbreviation, so Wittgenstein is correct in saying that “Slab!” is not short for “Bring me a slab” in this case.

While Wittgenstein’s interlocutor characterizes ‘short for’ as a formal relationship, Wittgenstein calls this characterization into question. In paragraph 19, Wittgenstein discusses with an interlocutor the expression “Slab!”, used when a builder wants his assistant to bring him a slab:

Wittgenstein: is the call “Slab!” in example (2) a sentence or a word? [...]

Interlocutor: “Slab!” is surely only a shortened form of the sentence “Bring me a slab.”

Wittgenstein: But why should I not on the contrary have called the sentence “Bring me a slab” a *lengthening* of the sentence “Slab!”?

Interlocutor: Because if you should say “Slab!” you really mean: “Bring me a slab”.

Wittgenstein: But how do you do this: how do you *mean that* while you *say* “Slab!”? Do you say the unshortened sentence to yourself? And why should I translate the call “Slab!” into a different expression in order to say what someone means by it? And if they mean the same thing—why should I not say: “When he says ‘Slab!’ he means ‘Slab!’”? Again, if you can mean “Bring me the slab”, why should you not be able to mean “Slab!”?

Interlocutor: But when I call “Slab!”, then what I want is, *that he should bring me a slab*.

Wittgenstein: Certainly, but does ‘wanting this’ consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter?⁴⁹

The interlocutor seems to think that the sentence “Slab!” would be incoherent on its own were it not ‘short for’ “Bring me a slab.” This position is embedded within a broader view of language according to which words basically represent objects; treated as stable representational units, meaningful words combine to form meaningful sentences in which each word conveys an antecedently specified meaning and serves a limited structural role. As a result, the interlocutor thinks that a speaker must incorporate words representing each constituent part of the concept of wanting to be brought a slab — the command (“bring”), the recipient (“me”), and the object to be brought (“a slab”) — in order to express this desire. According to the interlocutor’s understanding, the word “slab” on its own serves a merely ostensive function; that the exclamation “Slab!” can express completely the speaker’s desire of being brought a slab only makes sense if “Slab!” somehow *really means* or is ‘short for’ “Bring me a slab.” This seems to be what the interlocutor wants to express by saying, “Because if you should say ‘Slab!’ you really mean: ‘Bring me a slab’.” For the interlocutor, being ‘short for’ is thus a formal relationship of part to whole invoked in contexts where the part makes no sense on its own. Whether this relationship involves certain mental processes is largely irrelevant: being ‘short for’ is a logical necessity demanded by the structure of language.

For Wittgenstein, being ‘short for’ is primarily a mental relationship, involving meaning or form only secondarily. Since Wittgenstein sees word-meaning as determined by usage rather than strict representative relations (to present a simplified account of his position), he finds no problem with “Slab!” expressing in its entirety the concept which might otherwise be expressed as “Bring me a

⁴⁹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. 4th ed. (N.p.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11-12.

slab.” It is possible but not logically necessary that “Slab!” could be ‘short for’ “Bring me a slab” under this view. Wittgenstein questions what it would mean experientially for “Slab!” to be ‘short for’ something else—by asking, “Do you say the unshortened sentence to yourself?”, he implies that saying “Slab!” would have to involve thinking, “Bring me a slab” if the ‘short for’ relationship were in place. Since we do not think anything other than “Slab!” when we say “Slab!”, Wittgenstein seems to conclude that “Slab!” is not ‘short for’ anything and just as meaningful as “Bring me a slab.” At best, we can say that “Slab!” and “Bring me a slab” have identical meanings, but if we let this constitute “Slab!” being ‘short for’ “Bring me a slab,” equally so does it constitute “Bring me a slab” being ‘long for’ “Slab!” Importantly, both phrases still stand independently without need of each other. The validity of Wittgenstein’s position depends in one sense on a larger argument over whether linguistic meaning is determined by use, but it depends more specifically on whether ‘short for’ should be understood as a formal relation or a mental behavior.

In order to evaluate the interlocutor and Wittgenstein’s contrasting notions of ‘short for’, we will see how well they apply to the case of texting abbreviations as used by texters and non-texters. Let us lay out the parameters of this case study: though texters and non-texters are by no means definitive or exact demographic groups, within this essay, texters (as opposed to non-texters) will be those who possess greater comfort with texting abbreviations and use them regularly and fluidly within daily life. Non-texters are not necessarily those who never text but rather those who text less frequently and less naturally. Texters may be young people who grew up with an awareness of texting abbreviations, while non-texters may be older. This essay will focus on texting abbreviations which are acronyms constructed from the first letter of each word in a phrase (e.g., “lol” = “laugh out loud”), as opposed to those which are shortened forms of individual words (e.g., “nvm” = “never mind”). The phrase or sentence from which a texting abbreviation derives will be referred to as its “parent phrase.” The relationship of texting abbreviations to their parent phrases is thus similar to the relationship between “Slab!” and “Bring me a slab”; in both cases, one linguistic object is composed from components of the other, though the components are letters in the case of texting abbreviations and a word in the case of “Slab!” Through an analysis of how texting abbreviations relate to their parent phrases in various contexts, I will determine which definition of ‘short for’ better fits the structure of language.

The interlocutor’s understanding of language and the state of being ‘short for’ implies that texting abbreviations must be ‘short for’ their parent phrases. Composed from fragments of their parent phrases, texting abbreviations stand to their parent phrases in the relationship of part (or collected parts) to whole. Because these parts are fragments of the whole expression, they cannot stand independently. Thus, we are worse off than in the case of “Slab!” where the word “slab” at least had a referent, even if it did not constitute a full

sentence. Individual letters lack representative power out of context, and their arrangement in an acronym is meaningless on its own: if “lol” did not ‘stand for’ “laugh out loud,” it would have no meaning. Yet because texting abbreviations do in fact have meaning, this meaning must come from their ability to represent the parent phrases they are short for.

However, texting abbreviations demonstrate themselves not to be ‘short for’ their parent phrases when used by texters; the interlocutor’s theory thus fails. Rather than relying on their parent phrases for meaning, texting abbreviations take on full semantic independence in the vernacular of texters. The most extreme form of this independence manifests in texting abbreviations whose significations deviate from those of their parent phrases. To provide one example, “lol” is typically used equivalently with “I find this slightly funny” rather than “laugh out loud,” or else used as a filler term, somewhat comparable to “um” in verbal expression. Thus, “lol” cannot be ‘short for’ “laugh out loud” when “lol” and “laugh out loud” do not mean the same thing. Since abbreviations can have different meanings than their parent phrases, they do not need their parent phrases to provide them with meaning. Despite their etymological relationship, we must conclude that texting abbreviations and parent phrases stand as separate expressions with independent meanings which may or may not converge. Texting abbreviations’ status as independent units can also be seen in their verbal/sonic expression: for example, texters typically pronounce “lol” (whether verbally or through an interior voice) as a singular term, “lawl,” instead of spelling out the letters, “L-O-L” or expanding to the parent phrase “laugh out loud.” This sonic independence remains even when the meanings of a text abbreviation and its parent phrase converge — “ngl” and “not gonna lie” have equivalent meanings, and “ngl” is typically read out loud as “N-G-L,” but texters may still read “ngl” in a manner phonetically similar to “niggle” in their own heads. These actions disregard the part-to-whole relationship and instead treat abbreviations as independently coherent units. In a similar vein, texters also assert the independence of texting abbreviations through their writing practices, writing texting abbreviations in all lowercase like any other word (“ngl” instead of “NGL” or “N.G.L.”). Linguistic expressions formed from fragments of longer expressions do not necessarily attain meaning through reference to their parent phrases, from which their meaning may diverge as the parent phrase/abbreviation relationship is deemphasized and becomes vestigial. The interlocutor’s conception of ‘short for’ has collapsed.

In response, the interlocutor might say, “I cannot deny that texters use texting abbreviations as independent linguistic units, but they are wrong to do so and confused about what they are really saying.” I would point out that if texters view texting abbreviations incorrectly, there is in fact a group of people who view them correctly (in the interlocutor’s terms). It is non-texters who tend to see a relationship of dependence between texting abbreviations and their parent phrases — as we will examine later in more detail. The interlocutor thus

finds themselves claiming that a group of people who are less familiar with texting abbreviations, who use them with less ease, and who are generally aware of only a limited number of texting abbreviations are more correct in their use and understanding of these abbreviations than a group of people who are familiar with these abbreviations, who use them naturally and accurately, and who, in fact, invent them. The interlocutor's stance has lost its viability.

Having dispensed with the interlocutor's definition of 'short for', we will now develop a viable definition by examining what occurs between two expressions when the 'short for' relationship is actually in place. Though texting abbreviations as used by texters are not 'short for' their parent expressions, texting abbreviations as used by non-texters seem to be genuine examples of the 'short for' relationship. When using texting abbreviations which have come to hold modified meanings when used by texters, non-texters typically remain unaware of these modified meanings and continue to use such abbreviations interchangeably with their parent phrases. When reading text messages out loud, non-texters often speak the separate letters or the parent phrase instead of treating the abbreviation as one word; when texting, they often capitalize each letter in the abbreviation, calling attention to the relationship between the letters of the abbreviation and the words of the parent phrase rather than treating the abbreviation as an independent word. Through these speech and writing practices, non-texters emphasize the relationship between texting abbreviations and the parent terms from which they derive rather than treating abbreviations as singular, independent linguistic units. I will thus take texting abbreviations in their use by non-texters as an entry point into considering what 'short for' means.

By analyzing non-texters' reading practices regarding texting abbreviations, I can confirm and expand on Wittgenstein's implied definition of 'short for' as a mental process of translation, exploring the role of semantic dependence in 'short for' relations. Suppose a non-texter reads a text containing "lol" out loud. Plausibly, they may read the separate letters of the abbreviation while exhibiting signs of confusion, then verbally 'translate' the abbreviation into its parent phrase, which they will then respond to with signs of realization and understanding. Even when this 'translation' process does not occur verbally, there may be a temporal lag after non-texters read an abbreviation during which they appear confused; they may then realize the meaning, presumably after translating the abbreviation in their head, and carry on reading the text. This temporal lag while the abbreviation is 'decoded', or 'translated', reveals that the abbreviation is not understood on its own grounds but rather understood in reference to the parent phrase, which must be mentally recalled and substituted into the message. In accordance with Wittgenstein's definition of 'short for', texting abbreviations are mentally translated when they are heard, and presumably a non-texter who types a texting abbreviation is *really saying* the parent phrase in their head. To complete Wittgenstein's definition, we must also note that these mental

processes are necessary for the comprehension of text abbreviations rather than occurring coincidentally. I add to Wittgenstein's definition the interlocutor's notion of semantic dependence: when one expression is 'short for' another, it has no comprehensible meaning independently of the expression for which it is short. However, this dependence is not a necessary structural dependence founded on the relationship of part to whole; it is a circumstantial dependence predicated on the speaker or listener's linguistic reference frame. Our notion of semantic dependence can be thought of as comprehensional dependence, with comprehension approached as it is experienced by language-users. Thus, semantic dependence is recognizable by language-users in their own experience and exhibited in their actions; the independence of texting abbreviations as used by texters does not reduce to an automated or subconscious dependence, since an imperceptible comprehensional dependence does not count as dependence in our terms.

I now finally return to the case of "Slab!" According to the definition I have developed, "Slab!" is 'short for' "Bring me a slab!" if and only if understanding "Slab!" necessarily entails mentally translating "Slab!" to "Bring me a slab!" for a given understander. Thus, in most contexts, "Slab!" will not be 'short for' "Bring me a slab!" — the builder will yell "Slab!" without thinking "Bring me a slab" to him or her self, and the assistant will respond to this call without having to translate in their mind. In other words, the psychological processes entailed by 'short for' will not occur, and "Slab!" will serve as an independent unit of meaning. However, "Slab!" might indeed be 'short for' "Bring me a slab" under certain contexts. For example, on the assistant's first day, they might be confused upon hearing "Slab!" — in order to respond successfully, they might have to think, "Oh, what the builder means is, 'Bring me a slab,' that's what I should do." As time passes, the assistant will likely cease this process of mental translation, and "Slab!" will cease to be 'short for' "Bring me a slab" in their mind. In Wittgenstein's example, "Slab!" is understood without a psychological process of translation, so we can conclude that "Slab!" is not 'short for' "Bring me a slab."

Through exploring the use of texting abbreviations by both texters and non-texters, I have validated the Wittgensteinian claim that "Slab!" is not necessarily short for anything else and arrived at a new definition of 'short for' as a relation of mental semantic dependence. The interlocutor's conception of 'short for' as a formal relationship has been discredited through its incompatibility with texters' treatment of texting abbreviations as independently meaningful. A better definition of 'short for' has emerged from non-texters' treatment of these same abbreviations: I posit 'short for' as a psychological (and not formal) relationship of semantic dependence, as this dependence is actually experienced by language-users (and not merely assumed to be necessary). Further inquiry may find that our argument carries broader implications for the theory of language which produced the interlocutor's definition of 'short for' and lead to

further insights in our understanding of language's formal structure.

Bibliography

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