Title
Review: Wittgenstein, Language and Information: "Back to the Rough Ground!" by David Blair

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/51j7q6j5

Journal
InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 4(2)

ISSN
1548-3320

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Publication Date
2008-06-24

DOI
10.5070/D442000631

Peer reviewed

Wittgenstein, Language and Information: "Back to the Rough Ground!" by David Blair. Ann Arbor, MI: Springer, 2006. 358 pp. ISBN 10-4020-4112-8.

Wittgenstein, Language and Information represents a progression of discussion from David Blair's 1990 work, *Language and Representation in Information Retrieval*. While *Language and Representation* focused on how language philosophy, especially the ideas presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein, is an appropriate realm from which to explore meaning in language, *Wittgenstein, Language and Information* more explicitly examines Wittgenstein's works and philosophies to understand their relevance to information retrieval. Blair has four aims for this work: to provide an overview of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, to give a detailed explanation of Wittgenstein's late philosophy of language and mind, to establish the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy to problems in information retrieval, and to provide a series of detailed footnotes.

The first three aims frame the main sections of the book and build upon one another as Blair takes the reader deeper and deeper into Wittgenstein's philosophies. The first section gives a basic overview of Wittgenstein's philosophies, from early to late; the second provides a more thorough grounding in his ideas about language and mind; and the third section brings Wittgenstein's philosophies together with information retrieval to see how they might elaborate on some of the issues inherent in the latter. Blair does an excellent job providing the introductory information necessary for understanding Wittgenstein's philosophies. In the second section, his more detailed treatment of Wittgenstein's later beliefs draws a logical thread through a number of works that cover similar topics yet often read more as a stream of consciousness than an academic treatise. Wittgenstein's own writing does not follow a formal structure so that each chapter covers its own topic, but tends to bend and flow as he follows one idea until inspiration strikes to follow another. Blair pulls his reader along, providing as straightforward a treatment of Wittgenstein as possible.

In the culminating section, Blair examines information retrieval in light of a Wittgensteinian perspective. According to Blair, information retrieval has a number of inherent problems that boil down to the following: while information retrieval systems are quite good at providing access to data, they are not as good at providing access to intellectual content. Information retrieval systems are created by determining a more precise logical use of language than would be used in everyday life. Because the systems require very precise language, they are removed from everyday use and they are thus also removed from the wealth of context from which much of our everyday language is formed. Essentially, the more precise we get with our definitions, the less we are actually talking about the world in which we live. Words acquire much of their meaning from context—how they are used—and context is what is missing in information retrieval systems. The strengths in information retrieval to date have been due to the

adoption of the idea that each word has a corresponding object that can be clearly defined. Using Wittgenstein's philosophies as a framework, Blair finds this duality (name and object) false to the experiences of life. To paraphrase one of Blair's examples, the word "apple" is a signifier for a physical signified—an apple that can be pointed to or held. The problem becomes apparent when one tries to find the signified for more nebulous signifiers like "charisma" or "tomorrow."

Blair makes extensive use of footnotes throughout *Wittgenstein,* and he admits as much in the introduction. But while the notes are informative, they are rather large and can be very distracting in the text. A slightly smaller text size is used for the footnotes, which would normally be enough to distinguish them from the regular text of the book, but some of Blair's footnotes take up a page and a half. The unsuspecting reader gets to the bottom of the regular text, bypasses the footnote, and turns to the top of the next page; it may take a few sentences before she realizes she has landed in the middle of a footnote that continues on for the full page. One other distracting feature of the text is the repetitions of quotes and ideas. As each section of the text builds upon the previous, there is a certain level of repetition to be expected, but there seem to be large paragraphs of text and quotes from Wittgenstein repeated at least twice throughout the work. The effect can be disorienting for the unsuspecting reader who assumes she is experiencing a bit of déjà vu.

In the end, Blair notes a number of issues and misconceptions that exist in information retrieval, explores how the exactness in language needed by computers exacerbates these issues, and provides some insight on how to improve results from a system. A few of his insights follow: The focus on data in information retrieval systems is effective for some tasks but not others; organization of data provides some insight into a document, but a deeper understanding is often needed. Information cannot always be represented in an unambiguous fashion; meanings of words often vary depending on their context— when, where, and to whom they are said. Examination of prescribed elements of a document is all that is necessary in order to correctly catalog a document; how a document is used is not an important aspect of cataloguing.

While Blair's focus is on the appropriateness of Wittgenstein's philosophies as a vehicle for understanding information retrieval, his work is relevant beyond this scope. The first and second sections of the text, in their description of Wittgenstein's ideas on how humans process ideas, think, and react, and how we define ourselves and the world around us, as well as Wittgenstein's idea of Mind and what Mind is or is not, have immediate relevance to reference work and collection development. Blair has brought an interesting perspective to information retrieval that could help the field grow as users stagger under the weight of more and more information and the limitations of current methods of organization become apparent.

References

Blair, D. (1990). *Language and representation in information retrieval*. Amsterdam; New York: Elsevier Science Publishers.

Reviewer

Heather L. Hill is a PhD candidate at the School of Information Science and Learning Technology at the University of Missouri–Columbia. Her focus is the outsourcing of public library management. She teaches courses on academic libraries, collection development, and social constructs of information. She is really a reference librarian who is just currently doing other things at the moment. She has also been a library website developer as well as a repository developer for a Kauffman Institute-funded project for the Kansas City Public Library.