"Everyone Says I-Love-You": An Analysis of the Declaration of Love

Rafał Nahirny

Rafał Nahirny

"Everyone Says I-Love-You": An Analysis of the Declaration of Love

1.1

In the examples that J. L. Austin uses in his scrupulous research presented in *How to Do Things with Words*, the whole gamut of interpersonal relations is on display: "I insult you,"[1] "I apologize," "I bid you welcome,"[2] "I am sorry," "I am grateful," "I congratulate."[3] Only one statement appears to be missing, but anyone who has ever fallen in love will testify to its importance. There is no "I-love-you"; that simple and banal declaration of love.

The texts of Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein provide the opportunity for a philosophical enquiry that might supplement the means proposed by Socrates/Plato in the *Symposium*, and expressed by Diotima: "There is nothing to wonder at, [Diotima] replied [to Socrates], the reason is that one part of love is separated off and receives the name of the whole."[4] Identifying the meaning of the

Rafał Nahirny – works at the Institute of Cultural Studies, Wrocław University. He focuses in his research on sight, visuality, privacy, Surveillance Studies, and Michel Foucault's philosophy. He recently published *Czego pragną drony? Od atrakcji wizualnej do spojrzenia władzy*, a volume co-edited with Aleksandra Kil and Magdalena Zamorska (2017).

---

1   John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 68.

2   Ibid., 44-45.

3   Ibid., 79-80.

4   Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html, accessed December 21, 2017.

words "I-love-you" therefore means finding the whole of love, the feelings
to which these words refer. The analysis thus requires a breakdown of the
statement into simple constituent parts, its atoms: identifying the one ut-
tering the words (I, the speaker, the implied subject), love (that mysterious
movement of the soul about which the *I* is talking about), and the addressee
of the statement ("the listening you," Hippolytus and Aricia from Racine's
tragedy).[5] Yet we will follow the direction in which both *Philosophical Inves-
tigations* and *How to Do Things with Words* seem to point, and concentrate our
analysis solely on the verbal utterances that concern love – and especially:
"I-love-you."

1.2

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein tries to go beyond the theory of lan-
guage that he himself previously presented in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,
formulating a concept of language as tools: "Think of the tools in a toolbox:
there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails,
and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these
objects."[6] According to the premises of *Philosophical Investigations*, the main
subject of our enquiry should be the way in which specific expressions are
used. Contrary to what Wittgenstein wrote in the *Tractatus*, the function
of words is not just to state facts; there are many other linguistic games,
of which reporting on something is just one. Austin is of a similar opinion
when he writes, "It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the
business of a «statement» can only be to «describe» some state of affairs, or to
state some «fact», which it must do either truly or falsely."[7] According to Witt-
genstein, the analysis should no longer examine the "s t r a n g e connection
of a word with an object,"[8] but the "language-game," "the whole, consisting
of language and the activities into which it is woven."[9] To describe the lan-
guage-game, it will be necessary to consider the context in which the words
are spoken. We ought to be able to describe language in its action, and point
to the rules of use of specific words and phrases. We therefore need to leave

---

5   We shall return to Racine's *Phaedra* on a number of occasions in order to illustrate the
mechanisms and rules of language play related to declarations of love.

6   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 9.

7   Austin, *How to Do Things*, 1.

8   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 23.

9   Ibid., 8.

aside all our cultural knowledge on what love is, and treat the language-game as a primal fact. As Wittgenstein writes, "The point is not to explain a language-game by means of our experiences, but to take account of a language-game."[10] We must therefore go beyond "I-love-you" as a declaration of love. This is also the path that Roland Barthes appears to follow. In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, he proposes understanding "I-love-you" as a figure that does not refer to a confession understood as declaring one's feelings, but to a "love cry."[11] "Whence a new view of I - l o v e - y o u. Not as a symptom but as an action."[12]

2.1

In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* we can read: "I-love-you has no usages. Like a child's word, it enters into no social constraint; it can be a sublime, solemn, trivial word, it can be an erotic, pornographic word. It is a socially irresponsible word."[13] What changes the "I-love-you" during its socially irresponsible wanderings is its usage. After all, it is not only lovers who use these words towards each other, but also, for example, family members. And after all, there is a long, Christian tradition of using these words to address God (prayer, according to Wittgenstein, is also a type of language-game). The same people might use the expression "I-love-you" in many different language-games: apologising, forgiving, seduction and so forth. But a special usage, a particular language-game, seems to be reserved for "I-love-you" as a declaration of love.[14]

2.2

Learning a language is not solely about understanding what words mean using ostensive definitions of their meanings, as shown by the passage from

---

10   Ibid., 175.

11   Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 147. Is it not the case that Phaedra's cry when Hippolytus is to leave, when she is perhaps seeing him for the last time, epitomises what Barthes is writing about when he speaks of "I-love-you" as a cry?

12   Ibid., 152.

13   Ibid., 148.

14   Let us also note that one can also declare love in many different ways, of which "I-love-you" is just one.

Augustine's *Confessions* that opens *Philosophical Investigations*; it also entails the skill of using them, which we acquire by observing others.[15]

A certain difficulty arises, however, when learning to use words associated with the intimate sphere of human life. The situations in which we use these words and expressions usually exclude witnesses, "the observer."[16] Observing and learning them is therefore somehow mediated (for example by television).[17]

2.3

A language-game involves skill and familiarity with the rules concerning using specific names to which concrete paradigms are attributed: "A paradigm that is used in conjunction with a name in a language-game – that would be an example of something which corresponds to a name and without which it would have no meaning."[18] According to Wittgenstein, in the case of language-games we can speak of two types of paradigms – apart from those crucial for a given game, there are also paradigms of behaviour: "It is, one would like to say, not merely the picture of the behaviour that belongs to the language-game with the words 'he is in pain', but also the picture of the pain. Or, not merely the paradigm of the behaviour, but also that of the pain."[19]

In this case, we encounter further difficulties. Despite many efforts, the paradigm of the name "love" remains rather enigmatic, and in addition, in the case of love there is an internal paradox in the paradigms of behaviour, as Niklas Luhmann notes in *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*. These paradigms exist not so that they may be realised, but rather in order to constantly transgress them: "following rules meant not to follow the beloved."[20] Excessively zealous adherence to these conventions may be

15   "One learns the game by watching how others play it" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 31).

16   Ibid.

17   As Barthes writes, "every other night, on TV, someone says: *I love you*" (*A Lover's Discourse*, 151). Given the number of television channels available today, we can surmise that this declaration appears on screens much more frequently.

18   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 31.

19   Ibid., 108.

20   Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 69.

interpreted as hiding behind a social mask, and playing another inauthentic role, whereas an intimate relationship is in fact based upon the illusion of directness, and the assumption that we are in contact with the other person's "true self."[21] This is also why in intimate relations there is a stronger emphasis than anywhere else on breaking – breaking through – conventional behaviours.

2.4

The recipient of the "I-love-you" becomes something of a "certainty" by means of the declaration of love. This declaration also entails an end to the game of seduction, signs and signals of love; it is a radical conclusion to uncertainty and ambiguity. And yet, "the one who does not say I-love-you (between whose lips I-love-you is reluctant to pass) is condemned to emit the many uncertain, doubting, greedy signs of love, its indices, its «proofs»: gestures, looks, sighs, allusions…."[22]

Although the question of certainty appears on the margins of reflections in language-games, and rather in mathematical contexts, one can still draw conclusions regarding the way in which other language-games operate:

> I can be as c e r t a i n of someone else's feelings as of any fact. But this does not make the sentences "He is very depressed," "25 × 25 = 625," and "I am 60 years old" into similar instruments. A natural explanation is that the certainty is of a different k i n d . – This seems to point to a psychological difference. But the difference is a logical one.[23]

---

21   Barthes writes of the figure of truth that it is "every episode of language refer[ing] to the «sensation of truth» the amorous subject experiences in thinking of his love, either because he believes he is the only one to see the loved object «in its truth», or because he defines the specialty of his own requirement as a truth concerning which he cannot yield" (*A Lover's Discourse*, 229).

22   Ibid., 154.

23   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 235. In this example, which for Wittgenstein is a point of departure for reflecting on mathematical certainty, another type of certainty, that of someone else's feelings, appears as a counterpoint. Wittgenstein writes that this is not only a difference in the degree of certainty, but also one of the types of certainty. It is not the case that certainty is only a specific psychological state: "Am I less certain that this man is in pain than that 2 × 2 = 4? – Is the first case therefore one of mathematical certainty? «Mathematical certainty» is not a psychological concept" (ibid., 236). Mathematical disputes, says Wittgenstein, can be settled "with certainty" (ibid.).

Every language-game is entitled to a specific kind of certainty.[24] In the case of a declaration of love, of course, this means the certainty of "someone else's feelings." Lovers will therefore organise their behaviour in such a way as to persuade each other of the genuineness of their confessions.

According to certain indications, this game is not about likening this certainty to mathematical certainty. Sometimes, on the contrary, it is advised to walk the tightrope between certainty and uncertainty. In this case as well, the certainty of "the other person's feelings" is taken into account, forming a point of reference for subsequent moves.

2.5

The language-game in which the declaration of love is employed is, as we have realised by now, a unique one. This is because it concerns not so much the adept use of clearly defined names and expressions, but rather jointly defining and negotiating them in the course of the game while constructing an intimate relationship.

The paradigms of love and behaviour accompanying this sensation are highly problematised. The lovers know that a declaration of love is needed for establishing their mutual relationship. Yet they must work out their own system of signs and emblems of love, clarify and specify the language which they use in order to construct a mutual connection. Therefore, whereas the purpose of the language-game described at the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* is to build a house, the game opened by a declaration of love is distinctly self-oriented. Granted its ultimate purpose is to establish an intimate relationship, this however cannot take place without defining the fundamental names and expressions during the game, which also decides upon the nature of subsequent moves. What characterises this game is the fact that it is realised by determining its own paradigms.

2.6

A declaration of love certainly fulfils the criteria of "explicit performative" as stated by Austin: one that is "first person singular present indicative active."[25] We can therefore try to examine "I-love-you" from the perspective of his conclusions.

---

24   Ibid., 235.

25   Austin, *How to Do Things*, 68-69.

In an analytical sense, a declaration of love is a very risky venture. As a performative, it is extremely susceptible to "failure." According to Austin, the following conditions must be satisfied for the procedure to end in success: "the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked,"[26] and "the procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely."[27] It now becomes clear why, according to Barthes, silence is so very painful for the declarer: "To I-l o v e-y o u there are various mundane answers: «I do not love y o u»', «I do not believe a word», «Why do you have to say so?», etc. But the true dismissal is: «There is no answer»."[28] Why is this the case? Because it is not just the emotion that is dismissed, but also the very offer to engage in communication. The procedure may be severed internally, for example through the answer "I do not love y o u," or externally, through silence, as a result of which the words of the declaration lose their performative power.

This is also why Hippolytus is silent when Phaedra confesses her love for him: although in fact Racine takes his voice away in order to highlight her feeling of being rejected by her beloved. Hippolytus finishes with the words: "I go…" He makes to depart, to leave the stage. Perhaps he understands all too well Phaedra's earlier words, and wishes to do what people who suspect that somebody is about to declare their love to them often do: stop them from making this declaration. But Phaedra interrupts him: "You see that Phaedra's wild desires are out, / I love […]."[29] To bring this dramatic scene to some kind of conclusion, Racine gives a voice to Oenone, Phaedra's servant: "For God's sake come, my queen, unless / you want the shame of hostile witnesses. / Return at once from here, and shun this place."[30]

3.1

In their declaration of love, subjects begin a new language-game. In Wittgenstein's terms, this is the first move in a new language-game, although in a certain sense it can also be treated as the conclusion of another one.

---

26   Ibid., 34.

27   Ibid., 35.

28   Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 149.

29   Jean Racine, *Phaedra*, trans. C. J. Holcomb (Online: Ocaso Press, 2008), http://www.ocasopress.com/pdf/racine_phaedra_translation.pdf, line 672, accessed December 21, 2017.

30   Ibid., line 710.

The question "What does it mean that you love me?" or alternatively "Why do you love me?" is the next move in the game initiated by the declaration of love. These are formulated in the spirit of the philosophy of language from the *Tractatus*. Above all, they call for analysis of the meaning of such words as "love." In this way, the questions strip the declaration of love of its performative power.[31]

On the one hand, of course, this "question, repeated by women ad nauseam"[32] is a narcissistic one, which should rightfully be posed as such: "what is it in me that constitutes me as an object of desire" and plays a crucial role in the constitution of identity?[33] On the other, though, it is dictated by the rules binding in this language-game, which strives to specify the paradigms of the names used in it.

3.2

At the basis of this question lies a conviction similar to that which introspectionist psychologists have nurtured, and still do. This is based upon the problematic premise that all internal states are transparent and directly available to a subject. Indeed, we may say that we know we are experiencing a feeling defined as fear. We can "be scared" without knowing exactly what fear is, and how, for example, it differs from dread. From this perspective, the sentence "I know that I love you, but I don't have to know straightaway what it means to love" is neither improbable nor false.

In this sense, we are an enigma to our very selves, and, just like the behaviour of others, we must and try to understand our own inner experiences. In this respect, according to Charles Taylor, we need the help of others: "Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with certain special partner(s)."[34] In this sense, the question is not the right one, and the inability to answer it is by no means synonymous with incorrect reading of one's own emotions or feelings. After

---

31 Slavoj Žižek also uses another example to describe this mechanism. The statement "You are my master" does not mean being my master in general; you are always a master for somebody, an "I" uttering these words, someone's view making you the master thanks to the performative power of this statement. See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 131.

32 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

33 Ibid.

34 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36.

all, if this were not the case, we would have no need for psychology. The role of this question is different. It is meant to initiate and introduce the problem of defining what love is and what it means to love, in the very centre of the just-started language-game.

3.3

The protagonists of Racine's tragedy are entangled in a complex web of social power relations. Both Hippolytus in relation to Aricia, and Phaedra in relation to Hippolytus hold power over the other person, the object of their feelings. But the actual declaration of love radically turns this state of affairs around. Hippolytus and Phaedra discard their privileges, which are the result of a specific situation in the system of social relations.

As Žižek writes:

> "Being-a-king" is an effect of the network of social relations between a "king" and his "subjects"; but – and here is the fetishistic misrecognition – to the participants of this social bond, the relationship appears necessarily in an inverse form: they think that they are subjects giving the king royal treatment because the thing is already in himself, outside the relationship to his subjects, a king; as if the determination of "being-a-king" were a "natural" property of the person of a king.[35]

The enamoured subject, aware of this paradox, so to speak, acknowledges the power, which he sees as resulting from the positive characteristics of the object of love, and not from a symbolic mandate. The declaration of love is therefore also an attempt to transgress the fetishistic recognition of social relations.

In this symbolic abnegation of power, we find a characteristic feature of love: striving to encounter who the Other really is, without masks, social roles, and the theatre of everyday life ("None of you know what he/she is really like!"). It is at this point that the question repeated endlessly by women would find an additional justification unnoticed by Žižek, as a necessary supplement to the gesture of the subject declaring love.

4.1

Classical language theory assumes that "the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. […] Every word

---

35   Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 20.

has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands."[36] According to this definition, a declaration of love would mostly be about informing the listener of a certain mental state. Yet it is undeniable that certain movements of the soul are the cause of making declarations of love. So what do we need all the earlier analysis for? What did it show us? Is the absence of a declaration of love in analyses dictated by the fear of admitting that a declaration of love does not refer to certain inner feelings?

There is surely no doubt that we can love without declaring love. But this does not change the fact that a declaration has a certain performative power in which, perhaps, the lunacy of love is fulfilled.[37]

4.2

A declaration of love is not limited solely to informing the recipient of one's inner experiences. The attempt to define the essence of love, and what it means to love, is not all that happens in the act of professing love.[38] There is also something that we might call, following Austin, the "performative power" of the declaration.

If speaking is opening up to the Other, as Emmanuel Levinas writes,[39] then a declaration of love is the most radical opening of all, as it exposes one to the most painful wounds, to the humiliation that destroys human dignity. No guardedness or even circumspection are permitted here.

---

36 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2.

37 Phaedra and Hippolytus wait until news of the death of Theseus with their declaration. Could this mean that their lunacy has its limits? News of the death of Theseus, a guarantor, as it were, of the prohibitions that they are breaking with their love, triggers a disastrous series of events. Although Hippolytus is to an extent waiting for this situation, it also accentuates his "lunacy," as he offers the crown to a woman whose feelings he cannot even suspect.

38 Barthes is very radical in his opinion, arguing that analysis of the performative effect illustrates the entire meaning of the declaration of love; it "has no other referent than its utterance: it is a performative" (*A Lover's Discourse*, 148); "The word (the word-as-sentence) has a meaning only at the moment I utter it; there is no other information in it but its immediate saying: no reservoir, no armory of meaning. Everything is in the speaking of it" (ibid., 148-149).

39 This exposure "is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Springer, 2010), 45.

As an example of abuse through "not having the requisite intentions,"[40] Austin gives promises: "«I promise», said when I do not intend to do what I promise."[41] I can promise something, without having the intention of keeping the promise at the moment when I say the words "I promise." But still I trigger the whole mechanism associated with the "game of promising." With these words, I take on a certain responsibility, giving others a reason for specific expectations in the future, although my intentions conflict with my words. Does even a fraud who says "I-love-you" insincerely not expose himself to humiliation and rejection? In this case too, insincerity as an abuse, in the sense in which Austin understands the word, initiates the performative power of the statement.

A declaration of love always assumes the possibility of rejection. It is hard to imagine an easier way to humiliate a person. Is it not the case that every person declaring love faces the other person entirely defencelessly? At this moment, the recipient holds the speaker's fate in his or her hands. The declaration of love is tantamount to saying "You can do anything to me." The enamoured party gives up his privileges, handing the recipient of the declaration complete control over himself. The listener can make him happy, but can also deride his feelings and humiliate him in this or another way.

And is this not where the art of the declaration of love lies? The enamoured subject decides to declare his love, although the feeling that he is experiencing is not entirely clear to him. But is it not in this courage, in the risk to which he is exposing himself, that his love is ultimately fulfilled and realised?

4.3

A declaration of love brings a threefold risk for the enamoured party: that of silence, humiliation, and getting involved in a game whose roles he does not fully understand. Everything here is ambiguous, imprecise, as if impossible to pin down; but it is this lack of clarity, which one cannot avoid experiencing, that sustains and organises the whole game.

As a result of this "impotence" of language, is the only answer to the question "why do you love me?" the tautology "I-love-you, because I love you"? The enquiry designated by *Philosophical Investigations* and *How to Do Things with Words* shows that we can answer this question in the negative. "I-love-you, because I love you" will remain a tautology as long as we consider the declaration in the spirit of the *Tractatus*.

---

40 Austin, *How to Do Things*, 40.

41 Ibid.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, we can find the following passage: "But when I call out «Slab!», then what I want is *that he should bring me a slab*! – Certainly, but does wanting this consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter?"[42] What, then, is this different sentence that results from the performative power of the declaration of love that the enamoured subject thinks? Perhaps it goes like this: "I will take a risk for you…, I will expose myself to injury, humiliation…, I will give you complete power over me…, you can do whatever you like with me now…, because I love you."

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka

---

42   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 12.