

Ordinary Language Philosophy at the Limits of Speech: Voice, Gesture, and the Body

International Workshop and Conference UCLouvain-Bruxelles, Belgium

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Organized by Valérie Aucouturier (UCLouvain), Miranda Boldrini (Université de Nantes), Isabel G. Gamero Cabrera (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Sandra Laugier (Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), Mickaëlle Provost (UCLouvain-Bruxelles), Jasmin Trächtler (Dortmund University), Jeanne-Marie Roux (UCLouvain-Bruxelles).

Keynotes speakers: Estelle Ferrarese (Université Picardie Jules Verne) and Sarah Drews Lucas (Exeter University)

Ordinary language philosophy has long insisted that meaning is not the property of an abstract, disembodied speaker. It emerges from use and context, i.e the forms of life that speakers share—and forms of life are, irreducibly, lived in and through bodies. Yet the body itself has remained at the periphery of ordinary language philosophy's explicit concerns. This conference takes up the question of what ordinary language can do—and cannot do—when it reaches the threshold of embodied experience: pain, gesture, trauma, care, and the fragmented expressions through which a body makes itself understood or fails to.

This is the 5th event in the “Wittgenstein and Women” conference and workshop series (Wittgenstein & Women – International Conferences and Workshops), which was established with the aim of exploring Wittgenstein's philosophy as a fruitful resource for feminist and political thought and to support the work of women and other marginalised gender identities. The present conference turns to the body as the site where the possibilities and failures of ordinary language are most acutely at stake, and where the intersection of ordinary language philosophy with feminist philosophy, ethics of care, the philosophy of action, and ordinary anthropology opens new critical terrain.

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* places the body at the very foundation of its account of language. The extended treatment of pain (§§244–315) marks a philosophical turning point. Pain is precisely what cannot be treated as a private object that language merely names. The cry, the grimace, the gesture—these are ‘primitive’ forms of behaviour on which language is grafted. The child learns to use the word “pain” by replacing or supplementing her instinctive expressions (§244): language is continuous with bodily life, not superimposed upon it. Equally, *On Certainty*'s anchors knowledge in embodied certainty establishing the body as the ground on which language rests before it can begin to err or correct itself. And the concept of *Lebensformen* is, at its core, a claim about shared embodied existence: to share a form of life is to share a body of practices, responses and vulnerabilities (see Boncompagni 2023, Trächtler 2023).

This foundational role of the body is also a site of tension and failure. Drawing directly on Wittgenstein, Veena Das has shown how communities shattered by violence and collective trauma struggle to re-inhabit ordinary language—how meaning is reconstructed not through explicit proposition but through “*fragmented utterances, silences, situations, and gestures*” (Das 2006). This attention to the bodily texture of linguistic repair resonates with the tradition of ordinary anthropology (Brandel, Motta 2021; Das 2006 & 2020) and its insistence

that ethical life unfolds in suffering, gesture, and care rather than in explicit moral theorising. What is at stake in such cases is not a deficit to be compensated as if theory were charged with giving voice to what the body could not say. Symptoms, non-dits, and bodily expressions already signify, fully, in their own mode; they do not await verbal translation in order to produce meaning (Medina 2012; Provost 2023).

Yet, the body that presses against ordinary language is never a merely individual body. It is gendered, racialized, marked by class and by history. Some bodies are constituted as expressive, as capable of suffering that counts, as bearers of legitimate knowledge, when others are not. The Wittgensteinian attention to the *conditions* of shared language — who shares a form of life with whom, and on what terms — opens a critical space for examining these asymmetries (Medina 2012). Ethics of care, feminist epistemology, crip theory, and critical race theory have each developed resources for this examination that can be brought into productive and transforming dialogue with ordinary language philosophy and the philosophy of action (see Floyd & Laugier, eds., 2025; Crary & Donatelli; Laugier 2013).

The questions this conference addresses thus move on 1) a philosophical questioning: what is the relationship between embodied expression and the ordinary language in which it is partially articulated?; 2) a political interrogation: whose bodies are recognised as expressive, as capable of suffering that counts, as bearers of legitimate knowledge?, and 3) a methodological issue: how do we attend to forms of conflict and resistance that do not pass through verbal articulation — without reducing them, in the same gesture, to silences awaiting a theoretical voice? Proposals should therefore address the following three axis:

1. Gesture, expression, and the body's language What is the philosophical status of gesture, voice, posture, and affect in relation to ordinary language? What does Wittgenstein's account of primitive forms of expression contribute to a philosophy of gesture and bodily action? How does the body *show* what it cannot say — and what follows from this for the philosophy of mind, action, and meaning?

2. Pain, trauma, and the limits of articulation How does ordinary language respond to — or fail — experiences of pain, trauma, illness, and grief? What resources does Wittgensteinian philosophy, in dialogue with ordinary anthropology and ethics of care, offer for thinking about experience that resists hermeneutical capture? How are these limits gendered, racialized, or otherwise politically distributed?

3. Vulnerable bodies, forms of life, and moral recognition Whose bodies are recognized as expressive, as suffering, as knowing? How do gender, race, class, and disability structure the conditions under which bodily experience can be articulated in ordinary language — and what forms of resistance, subversion, repair, or reclamation become possible at these limits?

This is a two-part event, involving **a conference and workshops for graduate students** (MA- or PhD-students). Papers submitted to the workshops may be works in progress. Workshop papers should be submitted in advance to facilitate group discussions. The workshops will be led by two Keynote Speakers (Estelle Ferrarese and Sarah D. Lucas), who will ensure that discussions about the papers take place in a constructive and supportive atmosphere.

All submissions (**Workshops & Conference**) must be in English. There is no registration fee.

The aim of this event is to support **the philosophical work of women and all other marginalized gender identities on Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy**. You can read more about the Wittgenstein and Women conference and workshop series here: [Wittgenstein & Women – International Conferences and Workshops](#). We therefore invite submissions from women and members of all other marginalized gender identities only.

Proposals should be **500 words** in length, including a brief bibliography and 5 keywords.

Proposals must be submitted to **mickelle.provost@uclouvain.be** and **valerie.aucouturier@uclouvain.be** by **June 15, 2026**. Participants will be notified of the decision **on July 1**.