BEYOND THE
TRACTATUS WARS

The New Wittgenstein Debate

Edited by Rupert Read
and Matthew A. Lavery
4 CONTEXT, COMPOSITIONALITY, AND NONSENSE IN WITTGENSTEIN’S TRACTATUS

Silver Bronzo

Understanding without contextuality is blind; understanding without compositionality is empty. 

Diego Marcon

This paper aims to show that the Tractatus can be coherently committed, at one and the same time, to a strong version of the context principle (sufficiently strong to entail the austere conception of nonsense) and to a version of the principle of compositionality. It is quite natural to interpret these two semantic principles in a manner that renders them mutually incompatible. Taking my cue from some remarks in the Tractatus, I will try to develop alternative understandings of the two principles according to which they are compatible with one another and indeed positively interdependent. I hope to show that (1) there is good reason to attribute to the Tractatus the alternative understandings of each of these principles that I will develop below, and that (2) these alternative ways of understanding the two principles are philosophically superior to those that render them mutually incompatible.

In order to get an overview of the textual problem that I will address in this paper, it will help first to take a brief glance at three sets of quotations from the Tractatus.

In the Tractatus we find seemingly clear formulations of both the context principle and the principle of compositionality. It is a standard practice to attribute the earliest formulation of the context principle to Frege’s Grundlagen: “it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning.” The Tractatus appears to repeat this quite faithfully. This brings us to our first set of quotations:

It is impossible for words to occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition. (2.0122)

[O]nly in the context of the proposition has a name meaning. (3.3)

An expression has meaning only in a proposition. (3.314)

These quotations have struck many commentators as providing textual support for the attribution of the context principle to the Tractatus.

The principle of compositionality—which is also generally attributed to Frege—is usually taken to state that the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of its constituent words and their mode of combination. The Tractatus, again, seems to insist on this point. Hence our second set of quotations:

The proposition is articulate. (3.141)

I conceive the proposition—like Frege and Russell—as a function of the expressions contained in it. (3.318)

One understands it if one understands its constituent parts. (4.024)

The translation of one language into another is not a process of translating each proposition of one into a proposition of the other, but only the constituent parts of the propositions are translated. (4.025)

It is essential to propositions, that they can communicate a new sense to us. (4.027)

A proposition must communicate a new sense with old words. (4.03)

A characteristic of a complex symbol: it has something in common with other symbols. (5.261)

Commentators differ as to how mutually compatible these respective apparent commitments of the Tractatus are—and thus as to how mutually compatible these two sets of quotations are. To some, it has seemed that the possibility of their reconciliation becomes further threatened if the Tractatus is taken to be committed to a very strong version of the context principle. Moreover, the attribution of some very strong version of this principle would appear to be an inescapable consequence of the interpretation of the Tractatus endorsed by New Wittgensteinitans or revolute readers. Thus, to some it has seemed as if these interpreters of the Tractatus deprive us of the possibility of making coherent sense of the work as a whole.
Proponents of this interpretation have argued that the work as a whole is committed to an austere conception of nonsense, as opposed to a substantial conception.4 According to a substantial conception, there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense, which obtains when we utter words to which we have assigned no determinate meaning (such as “Flippy Wipple Triggle”); and substantial nonsense, which obtains when a sentence is composed of meaningful words put together in a way that violates the requirements laid down by a theory of sense. Different theories of sense will define different classes of substantially nonsensical propositions. A particularly clear example of such theories is the theory of logical syntax often attributed to the Tractatus.4 According to this theory, words have meaning in isolation; moreover, even when occurring in isolation, they belong to a determinate logical category: proper names, first order one-place predicates, first order relations, etc. The rules of logical syntax determine which words, belonging to which category, can be legitimately combined. A sentence such as “Socrates is wise,” for instance, is a permissible formula because it combines a proper name with a first order one-place predicate. “Socrates is identical,” on the other hand, illegitimately combines a proper name with the sign of identity, and is therefore nonsensical—nonsensical in a more interesting or substantial way than a sentence such as “Socrates is friable,” which is nonsensical merely because it contains a word to which no meaning has been assigned.4 According to the austere conception, on the other hand, there is no such thing as a theory of sense—no such thing as substantial nonsense deriving from the transgression of the limits drawn by such a theory. The only kind of nonsense there is is mere nonsense. We utter nonsense when we have not decided, or not made clear to ourselves, in which way we want to use our words. Some passages in the Tractatus seem to advocate quite straightforwardly the latter conception of nonsense. This brings us to our third set of quotations:

A possible sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted. (“Socrates is identical” means nothing because there is no property which is called “identical.” The proposition is nonsensical [unnatural] because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol is in itself impermissible.)

In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic. (5.473)

We cannot give a sign the wrong sense. (5.4732)

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts. (Even if we believe that we have done so.) . . . (5.4733)

The foregoing three sets of quotations, taken together, suffice to show that there are at least prima facie reasons for thinking that the Tractatus simultaneously endorses the context principle, the principle of compositionality, and the austere conception of nonsense. The question that will guide this inquiry is: is there now to read Wittgenstein as simultaneously incurring all three of these commitments without as ipso turning the Tractatus into an incoherent book? Or, in other words: can the context principle, the principle of compositionality, and the austere conception of nonsense fit together into a coherent picture? There is a deep tendency to assume that the answer to this question must be negative. It is not unnatural to think that the two principles enunciated in the first two sets of quotations are equivalent to the following two philosophical views—views that result when these principles are elaborated, as they are below, so as to be necessarily incompatible with one another:10

• **Contextualism:** The meaning and the understanding of a sentence are prior to the meaning and the understanding of the parts of the sentence. First we understand the whole sentence, and then we segment it to obtain the meanings of its parts. The meaning of a word is obtained from the segmentation of the meaningful propositions, the context of which must be given in advance.

• **Compositionality:** The meaning and the understanding of the parts of the sentence (of words) are prior to the meaning and the understanding of the whole sentence. First we grasp the meanings of each word, and then, by looking at the way they are put together, we grasp the sense of the whole sentence. The meaning of a sentence is constructed out of the meanings of its words, as a wall is constructed out of building blocks.

Now, contextualism quite clearly entails the austere conception of nonsense. If the meaning of a word consists in its contribution to the meaning of the sentence, and is indeed obtained through the segmentation of the meaning of the sentence in which it occurs, then there simply is no such a thing as combining meaningful words in meaningless ways. If the sentence is meaningless (nonsensical), its words are meaningless too. According to contextualism we have no independently given “building blocks” to combine with one another in a way that transgresses the combinational rules of logical syntax or any other prescription issued by a “theory of sense.” The words of a nonsensical sentence are logically inert, mere marks on the paper or waves in the air. Compositionality, on the other hand, seems to entail the possibility of forming instances of substantial nonsense. If words have meaning in isolation, why shouldn’t we be able to combine them, with their meanings, in both meaningful and nonsensical ways?

The conclusion towards which the preceding paragraph would appear to tend is the following: the only way to maintain a coherent conception of propositional meaning and understanding is to choose between the right-hand or the left-hand side of the following diagram:
Either we endorse the context principle, which entails the austere conception of nonsense, or we endorse the principle of compositionality, which entails the substantial conception of nonsense. I will assume that, if the context principle and the principle of compositionality are equivalent to contextualism and compositionism respectively, as outlined above, this dilemma is unavoidable. My aim, in what follows, is to see if it is possible to arrive at understandings of the context principle and the principle of compositionality respectively such that they are (1) compatible with one another, (2) compatible with the austere conception of nonsense, and thus (3) entail the falsity of the substantial conception of nonsense. (This means that one of my aims in what follows is to see if we can arrive at an outline of a coherent reading of the Tractatus as it stands.) To make good on the first of these three conditions will involve us in the long-running debate regarding whether it is possible to reconcile the two semantic principles. The second and third conditions place a constraint on possible strategies of reconciliation.

I will begin with an examination of a tentative reconciliation that does not satisfy the austere-requirement I have imposed. In order to find what we are looking for, it is sometimes helpful to be clear about what we are not looking for.

In a recent article Hans-Johann Glock has offered a critical examination of Wittgenstein's views about nonsense, the context principle, and compositionality. He argues that the context principle, under a "strict" or "literal" interpretation, entails the austere conception of nonsense; and that there are passages, in both the Tractatus and the later work, in which Wittgenstein endorses quite unambiguously the context principle, "strictly" understood, as well as the austere conception of nonsense. However, according to Glock, these are both implausible positions. The context principle flies in the face of the fact that words do have meanings in isolations, for example in dictionary entries; moreover, such a principle rules out the compositionality of language, which is necessary for accounting for the facts that sentences are complex and that we understand new sentences made up of familiar words. The austere conception of nonsense, Glock maintains, is utterly counter-intuitive: there are many kinds of nonsense, one of which is "combinatorial nonsense," i.e. nonsense derived by combining meaningful words in illegitimate ways. According to Glock, Wittgenstein was aware, in both his earlier and later works, of the shortcomings of these positions. Wittgenstein acknowledged, already in the Tractatus, the compositionality of language, and he allowed for substantial or "combinatorial" nonsense, especially in the Investigations. According to Glock, there is indeed a tension between the right-hand side and the left-hand side of the diagram in the previous section—a tension that permeates Wittgenstein's work, both early and late. The tension can be eliminated by adopting a "weak" or "non-restrictive" interpretation of the context principle. Consequently, Wittgenstein's view can be made coherent if we find sufficient reasons for attributing to him such a weakened version of the context principle.

The weak version of the context principle that Glock proposes differs from the restrictive one in the following way: according to the restrictive version, a word has meaning only when it actually occurs in a significant proposition, whereas according to the liberalized version a word has meaning only if it is capable of occurring in significant propositions:

[Words] must be capable of occurring in a proposition... A proposition is the minimal unit by which a move is made in the language-game; only propositions can say something... There is a general dependency of words on sentences in that the practice of explaining words is a preparation for their employment in sentences. On the other hand, any particular sentential employment presupposes that the component words have a meaning in advance, on account of an antecedent practice.

There is a general dependency between the meaning of a word and the use of the word in propositions. Its function is to contribute to the expression of thought, to the saying of something. Its meaning is "determined by how it can be used within sentences." This is, according to Glock, the "kernel of truth" in the context principle. But a word can have a determinate function without actually fulfilling it, as "a person... can have a role without actually fulfilling that role at any given instant." A word can have the function of contributing in such-and-such a way to the content of meaningful propositions without actually making such a contribution—either because it is not occurring in a proposition at all, but in isolation, or because it is occurring in a (substantially) nonsensical proposition. The weakened version of the context principle is not the result of a substantive conception of nonsense. It is also compatible with a qualified version of compositionism: the meaning of words is prior to the meaning of each particular sentence of which they are parts; they contribute to their content in accordance with the building-blocks picture. The qualification consists only in the fact that we must acknowledge as a necessary precondition the general capacity of words to occur in significant propositions.

Hence, Glock reconciles the context principle and the principle of compositionality by proposing interpretations of these principles that question their respective identifications with contextualism and compositionism. Both
principles are shown to be to some extent weaker, or more qualified, than the two versions of them which respectively entail the mutually incompatible positions with which they are associated in the diagram above. But this cannot be the form of weakening or qualification that we are after, if we wish to pursue our guiding question. In that case, we need the context principle to be “strong enough” so as to exclude the substantial conception of nonsense; and we need the principle of compositionality to be “weak enough” so as not to entail the substantial conception. Only in this way can we hope to find a coherent interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work that takes at face value—as Glock does20—his explicit and repeated endorsements of the “strict” version of the context principle and of the austerer conception of nonsense.21

III

Our initial exegetical impulse originated from the identification of the two semantic principles with contextualism or compositionality, which are incompatible because they assign priority either to words or to propositions. The assumption lying behind such forms of identification is that there must be a priority along these lines to be found here, somewhere. I am going to question this assumption. I will adopt a sort of mosaic procedure, by taking contextualism and compositionality at face value, and then asking: does either of these positions provide an intelligible notion of language? I’ll try to show that the answer is negative. No priority can be given to either the contexts of propositions or to the meanings of words, if we don’t want to lose sight of the phenomenos of language altogether. The context principle and the principle of compositionality, properly construed, articulate two necessarily interconnected aspects of language. On a proper construal, they are not only compatible but positively interdependent. The Tractatus, I will suggest, can help us to achieve such an understanding. Moreover—I will attempt to suggest—the Tractatus holds that the resulting form of interdependence is one that rules out substantial nonsense.

First of all, we need to be clear about what kind of priority compositionalist and contextualism each respectively place on either the meanings of words or the meanings of propositions. Many of the expressions that tend to occur in formulations of these positions suggest that the priority is temporal: “first we understand the proposition, then we segment it into its constituents parts”; “first we grasp the meanings of words, and then we proceed to put them together and obtain the meanings of propositions”; “words must have meaning in advance of the propositions in which they occur”, etc. But how do we know what we understand first? By introspection? Or through psychological experiments? It doesn’t seem that either of the two rival positions wants to make an empirico-psychological claim of this kind. The priority they invoke is conceptual rather then temporal. They are interested in the conditions of possibility—or, as I prefer to say, the conditions of intelligibility—of the phenomenon that they want to explain in terms of the conceptually prior item. The relation of conceptual priority has this in common with the relation of temporal priority: it is asymmetrical. The conceptually “posterior” term depends, for its possibility or conceivability, on the conceptually prior term, and not the other way around. This means the prior term is intelligible by itself, without any reference to the dependent term. So contextualism would appear to be committed to holding that the meanings of complete sentences are intelligible without any reference to the meanings of the words composing them; those meanings are indeed explained in terms of the meanings of sentences, which must therefore be already given. Compositionality, on the other hand, would appear to be committed to holding that the meanings of words are intelligible without any reference to the meanings of the sentences in which they occur; the latter sort of meaning is indeed explained in terms of the meanings of words, which, again, must be given in advance. Is either contextualism or compositionism right in advancing either of these priority claims? In this and the next section I will deal with contextualism; later I will dwell on compositionism.

In order to test the claim of contextualism, I propose that we try to imagine a completely non-compositional language. Such a language would consist in sentences whose meaning is grasped as a whole, without any articulation: they don’t have distinguishable parts that contribute through their meanings to the meaning of the whole. Richard Heck, in a recent paper,22 has proposed an illuminating way of trying to conceive such a language. What follows is a modification of Heck’s example.23 Let’s imagine, for the moment, that we have a language consisting of a finite numbers of sentences, say 3000. Let’s suppose that a natural number is associated with each sentence and that each sentence, with the associated number, is written down in a book. Each speaker carries with her a copy of the book and communicates with other people by uttering numerals. See you in the street and shout: “31”! You look it up in the book and find the correspondent: “31 = It’s a nice day today.” You then look for the sentence “You are right!” and shout to me the corresponding number: “28”! We smile to each other and walk past.

Now, it is clear that, in the peculiar situation I have described, some communication has taken place: the speakers made themselves understood to each other. Moreover, the sentences by means of which they communicated are non-compositional: even though the numerals “31” and “28” are phonetically or graphically complex, they are devoid of logical or semantic articulation. It is not that the utterance “31” means what it does in virtue of what the signs “3” and “1” mean. There is no correspondence between the phonetic and graphic parts of the utterance and the parts of the thought it expresses. The point I want to make is the following: the speakers in the situation I have described are merely using a code, whose expressive capacity is parasitic on the existence of a language that is compositional.

I am appealing to a slightly different version of the distinction between codes and languages that has been formulated by Wilfrid Sellars in the following passage:
Michael Dummert, in the context of his criticism of the position that Hans Sluga attributes to Frege, arrives at similar condenations by discussing a structurally similar example. Sluga—at least as presented by Dummert—takes Frege to hold a view that incorporates contextualism as I described it pretty faithfully. Propositions are first grasped as unarticulated wholes; the subsequent segmentation is a more notational device for representing the logical relations between sentences—logical relations that the unarticulated sentences have anyway.39 Dummert asks us to imagine the following case. He doesn’t know a word of Basque; he hears a Basque sentence (presumably he guesses that it is Basque from the context, or someone tells him that it is) and is told what the sentence means, say “The pigeons have returned to the dovecote.” Dummert can’t segment the sentence into parts and recognize the same parts as occurring in other sentences with the same meaning, as in the sentence “There are two pigeons over there.” Someone might want to claim that Dummert has non-compositional understanding of the Basque sentence, and use this case as a starting point for making sense of the idea of non-compositional languages. But Dummert comments: “I should not be said to understand the sentence; this is a case where the notion of understanding an expression comes apart from that of knowing it means.”39 The point is that he knows what the Basque sentence means as the speakers in our previous example know, with the help of the code-book, what the code formulae mean. Dummert makes clear that the situation does not change if we suppose that he doesn’t need a translator, because he has internalized a “translation-book” which gives, in English, the meaning of each complete Basque sentence:

Suppose, now, that, in a way I cannot account for, I find that, whenever I hear a sentence of Basque, it comes to me what it means as a whole, without my gaining any insight into how it splits up into words or how they go together; and, equally, that when I am prompted to say something to a Basque speaker, it comes to me what sounds to utter, again without any idea of the structure of the sentence. Viewed from the outside, I manifest an ability to speak the language; but it is natural to say that I do not really understand or know Basque.39

Dummert’s non-compositional mastery of Basque sentences does not amount to genuine understanding of them and to genuine knowledge of Basque. Moreover, such a mastery is completely parasitical on the (compositional) understanding of the English sentences that they encode:

in saying that I knew that a certain Basque sentence meant that the pigeons had returned to the dovecote, we should be saying only that I knew that it meant the same as “The pigeons have returned to the dovecote,” so that my “understanding” of the Basque sentence was parasitic on my understanding of the English one.39

[A] code, in the sense in which I shall use the term, is a system of symbols each of which represents a complete sentence. Thus . . . there are two characteristic features of a code: (1) each code symbol is a unit; the parts of the code symbol are not themselves code symbols. (2) Such logical relations as obtain among the code symbols are completely parastatical; they derive entirely from logical relations among the sentences they represent. . . . Thus if “Ω” stands for “Everybody on board is sick” and “Δ” for “Somebody on board is sick,” then “ΔΩ” would follow from “ΩΩ” in the sense that the sentence represented by “ΔΩ” follows from the sentence represented by “Ω.”39

The symbols of the code that Sellars describes in this passage are units devoid of semantic structure. Moreover, they are mere “flags” for the English sentences they represent. All their semantic properties—most notably their inferential relations—derive from the semantic properties of the English sentences they stand for. “ΔΩ” follows from “ΩΩ” only because the English sentence represented by “ΔΩ” follows from the English sentence represented by “ΩΩ.” The same, I am suggesting, is true of the expressions of the system of communication that I described above. “288” is an appropriate answer to “311” only because the English utterance represented by the first symbol is an appropriate answer to the English utterance represented by the second symbol. The imagined speakers communicate with one another by means of a code-book consisting of translation; and the sentences into which the code formulae are translated belong to a language (i.e. English) that does exhibit compositional structure. It might perhaps be the case that they communicate only by means of the code; but they think in a compositional language, and understand each other because they know the translations of the code formulae into the compositional language they master.

It would not be sound to object that the case I constructed is irrelevant because I supposed the code to contain only a finite number of formulae. An infinite number of formulae doesn’t turn a code into a language. We can suppose that the code book is a magick one, a sort of infinitely long dictionary containing a translation of all possible thoughts; or that the code book, by happy coincidence or divine predetermination, happens to contain a translation of all the thoughts in which the person who owns it actually traffics over the course of her lifetime.39 Moreover, the situation does not change if we suppose that the speakers in the example I constructed memorize the code, so that the translation of the code formulae comes immediately and automatically to their mind. That would simply make them into very skillful readers and users of the code.

This attempt to imagine a completely non-compositional language has therefore failed. We tried to follow a suggestion from Richard Heck; but what we ended up with was a mere code, which can serve as a vehicle for communication only because the people who use it have already mastered a compositional language.
The merely parasitical character of Duns Scot's "understanding" of the Basque sentences becomes apparent if we attend to the nature of his "understanding" of their logical relations. Duns Scot can see that the Basque sentence for "There are pigeons in the dovecot" follows from the Basque sentence for "The pigeons have returned to the dovecot" only because he can see that the former English sentence follows from the latter.

The moral I would like to draw from these examples is that contextuality is wrong in maintaining that we can conceive a language devoid of compositional structure. As the Tractatus says, "The proposition is articulate" (3.141)—meaning essentially articulate, and logically (rather than merely phonetically or graphically) articulate.

However, someone might think that it is too early to draw this conclusion and to recommend the Tractatus's conception of the constitutively articulate nature of language. The two examples I discussed were intended to show that when we try to imagine a completely non-compositional language we end up imagining, at best, a code, whose meaningful employment is parasitical on the knowledge of a genuine language. But perhaps the opposition between compositional languages and parasitical non-compositional codes was simply built into the examples. The change, in other words, is that our failure to imagine a completely non-compositional language was simply a symptom of our lack of imagination and of our preconceived ideas about what can count as a language. A good starting point for correcting these preconceptions—our objector might suggest—is to look at the later Wittgenstein, who was notoriously a severe critic of the "dogmatism" of the Tractatus. Let's look, for example, at the opening sections of the Philosophical Investigations. Wittgenstein asks us to conceive the language-game of the builders, which consists only of four words or "calls" (i.e., "block," "pillar," "slab," "beam"), as a "complete primitive language." Wittgenstein warns us that we shouldn't think of the calls of the builders, say "Slat!" as elliptical versions of longer English sentences, say "Bring me a slab!", any more than we should conceive of "Bring me a slab!" as a shortening of "Slat!" So Wittgenstein seems to be claiming that the builders have a language in the proper sense of the term, even though quite primitive—a language that is non-compositional if anything is. Moreover, this primitive non-compositional language would not be a mere code. Unlike the characters in our previous examples, the builders do not use their "calls" as signals standing for articulable sentences of a compositional language they must. The four calls are all the builders have. There is no other language standing behind their calls.

The calls are their language. And such language is non-compositional. I think, however, that we should not be so hasty in jetisoning the Tractarian suggestion about the essential articulateness of language. A number of commentators such as Rush Rhees, Stanley Cavell, and Warren Goldfarb have questioned the possibility of nullly imagining the language-game of the builders as a complete language. These authors stress that if the four calls really were all that the builders have to say, then they would appear more similar to marionettes or automata than to creatures who use a language. To imagine a language, as we are told in the Investigations, is to imagine a form of life. In order to attribute a language to the builders we need to make sense of their life, to make it intelligible to ourselves.

And this is difficult if we are asked to assume that they use words only for uttering the four calls on the building arena—they don't use words to rephrase, at the end of the day, what they have done, or to make plans, to express joy or tiredness, to refer to facts or tell stories. It seems uncontroversial to say that the builders use signals. We are told, similarly, that some monkeys use a small number of vocalizations for alarming the group about the presence of different sorts of predators: one signal for "eagle," one for "snake," and one for "leopard." The point I am questioning is whether we could conceive of a language that contains exclusively of signals—signals that are never put together to form complex, articulate sentences. When we try to use Wittgenstein's builders to make sense of the idea of a completely non-compositional language we face a dilemma. Either (a) we describe their life in such a poor way that the four calls are really all they have—in which case, as the cited commentators have pointed out, we will be strongly reluctant to attribute to them the mastery of a language and mindedness altogether; or (b) we will "enrich" their form of life to the point where we can make sense of them as fully minded creatures; we will be able, therefore, to credit them with beliefs, desires, and intentions as we do the rest of us. We can very well postulate that, for some strange reason, they express such propositional attitudes by means of unarticulated expressions; but it is clear that, at that point, we will have simply fallen back into the case of the code. Our evolved and humanised builders think in a compositional language, and encode what they want to say in non-compositional expressions.

We speakers of language often make use of expressions, signals, and gestures that are more or less clearly devoid of compositional structure. These are a medley of different things, which range from shouting "Hey!" to a person walking down the street in order to get her attention, to gestures of greeting, injury, and disdain, to single-word sentences such as calls ("Silver!") and commands ("Stop!"). The contract I have been drawing between codes and genuine language might give the impression that I am committed to regard all these different kinds of "meaningless" communicative acts as instances of the employment of codes. The Tractatus might indeed be committed to such a view. The book says, for example, that "[e]ven the proposition, "Ambul!," is composite" (4.032). And it might be willing to say, in a similar vein, that either the order "Stop!" contains "hidden variables" and is therefore articulate, despite appearances, or that it is a mere flag for the articulate English sentence: "I order you to stop doing that." (or, more precisely, a flag for the corresponding perfectly articulated sentence that can be given in a proper Begriffsschrift.) My suggestion, however, is that we can endorse the Tractarian insight about the essential articulateness of language without endorsing these controversial conclusions. All we need to do is recognize the parasitical character of our non-compositional forms of communication. This does not mean that all
such forms of communication are parasitical on the mastery of a compositional language in the same way in which aids are parasitical. It means, instead, that those forms of communication, like the expression of a code, stop being recognizable as what they are when we subtract from the background of their significant employment the mastery of a compositional language. Recognizing their parasitical nature will be sufficient for dissolving the inchoate impression that they could serve as starting points for making sense of the idea of a completely non-compositional language.

IV

I have criticized contextualism for maintaining that the meanings of sentences are conceptually prior to the meanings of words. This amounts to claiming that logical articulation is a merely contingent and, at least in principle, dispensable feature of sentences. Taking my cue from the Tauskite (3.141), I argued that, on the contrary, exhibiting a compositional structure—i.e., being articulated into logical parts—is a constitutive feature of language. (Apparent counterexamples, such as code-formulae and single-word sentences, are really parasitical cases.) This argument against contextualism is, at one and the same time, a motivation for a certain understanding of the principle of compositionality: language must be compositional (i.e., logically articulate), if it is to be recognizable as a language at all.29 My aim, in this section, is to show how different this conceptual motivation for the principle of compositionality is from a standard style of argument in support of the compositionality of language. Such standard arguments concede to contextualism the conceptual point. They concede—and indeed assume—that it makes sense to talk of completely non-compositional languages, and then go on to argue, from some more or less plausible empirical hypotheses, that human language must be compositional.

The following passage by Donald Davidson, which is a few dozen in the literature on compositionality, can be taken as a representative example of what I called “standard arguments” for the compositionality of language:

When we regard the meaning of each sentence as a function of a finite number of features of the sentence, we have an insight not only into what there is to be learnt; we also understand how an infinite aptitude can be encompassed by finite accomplishments. For suppose that a language lacks this feature; then no matter how many sentences a would-be speaker learns to produce and understand, there will remain others whose meanings are not given by the rules already mastered. It is natural to say that such language is unlearnable. This argument depends, of course, on a number of empirical assumptions: for example, that we do not at some point suddenly acquire an ability to intuit the meanings of sentences on no rule at all; that each new item of vocabulary, or new grammatical rule, takes some finite time to be learnt; that man is mortal.41

The mastery of a natural language is, for Davidson, an “infinite aptitude”: a speaker of language has the capacity to form and understand an infinite number of sentences. Compositionality is required for explaining such an aptitude only on the background of some empirical assumptions about human beings. According to Davidson, there seems to be nothing inherent—nothing defining conceivability—in the idea of a non-compositional language in which the meaning of each sentence is given by a specific rule. Mastery of such language would require an infinite number of accomplishments: we would need to learn as many rules as the sentences that can be formed, i.e., infinitely many rules. Since our mind and life are finite, and we lack magical powers, this is not possible. Our capacity to master a language must then be explained compositionally: we learn a finite number of linguistic rules that exhibit a compositional structure (say semantic and syntactic rules, i.e. a lexicon and a grammar), and this suffices to give us the capacity to understand an infinite number of sentences.

According to Davidson, compositionality is motivated only for finite, non-magical creatures like us. By contrast, in the previous section I argued that the very idea of a non-compositional language is problematic. It is not clear what we are asked to imagine when we are told of sentences whose meaning is given non-compositionally by specific rules. The best I could do, in this respect, was to imagine decreeing rules for the formula of a code.

Davidson’s argument has been the object of various criticisms. But the motivations for compositionality emerging from many of these criticisms can still count as standard arguments in the sense I have explained. Some authors have argued, for instance, that Davidson’s assumption about our capacity to form and understand an infinite number of sentences is questionable, and that the real motivation for the compositionality of natural languages does not depend on such an assumption.42 Here are two possible ways of motivating the compositionality of natural languages that do not depend on Davidson’s assumption, but that equally belong to the class of the standard arguments:

1. The sentences of a natural language, even though finite in number, are still too many to be mastered by a human mind in a non-compositional way. Our minds could not learn and store as many semantic rules as the possible sentences of a natural language.

2. Even if it were possible for our minds to learn and store a rule for each possible sentence of a language that we are able to understand, that is not what actually happens. Natural languages, as is sometimes said, are productive. When we hear a sentence, or want to form a sentence, we don’t apply a specific linguistic rule; we simply apply our knowledge of the lexicon and of the grammar of the language.

These two arguments for compositionality presuppose, like Davidson’s, the intelligibility of a contrasting case: a non-human and extremely powerful mind that supposedly can master completely non-compositional languages.
Given what else happens in the book, there are reasons for supposing that the author of the *Tractatus* would not find the implicit contrast case here to be an intelligible one. Even if we bracket the details of the *Tractatus*’s conception of language, there is therefore good reason to attribute to the *Tractatus* the conceptual argument for the compositionality of language rather than the standard one. Moreover, if we lift the bracket, a further reason is to be found in the *Tractatus*’s insistence on the articulate character of the proposition — which, I suggested, we should read as a constitutive claim. And yet a further reason is to be found in the *Tractatus*’s (closely related) discussion of our capacity to understand new sentences without the need of specific rules or, as the *Tractatus* says, specific “explanations.” According to a standard argument, this is a remarkable fact about human language. According to the *Tractatus*, it is a constitutive fact about language. When Wittgenstein says,

I understand the proposition, without its sense having been explained to me

(4.021)

he is not just pointing to, as it were, a fortunate coincidence: he is not remarking that it *had better be so*, because we would otherwise need a specific explanation for each sentence we encounter — a pretty inconvenient situation. Equally, when he writes

It is essential to propositions, that they can communicate a new sense to us

(4.027)

or

A proposition must communicate a new sense with old words (4.03)

he is not pointing out theoretical *destinate* that must be met if we want to account for our linguistic capacity without appealing to implausible empirical assumptions. Wittgenstein is rather unfolding here the concepts of “proposition” and “understanding a proposition.” A string of signs whose sense had to be explained to us, would not be a proposition in the proper sense of the word, nor would we understand it as we understand a genuine articulate proposition. A system of communication in which the understanding of each sentence requires the mastery of a specific rule would have the features, and the parasitical character, of a code.

We might say that, according to the *Tractatus*, it is necessary that we understand propositions without their sense being explained to us. But we need to be clear about the force of the necessity here involved. The necessity is not conditional on the fact that we want to exclude implausible empirical assumption such as magic, divine intervention, or the capacity to learn and store an infinite or extremely large number of rules. The idea that there is an alternative here — the magical understandings of propositions as unarticulated wholes — is the very idea that the *Tractatus* is problematizing. The necessity involved in the passages that I have quoted concerns the very applicability of our concepts of “proposition” and “understanding a proposition.”

V

I have contested the claim, advanced by contextualism, that the meanings of sentences are conceptually prior to, and therefore conceptually independent of, the meanings of the words of which they are composed. I have also tried to show how the critician I articulated amounts to a conceptual motivation for a certain understanding of the principle of compositionality — i.e., for the idea that sentences are logically articulate and that we understand them when we see how each of their parts gives its own semantic contribution to the expression of the complete thoughts that they convey. I am now going to criticize contextualism, which champions a different understanding of the principle of compositionality: the meanings of words, it is claimed, are conceptually prior to, and therefore conceptually independent of, the meanings of the sentences that they compose.

My criticism of this claim will be brusque. According to contextualism, the fact that words are used to make up sentences is related in a *merely contingent* way to the words’ meaningfulness (as in contextualism the fact that sentences are segmented into logical parts is related in a merely contingent way to the sentences’ meaningfulness). Compositionality appears therefore to be committed to the conceivability of the following scenario:

The endo compositionalistic scenario. We can have a list of words to which a meaning has been assigned; but such words are not part of a language — i.e., of a system of signs for the expression of complete thoughts. Equivalently, we can encounter a creature to which we attribute knowledge of the lexicon of a language, even if it clearly is not a speaker of the language — it lacks the capacity to combine words to say something, to perform complete linguistic acts.

It doesn’t seem very difficult to show that such a scenario is only apparently coherent. Suppose an archaologist claims to have discovered a find containing the lexicon of an ancient language, of which she purports to give a translation. To each symbol contained in the find, the archaologist associates an English word or an English turn of phrase. But — here comes the crucial part of the story — she denies to have gathered evidence that the symbols she claims to have translated were ever used to form complete sentences. But this is outrageous. On what basis does she translate a given symbol with, say, the English word “fish” if she has no evidence that such a symbol was ever used to express thoughts about fishes — e.g., the thought that eating a fish makes you no longer hungry, or that there are many
fishes in such-and-such a lake, or that the theft of a fish is punished in such-and-such a way? What is her basis for claiming that the signs she has "identified" and "translated" are meaningful semantic units at all, rather than decorative motifs? Similarly, let's suppose that an etiologist claims to have taught her parrot the English lexicon. Take any English word you want, her parrot knows what it means. However, she immediately concedes that the parrot is unable to understand any sentence composed out of the words of which "it knows the meaning." Again, it would be difficult to take the person making this claim about the parrot's knowledge of the meanings of words seriously. 

Given such paradoxical implications, it can seem mysterious how compositionality might ever appear as an attractive position. Indeed, those who are aware of these implications and want at the same time to preserve the general approach of compositionality will try to rule out the possibility of the crude scenario by means of appropriate qualifications. The account offered by Glock is a good example of such a strategy: by acknowledging the general dependence of the meanings of words on the meanings of sentences, he effectively rules out the possibility of the crude compositionalist scenario, while purporting to preserve the crucial tenets of compositionality. I'll come back to Glock's position in Section VI. For the moment, it will suffice to point out two factors that initially tend to push philosophers towards compositionality—even in its crudest and unqualified form—when they fail to be sufficiently clear about its paradoxical implications.

One factor is our impulse to search for a reductive account of our linguistic capacity. Compositionality appears to be in a position to promise a reductive, bottom-up explanation of our capacity to understand and form sentences, and indeed of the very acquisition of language. The picture underlying this appearance is that of the meanings of words as independently conceivable building blocks: we understand the sentences we hear because we have the appropriate (i.e., conceptually independent) capacity to identify the semantic building blocks of which they are composed; our capacity to understand the meanings of sentences presupposes our capacity to understand the meanings of words, and not the other way around. Hence the appearance of the availability of a noncircular explanation. Reflection on the real implications of compositionality—which I tried to condense in the crude compositionalist scenario—should lead us to question our impulse to look for an explanation of this kind.

A second factor that accounts for the appeal of compositionality is our tendency to think of natural languages on the model of the mathematical constructions that we call "formal languages." When we build a formal language, say the language of predicate logic, we start by specifying recursively the terms of the language (the "vocabulary") and a semantic function that assigns an interpretation, or semantic value ("a meaning"), to each term. But it is clear that this can be done even though we never go on to give a recursive definition, and an interpretation, of the well-formed formulae of the language (the "sentences"). Nothing seems to rule out the possibility that we may simply stop at Stage 1 (interpreted terms) without ever proceeding to Stage 2 (interpreted well-formed formulae). Stage 1 seems conceptually independent from Stage 2. Again, reflection on the paradoxical implications of compositionality should lead us to question the assumption that formal languages are (in this respect, at least) good models of natural languages. Such mathematical constructions tend to distort, rather than illuminate, what it is for a word to have a meaning.

VI

Compositionality may be described (to borrow a term used by John McDowell in his work on the philosophy of perception) as a "factorizing" conception of our linguistic capacity. The user of language is presented as a sort of two-headed creature: we have knowledge of the meanings of words, and, in addition, we have knowledge of how to use those words to express complete thoughts. When we perform successful linguistic acts we simultaneously exercise both kinds of knowledge. When we utter words in isolation or instances of substantial nonsense, we exercise the first, but not the second, kind of knowledge. The second kind of knowledge is presented as dependent on the first one; but nothing seems to exclude that it is, at least in principle, merely optional in relation to it.

The alternative conception that I want to attribute to the T나나, on the other hand, can be described as a form of "disjunctivism." According to epistemological disjunctivism (as elaborated, especially, by John McDowell103), either something is a perceptual experience by being a disclosure of how things are in the world, or it is at most the illusion of a perceptual experience. There is no epistemic highest common factor between vertical perceptual experience and perceptual illusion. Similarly, according to what we might label "semantic disjunctivism," referents are used in a meaningful way by being employed for the expression of meaningful propositions, or they are not used in a meaningful way at all—they are used at most with the illusion that we are using them meaningfully. There is no logical or semantic common factor between the use of words in the expression of thoughts and the occurrence of words outside the context of significant propositions. The capacity to use a word with a meaning, and the capacity to use it in the expression of thoughts, are linked by a necessary, internal relation. Something is not recognisable as an exercise of the first capacity without it also drawing on our competence to exercise the second capacity.

The T나나, I am suggesting, rejects compositionality by acknowledging the conceptual dependence of the meanings of words on the meanings of sentences. It does so by adopting a stronger version of the coextension principle entailing the austere view of nonsense: words have meaning only in the context of significant propositions. Moreover, as I argued in previous sections, the T나나 is also characterised by a simultaneous and symmetrical rejection of contextualism: it acknowledges the conceptual dependence of the meanings of sentences on their
logical articulation. For the *Tractatus*, the exercise of the capacity to understand and form complete sentences is, at one and the same time, the exercise of our capacity to use sub-sentential elements in the expression of thoughts. The dependence goes both ways, and is therefore an interdependence. The two capacities (of making sense, and of using sub-sentential words for making sense) come in one single package. Instead of speaking of two necessarily interconnected capacities it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of two aspects of a single capacity—the capacity to speak and understand a language.

This is the picture of our linguistic capacity that I want to attribute to the *Tractatus*. It is also the picture I would want to recommend in my own voice, with two amendments: (a) we should speak of “complete linguistic acts” instead of “propositions,” in order to do justice to, among other things, non-constative uses of language; and (b), as I argued at the end of Section III, we should allow for various kinds of non-compositional uses of language (such as single-word sentences) as parasitical cases. To properly explore the implications of these amendments would take us well beyond the scope of the present paper (into later Wittgenstein’s criticisms of the *Tractatus*).

I have tried to show that the Tractarian picture, by acknowledging the interdependence between the meanings of words and the meanings of sentences, is philosophically superior to both contextualism and compositionalism. I have not claimed, however, to have shown that it is the only alternative to both contextualism and compositionalism.

All the arguments I have offered thus far leave room for a position like Glock’s—which I would describe as a hybrid position. Glock’s adoption of a weak or “non-restrictive” version of the context principle is sufficient for ruling out the crude compositionalist scenario. He acknowledges a conceptual dependence (even though of a general sort) between the meanings of words and the meanings of the sentences in which they can occur. As we have seen, he claims that the meaningfulness of a word presupposes the existence of the general practice of using the word for the expression of complete propositions. Words, he maintains, must be capable of contributing to the sense of propositions; the meaning of a word “is determined by how it can be used within sentences,” by “the role that the word would play [but does not need to play] in propositions.” On the other hand, Glock’s position, like compositionalism, is a factorizing conception of our linguistic capacity. The weak version of the context principle he adopts leaves room for words to have meaning outside the context of significant propositions (and to retain that intrinsic meaning that they have acquired even when imported into an allegedly nonsensical propositional context). Glock wants a semantic highest common factor between the use of a word in the expression of complete thoughts and the employment (or non-employment) of the word in isolation or in substantially nonsensical combinations. The user of language is still presented as a two-headed creature: one head can speak (the one that knows the meanings of words), even though the other head (the one that knows how to use words to express thoughts) remains silent. The difference between Glock’s hybrid position and compositionalism is that, according to Glock, the second head must always be present—even though in silence—behind the speech of the first head; it must always be capable of speaking in unison with its twin companion. The crudity of compositionalism lies in the fact that, unlike Glock’s view, it does not exclude the eventuality that the first head may keep speaking even when the second head has been cut off, or never grew.

Now, it is clear that the verdict between the disjunctive picture I have been recommending and attributing to the *Tractatus* and Glock’s hybrid position (which acknowledges a merely general dependence of the meanings of words on the meanings of sentences by endorsing a non-restrictive version of the context principle) will depend, crucially, on the appraisal of the independent reasons that respectively support the restrictive conception of the context principle and the autere conception of nonsense. I will not enter into such a discussion here. I will just try to show how the materials present in the preceding discussion can lead us to question some of the apparent motivations of Glock’s position. My aim here is not to refute this position but (more modestly) merely to reduce its attractiveness.

(1) One of the reasons Glock offers for rejecting the restrictive version of the context principle is that it allegedly has the unattractive consequence that, if we endorse it, we would have to deny that “sentences are complex signs,” that “their meaning depends on the meaning of their constituents,” and that “understanding the components and mode of combination of a sentence is a necessary condition for a genuine understanding of the whole sentence.” But we have seen that these denials are implications of contextualism, not of the restrictive version of the context principle. We can maintain, quite literally, that words have meaning only in the context of meaningful propositions, and that propositions are essentially articulable. All we have to do is reject the claim that the meanings of sentences are conceptually prior to the meanings of their constituent words.

(2) We have seen that a deep motivation of compositionalism is the promise of a reductive, bottom-up explanation of our capacity to speak and understand a language. Sometimes Glock makes it seem as if the weak version of the context principle he favors allows for a fulfillment of this promise. He maintains, for example, that “any particular sentential employment presupposes that the component words have a meaning in advance.” The meanings of sub-sentential components, being available “in advance,” seem to provide an explanation of our capacity to understand the sentences that they compose. However, Glock is also committed to the idea that the meanings of the component words depend, in turn, on their general employment in propositions. That is to say, the meanings of the component words presuppose, in turn, their general employment in propositions. If it is a reductive explanation that we are looking for, we will already be disappointed by this apparent circularity; moreover, it is hard to see how the distinction between the “particular” and the “general” level of the dependence might help to show that the circularity is only apparent. Glock’s hybrid position—like the disjunctive
picture I recommended—is not in a position to promise the satisfaction of our desire of a reductive explanation of the capacity to speak a language. Glock therefore misrepresents the dialectical situation to the extent that he suggests that his view, unlike the disjunctive conception, leaves room for an explanation of this kind.

(3) At this point, we may start to become suspicious about the motivation for the hybrid position Glock favors. The weak version of the context principle, in Glock's hands, seems to be doing two things at once. In virtue of its being a version of the context principle, it acknowledges a conceptual connection between the meanings of words and the meanings of sentences, thus ruling out the crude compositionality scenario; and, in virtue of its being a weak version of the context principle, it seems to leave room for a reductive explanation of our linguistic capacity. But it can't do both things at once. By ruling out the paradoxical implications of compositionality, the weak version of the context principle rejects—to no less an extent than the strong version does—the only framework that seems suitable for satisfying our craving for a reductive explanation of linguistic mastery. The hybrid position seems to be driven by a simultaneous desire to reject the framework (because of its paradoxical implications) and to keep it (because it seems suitable for satisfying our craving). It is a merit of the strong version of the context principle, I submit, that it rejects this framework in a wholehearted way. This can help us to quench our craving for a reductive explanation, and therefore to achieve a more stable satisfaction. The hybrid position, on the other hand, seems perfectly contorted for the purpose of keeping this craving alive in the face of Wittgenstein's criticism of it; it appears to promise its satisfaction, while anachronizing our awareness of the paradoxical implications of the framework that such a satisfaction would require.

VII

In this last section of the paper, I sum up the results of the paper and connect them back to the Tractatus.

I have argued that the Tractatus can endorse, at one and the same time, a strong version of the context principle (entailing the antere conception of nonsense) and a version of the principle of compositionality. It can maintain, quite literally, (1) that words have meaning only in the context of significant propositions; and (2) that propositions are essentially articulated—which means that their sense is complex, that they are made up of semi-atomic parts that they share with one another, and that we understand them when we understand how each of their parts contributes to the complete thoughts they express. The Tractatus can coherently embrace both of these principles by rejecting the respective ways in which contextualism and compositionism seek to interpret them. In order to accomplish this, the Tractatus needs to reject-and, I have suggested, does reject—both the claim that the meanings of sentences are conceptually prior to the meanings of words, and the claim that the meanings of words are conceptually prior to the meanings of sentences. On this Tractarian understanding of the two principles, the context principle and the principle of compositionality articulate two necessarily interdependent aspects of our linguistic capacity. Nothing is recognizable as an exercise of the capacity to use words (i.e., sub-propositional elements), without its also being recognizable as drawing on the capacity to make sense (i.e., to express propositional sense); and vice versa. I suggested that this Tractarian picture can be improved, while retaining much of its spirit, by speaking of "complete linguistic acts" instead of "propositions," and by allowing for non-compositional uses of language as para-sentential cases—passissals, i.e., on the mastery of a compositional language.

I argued that this Tractarian picture is superior to both contextualism and compositionism. I don't claim to have argued, however, that it is the only way to avoid these two problematic positions. The criticisms I mounted against contextualism and compositionism leave room for a Glock-style hybrid position, which apparently acknowledges a strong conceptual interdependence between the meanings of words and the meanings of sentences, but in a way that seeks to attenuate the character of this interdependence so as to leave room for substantial nonsense. I have tried to show how the philosophical attractiveness of such a position diminishes once it is placed within the range of alternatives I have distinguished. Finally, I have tried to show that, in any case, it is not a position we can legitimately attribute to the Tractatus.

I want to close by giving a quick look at two passages in the Tractatus that bring out quite clearly the interdependence between a strong version of the context principle and the principle of compositionality. Each of the following passages will appear very puzzling as long as we maintain that the two semantic principles must be equivalent to contextualism and compositionism respectively. The first passage runs as follows:

The thing is independent, in so far as it can occur in all possible circumstances, but this form of independence is a form of connection with the atomic fact, a form of dependence. (It is impossible for words to occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition.) (2.1122)

This passage occurs quite early in the Tractatus, before the topic of language (as the system of the totality of propositions) is officially introduced. But the second sentence makes clear that what Wittgenstein says about "things" on the ontological level is meant to apply equally to words in their representing relation to the world. Wittgenstein does indeed allow here that a thing is independent. This might be taken to mean that a thing can occur in isolation, without being part of a fact—or, equivalently, that a word can have meaning in isolation, without being part of a proposition. But if this were what Wittgenstein is saying, how could he maintain, at the same time, that the independence of the thing/word is "a form of dependence" on the fact/proposition in which it occurs? The air of paradox...
disappears when we take Wittgenstein as saying that things essentially occur in facts, as meaningful words essentially occur in propositions. Facts and propositions are necessarily complex, articulate: they are made up of parts, and such parts can occur in other facts or in other propositions. The parts, therefore, are independent from any particular complex in which they occur; but they must occur in some fact or other, in some proposition or other. They would not be what they are—that is items that can make up a fact or a proposition—if “they could occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition.”

The second passage I want to consider clarifies what Wittgenstein means by “logical articulation” and shows how both the context principle and the principle of compositionality are built into this notion:

The proposition is not a mixture of words (just as the musical theme is not a mixture of tones).
The proposition is articulated: (3.141)

Words and tones, as marks on the paper or waves in the air, can surely occur in isolation. We can put such things together and obtain sequences of words and sounds. Surely these are (in a sense) complex phenomena and are (in a sense) made up of parts. However, they do not exhibit articulation. Articulation is not mere complexity; or, if you like, it is a special sort of complexity. A proposition or a musical theme are “complex,” and have “parts,” in a different sense in which “mixtures of words” and “mixtures of tones” are complex and have parts. A proposition has unity: it expresses a thought; a melody also has unity: it expresses a musical thought. Only what exhibits this kind of unity can be articulated in the Tractatus’s sense. A proposition, as I have tried to argue, is necessarily articulated into parts, and the same might be said of a melody. (Can we conceive of melodies consisting of a single note?) The parts of a proposition contribute to the articulation of its content, and make the same contributions to the articulation of the contents of other propositions. Analogously, the parts of a melody (i.e., its notes) contribute to the expression of a musical thought, and make the same contributions to have the same “musical meaning” in other melodies. But if we deprive these words and these tones of their significant context, they become mere marks and sounds, devoid of meaning. Conversely, if we start with words and tones as they are given to us in isolation, we will through their mere concatenation never be able to achieve unified wholes, but rather always only mere “mixtures.” The kind of “component” a word or a tone is, and the kind of “context” that a proposition or a melody is, are here seen to be interdependent notions that stand on the same level. This is just what compositionality and contextualism, in their opposite ways, each deny, thereby obstructing our understanding of the ways in which the author of the Tractatus wishes jointly to affirm both a version of the principle of compositionality and a version of the context principle.\^

9 I don’t follow the Ogden translation here.

10 As I further clarify below, in this paper I will use the term ‘priority’ and its cognates to designate an asymmetrical relation: if A is prior to B, B cannot be true prior to A.

11 On the other hand, I will use the term ‘interdependence’ to designate a symmetrical relation: if A and B are interdependent, A depends on B and B depends on A.

12 Moreover, I will not discuss the attempt to reconcile the two semantical principles by distinguishing different orders of priority, so that the meaning of sentences would be prior in one order, while the meaning of words would be prior in a different order. (Cf. M. Dummett, Frege: Philosophy of Language, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 4, where it is notoriously stated that sentential meaning is prior in the “order of recognition,” whereas sub-sentential meaning is prior in the “order of recognition.”) In this paper I am concerned only to argue against priority claims on behalf of either of these principles in the asymmetrical sense that I have just specified.


14 Ibid., p. 226.


16 Ibid., pp. 226–230.

17 Ibid., pp. 227–228.

18 Glock seems reluctant to stress the conclusion that the coherence of Wittgenstein’s thought is in some ways more elastic than his critical view that follows from this claim.

19 Ibid., p. 229.

20 Ibid., p. 235.

21 Ibid., p. 235.

22 Ibid., p. 228.

23 Glock is bound to hold that we should simply look at the conceptualization, all the passages that do not fit with the weak version of the concept principle that he is attributing to Wittgenstein.

24 Glock’s formulation of the “weak” version of the concept principle is reminiscent of what Dummett described as the “trivial truths” in the disam proposed by Quine as an interpretation of Frege’s concept principle, that “the sentence is the primary unit of significance” (Dummett, Frege: Philosophy of Language, p. 3). Corp Diamond has criticized Dummett’s discussion of Quine’s dictum, arguing for a much less trivial way of understanding it: it is a clear contrast from the excluded of substantial nonsense. This is, according to Diamond, the non-trivial way in which Frege and Wittgenstein understood the principle (Diamond, The Reality of Spirit, pp. 108–109). Ed Dams has applied Diamond’s criticism of Dummett to Glock’s discussion in “Contemtualism and Nonsense in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus,” South African Journal of Philosophy, 2006, vol. 25.2, pp. 92–96, and “Wittgenstein, Contemtualism and Nonsense: A Reply to Hans-Johann Glock,” Journal of Philosophical Research, 2008, vol. 33, pp. 111–125.

25 R. Heck, “What Is Contemtualism?”, unpublished. I should warn from the beginning that I am making a somewhat devious use of Heck’s paper. Heck develops a series of examples for illustrating the idea of a non-compositional language, regarding the intelligibility of which Heck tries no doubt. I think, on the contrary, that his examples are very nicely for elucidating the idea of a non-compositional language.

26 Heck’s original (purposely) example of non-compositional language is a language consisting entirely of numerals, where each numeral denotes a Gödel-number associated with a formula of arithmetic. The suggestion is that this would be a non-compositional language that can express all arithmetical propositions.


28 There are indeed difficulties in making such propositions (Does it make sense to talk of the set of all possible thoughts? Or of the set of thoughts a person had in her life? How many thoughts did I have in the last five minutes?); but I think they can be bracketed for the purpose of the present discussion.


30 Dummett, The Interpretation of Freges Philosophy, p. 308.

31 Ibid., p. 309.

32 Ibid., p. 309.


35 Ibid., p. 519.


38 It might be objected that monkeys are really different from automatons and machines, and that it is not clear that they don’t speak some form of language and enjoy some form of mindlessness. I am perfectly sympathetic with this idea. Monkeys, like us, come into the world and die, are hungry and cold and excited and terrified, enjoy sex and lying in the morning sun, take care of each other and of their offspring. It is in virtue of these and many other facts that we regard their signals as much more akin to language, and much more expressive of mindlessness, than the signals released by automatons or thermostats. The idea that monkeys have a form of life is far more intelligible to us than the idea that automatons or machines have one—for the latter don’t even seem to have a life. If one wishes to grant that monkeys do have a language, then my claim above amounts to the following: all we can get without compositionalism is the form of mindlessness and the form of “language” that raindrops—and other non-human animals—have. That is, we don’t get a language in the full and proper and uncontroversial sense of the term.

39 The criticism of contextualism I developed is not, however, a motivation for the particular interpretation of the principle of compositionalism given by compositionalists, according to which the meanings of sub-sentential elements are conceptually prior to the meanings of sentences (see Section V below).


42 Compare, by contrast, Heck’s insistence, in the paper I already referred to, that “magic is always a possibility.”

43 In some passages Frege seems to regard compositionality as a constitutive feature of language and thus to sit in the same camp where I have suggested we should place the Tractatus. For example, in a letter to Philip Jourdain (“Letter to Jourdain, Jan. 1914,” in The Frege Reader, ed. M. Beaney, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, p. 226), he argues that, without compositionality, the expression of any thought would require the adoption of a specific convention, so that “language in the proper sense would be impossible.” Other passages are more delicate: they will place Frege in the Tractarian camp or in the opposite Davidsonian camp according to whether we see Frege as arguing, respectively, for the compositionality of language in such, or (morely) for the compositionality of human languages. Cf. for instance “Logic in Mathematics,” in Poincaré s Writings, ed. H. Hermes, F. Kambartel and F. Kaulbach, transl. J. Long and R. White, Oxford, Blackwell, 1979, pp. 225, 243, “Compound Thoughts,” in Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy, ed. B. McGuinness, transl. M. Black et al., Oxford, Blackwell, 1980, p. 396.

44 It might also be helpful to reflect on the following question: When do we say that a person has learnt the meaning of a word? The obvious answer seems to be: When she has acquired the necessary to form and understand the word. Dictionaries, by the way, are designed precisely to help to confer such a capacity.


47 According to the amended view I am recommending, the capacity to make sense still depends on the capacity to meaningfully employ sub-compositional elements, but some of its exercises are not about exercises of the second capacity; they merely indirectly draw on that capacity. For example, when I direct at you the order “Stop!” I am making sense, but I am not directly exercising the capacity to make logically articulated sense. (Early Wittgenstein, as noted above, would have to deny this: he would not be able to recognize “Stop!” as a complete meaningful linguistic unit, unless he took its surface form to disguise a feature underlying multiplicity of logical structure.) However the capacity to make articulate sense is still operative: I would not be performing the same linguistic act if, for example, I could not use sentences containing the word “stop” as a sub-constituent element. The amended view I am recommending is compatible, I think, with the criticisms that the later Wittgenstein came to level against his former view about the essentially articulate nature of the proposition; see Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §§19-20, and Philosophical Cruxions 1912-1951, ed. J.C. Klagge and A. Nordmann, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 54-55.)


49 It is perhaps worth remarking that Glock’s hybrid position and the disjunctive conception, in spite of occasional similarities in verbal formulation, in fact make quite different appeals to the capacity to use words in meaningful propositions. According to Glock, when we utter substantive nonsense, we presuppose the capacity to use words in meaningful content; however, we don’t draw on that capacity—because, ex hypothesis, we are not actually making sense. That capacity is required to be in the background anyway: we utter a word with a meaning; but it doesn’t play any actual role in our succeeding to use the word with that meaning on a particular occasion; the background is semantically inert. This comes out vividly if we consider an alleged instance of substantive nonsense containing an obviously ambiguous word, say “The bank is a prime number.” The word “bank,” according to Glock, is used with its usual meaning. But which one? Does the meaningful employment of the word presuppose the capacity to use it in the expression of thoughts about financial institutions or about riverbanks? In Glock’s framework, the issue can be settled only by appealing to the bare psychological fact of the speaker’s linguistic intention to use the word this way rather than that. So his view implies that it is actually the nature of this intention that fixes the meaning of the word: our capacity to use a word with a particular meaning in certain (substantially non-nonsense) contexts depends, in fact, on nothing more than this intention—the successful exercise of the one capacity (to use something by the word apart from the character of its content) proceeds quite apart from any effort to engage the other capacity (to use it in a manner in which it sense contributes to the sense of the proposition as a whole). According to the disjunctive conception, on the other hand, we could not exercise the capacity to use words with meanings if we did not also bring into question the capacity to use these words in a manner that contributes to the sense of meaningful propositions. So when Glock says things like “Words must be capable of occurring in propositions” and “the meaning of a word is determined by how it can be used within sentences,” in fact it means something quite different (and much weaker) by these dicta than what is required by semantic disjunctivism.

50 Such a discussion would have to cover topics such as the following: (1) What does it mean for a word to occur in isolation? Are dictionary entries, for example, instances of words occurring meaningfully in isolation? (2) Does the substantive conception of nonsense rely on a plausible conception of linguistic intention? (3) Does the substantive conception of nonsense rely on a plausible picture of necessity—as constraining the use of language from the outside, rather than being constitutive of it? (4) Does the substantive conception offer a plausible account of Wittgenstein’s anti-metaphysical aims? Where Wittgenstein claims that a certain metaphysical-looking statement is nonsensical, he is commiting a veridict that follows from a “theory of sense” that he is endorsing? Some of these topics have already been discussed at length by New Wittgensteinians or Rosaline Readers.


52 See also L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Grammar, ed. R. Rhees, transl. A. Kenny, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1974, part 1, §1, where Wittgenstein remarks that there is a difference in kind between the sense in which a meaningful proposition has “parts” and the sense in which a meaningful proposition has “parts.”

53 Cf. L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Grammar, ed. R. Rhees, transl. A. Kenny, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1974, part 1, §1, where Wittgenstein remarks that there is a difference in kind between the sense in which a meaningful proposition has “parts” and the sense in which a meaningful proposition has “parts.”

54 I wish to thank James Conant, Ed Dinstein, Michael Keren, and Anjali Pande for conversations, comments, and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. I am very grateful to the members of the Preliminary Essay Workshop and to the members of the Wittgenstein Workshop at the University of Chicago for their questions, criticisms and suggestions. Finally, I wish to thank for their helpful comments the editors of the present book, Rupert Read and Matthew Lavery.