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WORDS, SENTENCES, AND SPEECH ACTS:
AN INTERPRETATION AND DEFENSE OF THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE

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For Annalisa
The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon

which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating.

J. L. AUSTIN
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Introduction

1. A strange dictum with an illustrious pedigree

In the *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Gottlob Frege writes that “it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning.”\(^1\) This dictum has come to be known as the Context Principle. Versions of it can be found in the works of other major figures of the analytic tradition, including Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and similar pronouncements appear in the works of earlier philosophers, including Jeremy Bentham. But in spite of this illustrious pedigree, it is not immediately clear what the principle can possibly mean. On the face of it, it can appear blatantly false. Isn’t it obvious that we can identify the meaning or meanings of words even when they occur outside of complete propositions? And doesn’t the principle appear to be incompatible with the indisputable fact that the meanings of propositions depend, in general, on the meanings of their constituent words and on the way they are combined, as stated by a truistic version of the so-called Principle of Compositionality?

Scholars have struggled to develop interpretations of the Context Principle that do not commit the quite respectable authors who held versions of it to patently implausible views. In most cases, the very authors who endorse some version of the Context Principle emphasize quite

\[^1\] *F*, §62, p. 73.
explicitly the compositional nature of language. Thus the exegetical task has often taken the form of showing how the authors in question can be coherently committed, at one and the same time, to both the Context Principle and the Principle of Compositionality.

This work makes a further contribution to the tradition that seeks to reconcile the Context Principle and the Principle of Compositionality. I propose a reading of the Context Principle which makes it fully compatible not only with a proper understanding of linguistic compositionality, but also a with a proper construal of a number of related phenomena, such as the fact that words tend to carry stable meanings across different employments, and the fact that we can identify the dictionary meanings of isolated words. The reading that I recommend differs from other influential reconciliatory accounts in the following respect: It presents a comparatively stronger and more literal construal of the dictum that “words have meaning only in the context of meaningful propositions.” While this construal does not rule out any obvious fact about language, it undermines the aspiration of providing bottom-up or top-down accounts of our capacity to form and understand logically articulate propositions. This aspiration, I contend, animates the main alternative readings of the Context Principle and can be characterized as a form of foundationalism.

The agenda of this work is at the same time historical and systematic. I propose detailed interpretations of how the Context Principle was construed by Jeremy Bentham, Bertrand Russell, Frege, and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein. I argue, against the received historical narrative, that even though we can find verbally similar dicta in all of these authors, the forms of contextualism propounded by Bentham and Russell should be sharply contrasted with, rather than assimilated to, the forms of contextualism championed by Frege and early Wittgenstein.
Moreover, I defend in my own voice (with a possible emendation) the construal of the Context Principle that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

Discussions of the Context Principle can take, and have often taken, quite different directions. Before I state the views that I am going to attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein, I will first delimit the topic of this work and the philosophical problematic that I am concerned to address. These prolegomena will occupy a significant number of pages, to the point of challenging the patience of the reader. But as Aristotle points out, “the beginning is thought to more than half of the whole, and many questions we ask are cleared up by it.”

2. Our topic

During the last few decades, a considerable part of the literature on the Context Principle has focused on its ontological implications, especially with regard to the question of the existence of abstract objects, and of numbers in particular. While I do not wish to deny the reality and importance of these implications, they exceed the scope of this work. The topic of this work is the question of the relationship between meaningful propositions and their meaningful parts. What this topic exactly is depends, first and foremost, on what is here meant by “meaningful proposition” and “meaning propositional part.”

The term “proposition” is here to be understood as a translation of the German word “Satz,” as used by Frege and early Wittgenstein. I follow the standard practice of translating this word with the term “proposition,” even if it may be equally translated (and is in fact sometimes

translated) with the more colloquial term “sentence.” A proposition, in the sense that is here relevant, is a certain kind of linguistic expression. The same applies to propositional parts. Russell, in some of his writings, uses the term “proposition” to designate what certain kinds of linguistic construction signify, rather than the linguistic constructions themselves. This Russellian use of the term “proposition” is very widespread in contemporary philosophy of language. However, with some explicitly noted exceptions, the term will here be employed in the non-Russellian register.

In order to explain what I mean by “meaningful proposition” and “meaningful propositional part,” I need to introduce two distinctions, each of which applies at both the propositional and the sub-propositional level. First, the distinction between the logical and non-logical meaning of a linguistic expression; and secondly, the distinction between the actual logical meaning and the established logical meanings of a linguistic expression.

Logical meaning is here specified, rather narrowly, in truth-conditional and inferential terms. A logically meaningful proposition is a linguistic expression that asserts or merely expresses the thought that something is the case, and which stands in inferential relations to other logically meaningful propositions. A logically meaningful propositional part is any linguistic expression—not itself a logically meaningful proposition—which contributes to determine the truth-conditions and the inferential relations of the logically meaningful propositions in which it occurs. How exactly the logical meaning of propositions and propositional parts is to be analyzed—for instance, whether it should be analyzed in terms of sense and reference, or only in terms of reference—is a further and more specific question, which does not have to be addressed in order to delimit the topic of this work, and about which this work aims to remain neutral. This work aims to remain equally neutral about the question of whether a proposition may merely
express a thought, as opposed to asserting it. The notion of “merely expressing a thought,” firmly defended by Frege, is widely accepted, but not indisputable. I have in fact no sympathy for such a notion. However, my purpose in this work is to engage in an investigation that presupposes neither the acceptance nor the rejection of that disputable notion.

The non-logical meaning of propositions and their parts is here defined in purely negative terms: It includes anything that we might want call the “meaning” of a linguistic expression, but which falls short of satisfying the previous characterization of logical meaning. Thus, one might want to refer to the mental images and feelings associated with linguistic expressions as their “meanings.” Such items will count, according to the present terminology, as non-logical meanings, and the correspondent expressions—in so far as they do not also have logical meanings—as non-logically meaningful. However, there is no reason to assume that there is no other sort of non-logical meaning besides the mental images and feelings triggered by linguistic expressions.

The notion of logical meaning, as specified above, is still in need of clarification. In order to further clarify it, we need to draw the second afore-mentioned distinction—namely, the distinction between the “actual logical meanings” of linguistic expressions and their “established logical meanings.” The actual logical meaning of an expression is the logical meaning that the expression actually has on some particular occasion of use. Its established logical meaning is a sort of potentiality: the potentiality that the word has of actually expressing on specific occasions a logical meaning, where this potentiality is determined by the standing conventions of the language, which are typically recorded in dictionaries. A linguistic expression may have several established logical meanings in a given language, but it may have, on some specific occasion of use, no actual logical meaning corresponding to any of those established logical meanings, or no
actual logical meaning at all. The word “bank,” for example, has in English at least two established logical meanings: it can be conventionally used to talk about riverbanks, or about certain financial institutions. Each occurrence of the word “bank” will retain its established logical meanings: every time we identify the word, we can say that it has those two established logical meanings in English. However, with the possible exception of puns (whose proper description, however, is a delicate matter), the word “bank” will have, on each of its occurrences, only one actual logical meaning, where this actual logical meaning may or may not correspond to any of its established meanings. We can imagine a context in which a speaker intends to use the word “bank” with a newly stipulated logical meaning—or, alternatively, with a logical meaning that can be recognized by a competent speaker of the language as an natural extension of one of the word’s established logical meanings—or, again, with a logical meaning that can be described as a derivative application of one of the word’s established logical meanings (as happens, for instance, with certain figurative uses of language). In such cases, the speaker may succeed in using the word with an actual logical meaning even though the word does not have (so far, at least) any correspondent established logical meaning. Conversely, in spite of its established logical meanings, the word “bank” may have on some particular occasion no actual logical meaning. During a game of Scrabble, for example, a player may produce an occurrence of the word “bank,” which will of course retain its established logical meanings: if it didn’t, its production wouldn’t be a legitimate move in the game. But the word will as a norm lack any actual logical meaning, since a Scrabble player does not typically come up with an occurrence of the word “bank” in order to talk about financial institutions or riverbanks or anything else: producing occurrences of words that actually have a logical meaning does not belong to the point of the game.
The expressions “actual logical meaning” and “established logical meaning” are formed by adjectivizing correspondent adverbs. To say that an expression, on some particular occurrence, “has an actual logical meaning” is to say that it actually has, on that occasion, a certain logical meaning; and to say that an expression, on some particular occurrence, “has an established logical meaning,” is to say that it potentially has a certain logical meaning, where the relevant sort of potentiality, as I said, is determined by existing linguistic conventions typically recorded in dictionaries. (We may introduce the adverb “L-potentially” to make this point more perspicuous.) Thus actual logical meaning stands to established logical meaning as actuality stands to potentiality. These are not two “kinds” of meaning in the way in which red apples and green apples are two kinds of apple, or in the way in which logical meaning and non-logical meaning are two kinds of meaning. They differ because they have different modes of being (because they are in different ways, i.e. actually and L-potentially respectively), not because they are different kinds of thing, each of which could be in different modes.

With this point clearly in view, the distinction between actual logical meaning and established logical meaning can be further specified by invoking the Aristotelian distinction between (a) first potentiality, (b) second potentiality (= first actuality), and (c) second actuality. Let me first illustrate the Aristotelian distinction with an example. According to Aristotle, the natural predisposition of human beings to acquire virtues of character is a first potentiality; the possession of virtues of character is a first actuality, in so far as it realizes the correlative first potentiality; but it is at the same time a second potentiality, because it is a potentiality to act virtuously, which is a second actuality. By applying this distinction to our case, we can now say: Actual logical meaning is a second actuality; established logical meaning is a second potentiality, in so far as it is a potentiality realized by actual logical meaning; but it is at the same
time some sort of actuality, namely a first actuality, in so far as it realizes the first potentiality of linguistic expressions to acquire established logical meanings. Thus the word “bank,” when it is used on a specific occasion to speak, say, about riverbanks, has a logical meaning in the strict sense of second actuality. The word, in contemporary English, has the second potentiality of conventionally meaning both riverbanks and a certain kind of financial institution (among several other things). Such potentiality is at the same time a form of actuality, namely a first actuality, since it is after all a actual matter of fact that “bank,” in contemporary English, can be conventionally used to talk about riverbank or financial institution (among several other things), but not about cats: no English dictionary mentions cat as one of the meanings of “bank.” There is of course a sense in which “bank” does have the potentiality of conventionally meaning cat (and pretty much anything else): but that is merely the sense in which linguistic expressions have the first potentiality to acquire established logical meanings.

The distinction between established and actual logical meaning may remind the reader of the commonly used distinction between “linguistic meaning” and “speaker’s meaning.” It is not obvious, however, that there is single widely-accepted construal of this nominal distinction. Determining the relation between the distinction I have introduced and “the” distinction between linguistic meaning and speaker’s meaning is, accordingly, a delicate task. This is not a task that I shall undertake in this work. Instead, I will ask the reader to refrain from any automatic identification of the distinction I have introduced with whatever understanding of the nominal distinction between linguistic meaning and speaker’s meaning she might happen to have in mind.

Given the distinction between the logical and the non-logical meaning of linguistic expressions, and the distinction between the established and the actual logical meaning of

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linguistic expressions, I can now delimit more precisely my topic as follows: *The topic of this work is the question of the relationship between actually logically meaningful propositions and actually logically meaningful propositional parts.* In what follows, I will often talk of the “meaning” of propositions and their parts without qualification. Any such occurrence of the term should be understood to mean *actual logical meaning*, in the sense I have elucidated. Qualifications will be introduced, in general, only when particular contrasts will be at issue.

I stated above that this work purports to make a new contribution to the project of reconciling the Context Principle and the Principle of Compositionality. I need now to clarify what I mean exactly by the “Principle of Compositionality.” I use this expression to refer to the idea, which I take to be quite unproblematic, that the meanings of propositions, in so far as they are composed of meaningful parts, *depend* on the meanings of their parts and on the way they are put together. In contemporary discussions, the expressions “Principle of Compositionality” and “linguistic compositionality” are often used to refer to a much stronger—and quite controversial—contention, according to which the meanings of linguistic constructions, in so far as they are composed of meaningful parts, are *fully determined* by the meanings of their parts and their mode of composition. This means that the meanings of semantically complex expressions are *not* compositional if they depend on any *additional* factors (for instance, on features of the context of utterance), unless these additional factors affect only the meanings of their semantically simple parts.5 To which extent natural languages are compositional in this stronger sense, and whether languages—natural or not—*can* be compositional in this stronger sense, are intensely debated questions. Such questions, however, fall outside the scope of this work. I shall seek, accordingly, to remain neutral with respect to their resolution. In what

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5 See for instance Szabó 2012.
follows, I will be exclusively concerned with the weaker and unproblematic form of linguistic compositionality that I have described.

Further on in this work, I will discuss a version of that Context Principle which involves the notion of a genus of which meaningful propositions, as here characterized, are only a species. Such a discussion will extend the topic of this work as presently delimited. It is not necessary, at this stage, to anticipate the character of that extension. What is more pressing, at the moment, is to complete the characterization of the un-extended topic of this work. In this regard, there is a question that remains to be answered.

I have said that I am concerned to discuss the question of the relation between meaningful propositions and meaningful propositional parts, and I have spelled out the relevant notions of “meaningful proposition” and “meaningful propositional part.” But what sort of relation am I referring to? I said that I am not interested in the question of whether propositional meaning is compositional in the strong sense that is normally the concern of contemporary disputes. But then, what is the problem that I am interested to address? If we rule out the question of whether propositional meaning is fully determined by sub-propositional meaning, how does the relationship between meaningful propositions and meaningful propositional parts come to be an issue?

3. Our problematic

The problematic that I am concerned to address in this work arises from the need of being able to vindicate, at one and the same time, the following two sets of truisms about the meanings of
words and the meanings of complete propositions. On the one hand, we have what I shall call *compositionalist truisms*:

CMP-1: The function of letters, in general, is merely to distinguish words from one another. By contrast, words have in general a meaning of their own and make distinctive contributions to the meanings of the propositions in which they occur.

CMP-2: We learn the meanings of words and rules for putting them together; but, in general, we do not have to learn one by one the meanings of complete propositions, as we have to do with idioms.

CMP-3: We can identify the dictionary meanings of words even when they do not occur in complete meaningful propositions.

CMP-4: Words, in general, mean on new occasions what they always meant.

On the other hand, we have what I shall call *contextualist truisms*:

CTX-1: We have words with established sub-propositional meanings in order to use them in complete propositions to say something that make sense.

CTX-2: To know the established sub-propositional meaning of a word is to know how to use the word in complete propositions to say something that makes sense.

It seems hard to deny that these two sets of truisms are equally compelling. The problem is that, when we attempt to vindicate them, we can easily get entangled in a dialectic of different but
equally unsatisfactory positions. It can seem, in fact, that in order to vindicate either set of truisms, we need to endorse philosophical commitments about the relative priority of propositional and sub-propositional meaning which make it impossible to incorporate into a stable and coherent position the other set of truisms.

The dialectic at issue involves three main positions, which I shall dub Semantic Atomism, Unilateral Contextualism, and The Hybrid View. Such positions constitute the main alternatives to the construal of the Context Principle that I am going to attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein and that I am going to defend, with a possible emendation, in my own voice. The advantage of such a construal of the Context Principle, I shall argue, lies precisely in the fact that it enables us to resolve the aforementioned dialectic by vindicating without incoherence both sets of truisms.

I will now describe the positions that are part of this dialectic and the main problems that they incur. In the body of this work, I will discuss in detail some particular historical incarnations of those positions—taken from both the primary and the secondary literature on the Context Principle—and I will examine the specific ways in which they are affected by the problems that I present here only very abstractly. The next few pages will present, so to speak, the philosophical backbone of the dialectic discussed in this work. The following chapters will demonstrate, among other things, that this is not the backbone of an imaginary creature.

The need to do justice to the compositionalist truisms may first incline us toward Semantic Atomism. This view holds that meaningful propositions are obtained by combining prior and independent sub-propositional semantic atoms that are in no way conceptually dependent on the meanings of the propositions in which they may occur. Such a view draws, more or less inchoately, on a picture of ostensive definition that plays an important role within
the empiricist tradition. According to this picture, ostensive definition is the device that gets language on its feet: words first acquire their meanings by being associated, through acts of outward or inward pointing, to determinate features of reality. Once words have received a meaning, a speaker can go on to combine them in complete propositions. In this way, Semantic Atomism appears to provide a natural explanation of how a first language is acquired. Moreover, it appears to vindicate all the compositionalist truisms. In particular, it seems to supply a satisfactory account of the fact that, given our knowledge of the lexical and grammatical rules of a language, we can form and understand an indefinite number of propositions in that language.

In spite of its initial appeal, however, Semantic Atomism runs quickly into problems. We can distinguish, in particular, an immediate and a deeper problem. The immediate problem is that Semantic Atomism faces the obligation of explaining the so-called “unity of the proposition.” If words have a meaning prior to and independently of their occurrence in meaningful propositions, how can we account for the difference between a meaningful proposition, which manages to say something, and a mere concatenation of meaningful words, which does nothing more than expressing one sub-propositional content after another? It is difficult to see how this challenge can be met without rejecting the constitutive commitments of Semantic Atomism. Even if we bracket this difficulty, that view faces an even deeper problem. It is not merely the case that the view has an account of meaningful words, but lacks a satisfactory account of meaningful propositions. The view, arguably, is not even entitled to talk about meaningful words. For Semantic Atomism, the fact that meaningful words occur in meaningful propositions is purely accidental. The view, therefore, assumes that we can make sense of a creature that “knows” the meanings of words, but is incapable of using words in complete proposition to say something intelligible. But it is highly doubtful that we can conceive of such a thing. Whatever
“knowledge” is possessed by a creature that cannot speak, it is not knowledge of the meanings of words—in the sense in which we speakers of language can be said to know the meanings of words. Semantic Atomism fails to vindicate the contextualist truisms; and because of this, it is ultimately incapable of rendering intelligible either propositional or sub-propositional meaning.

Unilateral Contextualism arises most naturally as a reaction against Semantic Atomism. It seeks to do justice to the contextualist truisms, resisting the implausible idea that words occur in propositions only accidentally. But in order to achieve this purpose, it reverses the direction of unilateral priority posited by Semantic Atomism. Meaningful words are now supposed to be obtained by segmenting prior and independent meaningful propositional monoliths that are in no way conceptually dependent on the meanings of their parts. Instead of a purported bottom-up derivation of propositional meaning from sub-propositional meaning, we now have a purported top-down derivation of sub-propositional meaning from propositional meaning.

Unilateral Contextualism also runs into problems. As in the case of Semantic Atomism, it faces both an immediate and a deeper problem. The immediate problem is that Unilateral Contextualism has to show that it can account for genuine sub-propositional meaning—and not merely for notational devices that help us to distinguish complete propositions from one another, in the way in which letters are typically used to distinguish words from one another. But it is difficult to see how the position could possibly meet this challenge without abandoning its characteristic commitments. The idea of a genuinely meaningful sub-propositional expression is precisely the idea of a linguistic unit that makes a contribution to the meaning of the propositional whole to which it belongs. If the meaning of the whole is in no way dependent on the meaning of the parts, as Unilateral Contextualism maintains, then the parts do not really have a meaning of their own: the word “cat,” as it occurs in “The cat is on the mat,” is bound to
remain as devoid of independent meaning as the letter “c” in the word “cat.” Unilateral Contextualism, however, faces an even deeper problem. It is not merely that it supplies an account of propositional meaning but lacks a satisfactory account of sub-propositional meaning. The view is not even entitled to talk about propositional meaning. For Unilateral Contextualism, the fact that meaningful propositions appear to be articulated into meaningful parts is purely accidental. The view, therefore, assumes that we can make sense of a creature that can express complete, inferentially related propositional contents, but can only do so by means of logically inarticulate signs. (By a “logically articulate sign,” I mean here and elsewhere in this work a sign that exhibit semantic complexity, as opposed to merely physical, typographical, or phonetic complexity.) But again, it is highly doubtful that we can conceive of such a thing. We can of course conceive of creatures that can only communicate by means of logically inarticulate signals; but there is arguably a qualitative difference between achieving this form of communication and expressing or asserting thoughts about how things stand—in the sense in which we speakers of articulate language can be fully said to carry out these accomplishments. Unilateral Contextualism is sensitive to the urgency of vindicating the contextualist insights, but fails to do justice to the compositionalist truisms. And because of this, it is ultimately incapable—like Semantic Atomism—of rendering intelligible either propositional or sub-propositional meaning. Thus Unilateral Contextualism ends up sharing the same predicament of Semantic Atomism, even though for opposite reasons.

At this point of the dialectic, it should become apparent that we need a position which occupies a middle ground between those two extreme views. This is what the Hybrid View seeks to do. On the one hand, the Hybrid View purports to reject the implausible idea that the occurrence of meaningful words in meaningful propositions is purely accidental. For the Hybrid
View, we can only make sense of word-meaning as a possible contribution to propositional meaning. The concept of sub-propositional meaning presupposes, accordingly, the concept of propositional meaning: if there were no such thing as a meaningful proposition, there would also be no such thing as a meaningful word. But on the other hand, the Hybrid View wants to retain most of the bottom-up explanatory ambitions of Semantic Atomism. For the Hybrid View, a word may actually have a meaning even if it makes, on that occasion, no contribution to the meaning of any proposition; and if it happens to occur in the context of a complete proposition, it may have a meaning prior to and independently of the meaning of the whole proposition. In this manner, the Hybrid View purports to give an account of the meanings of isolated words, as well as an account of our capacity to understand propositions that we have never previously encountered. For the Hybrid View, in fact, we may unilaterally derive our understanding of a new proposition from our prior understanding of its parts, whose meanings may be fixed on that occasion prior to and independently of the meaning of the whole proposition.

The Hybrid View can be described as a refined or more cautious form of Semantic Atomist, because it seems to give us most of what is promised by Semantic Atomism, while avoiding its problematic commitments. The view appears to fulfill the promise of a bottom-up explanation of our capacity to form and understand new propositions, while vindicating, at one and the same time, both the compositionalist and the contextualist truisms. For these reasons, it is probably the position that most semantic atomists, upon reflection, will be inclined to endorse. Doubtlessly, the Hybrid View has its attractions, and I regard it as the most serious contender of the position that I will attribute to Frege and Wittgenstein and defend, with a possible emendation, in my own voice. But I will argue that the Hybrid View is inherently unstable. The only thing that prevents it from collapsing either into Semantic Atomism or into the Frege-
Wittgenstein view are ad hoc requirements lacking any intrinsic plausibility or independent justification.

I shall argue that the Frege-Wittgenstein view as I am going to construe it has the virtue of allowing us to vindicate both sets of truisms without incoherence or unmotivated stipulations. There is indeed something that such a view asks us to give up: The demand for a bottom-up or top-down explanation of our capacity to form and understand articulate propositions. But neither the necessity nor the possibility of an explanation of this sort has the status of a truism. Quite to the contrary, given the character of the difficulties encountered by Semantic Atomism, Unilateral Contextualism, and the Hybrid View—each of which attempts in its own way to satisfy that demand—there is good reason to suspect that a bottom-up or top-down explanation of our capacity for articulate language is not really something to long for, and not even something to renounce to, but a fantasy from which to seek liberation.

4. The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle

There are many differences between the conceptions of propositional and sub-propositional meaning respectively advanced by Frege and early Wittgenstein, and by Frege before and after the introduction of the sense/reference distinction. Such differences have inevitable repercussions on the specific versions of the Context Principle respectively championed by early Frege, mature Frege, and early Wittgenstein. (By “early Frege” and “mature Frege,” I mean here Frege before and after the introduction of the sense/reference distinction; by “early Wittgenstein,” I mean the author of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus; unless otherwise
specified, I will stick to this terminological policy throughout the rest of this work.\(^6\) In the following chapters, I will discuss the differences between those specific versions of the Context Principle. But there is a level of abstraction at which I want to attribute to early Frege, mature Frege, and early Wittgenstein the same understanding of the Context Principle. Such an understanding, to which I shall refer as the “Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle,” can be formulated in the following way:

\[\textit{The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. Words have actual sub-propositional logical meaning only on those occasions in which they make a contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition.}\]

The notions of “actual sub-propositional logical meaning” and “meaningful proposition” that I am invoking here are those specified in Section 2. Such notions are sufficiently abstract to leave room for significant disagreements between early Frege, mature Frege, and early Wittgenstein about the specific way in which the aforementioned formulation of the Context Principle should be implemented.

I said above that a meaningful proposition, as I am using the expression, is a linguistic construction that is actually used, on some specific occasion, to assert that something is the case, \textit{or to merely express the thought} that something is the case. I emphasized that this disjunction should not be understood as carrying the implication that there \textit{is} such a thing as merely

\(^6\) It is customary to include the pre-\textit{Tractarian} writings among the writings of the “early Wittgenstein.” My use of the expression is more restrictive and reflects the fact that this work does not aim to give a systematic account of how and whether Wittgenstein’s construal of the Context Principle evolved between the pre-\textit{Tractarian} writings and the \textit{Tractatus}. 18
expressing the thought that something is the case: this is an issue, I stated, about which I want to remain neutral in this work. Now I wish to emphasize that I aim to remain equally neutral about the debatable question of whether the *Tractatus* accepts the notion of propositions that merely express thoughts without asserting them. (It is uncontroversial, I take it, that *Frege* accepts such a notion.) So the previous formulation of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle can be expanded as follows: Words have actual sub-propositional logical meaning only on those occasions in which they make a contribution to the meaning of a linguistic construction which is used to assert that something is the case, or to merely express the thought that something is the case, *if there is such a thing*.

The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle applies to *actual* logical meaning. However, it also sets constraints—albeit indirectly—on *established* logical meaning, as previously defined. Since established logical meaning stands to actual logical meaning as potentiality stands to actuality, any account of the latter will have implications for an account of the former. For the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, a word has an established sub-propositional logical meaning if it has the potentiality, determined by existing linguistic conventions, of making a logical contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition.

Both Frege and early Wittgenstein, I argue, are firmly committed to the following understanding of linguistic compositionality:

*The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of linguistic compositionality.* The meanings of a logically articulate proposition depends on the meanings of its meaningful parts, each of
which makes a distinctive contribution to the meaning of the whole and may occur with the same meaning in an indefinite number of other propositional wholes.

I maintain that there is no tension whatsoever between this sort of commitment to linguistic compositionality and a commitment to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. The two commitments, on the contrary, fit together into a coherent picture of propositional and sub-propositional meaning. The meaning of a complete proposition, in so far as the proposition is composed of meaningful parts, depends on the meanings of its parts; but the meanings of these parts depend in turn on the meaning of the whole: the parts would not have the actual logical meanings that they have if they did not occur in that proposition or in some other proposition in which they make the same contribution to the meaning of the whole. In a logically articulate proposition, the actual logical meaning of the whole and the actual logical meanings of its parts are conceptually (or, if you prefer, metaphysically) equiprimordial and interdependent. Frege’s and early Wittgenstein’s respective understandings of the Context Principle and of linguistic compositionality spell out the two aspects of this form of equiprimordiality and interdependence.

I will suggest that the conception of logically articulate propositions that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein can be stated synthetically in terms of the British Idealist notion of an organic unity. This is the notion of a whole that is what is in virtue of its parts, while its parts are what they are in virtue of the whole, because their identity is determined by the function that they fulfill within the whole. My contention is that Frege and early Wittgenstein construe logically articulated meaningful propositions as organic unities in this sense. (In order to prevent misunderstandings, it is worth emphasizing from the very beginning that the British Idealist
notion of an organic unity that I am invoking is significantly more abstract than the Aristotelian notion of a living organism and shares, accordingly, some but not all of its features.)

The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle rules out atomistic conceptions of linguistic compositionality. In particular, it rules out both the thoroughly atomistic conception of compositionality championed by Semantic Atomism (according to which the meanings of propositions depend on the meanings of their parts, but the meanings of propositional parts are in no way dependent on the meanings of propositional wholes), and the restrictedly atomistic conception of compositionality championed by the Hybrid View (according to which the meanings of propositions depends on the meanings of their parts, but the meanings of propositional parts are only generally dependent on the meanings of propositional wholes: at least on some occasions, the meanings of sub-propositional expressions may be in no way dependent on the meanings of the particular propositions in which they occur on those occasions.) These alternative conceptions of compositionality can be rendered attractive by the impression that the account I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein is too weak to vindicate one of the truisms mentioned in Section 3—namely, the truism that words, in general, mean on new occasions what they always meant. But I argue that this impression is unfounded. That truism, I maintain, can be fully vindicated by adopting the following understanding of linguistic stability, which is perfectly compatible with the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle:

*Understanding of linguistic stability compatible with the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle.* By default, the logical meanings that words have on specific occasions actualize their established meanings. But what logical meaning a word actually
possesses on any particular occasion is determined by the function that the word fulfills
within the meaningful proposition in which it occurs.

In general, when we hear or see a proposition, we assume that its words are used in the familiar
ways. While this assumption is perfectly justified (and even constitutive, I will suggest, of what
it is to a be a language-user), it is always defeasible. From the fact that a word has a certain
established meaning, it does not follow that the word actualizes on a particular occasion that
established meaning. This is particularly clear if we think about natural languages, in which
words normally have multiple established meanings (more or less related to each other), and the
natural extension of established meanings in new and surprising ways is a pervasive
phenomenon. But the same point holds even of artificial languages containing only unambiguous
expressions with fixed meanings. The question, in such cases, is whether the speaker is actually
using her words in accordance with the conventions of the artificial language that we have in
mind: she might be speaking a different language (largely overlapping, perhaps, with the
language we have in mind), or she might even be putting her words to no logical use at all (even
in spite of what she thinks she is doing). These issues, according to the aforementioned
understanding of linguistic stability, are settled only by the roles that words fulfill in the
meaningful propositions in which they actually occur.

There is another thesis that I will attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein which is
related to their shared construal of the Context Principle. It is a thesis whose acceptance provides
the entitlement for avoiding what I called above the “deeper problem” of Unilateral
Contextualism—namely, the problem of being committed to the intelligibility of a creature that
expresses or conveys the same propositional contents that we express by means of articulate
propositions, but can only do so by means of signals completely devoid of internal logical structure. The thesis can be stated as follows:

**Constitutivist thesis about linguistic compositionality.** Sub-propositional logical articulation is constitutive of meaningful propositions. Linguistic constructions that express or convey complete propositional contents but are devoid of internal logical structure are parasitical cases. Forms of communications that lack sub-propositional logical structure and are in no way conceptually dependent on logically articulate propositions cannot be said to express or convey propositional contents, in the sense in which logically articulate propositions and the correspondent parasitical cases can be fully said to express or convey propositional contents.

The point here is not to get fixated on terminology, but to recognize qualitative differences. Consider those monkeys that are sometimes said to possess a system of communication consisting *entirely* of three signals—one for alerting the group about the presence of an eagle, one for the presence of a leopard, and one for the presence of a snake. (Whether or not this claim is accurate is not important for our purposes.) There are many unquestionable similarities between what those monkeys do with their signals and what we do when we shout, say, “There is a snake over there,” or, more simply, “Snake.” In virtue of these similarities, we may refer to the monkeys’ signals as “propositions,” and to their system of communication as a “language.” There are also similarities between what the monkeys do with their signals and what we do when we use non-compositional codes for conveying propositional contents—say, when we use a red light for conveying what could be expressed by the proposition: “The parking garage is full.” In
virtue of these similarities, we may say that the monkeys manage to express or convey “propositional contents.” But according to the thesis under discussion, there is a qualitative difference between the “propositions” and the “language” used by those monkeys, and the logically articulate propositions used by linguistic creatures like us. Similarly, there exists a qualitative difference between the “propositional contents” expressed or conveyed by the monkeys, and the propositional contents expressed or conveyed by masters of articulate languages. Sub-propositional logical articulation, according to this thesis, thoroughly transforms the nature of propositions, of the language to which they belong, and of the contents that they can be used to communicate. Far from being incompatible with linguistic compositionality, the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is compatible with a very strong justification of the necessity of compositionality: Our language must exhibit sub-propositional compositional structure in order to be recognizable as the sort of language that it is.

There are apparent counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context principle—i.e. cases in which words appears to be perfectly meaningful, even though they occur in “isolation,” outside the context of meaningful propositions. I show that there isn’t here a single sort of case, but a very heterogeneous class of cases. Some of these cases, I argue, can be dealt with by invoking the distinctions introduced Section 2—namely, the distinction between propositional and sub-propositional meaning, between logical and non-logical meaning, and between actual and established logical meaning. I argue that, on the background of some plausible assumptions, there are indeed some genuine counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. I formulate a generalized version of that construal of the Context Principle which accommodates those problematic cases. The more general version of the Context Principle that I propose involves a notion of “speech act” which admits among its
species assertions and mere expressions of thoughts (if there are such things), but also an indefinite number of other species. However, I don’t try to defend the aforementioned assumptions, and I leave it open, accordingly, whether one should adopt my proposed generalization of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, or whether one should stick to that construal of the Context Principle and describe the putatively problematic cases in a different manner.

5. Synopsis

In the following chapters, I will examine in detail the views of a number of classical figures of the analytic tradition, engaging at some length with part of the relevant secondary literature. The aim of this exegetical exercise is to reconstruct one of the ways in which the philosophical dialectic described above has unfolded historically. In this manner, I hope to bring out more forcefully the respective motivations, attractions, and difficulties of the various positions that I have characterized so far only rather abstractly.

Chapter 1 focuses on the writings of two empiricist authors who have often been read as endorsing some version of the Context Principle: Bentham and Russell. I show that these authors take for granted a philosophical framework which admits only of unilateral forms of dependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. According to such a framework, genuinely significant sub-propositional expressions exhibit the form of complete independence from propositional context posited by Semantic Atomism. All other sub-propositional expressions are characterized by the despotic dependence on propositional context envisioned by Unilateral Contextualism: they are devoid of any meaning of their own and occur merely as
surface-grammatical parts of meaningful propositions, making no logical contribution to the meanings of the wholes to which they belong. The acceptance of this framework, I further show, leads Bentham and Russell into serious philosophical problems: Bentham is drawn into a dialectic which ultimately commits him to denying the very existence of sub-propositional meaning, whereas Russell faces the problem of propositional unity.

Chapter 2 argues that Frege opposed the philosophical framework I attribute to Bentham and Russell. There are indeed striking verbal similarities between Frege’s formulations of the Context Principle and some passages in Bentham and Russell; but such similarities are merely verbal. Frege rejects the assumption that we must choose between the two forms of unilateral dependence posited by Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism. For Frege, meaningful propositions and their meaningful parts are characterized by a form of interdependence which is ruled out by the framework accepted by Bentham and Russell. Frege’s understanding of the Context Principle and his non-atomistic understanding of linguistic compositionality spell out the two directions of this form of interdependence. I suggest that Frege’s view can be clarified by invoking the British Idealist notion of an “organic unity.” I go on to argue that Frege is coherently committed to a constitutivist thesis about compositionality which provides a much stronger explanation for why our language must be compositional than the familiar arguments from learnability and productivity. I show that Frege attributes to some expressions the sort of contextual dependence that Unilateral Contextualism ascribes to all sub-propositional units, but I claim that Frege treats such expressions as parasitical cases. Finally, I argue that Frege’s view is not merely different from those advanced by Bentham and Russell, but is also able to avoid their respective problems.
Chapter 3 strengthens the case for my interpretation of Frege’s construal of the Context Principle by arguing that it provides a new and more satisfactory resolution of a much-debated exegetical problem. There is strong evidence that Frege endorses two theses about the contents of propositions which appear to be mutually incompatible. On the one hand, he holds that such contents are structured into parts which correspond, in general, to the parts of the propositions that express them. On the other hand, he holds that the content of a proposition can be analyzed in mutually irreducible sets of parts. I argue that these two theses can be seen to be consistent if we appreciate the fact that Frege adopts a non-atomistic conception of the parts of propositional contents which is analogous to the non-atomistic conception of propositional parts that I ascribe to him in the previous chapter.

Chapter 4 argues that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* inherits Frege’s construal of the Context Principle. It is widely believed, especially outside the circles of Wittgenstein’s scholars, that the *Tractatus* champions a form of Semantic Atomism; but I show that this is an historical fiction. I discuss in detail the version of the Context Principle explicitly stated in the book and I suggest that it can be clarified by reformulating it in terms of the Tractarian distinction between “signs” and “symbols.”

Chapter 5 shows that the *Tractatus*—going beyond Frege—spells out explicitly the implications of its construal of the Context Principle for the question of the nature of nonsense. Following the so-called “resolute readers” of the *Tractatus*, I attribute to the *Tractatus* an “austere” conception of nonsense, as opposed to a “substantial” conception of nonsense. More specifically, I distinguish three versions of the austere conception of nonsense. Even if I believe that the *Tractatus* endorses what I call the “strong” version of the austere conception of nonsense, I confine myself to arguing that it is committed to what I dub the “moderate” version
of that conception, which is entailed by the construal of the Context Principle that I attribute to
the book in the previous chapter. For the *Tractatus*, I maintain, there is no such thing as a
combination of words which is nonsensical because it combines meaningful elements in an
illegitimate way. When we fail to use words to say something that make sense, we also fail to
give a meaning (i.e. an actual logical meaning) to each of the words that we are using.
Nonsensical combinations of words may generate *illusions of meaning* on our part, but do not
express illegitimate combinations of sub-propositional meanings.

Chapter 6 deals with a number of objections and putative counterexamples to the
construal of the Context Principle I ascribe to Frege and the *Tractatus*. I show that such a
construal of the Context Principle is compatible with plausible accounts of dictionary meaning,
linguistic stability, and language acquisition. I defuse a number of putative counterexamples by
arguing that they are not really cases in which words have *actual logical sub-propositional*
meanings outside the context of meaningful propositions. I argue that, if we accept some
plausible but not inevitable assumptions, some cases are genuine counterexamples to the Frege-
Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. I propose a generalized version of that construal
of the Context Principle which can deal with those cases. However, I do not argue that it is
obligatory to deal with those apparent counterexamples by endorsing the generalized version of
the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle that I propose.

Chapter 7 discusses the Hybrid View. I engage with three version of that view: the very
influential interpretation of Frege’s Context Principle proposed by Michael Dummett, the similar
interpretation of Frege’s Context Principle more recently proposed by Richard Gaskin, and the
interpretation of the Context Principle proposed by Hans-Johann Glock in the context of his
interpretation of the *Tractatus*. I argue that the Hybrid View, in each of those three versions, is
unstable and collapses either into Semantic Atomism or into the stronger construal of the Context Principle that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

In the Conclusion, I relate the issues discussed in this work to a more general philosophical problematic: The question of whether our mental capacities admit and are in need of foundations. I suggest that the view I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein can be seen as a form of anti-foundationalism, whereas the three competing positions—i.e. Semantic Atomism, Unilateral Contextualism, and the Hybrid View—can each be seen as attempting to provide a foundationalist account of our capacity for articulate language.
Chapter 1

Contextualism within the Empiricist Framework:

Bentham and Russell

1. Did Bentham and Russell endorse the Context Principle?

The standard formulation of the Context Principle is normally identified with a dictum that appears in Frege’s *Foundations of Arithmetic*: “[I]t is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning.”¹ Versions of this dictum reappear in Wittgenstein’s writings, both early and later. More surprisingly, we can find statements that exhibit a striking verbal similarity with Frege’s dictum in authors that belong to a very different philosophical milieu—authors such as Jeremy Bentham and Bertrand Russell.

It does not seem uncontroversial to say that Bentham and Russell, unlike Frege and Wittgenstein, work within a philosophical tradition that has its roots in classical empiricism; and since a central feature of classical empiricism is its atomism (at the epistemological as well as at the semantic and metaphysical level), it might seem remarkable that these authors are committed to claims that sound very much like Frege’s Context Principle, which appears to express, if anything, some kind of anti-atomistic contention. Several authors and commentators, however,

¹ *F*, §62, p. 73.
have argued that there is much more than a merely verbal similarity between the formulations of the Context Principle that appear in Frege and Wittgenstein on the one hand, and the statements about propositional and sub-propositional meaning that figure in the works of Bentham and Russell. Bentham is said to have anticipated Frege’s Context Principle; and the same principle is then thought to resurface in Russell’s writings as much as in does in Wittgenstein’s. The result is a historical narrative that places the philosophy of language of (authors as otherwise diverse as) Bentham, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein along a single line of continuity.

In opposition to this historical narrative, I maintain that the form of contextualism that is elaborated by Frege and then inherited and reworked by Wittgenstein may not be found in Bentham and Russell. Explaining why this is the case will help to bring out both the specificity and the philosophical attractiveness of the approach championed by Frege and Wittgenstein. The role of the present chapter within this work as a whole is to set up a useful contrast. I am here going to describe the forms of contextualism to be found in Bentham and Russell. Then, in subsequent chapters, I will characterize the kind of contextualism that is advanced by Frege and then inherited by Wittgenstein, arguing that it should be contrasted—rather than assimilated—with Bentham’s and Russell’s. Moreover, since my aim is not only to show that the Frege-Wittgenstein view is different from the views endorsed by either Bentham or Russell, but also to show that it is philosophically superior to them, I am going to highlight the fundamental problems encountered by Bentham and Russell, in order to argue, at a later stage of my presentation, that the Frege-Wittgenstein approach has the advantage of avoiding those problems by rejecting the assumptions that are required for their very formulation.

I am going to show that Bentham and Russell develop their respective accounts of the relationship between the meanings of words and the meanings of sentences within a general
philosophical framework that I shall dub the *Empiricist Framework*. This framework is characterized by two fundamental commitments. The first commitment (1) is an *atomistic* conception of sub-propositional meaning: it is assumed that genuinely significant words must have a meaning that is in no way dependent on their propositional contexts. This commitment is derived, more or less inchoately, from an understanding of ostensive definition that runs deep in the empiricist tradition—namely, an understanding according to which some sort of ostensive act plays a foundational role in a non-circular explanation of how words can first acquire and retain their meanings. The second fundamental commitment of the Empiricist Framework (2) is that, when we inquire about the semantic status of any given word, we must choose between two options: (a) either the word complies with the atomistic ideal and has a meaning that in no way depends on its propositional context, or (b) the word is characterized by the unilateral form of contextual dependence that belongs to so-called *contextually defined expressions*. In the latter case, the word turns out to be a *sham* semantic unit that, in spite of grammatical appearances,

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2 The following characterization of the “Empiricist Framework” is partially stipulative. Atomism, as well as the tendency to admit only of unilateral directions of priority, are characteristic elements of classical Empiricism; this suffices, arguably, to justify my terminological choice. However, it may not be the case, or it may not be immediately clear, that each classical empiricist is consistently committed to such a framework. Moreover, the form of “empiricism” elaborated by some contemporary philosophers (such as John McDowell and, before him, Wilfrid Sellars) is inherently inimical to the Empiricist Framework. Finally, some philosophers may be committed to the Empiricist Framework even though they do not count as empiricists in all respects. Early Russell is a good example: his philosophical approach, in *The Principles of Mathematics*, is already informed by a commitment to the Empiricist Framework, even though he is comparatively less concerned with epistemological issues as in later works and certainly does not believe—as the classical empiricists do—that all knowledge comes from sensory experience.

3 This is the conception of ostensive definition that is famously examined and critiqued in the opening sections of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. See *PI* §§1-49.
makes no contribution to the meanings of the propositions in which it occurs. In subsequent chapters, I will argue that the form of contextualism advanced by Frege and Wittgenstein is a self-conscious rejection of the whole Empiricist Framework.

Even though Bentham and Russell are both equally committed to the Empiricist Framework, there are some major differences between their respective views about the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. These differences are caused by the fact that Bentham and Russell integrate their shared commitment to the Empiricist Framework with different sets of collateral metaphysical and epistemological doctrines. Thus Bentham’s allegiance to the Empiricist Framework, in conjunction with his other assumptions, drives him into a philosophical dialectic which ultimately commits him to the paradoxical position that I shall call Radical Benthamite Contextualism: a position that extends to all sub-propositional components the semantic status of contextually defined expressions. Meaningful propositions, according to this radical position, are semantic monoliths that may exhibit at most a merely grammatical sub-propositional articulation; the very idea of a sub-propositional semantic unit vanishes into thin air. Russell, on the other hand, is in no way forced to embrace such an implausible position. (Throughout this dissertation, when I speak of “Russell” without further specification, I refer to the broad phase of his philosophical development that begins, roughly, with the publication of the Principle of Mathematics in 1903 and ends with the deliverance of the “Lectures on Logical Atomism” in 1918.) This is due to differences between Russell’s collateral doctrines and Bentham’s. But the fact that Russell can escape the dialectic that draws Bentham into Radical Benthamite Contextualism does not mean that his account is free of difficulties.

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4 This is the sense in which I will talk in this chapter of “contextual definition”; it is not the only sense that reflects current philosophical usage. For a related but different use of the term, see below, Chapter 2, Section 9.
While Russell avoids Bentham’s problem—call it the *problem of the disappearing sub-propositional meaning*—he faces the well-known *problem of the unity of the proposition*. The two problems may be seen as two variants of the same general problematic—call it the *problematic of semantic atomism*. In the next chapter, I shall argue that one of the merits of the form of contextualism elaborated by Frege (and then inherited by Wittgenstein) is to avoid the whole problematic, in both its Benthamite and Russellian variant, by thoroughly rejecting the Empiricist Framework.

I believe it is worthwhile to discuss both Bentham and Russell—even though they are equally committed to the Empiricist Framework—because this will help to put the approach championed by Frege and Wittgenstein into sharper relief. It is important to see, in fact, that if we are interested in the question of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning, the differences between Bentham’s and Russell’s respective positions are much less significant than what they have in common. The significant contrast is between the positions advanced by Bentham and Russell, on the one hand, and the positions advance by Frege and Wittgenstein, on the other. In so far as the aforementioned question is concerned, the history of early analytic philosophy is properly thought of as the interaction of two quite opposite strands: a strand represented by Russell and anticipated by Bentham, which accepts the Empiricist Framework, and a strand represented by Frege and Wittgenstein, which opposes the Empiricist Framework. This contrast is completely obscured by the continuist narrative outlined in the opening paragraphs of this section.

I will begin with the examination of Bentham’s contextualism, which will occupy us for most part of the chapter (Sections 2-10). Russell’s view will be discussed in the penultimate section (Section 11). This uneven treatment of the two philosophers is due partly to the fact that
Bentham’s philosophy of language is much less known than Russell’s (with the consequence that its presentation will require a more extensive engagements with the primary texts), partly to the fact that by the time we get to Russell, many of the notions that will be required for discussing his position will have already been properly introduced.

2. The standard story of Bentham’s contextualism: Quine and Hacker

Bentham’s contextualism and its relation to the analytic tradition are not topics that have been widely discussed. The existing accounts, however, tend to conform to what I shall call the standard story of Bentham’s contextualism. According to this story, Bentham is a forerunner of the form of contextualism that is encapsulated in Frege’s Context Principle. Two features of Bentham’s philosophy are said to anticipate Frege’s contextualism: (1) the use of contextual definition, and (2) the claim that propositions, rather than words, are in some sense the real “integers” of language. These features, it is maintained, are connected to one another. Moreover, they are taken to show that Bentham was committed to the same kind of priority of propositional meaning over word-meaning that is stated in Frege’s Context Principle. On these grounds, the advocates of the standard story conclude that there is a significant continuity between Bentham and subsequent analytic philosophers who either endorse some sufficiently close version of Frege’s Context Principle (such as Frege himself, of course, but also early and later Wittgenstein), or make explicit use of contextual definition (such as Russell and Quine).

The standard story of Bentham’s contextualism has been advocated by several authors, both within and outside Bentham scholarship. Some representative formulations can be found in
the works of W. V. O. Quine and P. M. S. Hacker. Consider, for example, these passages from two famous papers of Quine’s:

Bentham’s [innovation] was the recognition of contextual definition, or what he called paraphrasis. He recognized that to explain a term we do not need to specify an object for it to refer to, nor even specify a synonymous word or phrase; we need only show, by whatever means, how to translate the whole sentences in which the term is to be used. […] This idea of contextual definition, or recognition of the sentence as the primary vehicle of meaning, was indispensable to the ensuing developments in the foundations of mathematics. It was explicit in Frege, and it attained its full expression in Russell’s doctrine of descriptions as incomplete symbols.

Contextual definitions precipitated a revolution in semantics. […] The primary vehicle of meaning is seen no longer as the word, but as the sentence. Terms, like grammatical particles, mean by contributing to the meaning of the sentences that contain them. […] It was the recognition of this semantic primacy of sentences that gave us contextual definitions, and vice versa. I attribute this to Bentham. Generations later we find Frege celebrating the semantic primacy of sentences, and Russell giving contextual definition its fullest exploitation in technical logic.

Quine is maintaining that Bentham shared with Frege the two ideas that I mentioned above, namely “the idea of contextual definition” or “paraphrasis,” and (2) “the recognition of the

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5 Quine is arguably the author who, more than anybody else, has brought this historical claim to the attention of a wide philosophical public. To my knowledge, he is also the first who claimed that there is a connection between Bentham’s contextualism and Frege’s. Before him, between the two wars, C. K. Ogden and John Wisdom had argued that Bentham anticipated some contextualist aspects of Russell’s philosophy, i.e. his use of contextual definition (see especially Ogden 1932 and Wisdom 1931). Ogden was proud of contributing to the “rediscovery” of Bentham’s logico-linguistic writings, and it is actually very likely that Quine knew about such writings through Ogden’s Bentham’s Theory of Fictions (1932), to which he explicitly refers (Quine 1981, p. 68; Ogden’s volume consists of a long introduction and some excerpts from Bentham’s collected works). In the second half of the twentieth century, Quine’s historical thesis (to the effect that Bentham anticipated Frege’s contextualism) has been generally accepted by Bentham scholars (see e.g. Harrison 1983, pp. 64-68; Hart 1982, p. 10). Outside Bentham scholarship, Quine’s thesis has been restated by P. M. S. Hacker (Hacker 1997, p. 67, n. 24; Hacker and Baker 2005, pp. 172-173) and, more recently, by Hans-Johann Glock (Glock 2008, p. 124).

6 Quine 1969a, p. 72.

7 Quine 1981, pp. 69-70. See also Quine 1953, p. 39.
sentence as the primary vehicle of meaning.” These two ideas, for Quine, are intimately connected: they mutually support one another (as he suggests in the latter passage), or can even be seen as basically equivalent (as he suggests in the former passage). They jointly constitute a “revolution in semantics” that was initiated by Bentham, was further developed by Frege, and culminated in Russell’s theory of descriptions. It is evident from other passages that Quine wants to place some regions of his own work (such as his discussion of the “virtual theory of classes,” which will be briefly discussed below) along this line of historical continuity. Even though Quine, in the two passages quoted above, does not mention explicitly Frege’s Context Principle, it seems safe to assume that such a principle is at least part of what he has in mind when he speaks of Frege’s “celebrat[ion]” of the “semantic primacy of sentences.”

Hacker makes similar points. He stresses, like Quine, that Bentham’s use of “paraphrasis” anticipates Frege’s philosophical procedures. For example, Bentham’s paraphrastic analysis of legal notions is supposed to be similar to Frege’s contextual analysis of numbers: “As Frege thought that the way to investigate the nature of numbers was to analyze sentences in which numerals occurred, so Bentham thought that the way to analyze the nature of duties, obligations and rights […], was to analyze sentences in which the terms ‘duty,’ ‘obligation’ or a ‘right’ occurred.” Hacker also agrees with Quine about the fact that Bentham anticipated Frege’s recognition of the semantic primacy of sentences. Here Hacker explicitly connects Bentham’s contextualist views with Frege’s Context Principle: “Bentham propounded a form of the context principle, closer to the later Wittgenstein than to Frege’s (not altogether happy)

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contention that a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence.”

According to Hacker, Bentham’s version of the Context Principle “rightly stresses that the sentence is, as Wittgenstein was later to argue, the minimal move in the language game.” In support of this attribution, he quotes the following passage from Bentham:

But by anything less than the entire proposition, *i.e.* the import of an entire proposition, no communication can have place. In language, therefore, the integer to be looked for is the entire proposition—that which Logicians mean by the term logical proposition. Of this integer, no one part of speech, not even that which is most significant, is anything more than a fragment; and, in this respect, in the many-worded appellative, part of speech, the word *part* is instructive. By it, an intimation to look out for the integer, of which it is a part, may be considered as conveyed. A word is to a *proposition* what a *letter* is to a word.

Bentham is here attributing some form of priority to complete propositions over their parts. For Hacker, it is the same kind of priority that constitutes the true insight behind Frege’s “not altogether happy” formulation of the Context Principle—*i.e*., the insight that finds more proper expression in the later Wittgenstein’s restatement of the principle, as Hacker understands it. Hacker’s discussion suggests that such a contextualist tenet is connected, somehow, to the use of contextual definition; but he does not explain the precise nature of this connection.

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13 The passage quoted by Hacker, *when taken in isolation*, is open to a variety of interpretations. We can distinguish at least three such interpretations.

i) The passage *may* be taken to express the very weak version of the Context Principle that Hacker appears to favor, which emphasizes the fact that only complete propositions can be used to say something intelligible, but leaves open the possibility that words may retain their meanings independently of the logical character of the propositional context—if any—in which they occur. This reading of the passage has to be supplemented with a consistent interpretation of the analogy between words and letters that appears in its last sentence. It is not immediately clear how this could be accomplished (and this might be part of the reason why Hacker, on another
I do not believe that the standard story of Bentham’s contextualism is completely wrong. The truth contained in it is that Bentham’s did in fact anticipate the use of contextual definition, which played an important role in the subsequent developments of analytic philosophy. I will demonstrate this point in Sections 3-7. However, Bentham did not anticipate the Context Principle, as Frege and Wittgenstein understand it. The two issues should be sharply distinguished. In Section 7, I will show that Bentham is committed to the Empiricist Framework, and in Section 8 and 9, I will show that this commitment, in conjunction with his collateral metaphysical and epistemological doctrines, drives him into the paradoxical position that I call

ii) The isolated passage may also be interpreted in a way that is fully consistent with the form of contextualism that I want to attribute to Frege and Wittgenstein. The analogy between words and letters, whose history goes back to Plato, can be read in a way that accurately illustrates Frege and Wittgenstein’s understanding of the Context Principle. Gilbert Ryle, I believe, provides such a reading of the analogy. He suggests, in the context of a discussion of Plato, that the phonetic relation between certain letter-sounds (such as the sound “b”) and syllable-sounds can be taken as a good model for the semantic relation between the meanings of words and the meanings of sentences. Just as we cannot pronounce the sound “b” without pronouncing the sound of some syllable containing the sound “b,” so we cannot mean something by a word without expressing a complete propositional content involving the meaning of the word (see Ryle 2009, pp. 57-75).

iii) Finally, the isolated passage may also be interpreted as an expression of Radical Benthamite Contextualism. Such an interpretation adopts a reading of the letter/word analogy that is completely different from Ryle’s: the semantic relation between a proposition and its constituent words is taken be modeled on the semantic relation between a word and its letters. The word “cat” as it occurs in “The cat is on the map, no more has a meaning of its own than the letter “c” as it occurs in the word “cat.”

Such a plurality of possible interpretations, however, is highly restricted when the passage is read against the background of Bentham’s views about language. When this is done, there is actually no room for interpretation (2), for reasons that I hope will become evident in the course of this chapter. In my view, this suffices to show that the passage does not anticipate Frege’s or Wittgenstein’s Context Principle. Since this is the question that I am here concerned to address, I don’t have to take a stance on whether the passage quoted by Hacker should be read in accordance with (1) or (3). But I am inclined to think that in the light of the Benthamite doctrines that I will discuss in the following sections, the most plausible is reading of the passage is actually (3).
Radical Benthamite Contextualism, which rules out of the picture the very idea of sub-propositional meaning. In the following chapters, I will show that the Context Principle, as Frege and Wittgenstein construe it, not only vindicates the truism that words have in general a meaning of their own (thus rejecting Radical Benthamite Contextualism), but opposes the Empiricist Framework itself (thus rejecting all the positions developed within such framework, including a position like Russell’s, which does not commit its advocates to anything like Radical Benthamite Contextualism).

In accordance with this plan, I will begin with the demonstration that Bentham anticipated the use of contextual definition. The first thing that we will need, in this respect, is an account of Bentham’s conception of “paraphrasis.”

3. Bentham on paraphrasis and fictitious entities

Throughout his long career, and in connection not only with his main intellectual interests—jurisprudence and the philosophy of law—but also with several other areas of philosophy, Bentham engaged in a sustained discussion of a problematic class of words that he called “names of fictitious entities.” These words present themselves, grammatically, as nouns, just as the members of the contrastive class of words, which Bentham calls “names of real entities.” In virtue of their grammatical form, names of fictitious entities seem to have the linguistic function of naming something; but the impression, according to Bentham, is deceptive.14 A fictitious

14 Here is one of the several passages where Bentham formulates the connection between names of fictitious entities and the superficial grammar of language: “Wherever there is a word, there is thing: so says the common notion […]. Wherever there is a word, there is a thing: hence the almost universal practice of confounding fictitious entities with real ones—corresponding
entity, as he puts it, “is an entity to which, though by the grammatical form of the discourse employed in speaking of it, existence be ascribed, yet in truth and reality existence is not meant to be ascribed.”¹⁵ When we employ names of fictitious entities, despite grammatical appearances, we do not really intend to name objects; on the other hand, our understanding of what it is that we really want to do with these words is cloudy and needs clarification. According to Bentham, the only method of clarification that can be helpful in this connection is what he calls “paraphrasis”—a method that he regards as one of his main inventions.¹⁶ Bentham gives, in different places, various descriptions of paraphrasis, which are not always identical to one another.¹⁷ The description contained in the following passage, however, can be regarded as representative:

The paraphrasis consists in taking the word that needs to be expounded—viz. the name of a fictitious entity—and, after making it up into a phrase, applying to it another phrase, which, being of the same import, shall have for its principal and characteristic word the name of the corresponding real entity. In a definition, a phrase is employed for the exposition of a single word: in a paraphrasis, a phrase is employed for the exposition of an entire phrase, of which the word, proposed to be expounded, is made to constitute the principal or characteristic word.¹⁸

In order to clarify the use of a name of a fictitious entity, we need, first of all, to form an entire proposition of which it is the “principal and characteristic word”—an operation that Bentham

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¹⁵ Fragment on Ontology, in W, vol. 8, p. 197.
calls “phraseoplerosis.” Then we need to translate this sentence into another sentence, with exactly the same “import” or content, which has for its “principal or characteristic word” a name of a real entity. (“Paraphrase,” Bentham remarks, literally means “giving phrase for phrase”; throughout this discussion, Bentham uses “phrase” to refer to an entire sentence). Here is the example that Bentham employs for illustrating his doctrine of paraphrasis—the paraphrasis of the term “obligation”:

An obligation (viz. the obligation of conducting himself in a certain manner), is incumbent on a man, (i.e. is spoken of as incumbent on a man), in so far as, in the event of failing to conduct himself in that manner, pain, or loss of pleasure, is considered as about to be experienced by him.

This means that when I say, for example, that I have an obligation to give your money back to you, what I really mean is that I expect to suffer pain if I don’t do it. In the new and (according to Bentham) equivalent sentence, the problematic word “obligation” has been made to disappear; moreover, there is no mention of cognate words that Bentham regards as equally problematic—such as “right,” “duty” or “entitlement.” Talk about obligations has been unmasked as talk about people and their sensations of pleasures and pain, which Bentham regards as real entities. The first kind of talk is, in Bentham’s words, a mere “representative” or “succedaneum” of the corresponding talk involving reference to real entities: if we make true and significant statements about our obligations, rights, titles, etc., that is so only in so far as we are making statements about the pain that we expect to suffer in case we perform, or fail to perform, certain actions.

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20 Radical Reform Bill, in W, vol. 3, p. 594
As Bentham nicely puts it, the talk that involves names of fictitious entities such as “obligations” stands to its paraphrased equivalent as paper currency stands to its gold equivalent:

These fantastic denominations [i.e., names of legal fictitious entities] are a sort of paper currency: if we know how at any time to change them and get sterling in the room, it is well; if not, we are deceived, and instead of being masters of so much real knowledge as by the help of them we mean to supply ourselves with, we possess nothing but sophistry and nonsense.23

There is nothing intrinsically problematic, for Bentham, in using sentences containing names of fictitious entities, as long as we know how to paraphrase them away. A genuine content expressed in a grammatically misleading way is still a genuine content. The use of names of fictitious entities is problematic only in so far as it leads us to form sentences that do not admit of any adequate paraphrasis—sentences that, despite grammatical appearances, do not express any real content, but only “sophistry and nonsense.”24

4. Comparing Bentham, Russell, and Quine on contextual definition

In order to further clarify Bentham’s conception of paraphrasis, as well as the correlative distinction between names of real entities and names of fictitious entities, it is helpful to compare

23 LG, p. 251.
24 For the sake of simplicity, I will ignore the role that Bentham assigns to “archetypation.” This is the operation, connected to paraphrasis, by means of which we can bring out the mental images associated with names of fictitious entities. According to Bentham, for example, the “emblematic” or “archetypal” image associated with the word “obligation” is “that of a man lying down, with a heavy body pressing upon him” (Essay on Logic, in W, vol. 8, p. 246). More generally, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will bracket the issue of the role that “ideas” and mental images play in Bentham’s philosophy of language.
it to more recent uses of the technique of contextual definition. We can focus on two examples: Quine’s virtual theory of classes, and Russell’s theory of definite descriptions.

According to Quine, the “virtual theory of classes” provides a reduction of part of set theory to first order logic. The reduction is accomplished by providing (what Quine calls) a “contextual definition” of the distinctive expressions of set theory, namely the term “class” and the predicate “is a member of.” Such a contextual definition consists in taking the whole sentence $a \in \{x: Fx\}$ (i.e., “$a$ is a member of the class of $Fs$”) and translating it into the equivalent sentence $Fa$ (i.e., “$a$ is $F$”), which contains only expressions belonging to the language of first-order logic. The first sentence, according to the virtual theory, is just a potentially misleading notational variant of the second sentence; it just says, “in disguise,”\textsuperscript{25} what the second sentence says. Even though our grammatical form of expression suggests that we are invoking a particular class of objects, namely “classes,” and a particular predicate of class-membership, this is a “sham invocation,”\textsuperscript{26} a mere “manner of speaking to be paraphrased away at will.”\textsuperscript{27}

Turning now to Bentham, we see that these same descriptions apply quite well to his theory of names of fictitious entities. For Bentham, when we talk about obligations, for example, we just say, \textit{in disguise}, what we could say by means of a more parsimonious language that lacks any legal vocabulary and mentions only people, their actions, and their sensations of pain. Even though, by employing the language of obligations, we seem to invoke a class of “legal objects,” that is just a \textit{sham invocation}, a \textit{manner of speaking to be paraphrased away at will}.

\textsuperscript{25} Quine 1986, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{26} Quine 1986, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{27} Quine 1986, p. 73. For further discussion of the virtual theory of classes, see Quine 1969b, pp. 15-27.
Let’s now consider Russell’s theory of definite descriptions. This theory analyzes sentences containing definite descriptions into sentences in which these expressions have been made to disappear. To take Russell’s famous example, “The present King of France is bald” should be analyzed as “There is one and only one x such that x is the King of France and x is bald.” Expressions like “The present King of France” are, according to Russell, “denoting phrases,” and the theory that he proposes “gives a reduction of all propositions in which denoting phrases occur to forms in which no such phrases occur.”\(^{28}\) Denoting phrases present themselves, grammatically, as expressions that have the logical function of naming objects—a misleading impression that the theory of descriptions can help to dispel by representing in a more perspicuous way what we are actually saying when we employ these expressions in discourse. As David Kaplan has put it, Russell’s “contextual definitions”\(^{29}\) of denoting phrases may be treated “as rules for translating ordinary, logically imperfect language into a logically perfect symbolism.”\(^{30}\) In a similar fashion, we may regard Bentham’s paraphrastic exposition of the term “obligation” as a translation rule that allows us to move from sentences of ordinary language to sentences (not so much of a “logically perfect symbolism,” but rather) of a restricted version of ordinary language that has been purged of all names of legal fictitious entities—a restricted version of ordinary language that supposedly presents in a clearer and more perspicuous way what we want to say when we use sentences involving those problematic expressions.

A first survey, therefore, appears to reveal strong similarities between Bentham’s use of paraphrasis and the use of contextual definition by later analytic philosophers such as Russell

\(^{28}\) Russell 1905, p. 45.

\(^{29}\) This is the term that Kaplan uses for describing Russell’s theory of descriptions (Kaplan 1972, p. 233).

\(^{30}\) Kaplan 1972, p. 234.
and Quine. But in order to fully assess these similarities, as well as to address the further issue of whether Bentham anticipated Frege’s (and Wittgenstein’s) Context Principle, we need to plunge more deeply into Bentham’s philosophy of language.

5. The structure of Bentham’s contextualism: complicating the picture

The account that I have offered so far of Bentham’s doctrine of paraphrasis and fictitious entities has been partial in two important respects.

In the first place, I have considered only what I propose to call the *central application* of Bentham’s theory of fictions, i.e. names of fictitious entities that, according to Bentham, can be effectively paraphrased away. But Bentham, in his more theoretical writings, wants to talk as well of names of fictitious entities that cannot, even in principle, be paraphrased away. I will refer to this area of Bentham’s philosophy as the *extended application* of the theory of fictions and postpone its discussion until Section 8.

In the second place, my previous account has been partial even in relation to Bentham’s central application of the theory of fictions. I wanted to show that, for Bentham, the distinction between names of fictitious entities and names of real entities is a distinction between misleading and perspicuous grammatical expressions. But what is, in Bentham’s view, the relevant criterion of grammatical perspicuity? In other words: What guides Bentham’s use of the technique of paraphrasis? These questions, when asked in relation to the central application of the theory of fictions, can be given two different answers, for each of which there is some textual support. I will distinguish, accordingly, between a *philosophically neutral* and a *philosophically committed* interpretation of the central application of the theory of fictions. According to the philosophically
neutral interpretation, the technique of paraphrasis is meant to function as a *clarificatory tool* that relies on nothing more than our pre-theoretical sense of what follows from what, of what is a valid or invalid inference, of what expresses an intelligible content or mere confusion. According to the philosophically committed interpretation, on the other hand, Bentham’s use of paraphrasis is guided by a set of substantial and controversial philosophical assumptions: paraphrasis works as an *accommodating device* that serves to fit apparently recalcitrant cases into Bentham’s preconceived views of the conditions that must obtain if a sub-propositional expression is to be genuinely significant.

These two interpretations of the central application of the theory of fictions will be discussed in Sections 6 and 7 respectively. We will see that each of them may be equally available for at least some instances of the central application of the theory of fictions. I will argue, however, that the extended application of the theory of fictions is beyond the reach of the philosophically neutral interpretation: the only way to make sense of such an application is as a further (and almost desperate) attempt to accommodate an ever-increasing class of counterexamples into Bentham’s unexamined conception of genuine sub-propositional meaning.

6. The philosophically neutral interpretation of the central application of the theory of fictions

I will approach the discussion of the philosophically neutral interpretation of Bentham’s theory of fictions by considering a concrete example: the role of paraphrasis in Bentham’s criticism of natural rights.
Bentham contrasts “natural rights” with “political rights.” The latter kind of rights, he thinks, constitutes the primary and proper sense in which we speak of rights. According to his analysis, for each political right there is a corresponding obligation; and an obligation, as we saw, is a “legal fictitious entity” that should be paraphrased in terms of expectations of pain. I have, say, a political right to health care if some people belonging to the relevant institutions have the obligation to provide me with health care assistance; and these people, in turn, have such an obligation only if they can expect to suffer some form of pain, inflicted by the designated institutions, in case they do not provide me with the due assistance. For Bentham, when we assert the existence of a right, in this political and primary sense, we assert a matter of fact—the fact that the people who have the correspondent obligation can reliably expect to be punished, if they do not comply with it. But something different happens when we start talking about natural rights:

If I say a man has a right to this coat or the land, meaning a right in the political sense of the word—what I assert is a matter of fact […]. If I say a man has a natural right to the coat or the land—all that I can mean, if it mean any thing and mean true, is, that I am of the opinion he ought to have a political right to it; that, by the appropriate services rendered upon occasion to him by the appropriate functionaries of government, he ought to be protected and secured in the use of it […].

It might seem that when we move from political rights to natural rights, we simply start talking about another species of rights. But the difference is for Bentham much more radical than we might initially realize. When we talk about natural rights (as Bentham puts it in the course of a similar discussion), we start using the word “right” in a “figurative and improper” sense, and we should not expect that “the same conclusions [are] to be drawn from any proposition in which it

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is used in this sense, as might be drawn from them if it were used in the other sense, which is its proper one."

Bentham’s paraphrasis of legal terms can help us realize how radical the projection of the word “right” here at issue is and warn us against the inclination to draw from its projected application the same conclusions that follow from its primary use. It is clear, indeed, that the projected application of the word is not paraphrasable in the same sort of way in which we can paraphrase its primary use. Who is going to be punished in case our “natural rights” are not respected? And by whom? By Nature? For Bentham, it is clear that, when we start speaking about natural rights, we don’t want anymore to assert a matter of fact, but to make a normative statement, to the effect that someone ought to be granted a political right. The projected use of the word “right” requires a completely different paraphrasis. The technique of paraphrasis can help us recognize this difference in use, against a tendency to confuse the two uses and to exploit the confusion for the attainment of questionable ends. Here is a passage in which Bentham diagnoses the motivation that typically leads one to talk about natural rights:

To engage others to join with him in applying force for the purpose of putting things into a state in which he would actually be in possession of the right, of which he thus pretends to be in possession, is at bottom the real object and purpose of the confusion thus endeavoured to be introduced into men’s ideas, by employing a word in a sense different from what it had been wont to be employed, and from thus causing men to accede in words to positions from which they dissent in judgment.  

By asserting the existence of a natural right, we want to make a normative statement; we want to convince our interlocutor that things ought to be in a certain way. But by masking this assertion as the statement of a matter of fact, we manage to subtract ourselves from the genuine

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32 Fragment on Government, in FG, pp. 496-498. The remark refers to the analogous difference between the duties of the governed and the so-called “duties” of a supreme governor.  
requirements of a normative discussion. Our interlocutor, confused by the form of our assertion, will not properly challenge our statement by asking and evaluating the moral or political grounds for our claim. At the same time, he won’t simply take our assertion as the statement of a matter of fact, as happens when we talk about political rights. If he did so, he could argue very easily that our assertion is false, by pointing out that there is in fact no power (political or otherwise) that is enforcing the right that we are talking about. He definitely understands that this objection would be out of order; that’s not what we are talking about. On the other hand, what it is that we are talking about is unclear to him; and it is in virtue of this very confusion that we manage to lead him to assent, unwittingly, to our normative positions.

Bentham writes that natural rights have been given birth by the “weakness of the understanding” and their adoption in discourse has been fostered by “the heat of argument” and the “force of passions”: people appeal to the natural rights talk when they want to persuade us to assent to positions that are ungrounded, or whose grounds they are unable to effectively articulate.\textsuperscript{34} Paraphrasis can serve in this respect as an instrument of intellectual and moral liberation. It helps us to dispel the confusions that are created by a certain vocabulary—confusions that, according to Bentham, are typically exploited, with a greater or lesser degree of self-consciousness, in the service of “sinister interests” and for the perpetration of moral and political abuse.

Of course, Bentham’s criticism of natural rights can give rise to various objections. It is not my intention, here, to take a stance on such a delicate topic in political philosophy. I am interested in Bentham’s discussion of natural rights only in the following respect: in so far as it has some plausibility, it shows that the use of paraphrasis does not need to rely on a substantive

\textsuperscript{34} Pannomial Fragments, in \textit{W}, vol. 3, pp. 219-220.
philosophical doctrine that backs up the distinction between “misleading” and “perspicuous” linguistic expressions. Bentham thinks that there is a significant difference between our talk of “political” and “natural” rights, and that this difference in use is obscured by our forms of expression. He also thinks that the failure to notice this difference leads to confusion (where the confusion can be identified through the exercise of our ordinary critical capacities), and that this confusion can be exposed and avoided by replacing the original form of expression with a different one. This may be all one needs in order to regard the old form of expression as grammatically misleading and the new form of expression as grammatically perspicuous, and in order to call some of the words that appear in the former but not in the latter “names of fictitious entities.” In so far as Bentham reasons in this way, he is not inferring the distinction between real and fictitious entities from a set of philosophical commitments, but introducing it ex post facto as the result of a clarificatory process involving paraphrasis.35

I have argued that there is at least some room for a philosophically neutral interpretation of Bentham’s use of paraphrasis in connection with his discussion of natural rights; and I believe that a similar case can be made for other regions of his thought.36 But such an interpretation, however genuinely grounded in some moments of Bentham’s philosophy, cannot be the whole story of the motivations that lead him to the central application of the theory of fictions. Bentham

35 The description of the philosophically neutral employment of paraphrasis that I have provided in the last paragraph draws on the account of the clarificatory use of a “perspicuous notation” that has been offered (in the context of a discussion of Frege and Wittgenstein) by Cora Diamond and James Conant, among others. See Diamond 1991, chap. 4; Diamond 2004; Conant 2002a.

36 We might consider, for example, the role of paraphrasis in Bentham’s criticism of the peculiar juridical procedures that Common Law judges used to call “legal fictions” (e.g., the procedure of “ejectment”). In such cases, Bentham employs paraphrasis for unmasking the surreptitious and illegitimate arrogation of legislative powers by Common Law judges. See e.g. Pannomial Fragments, in W, vol. 3, pp. 223-224; Constitutional Code, in W, vol. 9, pp. 77-78; for a helpful discussion, see Harrison 1983, pp. 24-46.

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was indeed clearly committed to a set of substantial philosophical assumptions that could not but dictate in advance what had to be regarded as a grammatically perspicuous expression to be taken at face value (i.e. a “name of a real entity”) and what had to be regarded as a grammatically misleading expression to be paraphrased away (i.e. a “name of a fictitious entity”). We now turn to the examination of these assumptions and of the correlative philosophically committed interpretation of the central application of the theory of fictions.

7. Bentham’s empiricist assumptions and the philosophically committed interpretation of the central application of the theory of fictions.

Bentham is committed to a number of semantic, ontological, and epistemological theses that jointly determine what can count as a meaningful sub-propositional expression. His crucial and most unexamined assumption is that the only way in which words can genuinely have a meaning is by naming some kind of entity:

The only part of speech which is perfectly simple in its import, and at the same time integrally significant, is the noun-substantive. […] A noun-substantive is a name […]. The entity of which it is a name, belongs either to the class of real entities, or to the class of fictitious entities.  

Full-blooded sub-propositional meaning is explained in terms of the name-bearer relation: a word is significant in so far as it has been “attached,” so to speak, to some entity. On this view, which words are genuinely significant will depend on which entities there really are: an entity

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must be *there* in order to have a word attached to it. Hence the relevance of Bentham’s ontological doctrines, which are shaped in turn by his epistemological views. He divides “real entities” into “perceptual” and “inferential.” The former are entities that we know through the immediate testimony of the senses (including inner sense); the latter are entities whose existence we infer on the basis of what we are immediately aware of.\(^3^8\) Bentham is not completely consistent about what is supposed to belong to each of these categories. When he is engaged in applying the theory of fictions and the technique of paraphrasis to particular cases (e.g., when he offers his paraphrasis of the term “obligation”), he is not very interested in inferential real entities and seems to count among perceptual real entities not only inner sensations such as pleasure and pain, but also perceptible objects of the external words such as persons and tables. However, in his more theoretical writings, he explicitly contemplates the possibility of inferential real entities such as the “Almighty Being” or “the human soul, conceived in a state of separation from the body,”\(^3^9\) and he shares with other classical empiricists the impulse to retreat from the external world and to relegate ordinary objects to the class of *inferential* real entities: the only genuine perceptible real entities would be first-personal mental items, i.e. feelings of pleasure and pain and ideas of external objects.\(^4^0\) But Bentham is reluctant to pursue consistently this latter line of thought. He tries to reduce the distance between our individual perceptions and the objects of the external world by observing the irresistible character of the inference here at issue and by offering a sort of “pragmatic proof” of the existence of the external world—a proof that, in all its crudity, amounts to the following: Suppose that the objects that correspond to your

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\(^3^8\) See *Fragment on Ontology*, in *W*, vol. 8, pp. 195-196; *Chrestomathia*, in *W*, vol. 8, p. 126.  
\(^3^9\) *Chrestomathia*, in *W*, vol. 8, p. 126.  
\(^4^0\) See *Chrestomathia*, in *W*, vol. 8, p. 126; *Fragment on Ontology*, in *W*, vol. 8, p. 196.
sensible ideas do not exist, act accordingly, and “the perception of pain will at once bear witness against you.”

In spite of these oscillations in Bentham’s ontological and epistemological doctrines, the general picture of sub-propositional meaning that emerges from his commitments is quite clear: a word has meaning by naming something that exists and that we can somehow point to, either directly (with our actual finger or, as it were, with our mind’s finger) or indirectly (with the aid of our inferential capacities). In accordance with a characteristic tendency of the empiricist tradition, ostensive definition is here taken to display the essence of sub-propositional meaning. Moreover, the relevant understanding of ostensive definition is one that makes it mysterious why sub-propositional meaning should not be atomistic: if words acquire and retain their meanings by being “attached” to some entities (whose existence and identity must be determined in advance on independent grounds), then what difference can it make to their meaningfulness whether they occur alongside other words—each of which, insofar as it has a meaning, also already names an entity? In particular, what difference can it make to their meaningfulness whether words occur in complete propositions?

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41 Fragment on Ontology, in W, vol. 8, p. 197. See also Chrestomathia, in W, vol. 8, p. 188.
42 Bentham discusses explicitly the nature and special status of ostensive definition under the rubric of “exposition by representation”:

If all words were significative of real entities, and if these were all objects which might at all time be brought within the reach of perception both of the learner and the teacher, exposition would be easy and consist in the pointing to the object in question, and pronouncing at the same time the word which it is wished to attach to it as its name. This is exposition by signs, and may be termed representation. Among persons who have no common language by which they can communicate their ideas, this is at first the only practicable method, and we see it continually exemplified when a child is taught to speak, or a foreigner who understands no words with which we are acquainted, or who cannot make use of dictionaries or any other written explanations of our words, is instructed in our language. (Essay on Logic, in W, vol. 8, p. 243) [Footnote continues]
Given Bentham’s commitments, it is inevitable that some words are going to appear in
good shape, while many other words are going to appear problematic. All abstract terms, for
example, seem to threaten the plausibility of Bentham’s assumptions. Take the term
“obligation.” There surely is no Benthamite “real entity” that is named by this word: we cannot
perceive or point to an obligation, and we cannot infer its existence as we may infer the existence
of material objects from our perceptions, or the existence of a soul from the movements of a
human body. It seems therefore that the word “obligation” should be condemned as meaningless.
But this would be paradoxical, since we ordinarily employ the word in sentences that appear to
express perfectly intelligible contents. At this point, paraphrasis can work as an elegant
accommodating device that resolves the theoretical impasse. By paraphrasing away the term
“obligation,” we show that there is no need of accounting for the meaning of the word by looking
for an entity that is named by it. The word, in fact, does not have any meaning of its own; it is
only a sham sub-propositional semantic unit. At the same time, paraphrasis allows us to vindicate
the idea that the sentences in which the word “obligation” normally occurs are perfectly
intelligible. So it turns out that the word “obligation” is not, after all, a real problem for

Clearly, Bentham assigns a foundational role to ostensive definition. For Bentham, all other
methods of explaining or defining the meanings of words (which Bentham discusses in the
chapter of the Essay on Logic that includes the passage just quoted) must ultimately rely on the
prior and independent possibility of ostensive definition. Even more significantly, ostensive
definition is what allows a child to be taught her first language. Apparently, all the child needs to
do in order to be taught the meaning of a word is to identify the word, the entity to which it is
meant to be attached, and the act of pointing that is supposed to perform the correlation—where
none of these acts of identification is taken to require an understanding of the complete
propositional contents that the word, so defined, may be used to express. The capacity to grasp
the meanings of words is conceived to be separate from and independent of the capacity to use
words in intelligible propositions. The foundational status that Bentham assigns to ostensive
definition shows that he is committed to an atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning.
Bentham’s views about genuine sub-propositional meaning. The recalcitrant case has been accommodated into Bentham’s picture of the meanings of words.

According to this interpretation, Bentham’s employment of paraphrasis is guided by a canon of perspicuity that is established in advance on theoretical grounds. The distinction between “misleading” and “perspicuous” expressions is grounded on something more than the unprejudiced internal observation of our assertoric and inferential practices: it is grounded on a substantive (and controversial) philosophical theory.

Given Bentham’s empiricist commitments, we can read an accommodating intention into any instance of his use paraphrasis. However, the legitimacy of this suspicious approach to Bentham’s theory of fictions should not be taken to imply that the philosophically neutral interpretation examined above could never be appropriate. We may think, indeed, that some of Bentham’s applications of the technique of paraphrasis are only externally related to his empiricist assumptions. His critique of natural rights, for example, might not be taken to actually rely on those assumptions. If that is correct, we might want to retain Bentham’s analysis of the right-talk as a valuable clarificatory tool, while recommending the rejection of his problematic empiricist commitments. The applicability of the philosophically neutral interpretation requires therefore a certain degree of abstraction from the actual historical features of Bentham’s philosophy: to apply it to a particular case is to claim that certain aspects of his thought and procedures are independent of the larger philosophical system to which they contingently belong. The question of when it is possible to perform such an abstraction—and thus to apply the philosophically neutral interpretation—cannot be given any general answer: whether a certain paraphrastic analysis can be put to a genuinely clarificatory use is an issue that can only be determined piecemeal by considering each case on its own merits.
There is therefore a certain ambivalence in Bentham’s use of paraphrasis. By default, we are entitled to appeal to the philosophically committed interpretation; but in each particular case, we can ask whether it is possible to redeem Bentham’s position through a philosophically neutral interpretation of what he is actually doing. Conversely, even though in certain cases Bentham might be taking himself to be using paraphrasis as an innocent clarificatory tool, we can always suspect that he is actually employing paraphrasis as an accommodating device.

I don’t think it would be difficult to show that such an ambivalence is also a feature of later uses of contextual definition. If this is correct, then there is even further support for the historical claim that Bentham anticipated the use of contextual definition by later figures of the analytic tradition. But in order to establish whether Bentham anticipated the Context Principle, as understood by Frege or Wittgenstein, we need to see how his empiricist assumptions lead him beyond the central application of the theory of fictions and shape his general conception of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning.

8. The extended application of the theory of fictions

We have seen that given Bentham’s philosophical commitments, some words are going to appear problematic. We have also seen that Bentham can elegantly deal with some of these apparent counterexamples—such as the abstract term “obligation”—by means of paraphrasis. On a closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the class of words that seem to fail to comply with

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43 Russell’s theory of descriptions could serve as a very good example: he presents his analysis of denoting phrases as a way of solving philosophical puzzles (see Russell 1905, p. 47), but as we shall see in Section 10, it is clear that his analysis serves as well to protect his philosophical assumptions from apparent counterexamples.
Bentham’s philosophical requirements extends well beyond the class of abstract legal terms such as “obligation” and “right.” We shouldn’t be surprised, therefore, to find Bentham trying to deal with an explosive proliferation of “names of fictitious entities.” In fact, as we are now going to see, the attempt to think through his own philosophical commitments leads Bentham to posit a kind of fiction that is even in principle impossible to paraphrase away—a kind of fiction that is intrinsic to articulate language as such.

Bentham comes to regard as fictitious “all those entities that will be found included in Aristotle’s […] Ten Predicaments, the first excepted,” that is “2) Quantity, 3) Quality, 4) Relation, 5) Places, 6) Time, 7) Situation, 8) Possession, 9) Action, 10) Passion or Suffering.” The first Predicament, which Bentham excludes from the list of fictitious entities, is “Substance.” More generally, Bentham is led to think that any time we utter a meaningful proposition, even the simplest one, we are already involved in naming fictitious entities:

Among names of fictitious entities, the foremost, and those the designation of which is of the most immediate necessity to mind-expressing converse, are qualities.

[Footnote: Quality being taken in the largest sense of which the word is susceptible, in that which, in its import, is co-extensive with the applicability of the word so much used in the Aristotelian Logic school, predication.]

Taking the word proposition in its simplest acceptation, by every proposition the existence of some quality in some subject is asserted. A proposition is any portion of discourse by which the existence of some quality in some subject is asserted. The name of the substance is the noun-substantive. The name of the quality is the noun-adjective. The word by which the relation between the quality and the substance is asserted, viz. the existence of the one in the other, is by logicians called the copula.

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All qualities “in the largest sense of the term” are names of fictitious entities. Any time we predicate a quality of a substance—that is, every time we say something of something—we are already slipping into fiction. Here is Bentham’s discussion of an illustrative example:

That apple is ripe. Apples are sweet. Apples are good. An apple is a real entity; in saying that apple exists,—the existence of which, I express my opinion, is a real entity. But *that apple is ripe*; of what is it that, in addition to that of the apple, I express my opinion of the existence? It is the existence of the quality of ripeness in the apple. But the quality of ripeness, is it a real entity? Different from apples, and everything else that is susceptible of it, has this quality, or any quality, any separate existence? [...] In saying this apple is ripe, what is it that I affirm? It is, that *in* this apple is the quality of ripeness. The two expressions are equivalent. But,—in this apple is the quality of ripeness, in the assertion thus made, what is the image that I bring to view? It is, that the apple is a receptacle; and that, in this receptacle, the quality of ripeness, the imaginary, the fictitious entity called a *quality* is lodged. [...] Thus it is that, in the use made of language, fiction, at the very first step that can be taken in the field of language, fiction, in the simplest, or almost the simplest case, in which language can be employed, becomes a necessary resource.46

Bentham just cannot conceive of words having a genuine meaning other than by naming some kind of “real entity.” So, when he considers a very simple proposition such as “That apple is ripe,” he cannot but be puzzled by the words in the sentence that do no even appear to name something. So he assumes—with a quick and supposedly innocent move—that the proposition “That apple is ripe” is equivalent to “Ripeness is in the apple.” Bentham regards the second proposition as a way of explaining the import expressed by the first proposition, a more perspicuous rendering of its content.47 Indeed, he explicitly argues that the simplest proposition

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47 Bentham makes this point explicit just a few lines after the passage that I have quoted: “[...] to the explanation of the import of the word *ripe*, the word *ripeness* may thus be rendered subservient [...]” On this issue, I disagree with the otherwise extremely helpful reconstruction offered by Ross Harrison. He argues that, for Bentham, qualities are problematic only to the extent that they are referred to by means of abstract substantive (“ripeness,” “redness” etc.).
contains, in spite of grammatical appearances, at least four elements: a “noun-substantive,” which names a quality, the copula, the preposition “in,” and a name of a real entity, “in which” the existence of the quality is asserted.\textsuperscript{48} But once we have so rephrased our original proposition, we may ask what “ripeness” is a name of. What is the entity to which this word refers? Can we point to ripeness, as we can point to that apple? According to Bentham, there is no real entity of which “ripeness” can be a name; the word is a name of a fictitious entity, and the same holds for all words that appear to name qualities—words that, according to Bentham, are necessarily involved in \textit{any} possible articulate proposition.\textsuperscript{49} There is therefore a kind of fiction that is a constitutive feature of our language: “In the mind of all, fiction, in the logical sense, has been the coin of necessity”,\textsuperscript{50} and again: “[F]iction […] is a contrivance but for which language, or, at any rate, language, in any form superior to that of the language of the brute creation, could not have existed.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} “[S]ugar is sweet. The number of words employed here no more than \textit{three}; but, in the form of expression, an abbreviation may be observed. Sweetness (the quality of sweetness) is in sugar. […] For the formation of a proposition […] no fewer than four objects require to be brought to view” (\textit{Essay on Language}, in \textit{W}, vol. 8, p. 337). See also p. 333 in the same work, and the editors’ discussion of Bentham’s theory of predication in \textit{DO}, p. 247.

\textsuperscript{49} In the long passage quoted above, the contrast between the proposition “That apple exists” and the proposition “That apple is ripe” appears to suggest that the former should not be taken to contain any name of fictitious entity—as if “existence,” for Bentham, were not a predicate. But according to Bentham’s official account, existence does count as a quality, and thus as a name of a fictitious entity (see \textit{Fragment on Ontology}, in \textit{W}, vol. 8, p. 210). Therefore, existential statements are no exception to the thesis that any articulate proposition contains one or more names of fictitious entities.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Fragment on Ontology}, in \textit{W}, vol. 8, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Fragment on Ontology}, in \textit{W}, vol. 8, p. 198.
The contrast that Bentham alludes to in this last quotation between human language and the language of brutes is not just a rhetorical flourish, but a theme that he elaborates in some detail and that sheds further light on his doctrine of ineliminable names of fictitious entities. Bentham thinks that animals definitely have a language, but one different from ours in being completely inarticulate. Like us, animals can express propositions; but, unlike us, they are incapable of expressing propositions that are articulated into sub-propositional elements: “Brutes have no terms—their language is all propositions; their faculties enable them not to break them down into words.” Moreover, according to Bentham, a language like that of brutes is at the origin of our own articulate language:

Of language in its origin, the parts could not have existed in a degree of simplicity, equal to that of the most simple of those at present in use. The first words must, in their import, have been equivalent to whole sentences, to sentences expressive, for example, of suffering, of enjoyment, of desire, of aversion.
Of this original language, the parts of speech called interjections are examples.
Of this nature is, and seems destined for ever to continue, the language of quadrupeds and other inferior animals.
To form the words of which language is at present composed has been the work of analysis. The original sentences were, as it were, broken down into words, those words into syllables, and these syllables, with the help of written and visible signs, into letters.
Of these elements, thus formed by analysis, those called words will now be put together in the way of sentences.

Human beings first used to talk, like brutes, by means of entire, unstructured propositions. Then, when their faculties evolved, our ancestors proceeded, “by abstraction and analysis,” to break down propositions into parts, giving us the form of language that we presently master. According

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to Bentham, our use of “interjections” is a trace of that original language, as well as an element of commonality with other animals.55

Bentham has an ambivalent attitude toward the inarticulate language that he places at the origins of human society. On the one hand, the fact that it is the sort of language that “inferior animals” still speak today suggests that the articulation characteristic of human language has constituted some form of progress or gain. On the other hand, the process of “abstraction and analysis” that gave us articulate language is also the process that made us fall into fiction. By breaking down the proposition into sub-propositional components, according to Bentham, we inevitably introduce a class of words—“names of qualities”—that, in spite of grammatical appearances, do not name any real entity and are therefore devoid of genuine meaning. So there is a sense in which the inarticulate language originally employed by mankind—and still employed by non-human animals—is an ideal language: the only form of language that is not grammatically misleading and that avoids any form of fiction. In an almost biblical way, it seems that fiction was the price we had to pay for acquiring specifically human capacities.

We need now to see how far we have gone from the central application of the theory of fictions. In the central application of the theory, paraphrasability is a constitutive property of names of fictitious entities. Meaningful propositions featuring names of fictitious entities can be rewritten as propositions that do not contain those problematic terms; a grammatically misleading proposition is always contrasted with a grammatically perspicuous proposition; and the accommodating power of Bentham’s doctrine depends precisely on the possibility of replacing a grammatically misleading proposition with a grammatically non-misleading one. The word “obligation” is not a counterexample to Bentham’s views about sub-propositional meaning.

55 See, in addition to the passage just quoted, Chrestomathia, in W, vol. 8, p. 188.
because it can be eliminated with no remainder. But in the case of “names of qualities,” the situation is very different. These are labeled “names of fictitious entities,” even though it is *ex hypothesi* impossible to paraphrase them away (except perhaps on pain of giving up articulate language altogether). If Bentham appeals to paraphrasis at all in this context, it is for *introducing* names of fictitious entities rather then for eliminating them. As we have seen, he argues that the proposition “That apple is ripe” should be rewritten as “Ripeness is in the apple”: we need therefore to pass from a proposition containing the adjective “ripe,” which does not even *appear* to name something, to a proposition containing the abstract noun “ripeness,” which now does seem to name something, namely a “quality.” Once we have reached this level of analysis, there is nothing else we can do. We cannot get rid of names of qualities via paraphrasis: reaching them is reaching bedrock. They are an intrinsic feature of articulate language, and should be accepted as such. Bentham is in fact conceding that his view of sub-propositional meaning cannot account for meaningful predicates. But he does not take this fact as a refutation of his initial assumptions. Rather, he bites the bullet and claims that names of qualities, even though indispensable for human linguistic communication, are not genuine sub-propositional components. Bentham’s “accommodation” of predicate expressions into his view of sub-propositional meaning boils down to a *call for resignation*: we should just accept that, as masters of articulate languages, we are condemned to express our thoughts in a grammatically misleading way.

We can sum up the picture of propositional and sub-propositional meaning that emerges from the extended application of the theory of fictions in the following way. Propositional contents can be expressed by means of unstructured signals, as brutes express them; or they can be expressed by means of propositions that exhibit an internal grammatical articulation. This grammatical articulation, however, corresponds only *partially* to a genuine semantic articulation.
Names of real entities are semantic units (Bentham wants to retain this fundamental idea); but every articulate proposition necessarily involves some names of qualities, which are no more than sham semantic units.

Such a picture is highly problematic in several respects. First, the implicit suggestion that the inarticulate system of communication of our primitive ancestors would be more perspicuous than our own articulate language looks openly paradoxical. Second, the picture is incapable of vindicating the intuitive idea that the meaning of a complete articulate proposition is the result of the semantic contributions of its parts. According to Bentham’s official position, names of real entities contribute to the meanings of the proposition in which they occur; but there is no other semantic unit that can combine with names of real entities to convey a propositional content. We can use meaningful words, and we can convey complete propositional contents; but we cannot convey complete propositional contents by using meaningful words. There remains an unbridgeable gap between the meanings of words and the meanings of propositions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the semantic picture that emerges from the extended application of the theory of fictions is still unstable. Regardless of what Bentham is fully prepared to concede, his philosophical commitments entail that even “names of real entities” should be regarded as fictitious. This brings us to the last stage of the dialectic of Bentham’s contextualism—which is arguably also its point of implosion. As we think through Bentham’s requirements for “genuine” sub-propositional meaning, we realize that the range of cases that actually satisfy them shrinks to a vanishing point.

56 No doubt this is part of the reason why Bentham remains so ambivalent about the status of the language of brutes.
9. The final stage of the dialectic: Radical Benthamite Contextualism

Let’s recall that for Bentham an elementary proposition has the form “Φ is in A,” where “Φ” stands for the name of a quality (i.e. a name of a fictitious entity), and “A” stands for the name of a real entity. So the canonical form of a proposition such as “That apple is ripe” is “Ripeness is in that apple,” where “that apple” is (according to Bentham’s official account) a significant sub-propositional component which names a real entity. But if we look at the way in which Bentham describes this sort of example, the situation appears to be more insidious. In a passage that was quoted above, Bentham writes:

[…] In saying this apple is ripe, what is it that I affirm? It is, that in this apple is the quality of ripeness. The two expressions are equivalent. But,—in this apple is the quality of ripeness, in the assertion thus made, what is the image that I bring to view? It is, that the apple is a receptacle; and that, in this receptacle, the quality of ripeness, the imaginary, the fictitious entity called a quality is lodged.\(^{57}\)

In saying that the quality of ripeness is in that apple, we use the expression “that apple” to refer—not to a real entity that has separate existence—but to a mere receptacle of qualities; and in Bentham’s framework, such a receptacle cannot be any less fictitious than qualities themselves. In this connection, it is helpful to have in view a remark that Bentham wrote shortly before the end of his life:

Each thing is,—the whole of it, what it is,—but we may consider the whole of it together, or any one or more parts of it at a time, as we please—thus we make,—thus we have abstracted,—abstract ideas.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{57}\) *Essay on Language*, in *W*, vol. 8, p. 331; the second emphasis is mine.

\(^{58}\) *Memorandum Book*, in *W*, vol. 11, p.72.
The expression “that apple” can name a real entity, and thus be genuinely significant, only if it is used to name “the whole” of the apple; but as soon as we formulate and express a proposition about the apple, we abstract from the real apple some fictitious qualities and a fictitious receptacle in which such qualities are said to exist. A noun-substantive such as “that apple,” when used to express a propositional content, becomes a name of a fictitious entity.

A similar conclusion seems to follow from Bentham’s discussion of Aristotle’s ten predicaments. As we saw above, he contrasts the first predicament with the others, claiming that substances and only substances are real entities; the other predicaments express qualities (in Bentham’s capacious use of the term), and are therefore names of fictitious entities. But when Bentham explains the relationship between a substance and its qualities, the alleged asymmetry between names of substances and names of qualities disappears. Consider the following explanations of the predicaments of “quantity,” “quality” (in Bentham’s restricted use of the term, which applies specifically to one of the ten predicaments), and “place”:

1. Quantity. Quantity cannot exist without some substance of which it is the quantity. Of substance, no species, no individual can exist, without existing in some quantity.
2. Quality. Quality cannot exist without some substance of which it is the quality. Of substance, no species can exist without being of some quality. […]
3. Place. Of place, the notion cannot be entertained without the notion of some substance considered as placed, or capable of existing, or, as we say, being placed in it. […] Of no individual substance is any notion commonly entertained without some notion of a place—a relative place being occupied by it.59

Qualities, quantities and places are not real entities that enjoy a separate existence; they are mere abstractions, and the words that seem to name them are only names of fictitious entities. But

59 *Fragment of Ontology*, in *W*, vol. 8, p. 199.
substance itself can only exist in some quantity, with some qualities, and positioned in some place; so it seems that bare substance—as the substratum of predications of quantity, quality and place—is also an abstraction and therefore a fictitious entity. According to Bentham, when alleged names of real entities are used in propositions to express complete propositional contents, they purport to name a “substance” in this fictitious sense: a mere “receptacle” that is said to contain the fictitious entities expressed by the predicates. It turns out, therefore, that no part of speech—as long as it is considered in the context of a complete proposition—is the name of a real entity.

At this point, it seems that if we want to find a genuine name of a real entity (and thus a part of speech having genuine sub-propositional meaning) we need to look at the way in which noun-substantives are used outside propositional contexts. Consider the following scenario. An apple is in front of me; I stare at it and focus my attention on it; but I don’t perform any abstraction: I don’t think of the apple as such-and-such, but consider it in its complete and concrete existence; then I utter the words “That apple,” meaning to name the apple—the whole

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60 What about the words “is” and “in,” which, according to Bentham, must appear in the canonical form of any possible articulate proposition in addition to names of substances and names of qualities? To the extent that Bentham discusses this issue, he seems to treat such words as further names of fictitious entities. He claims that the copula serves to assert the existence of a quality in a substance, and he maintains that existence is a fictitious entity (see Chrestomathia, in W, vol. 8, p. 189, and Fragment on Ontology, in W, vol. 8, p. 210, respectively). Moreover, he includes “in” among the “prepositions of space,” which are “expressive of the notion of space,” and space is just another fictitious entity (Fragment of Ontology, in W, vol. 8, p. 200). However, Bentham is rather evasive about this topic—and there are good reasons for that. While we can rephrase “The apple is ripe” as “Ripeness is in the apple” (by nominalizing the adjective and introducing an expression that appears to name some kind of entity), it is difficult to see what it would be to rephrase this latter proposition so as to “make perspicuous” the fact that words “is” and “in” are names of fictitious entities. The concatenation “Ripeness existence inside-ness the-apple” does not even look like a significant proposition, let alone an accurate rewording of our original proposition. Digging into these issues would have put even more pressure on Bentham’s assumptions about the nature of sub-propositional meaning. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bentham was reluctant to do it.
of it. In a case like this, one might think, the expression “that apple” names a real Benthamite substance. I suspect that it is the inchoate imagination of a scenario of this kind that sustains Bentham’s initial assumptions about the meanings of words. But a philosophically uncaptive mind should find such a scenario rather puzzling. What is the person doing when she utters the words “that apple” while staring at an apple in front of her? We can imagine, perhaps, that the person is, as it were, calling, or invoking, or contemplating the existence of the apple. But in that case she would be performing a complete speech act. In Bentham’s terminology, she would be expressing a complete proposition by means of an unarticulated (or only partially articulated) expression, as happens when we use “interjections.” Bentham himself insists that anytime we speak meaningfully we assert an entire proposition, though we may do this by means of a single word.\(^\text{61}\) By Bentham’s own lights, therefore, the scenario that we have described, to the extent that it is intelligible, does not show the essence of “real” sub-propositional meaning (as we might be initially inclined to suppose); it merely shows that what we recognize as a sub-propositional grammatical unit can be used to assert a complete proposition.

If the reconstruction that I have been offering is correct, Bentham’s view of “genuine” sub-propositional meaning finally collapses. No word satisfies the requirements that Bentham lays down. What we are left with is Radical Benthamite Contextualism: a view of meaningful propositions as semantically unstructured wholes that leaves no room for sub-propositional meaning. Bentham recurrently wants to talk about the “independent import” of words, about words being more or less “significant” than others, about ways of “exposing the import” of words. But after ascending from the central to the extended application of the theory of fictions, and then to the final stage of the dialectic of Bentham’s contextualism, we see that he is not

really entitled to speak that way. The process of “abstraction and analysis” through which the inarticulate propositions of our quasi-human ancestors were broken down into “fragments” is, for Bentham, an intrinsically falsifying process. Between the “language of brutes” and our own language there is no real semantic difference: the articulation exhibited by our propositions is merely grammatical; at most it can deceive us into thinking that it corresponds to a genuine semantic complexity.

This concludes our discussion of Bentham. In the next section, we are going to examine Russell’s views and the different sort of difficulties that saddle his account of propositional and sub-propositional meaning.

10. Russell: atomism, contextualism, and the problem of propositional unity

Russell is committed to empiricist assumptions that overlap with Bentham’s in some important respects, and differ in others. In virtue of the specificities of his own philosophical system, Russell is able to avoid the paradoxical outcome of Radical Benthamite Contextualism; but in virtue of the ideas that he shares with Bentham, Russell is drawn into equally intractable problems.

It is well known that Russell changed his mind many times and very rapidly. As I mentioned above, I am only going to consider the works he wrote between 1903 and 1918. More specifically, I will focus on the views that follow the introduction of the theory of descriptions in “On Denoting” (1905), taking into account the Principles of Mathematics (1903) only in so far as
it expresses commitments that continue to inform Russell’s thought after the adoption of that theory.

Throughout this broad phase of his philosophical development, Russell shares with Bentham an atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning, modeled on a characteristically empiricist understanding of ostensive definition. A word—any word—has a meaning by naming an object to which it has somehow been attached. This assumption finds expression in Russell’s “fundamental principle” for the analysis of propositions, which is known in the secondary literature as the “principle of acquaintance”:

> Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted. [...] We must attach some meaning to the words we use, if we are to speak significantly and not utter mere noise; and the meaning we attach to our words must be something with which we are acquainted.62

Words have meanings by naming entities with which we are directly acquainted. The view, here, is atomistic at all levels—ontological, epistemological, and semantic. The world is a collection of conceptually independent entities; we can be acquainted with some of these entities, where “acquaintance” is a primitive two-term relation that can hold between a subject and an entity independently of any other epistemic stance of the subject; and we can attach a word to each of the independent entities with which we are independently acquainted, so that the word acquires

62 Russell 1912, p. 58. See also Russell 1905, p. 56: “[I]n every proposition that we can apprehend [...] all the constituents are really entities with which we have immediate acquaintance.” Arguably, an anticipation of the principle of acquaintance appears already in the Preface to the *Principles of Mathematics*, where Russell writes that the process of logical analysis necessarily terminates with entities with which the mind must have “that kind of acquaintance [...] which it has with redness or the taste of a pineapple” (Russell 1903, p. v).
and retains a meaning independently of its possible occurrence in propositional contexts. Thus for Russell, as for Bentham, the name-bearer relation, atomistically understood, constitutes the model of all sub-propositional meaning.

Moreover, Russell shares with Bentham the idea that we must choose between the atomistic independence from propositional context of genuinely significant words, and the unilateral form of dependence that characterizes contextually defined expressions. All the apparently significant expressions that do not comply with the atomistic ideal must be paraphrased away through contextual definition. Initially, in “On Denoting,” Russell argues that we must paraphrase away all “denoting phrases,” which include definite descriptions as well as the expressions that we use in ordinary language to express generality (such as “some,” “all,” “every,” etc.). Then, in subsequent writings, Russell introduces the general notion of an “incomplete symbol” for all the expressions requiring contextual definition, and subsumes under this category not only denoting phrases, but also various kinds of “logical constructions” (such as, for example, classes).

There is therefore substantial agreement between Bentham and Russell about the nature of sub-propositional meaning. However, Russell’s epistemological and metaphysical doctrines differ significantly from Bentham’s and trigger a different philosophical dialectic. The first difference to notice is that Russell imposes a stricter epistemological requirement on sub-propositional meaning. As we saw above, Bentham maintains that we can name not only entities of which we are immediately aware, but also entities that we know by inference. “The Almighty Being” can be, for Bentham, a genuine name, and thus a genuinely significant word, provided

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63 For a masterful discussion of Russell’s atomism, see Hylton 1990.
64 See Russell 1918-1919, p. 253.
that we are right in inferring its existence from entities that we know to exist non-inferentially. For Russell, on the contrary, all significant words must name entities with which we are immediately acquainted. Words that appear to be significant, even though they do not satisfy this requirement, must be paraphrased away. So, for example, any meaningful proposition asserting something about “the Almighty Being” must be analyzed until we reach a form of expression containing only words that stand for entities with which we are acquainted.

This stricter epistemological requirement on the meaningfulness of words can appear to set up the conditions for an even more uncontrolled proliferation of contextually defined expressions than the one to be found in Bentham. But this is not actually the case. We certainly find in Russell an astonishing growth of contextually defined expressions; but not as uncontrolled as Bentham’s. When Russell comes to think that we can never be directly acquainted with the objects of the external world, but only with the sense data that are possibly caused by them, he also comes to maintain, as required by his assumptions, that all the words that appear to name such objects (i.e. the words that we ordinarily take to be paradigmatic examples of proper names) are not really names, but incomplete symbols that must be analyzed in terms of names of sense-data. As Russell’s philosophy develops, more and more expressions are regarded as incomplete symbols. But in spite of this, Russell, unlike Bentham, never reaches the point of being committed to the paradoxical idea that all words have the status of

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65 Russell’s view of how this analysis should be carried out changes significantly over time. In “On Denoting” (1905), Russell was still allowing for the possibility of genuine names of persons and external objects, provided that we are acquainted (in a relatively ordinary sense of the word) with their bearers. In The Problems of Philosophy (1912), Russell maintains that all names of external objects should be analyzed away by applying the theory of definite descriptions: when we speak about “Scott” we are really speaking about the cause of such-and-such sense data. In “The Relation of Sense Data to Physics” (1914), Russell argues that we can avoid committing ourselves to the uncertain existence of external causes of our sense data: we can simply conceive the talk about people and chairs as talk about classes of sense data.
contextually defined expressions. In fact, he never needs to go beyond what corresponds to the
first stage of the dialectic of Bentham’s contextualism—i.e. the stage at which we introduce only
contextually defined expressions that can be effectively paraphrased away.

Russell is entitled to stop at this point of the dialectic because he adopts a more liberal
metaphysics, integrated with appropriate epistemological stipulations. For Russell, *universals* are
genuine entities. They do not “exist” in the manner in which (mental or physical) particulars
exist; but they nonetheless “have being” or “subsist” in a timeless world.66 Moreover, he posits
that we can be directly acquainted with universals.67 As Bentham believes that every articulate
proposition must contain at least a name of a quality, so Russell thinks that “[e]very complete
sentence must contain at least one word which stands for a universal.”68 For Bentham, however,
qualities are not real entities, and thus all the words that purport to name qualities must be
regarded as sham semantic units that have no real meaning. For Russell, on the other hand,
universals are entities that meet all the metaphysical and epistemological requirements for being
named by our words. Russell, therefore, has room for propositions that contain only genuinely
significant words, requiring no further analysis. These will be propositions that consist of
appropriate combinations of names of particulars and names of universals with which we are
immediately acquainted.

It seems, therefore, that in virtue of metaphysical and epistemological contrivances,
Russell is able to vindicate the idea of sub-propositional meaning and thus to avoid the
unpalatable tenets of Radical Benthamite Contextualism. But the same atomistic conception of
the meanings of words that leads Bentham into his troubles drives Russell into the *problem of the*

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66 See Russell 1912, pp. 89-90 and 100.
67 See Russell 1912, pp. 51-52 and 101.
68 Russell 1912, p. 52; see also p. 93.
unity of the proposition. Russell’s account reduces propositions to mere lists of objects. But propositions are different from mere lists: the former, unlike the latter, manage to say something. By construing all significant words as names of objects, and by assuming that naming is prior to and independent of saying, Russell puts himself in the uncomfortable position of having to answer the following question: How can we ever get from naming to saying? Such a question has all the appearances of a hopeless philosophical impasse. To stipulate that a proposition is made up of words that atomistically name different kinds of entities—“particulars” and “universals”—doesn’t seem to help. The list “Socrates, walking” appears to be as incapable of expressing a genuine propositional content as the list “Socrates, Plato.” And it is equally unhelpful to introduce further propositional elements in the hope that they could “glue together” names of particulars and names of universals. Given Russell’s assumptions, these new expressions can only be names of other entities; their introduction, accordingly, will simply generate longer lists of objects.69

Russell was well aware of the problem. In the Principles, he formulates the problem of propositional unity as a difficulty in accounting for the nature of “verbs.”70 By “verbs,” in that work, Russell means non-linguistic entities denoted by grammatical verbs; and by “propositions,” he means non-linguistic entities denoted by meaningful sentences, characterized by the peculiar fact that either have the property “truth” or the property “falsity.” A proposition, he maintains, is a unity that differs from the mere enumeration of its constituent parts. The

69 The problem of propositional unity was one of the central concerns of early analytic philosophers. Its classical formulation is normally associated with F. H. Bradley; see for instance Bradley 1893, chap. 2. The problem was then virtually forgotten by later generations of analytic philosophers. But in recent times, there has been a renewed interest in the problem, even outside the circles of historians of analytic philosophy. See for example Palmer 1988; Gibson 2004; Davidson 2005, especially chaps. 4 and 5; King 2007; Searle 2008; Gaskin 2008.

70 The account that follows is based especially on Russell 1903, §§52-55, 81, 136-138.
source of propositional unity is the verb. Verbs can occur in two ways: as verbs, and as verbal-nouns. A verb binds together the propositional constituents only when it actually occurs as a verb. The problem is that when we analyze the proposition, we inevitably turn the verb into a verbal noun, thus destroying the unity of the proposition:

A proposition [...] is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition. The verb, when used as verb, embodies the unity of the proposition, and is thus distinguishable from the verb considered as term, though I do not know how to give a clear account of the precise nature of the distinction.\(^{77}\)

In Russell’s atomistic system, there is no room for “verbs as verbs.” He acknowledges that this is a fundamental difficulty, and that he has no clue about how to solve it, but decides nonetheless to leave it unsolved, with the rather surprising excuse that the problem belongs to logic in general, whereas the book that he was writing was specifically concerned with the foundations of mathematics.\(^{72}\)

The “problem of propositional unity,” as Russell explicitly frames it in the *Principles*, does not take place at the level of language, but at the level of the entities denoted by linguistic expressions. But a structural analogue of that problem appears for Russell at the level of language. Just as Russell cannot explain how a “proposition” (in his sense) can be anything more than an *aggregate* of entities, so he cannot explain how a sentence can be anything more that a sequence of meaningful words that *lists* a number of entities, without expressing anything that can be judged to be true or false. Already in the *Principles*, therefore, Russell faces the “problem

\(^{71}\) Russell 1903, §54.  
\(^{72}\) See Russell 1903, §§52 and 55.
of the unity of the proposition” in the sense in which I have used and will continue to use this expression in this work (unless otherwise specified).

The problem, in various forms, continues to haunt Russell in later works, even though he never discusses it as explicitly as he did in the Principles. In a letter to F. H. Bradley, written eleven years after the publication of the Principles, when his philosophical positions had already undergone many significant changes, Russell was still ready to admit that he had no solution to the question of unities: “I fully recognize the vital importance of the questions you raise, particularly as regards ‘unities’; I recognize that it is my duty to answer if I can, and, if I cannot, to long for an answer as long as I live.” We shouldn’t be surprised by the fact that Russell continues to be stuck with the same problem. The various doctrines that he adopts after the Principles are developed within a framework that remains thoroughly atomistic; and it seems that the problem of propositional unity is bound to remain intractable unless that very framework is put into question.

Bentham does not face the problem of propositional unity. According to the radical form of contextualism to which he is ultimately committed, there is nothing left that needs to be unified into a complete proposition. Meaningful propositions, for Bentham, are semantic monoliths, devoid of internal articulation, and there can be no issue of how the parts can cohere into a unified whole if the whole is assumed to lack parts in the first place. Conversely, Russell does not run the risk of losing sight of the idea of sub-propositional meaning; but the very commitments that enable him to avoid this difficulty draw him into the problem of propositional unity.

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74 There is widespread agreement among commentators about the lasting significance of the problem of the unity of the proposition in the development of Russell’s philosophy. See for instance Linsky 1992; Hylton 2005, chap. 1; Candlish 1996; Conant 2002b; Hanks 2007; Stevens 2008.
unity. Even though Bentham and Russell face different problems, these problems stem from their shared acceptance of the Empiricist Framework.

11. Conclusion

I have argued that Bentham and Russell develop their respective views of propositional and sub-propositional meaning within the Empiricist Framework. This philosophical framework admits only of unilateral relations of priority and dependence between the meanings of words and the meanings of propositions. It posits an atomistic ideal of sub-propositional meaning, according to which genuinely significant words have meanings that in no way depend on the meanings of the propositions in which they occur. Moreover, the Empiricist Framework imposes a forced choice between this form of atomistic independence from propositional context and the unilateral form of dependence that characterizes contextually defined expressions. For any word, either it satisfies the atomistic ideal, or it is a *sham* semantic unit, which makes no real contribution to the meanings of the propositions in which it occurs. The only form of contextualism that is possible within the Empiricist Framework is one that attributes to *some* or *all* sub-propositional expressions a unilateral dependence on propositional context.

I have also shown that Bentham and Russell, by adopting this framework, run into difficulties. The difficulties they face differ in accordance with the different metaphysical and epistemological doctrines with which they integrate their common commitment to the Empiricist Framework. Bentham is drawn into a dialectic which ultimately commits him to Radical Benthamite Contextualism. According to this position, there is no such thing as genuine sub-propositional meaning. The position admits only of meaningful propositions, construed as
semantic monoliths devoid of any semantic articulation. But in the absence of an account of word-meaning, it is questionable whether Bentham is actually entitled to talk even of propositional meaning. Russell appears to be able to make room for both propositional and sub-propositional meaning. But he cannot explain how the two kinds of meaning are connected with one another. He cannot explain how a number of words can combine into a unified proposition which manages to expresses a complete propositional content. But in the absence of an account of propositional unity, it is doubtful whether Russell is actually entitled to talk of either meaningful words or meaningful propositions.

Even if one thinks that the difficulties encountered by Bentham and Russell are not insurmountable, they should appear serious enough to make it worthwhile to explore the merits of rejecting the Empiricist Framework. In the next chapter, I will argue that Frege follows this alternative approach.
Chapter 2

Frege’s Contextualism

1. Frege against the Empiricist Framework

In the previous chapter I examined two accounts of propositional and sub-propositional meaning that are developed within the Empiricist Framework: one proposed by Jeremy Bentham, and the other proposed by Bertrand Russell. The Empiricist Framework, as I defined it, is characterized by an atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning and by the correlative assumption that we must choose between two options: for any word, either it has a meaning that in no way depends on its propositional context, or it merely appears to have a meaning of its own, but is in fact a sham semantic unit that makes no contribution to the meanings of the wholes of which it is a part. I argued that Bentham and Russell, in spite of the differences that distinguish their respective accounts, are equally committed to these basic assumptions. Moreover, I showed that their shared commitment to the Empiricist Framework is the source of difficulties for their respective accounts—difficulties that vary in accordance with the differences between their respective collateral views about metaphysical and epistemological matters. Bentham is drawn into a philosophical dialectic which issues in a radical form of contextualism which leaves no
room for the very idea of sub-propositional meaning; Russell, on the other hand, is left with the problem of propositional unity.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. I will argue, first, that Frege’s account of the relation between propositional and sub-propositional meaning—hereafter Frege’s Contextualism—opposes the Empiricist Framework and should therefore be contrasted with Bentham’s and Russell’s respective views. Secondly, I will maintain that Frege’s Contextualism has the advantage of avoiding the difficulties that Bentham and Russell incur in virtue of their shared commitment to the Empiricist Framework.

I will begin with an overview of two sets of passages from Frege’s writings. In Section 2, I will look at passages where Frege is ostensibly committed to some form of dependence of sub-propositional meaning on propositional meaning. In Section 3, I will look at passages where Frege is ostensibly committed to some form of dependence of propositional meaning on sub-propositional meaning. Then, in subsequent sections, I will propose interpretations of those forms of dependence, arguing that they constitute the two aspects of a form of interdependence between propositional wholes and propositional parts which is ruled out by the Empiricist Framework and is significantly stronger than the forms of interdependence posited by the most influential interpretations of Frege’s work.

2. The primacy of propositions

Frege’s commitment to the idea that the meanings of words are in some way dependent on the meanings of complete propositions is most famously expressed in the various formulations of the
Context Principle that occur in the *Foundations of Arithmetic*. The Context Principle is stated explicitly at least four times in that work:¹

[1] In the enquiry that follows, I have kept to three fundamental principles:
[i] always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
[ii] never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but always in the context of a proposition;
[iii] never to loose sight of the distinction between concept and object.²

[2] But we ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning. It may be that mental pictures float before us all the while, but these need not correspond to the logical elements in the judgment. It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on its parts also their contents.³

[3] How, then, are numbers to be give to us, if we cannot have any ideas or intuition of them? Since it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning, our problem become this: To define the sense of a proposition in which a number word occurs.⁴

[4] We next laid down the fundamental principle that we must never try to define the meaning of a word in isolation, but only as it is used in the context of a proposition.⁵

There are several differences between these formulations of the Context Principle.⁶ It is common practice to treat the formulation that appears in the third quotation (“It is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning”)—or alternatively, the almost equivalent formulation

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¹ I wrote “explicitly stated” because it may be argued that the Context Principle is adumbrated also in other parts of the texts (for example, in *F*, §46, p. 59: “It should throw some light on the matter to consider number in the context of a judgment which brings out its basic use”); and I wrote “at least four times” because one may want to count two formulations of the Context Principle in the second quotation given below.

² *F*, Introduction, x.

³ *F*, §60, p. 71.

⁴ *F*, §62, p. 73.


⁶ For a helpful discussion of some of the differences between these formulations, see Stuhlmann-Laeisz 2001.
that occurs in the second sentence of the second quotation (“Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning”)—as the standard formulation of the Context Principle. As I hope to show in the course of the following sections, this practice is well founded. Its justification derives from the following asymmetry: While the import of the privileged formulations of the Context Principle can be clarified by examining the other formulations, focusing exclusively on any of those other formulations can encourage various misinterpretations of the Context Principle. At this stage, however, it is enough to observe, quite uncontroversially, that the formulations of the Context Principle contained in the four passages quoted above—whether we take them individually or collectively—express a view that attributes to the meanings of words some form of dependence on propositional context.

As it is often observed, The Foundations of Arithmetic, a relatively early work (1884), is the only place where Frege explicitly states the Context Principle. In particular, none of the formulations of the Context Principle that occur in the Foundations is reasserted in other works.

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7 To anticipate, the formulations that occur in the first and forth quotation, when taken by themselves, may encourage a merely epistemic understanding of the Context Principle, according to which we should not look for the meanings of words in isolation because in natural language words are often ambiguous and propositional context is needed to carry out disambiguation. But as I shall argue in Section 5, Frege endorsed a much stronger form of contextualism. The reason why we should not ask for the meanings of words in isolation is that words do not have a meaning except as parts of meaningful propositions—and this is meant to apply to all words (ambiguous or not), of any language (natural or artificial). On the other hand, the formulation that occurs in the last sentence of the second quotation, when taken in isolation, may encourage an excessively strong construal of the import of the Context Principle. As I shall argue in detail in Section 10, the notion of propositional “part” is doing a lot of work in that formulation and must be understood in the right way. Frege view is that, if a proposition is meaningful, then its logical (or semantic) parts also have a meaning. He certainly does not believe that if a proposition is meaningful, then all its orthographical parts (such as letters), or visual parts (such as patches of color), also have a meaning of their own. Moreover, as will be shown in Section 9, he does not think that everything that looks like a logical part of a proposition is actually so: meaningful propositions (of ordinary language) can contain grammatical units that, in spite of appearances, do not have any meaning of their own.
However, there are some passages, in both very early and very late writings, which express
Frege’s constant commitment to a view that can be seen to be closely connected to the contextual
dictum. The two passages that follow were written in 1880/1881 and 1919 respectively:

[I]nstead of putting a judgment together out of an individual subject and an already
previously formed concept as predicate, we do the opposite and arrive at a concept by
splitting up the content of possible judgment.\(^8\)

What is distinctive of my conception of logic is that I begin by giving pride of place to the
content of the word ‘true’, and then immediately go on to introduce a thought as that to
which the question “Is it true?” is in principle applicable. So I do not begin with concepts
and put them together to form a thought or judgment; I come by the parts of the thought by
analysing the thought.\(^9\)

These passages are not directly concerned with meaningful linguistic expressions, but with
“contents of possible judgments” and “thoughts.”\(^{10}\) Some commentators have plausibly argued
that these passages express Frege’s inheritance of the Kantian doctrine of the primacy of
judgment and his opposition to the traditional atomistic approach to logic, according to which
judgeable contents or thoughts arise from the combination of independently conceivable
components. The Context Principle, then, can be seen as a consequence of this anti-atomistic
conception of the components of judgeable contents or thoughts, which Frege espoused

\(^8\) “Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Concept-script,” in \(PW\), p. 17.
\(^9\) “Notes to Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in \(PW\), p. 253.
\(^{10}\) The different terminologies that Frege employs in the two passages reflect some changes in
his semantic views. Early Frege used the expression “content of possible judgment” to refer to
the logical content of a complete declarative sentence, which can be intelligibly judged to be
ture. After the introduction of the sense/reference distinction, the earlier notion of judgeable
content is split up into the notion of “thought” (the \textit{sense} of a complete declarative sentence) and
“truth-value” (the \textit{reference} of a complete declarative sentence), and judgment is characterized
as the “advancement from a thought to a truth-value”; see “On \textit{Sinn} and \textit{Bedeutung},” in \(TFR\), pp.
151-171.
throughout his career.\textsuperscript{11} If there is no such thing as a thought-component “in isolation” (since the parts of the thought are not unilaterally prior to the thought, but are only obtainable by analyzing the complete thought), then there is no such thing as an isolated word expressing an isolated thought-component. On the contrary, words express thought-components by being parts of propositions that express complete thoughts of which those thought-components are constituent parts.\textsuperscript{12} The dependence of word-meaning on propositional meaning reflects the dependence of thought-components on complete thoughts.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, we need to clarify what kind of dependence is at issue in the passages that we considered in this section. But in preparation for that task, it will help to have in view some of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Hans Sluga has defended this reading on many occasions. See Sluga 1975; Sluga 1977; Sluga 1980, pp. 90-95; Sluga 1987, p. 86. See also Conant 1998, p. 232.
\item For simplicity, I am formulating this point only in terms of “thoughts” and “thought-components.” But the same point can also be formulated in terms of “judgeable contents” and “components of judgeable contents.”
\item This account of the import of the two passages quoted above and of their relationship to the Context Principle has been challenged by Michael Dummett. For Dummett, those passages concern the question of the extraction of “complex predicates” from complete propositions and the correlative formation of new (complex) concepts—a question that he thinks is quite independent from whatever is at stake in the Context Principle (see Dummett 1981b, pp. 295-6, 539; for the distinction between “complex” and “simple predicates,” see Dummett 1981b, pp. 292-322, and Dummett 1981a, pp. 27-33; these views of Dummett’s will be further discussed in Chapter 3, Section 4). There are at least three reasons, however, for finding Dummett’s reading of the two passages far from conclusive. First, the attribution to Frege of the distinction between “simple” and “complex predicates” (which, as Dummett acknowledges, was never explicitly drawn by Frege) is itself controversial and has been challenged by several commentators on both exegetical and philosophical grounds (see Sluga 1975, p. 480; Geach 1975, pp. 147ff; Geach 1976). Secondly, in the 1919 passage, Frege speaks quite generally of how he comes “by the parts of the thoughts by analyzing the thought,” and this would be eminently misleading if he were really talking about a very restricted class of thought-components, namely the senses of complex predicates, as opposed to the senses of proper names and simple predicates. Finally, the 1880/1881 passage is followed by an analogy (which I will discuss in detail in Section 7) that would be grossly inadequate if the passage were intended to apply only to a restricted class of sub-propositional contents.
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the passages where Frege appears by all means to be committed to the existence of a dependence that runs in the opposite direction.

3. The “independent” meanings of words

There are many places in Frege’s writings where he claims that words have a meaning of their own and that the meanings of propositions depend on the meanings of their constituent words. Most famously, Frege emphasizes these ideas in some of his later writings, where he connects the semantic articulation of propositions to the so-called productivity of language—i.e. the fact that, given our mastery of a finite lexicon and a finite number of grammatical rules, we can form and understand an indefinite number of propositions, many of which have never been heard before. Here is a representative selection of passages:

[A] proposition consists of parts which must somehow contribute to the expression of the sense of the proposition, so they themselves must somehow have a sense. Take the proposition “Etna is higher than Vesuvius.” This contains the name “Etna,” which occurs also in other propositions, e.g. in the proposition “Etna is in Sicily.” The possibility of our understanding propositions which we have never heard before rests evidently on this, that we construct the sense of a proposition out of parts that correspond to the words. If we find the same word in two propositions, e.g. “Etna,” then we also recognize something common to the corresponding thoughts, something corresponding to this word. Without this, language in the proper sense would be impossible. We could indeed adopt the convention that certain signs were to express certain thoughts, like railway signals (“The track is clear”); but in this way we would always be restricted to a very narrow area, and we could not form a completely new proposition, one which would be understood by another person even though no special convention has been adopted beforehand for this case.\(^\text{14}\)

It is remarkable what language can achieve. With a few sounds and combinations of sounds it is capable of expressing a huge number of thoughts, and, in particular, thoughts

\(^\text{14}\) Frege to Jourdain, Jan 1914, in \textit{TFR}, p. 320.
which have not hitherto been grasped or expressed by any man. How can it achieve so much? By virtue of the fact that thoughts have parts out of which they are built up. And these parts, these building blocks, correspond to groups of sounds, out of which the proposition expressing the thought is built up, so that the construction of the proposition out of the parts of a proposition corresponds to the construction of a thought out of the parts of a thought. And as we take a thought to be the sense of a proposition, so we may call a part of a thought the sense of that part of the proposition which corresponds to it.\footnote{15}

Both of these passages were written after the introduction of the sense/reference distinction. The sense of a complete proposition, for Frege, is a thought; if the proposition has a reference in addition to a sense, its reference is a truth-value, i.e. The True or The False. Frege’s claim, in the previous passages, is that “language in the proper sense” exhibits sub-propositional compositional structure. Propositions are not semantic monoliths that pick out internally unstructured thoughts. On the contrary, both thoughts and propositions are internally articulated. Moreover, the logical structure of propositions is isomorphic to the structure of the corresponding thoughts. Propositions are made up of words that have a sense (and possibly a reference) of their own. A word may retain the same sense (and the same reference, if it has any reference) in different propositional contexts. The senses of the individual words or phrases that make up a proposition \textit{compose} the thought expressed by the whole sense. If all the parts of a proposition have a reference in addition to a sense, they also contribute to determining the reference of the whole proposition—i.e., they contribute to determining whether the whole refers to The True or The False.\footnote{16}


\footnote{16} For the sake of simplicity, I will ignore in this chapter Frege’s discussion of indexical expressions such as “I,” “here,” or “today.” Frege argues that in the case of a proposition containing indexical expressions, the sense and reference of its constituent expressions do not \textit{suffice} to determine the sense and reference of the proposition as a whole: one must consider also some features of the context in which the proposition is uttered (see “Thought,” in \textit{TFR}, pp. 331-}
Frege’s commitment to the sub-propositional articulation of language emerges also in a variety of other contexts, where he is not immediately concerned to highlight the connection between compositionality and productivity. In a short piece in which he summarizes his main logical doctrines, Frege remarks:

[A] thought is made of parts that are not themselves thoughts. […] Splitting up the thought expressed by a proposition corresponds to […] a splitting up of the proposition. […] We can regard a proposition as a mapping of a thought: corresponding to the whole-part relation of a thought and its parts we have, by and large, the same relation for the proposition and its parts.\(^\text{17}\)

To the surprise of many commentators, Frege makes these remarks only a few paragraphs after a passage (quoted in the previous section) in which he claims that the distinctive feature of his logic is to begin with what is true or false, i.e. a thought, and then come by the parts of the thought by analyzing the thought.

In a different work, Frege formulates in a similar way the idea that the structure of propositions mirrors the structure of the thoughts they express—this time in the context of a discussion of the kind of definition that allows us to replace complex sub-propositional expressions with simple ones:

As a proposition is generally a complex sign, so the thought expressed by it is complex too: in fact it is put together in such a way that parts of the thought correspond to parts of the proposition. So as a general rule when a group of signs occurs in a proposition it will have a sense which is part of the thought expressed.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{17}\) “Notes to Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in *PW*, p. 255, modified translation.
\(^\text{18}\) “Logic in Mathematics,” in *PW*, pp. 207-208.
Quite interestingly, Frege holds in this passage that it is only “generally” the case that propositions are complex signs. Similarly, in the passage that I quoted immediately before this one, Frege holds that he grammatical articulation of a proposition corresponds only “by and large” to the articulation of the thought that it expresses. I will come back in Section 9 on the significance of these qualifications. For the moment, I am interested in eliciting the idea that these qualifications are meant to modify: the view of propositions as made up of parts that have meanings of their own and that contribute to the meanings of the propositions of which they are parts.

When Frege describes propositions as “complex signs,” he is not concerned with merely grammatical or orthographical complexity, but with semantic complexity. In Frege’s mature view, the notion of semantic complexity has two aspects, corresponding to his distinction between sense and reference. The following passage from the Grundgesetze clarifies the notion of semantic complexity by focusing on the level of reference (Bedeutung):

Any symbol or word can indeed be regarded as consisting of parts; but we do not deny its simplicity unless, given the general rules of grammar, or of the symbolism, the Bedeutung of the whole would follow from the Bedeutungen of the parts, and these parts occur also in other combinations and are treated as independent signs with a Bedeutung of their own.\(^{19}\)

A referring sign should be regarded as “complex,” in Frege’s terminology, only if it is composed of parts with a reference of their own, each of which contributes to determining the reference of

\(^{19}\) *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, vol. 2, §66, in *TFR*, p. 269.
the whole sign. Since, for Frege, there is no reference without sense (words refer to objects and concepts via their senses), semantic complexity at the level of reference implies semantic complexity at the level of sense: a complex referring expression is made up of parts that have a sense of their own, jointly composing the sense of the whole sign. On the other hand, since Frege officially envisions the possibility of expressions that have sense but lack reference, a sign can be semantically complex at the level of sense even though it lacks complexity at the level of reference. Linguistic constructions such as “Odysseus set ashore at Ithaca”, or “The father of Odysseus,” are semantically complex when considered as expressions having sense, but lack a correspondent complexity when considered as expressions having reference, because some of their constituent parts have no reference. So when Frege writes, in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, that “a proposition is in general a complex sign,” he means that a proposition is characterized at least by semantic complexity at the level of sense, and possibly also by semantic complexity at the level of reference. In either case, the complexity that Frege ascribes to propositions is much richer than merely grammatical or orthographical complexity.

An instructive illustration of the contrast between semantically complex and semantically simple signs is provided by a discussion that appears in the Grundgesetze. Frege is considering a proposal to avoid Russell’s paradox about the classes of classes that are not members of themselves by regarding terms that purport to refer to classes (and to numbers, which Frege conceives as classes) as “sham proper names”:

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20 Frege, in the passage just quoted, is concerned to clarify the semantic complexity of signs in general—both propositional and sub-propositional. Frege is not trying to bring out what belongs specifically to the complexity of propositions, as opposed to the complexity of complex singular terms and complex concept-words. In fact, in Frege’s mature system there is arguably no room for a difference in kind between propositional and sub-propositional semantic complexity, since propositions are officially treated as complex proper names of truth-values.
[Suppose we] regard class names as sham proper names which would thus not have a Bedeutung. They had to be regarded as part of signs that had a Bedeutung only as wholes. Now of course one may think it advantageous for some end to form different signs that partly resemble one another, without thereby making them into complex signs. The simplicity of the signs requires only that the parts that may be distinguished within it should have no separate Bedeutung. On this view, then, even what we usually regard as a number sign would not really be a sign at all, but only an inseparable part of a sign. A definition of the sign “2” would be impossible; instead we should have to define many signs, which would contain “2” as an inseparable part, but could not be regarded as logically compounded of “2” and another part. It would thus be illicit to replace such an inseparable part by a letter; for as regard the content of the whole sign, there would be no complexity.21

The proposal that Frege is here examining is to treat class terms as contextually defined expressions.22 (One thing that should be kept in mind, here, is that a “proper name” [Eigennname], in Frege’s terminology, may be semantically complex; definite descriptions count therefore for Frege as proper names; in the rest of this chapter, we will follow Frege’s terminological policy.) The idea is that while class terms may occur as parts of meaningful signs, they are themselves only pseudo semantic units devoid of a separate meaning (sense and reference). So a sign of the form “\{x: Fx\} = \{x: Gx\}” is meaningful: it says, as a whole, that all Fs are Gs. But, on the view under consideration, it does not mean what it does in virtue of the independent meanings of the signs “\{x: Fx\}” and “\{x: Gx\}”: these are sham proper names that can be paraphrased away. Similarly, a sign of the form “a \in \{x: Fx\}” says that a is F, but it does not do so in virtue of the semantic contribution provided by the sings “a” and “\in” and “\{x: Fx\}.” Even if we regarded the proposition as logically composed of “a” and “\xi \in \{x: Fx\},” where the latter is a genuine concept-word (meaning the same as “\xi is F”), the apparent proper name contained in the

22 Cf. the discussion of the “virtual theory of classes” in Chapter 1, Section 4.
concept-word would still be an inseparable part of a meaningful sign, devoid of independent semantic significance. Frege here rejects such an understanding of class terms and numerals on the ground that it is incompatible with some basic features of arithmetical practice. He maintains that class terms must be regarded as genuine semantic units. This is therefore a case where Frege is engaged in vindicating the notion of sub-propositional semantic complexity.

The last passage that I would like to mention in this section occurs in the context of a criticism of “incomplete” or “conditional” definitions. For Frege, a proper definition must fix the sense and reference of a word in all its possible propositional contexts. For example, the definition of a first-level concept-word must determine, for any object, whether it does or does not fall under the concept supposedly designated by the concept-word. Similarly, the proper definition of a proper name must determine, for any object, whether it is or it is not identical to the object supposedly designated by the proper name. Frege argues that proper definitions are necessary when we are interested in drawing inferences and carrying out proofs. He attacks, accordingly, the mathematical practice of providing “incomplete definitions” (as happens, for example, when one defines “addition” initially only for natural numbers and then “extends” its meaning by defining it for rational numbers, real numbers, and so on). A proper definition, for Frege, must fix the sense and reference of a word once and for all; only in this way it succeeds in conferring to the word an “independent Bedeutung,” which he thinks is necessary if we are going to use the word in inferences:

The task of our vernacular languages is essentially fulfilled if people engaged in communication with one another connect the same thought, or approximately the same thought, with the same proposition. For this it is not at all necessary that the individual words should have a sense and Bedeutung of their own, provided only that the whole proposition has a sense. Where inferences are to be drawn the case is different: for this it
is essential that the same expression should occur in two propositions and should have exactly the same Bedeutung in both cases. It must therefore have a Bedeutung of its own, independent of the other parts of the proposition. In the case of incompletely defined concept-words there is no such independence: what matters in such a case is whether the case at hand is one to which the definition refers, and that depends on the other parts of the proposition. Such words cannot therefore be acknowledged to have an independent Bedeutung at all. This is why I reject conditional definitions of signs for concepts.23

The requirement of complete definition is certainly open to dispute. (It is obviously unreasonable if applied to ordinary language, as Frege is ready to admit; and it can perhaps be questioned even in connection with formal disciplines such as mathematics.24) We are not interested, here, in the requirement as such, but in some of the weaker theses that it implies. The requirement laid down by Frege shows that he recognized the phenomenon of sub-propositional meaning: words can have a meaning (i.e. a sense and reference) of their own and occur with the same meaning in a whole range of different propositional contexts. Moreover, the rationale that Frege supplies for his requirement shows that he regards the semantic articulation of propositions as a precondition of our capacity to draw inferences. There would be no such thing as a valid inference if propositions were not articulated into semantic units that they could share with one another. Take the following argument: “Everything that is a man is mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal.” This argument would not be valid if “Socrates” didn’t have the same meaning in the second premise and in the conclusion, if “man” didn’t have the same meaning in the two premises, and so on.25 This seems to be a sound point even if we drop Frege’s stronger

23 Frege to Peano, 29.9.1896, in PMC, p. 115. For the sake of conformity with previously quoted passages, I changed the translation by leaving the word “Bedeutung” untranslated.
24 Peano, replying to Frege, points out that “extensions of meaning happen all the time in mathematics (Peano to Frege, undated, in PMC, p. 119).
25 But couldn’t propositions follow logically from one another, even if they were completely devoid of sub-propositional structure? This would be possible if the concept of inference could be completely divorced from the concept of formal validity; but the possibility of such a
claim that in order to fix the reference (Bedeutung) of a word, we must specify in advance what semantic contribution it makes to the determination of the reference of all the propositions in which it can possibly occur.

From the various passages that have been considered, it seems safe to conclude that Frege is concerned to emphasize, in the context of a wide variety of discussions, that the meanings of propositions, in so far as they are composed of meaningful words, depend on the meanings of their constituent words.

4. The “notorious crux of Frege interpretation”

It is widely maintained that the two sets of passages that I have presented are prima facie mutually incompatible. As some authors have colorfully put it, reconciling Frege’s commitment to the Context Principle with his commitment to linguistic compositionality is “a notorious crux of Frege interpretation.” If Frege is committed to the idea that the meanings of words depend on the meanings of the propositions in which they occur, how can he be coherently committed to the idea that the meanings of propositions depend on the meanings of their constituent words?

26 For a recent discussion of the exegetical and philosophical problems raised by Frege’s allegedly inconsistent claims, see Pelletier 2001 and Janssen 2001.

Scholars have tended to follow two main exegetical strategies for dealing with this putative problem. I shall refer to these strategies as the developmental approach and the two-orders-of-priority approach.

The developmental approach concedes that the commitments expressed in the two sets of remarks that I have quoted are mutually incompatible. Its ambition is not to show that Frege did not hold incoherent views, but, more modestly, that he did not hold incoherent views at the same time. The suggestion is that early Frege initially championed the priority of propositional meaning over sub propositional meaning, but then, sometimes after the publication of the Foundations, changed his mind and championed the priority of sub propositional meaning over propositional meaning.\(^\text{28}\)

The main problem with this approach is that it lacks convincing textual support. It is indeed true that the formulations of the Context Principle that occur in the Foundations are not restated in Frege’s later writings. And it is true that Frege connects explicitly the compositionality of language to its productivity only in his later writings. But it should be noticed, first, that Frege never explicitly rejected the Context Principle. Secondly, as we saw in Section 2, Frege subscribed throughout his career to a doctrine of the primacy of judgment that can be plausibly seen to be closely connected to the Context Principle. Finally, the recognition of the compositional nature of language can be seen to be implicitly at work throughout Frege’s career. Indeed, it appears to be involved in the very formulations of the Context Principle that occur in the Foundations: Words have a meaning—their own meaning!—only in the context of

\(^{28}\) Versions of the development approach can be found in Black 1964, p. 117; Resnik 1967; Resnik 1976; Milne 1986.
the proposition. The developmental approach owes whatever plausibility it possesses to the apparent lack of an alternative, rather than to positive textual evidence.

The two-orders-of-priority approach maintains that we should relativize the relation of dependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning to two different “order” or “levels.” This is by far the most popular strategy among commentators and exists in several different variants. Its first and most influential variant was proposed by Michael Dummett. According to Dummett, Frege maintains that propositional meaning is prior “in the order of explanation,” whereas word-meaning is prior “in the order of recognition.” What it is for a word to have a meaning is explained in terms of the contribution that the word makes to the meanings of the propositions in which it can occurs. Thus the meanings of propositions are prior in the order of explanation. But the recognition of the meanings of (at least some) propositions proceeds from the antecedent and independent recognition of the meanings of the words of which they are composed. Thus the meanings of words are prior in the order of recognition.29

More recently, Øystein Linnebo has argued for an elaboration of Dummett’s proposal which identifies the two “orders” distinguished by Dummett with the level of meta-semantic and semantic explanation respectively.30 A reconciliation between the Context Principle and the principle of compositionality which resembles Dummett’s in several respects has also been advanced by Hans-Johann Glock (in the context of a discussion of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus). Part of his proposal is that there is a general priority of propositional meaning over word-meaning, since the function of words is to contribute to the expression of complete propositional

29 See Dummett 1981a, p. 4; Dummett 1981b, pp. 545-547.
30 Linnebo, Unpublished A.
contents; but on each particular occasion in which words are used, their meanings are prior to the meanings of the propositions in which they occur.\textsuperscript{31}

I will discuss Dummett’s interpretation and other similar versions of the two-orders-of-priority approach in Chapter 7. I will argue that the views described by these interpretations are philosophically unstable. If that is correct, the principle of charity gives us good reason to look for a different reading. I will also show that such interpretations are explicitly designed to leave room for the possibility of \textit{meaningless combinations of meaningful words}. A combination of words such as “Chairman Mao is rare,” to take one of Dummett’s examples, is supposed to be meaningless \textit{because} it combines a proper name with a second-level concept-word, thereby violating Frege’s “theory of significance.”\textsuperscript{32} But if Frege wanted to leave room for the occurrence of meaningful words in nonsensical combinations, it is not easy to see how he could have possibly meant what he said when he wrote that “it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning”\textsuperscript{33} (\textit{F} §62, p. 73) and that “[i]t is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense,” since “it is \textit{this} that confers on its parts also their contents.”\textsuperscript{34}

The two-orders-of-priority approach can be fairly described as positing a form of \textit{interdependence} between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. The interpretation that I am going to propose also posits a form of interdependence between propositional wholes and propositional parts. But it is a \textit{stronger} form of interdependence, which rules out the possibility of meaningless combinations of meaningful words. For Frege, I am going to argue, there is indeed a sense in which words do not have a meaning in isolation or in nonsensical

\textsuperscript{31} Glock 2004, p 229.
\textsuperscript{32} Dummett 1981a, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{F}, §62, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{F}, §60, p. 71, emphasis added.
combinations, but only in the context of significant propositions. And yet, his view remains fully compatible with his statements about the compositional nature of language.  

5. The articulate proposition as an organic unity

In order to state my interpretation of Frege’s Context Principle, I first need to introduce a distinction that is not explicitly drawn in Frege’s writings. I shall distinguish between “logical units” and “linguistic expressions”:

A *logical unit* is a written or spoken item that, on each of its occurrences, actually expresses a propositional or sub-propositional content.

A *linguistic expression*, on the other hand, is a written or spoken item that, on each of its occurrences, *looks like* a logical unit, without necessarily *being* such a unit.

Logical units are items that have, on each of their occurrences, actual logical meaning, as this notion was defined in the Introduction (Section 2). *Words* are special cases of linguistic expressions, and whenever a word actually expresses a sub-propositional content, it is a *sub-propositional logical unit*, having actual sub-propositional logical meaning. In order to illustrate this distinction, let’s consider the following propositions:

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35 The interpretation that I am going to propose develops suggestions contained in the writings of Gilbert Ryle (Ryle 2009, pp. 61 and 191-192) and, more recently, in those of Cora Diamond and James Conant (Diamond 1991, pp. 108-113; Conant 2002, p. 432, n. 34). A relevant passage from Ryle will be discussed in Section 7.
a) Vienna is a metropolis.
b) Vienna is the capital of Austria.
c) Vienna is a town in Virginia.
d) Trieste is no Vienna.
e) Vienna Cake contains apricot jam.

In each of these propositions we have a token of the same linguistic expression “Vienna.” But only in (a) and (b) the tokens of “Vienna” are tokens of the same logical unit. In (c) (assuming it is true), “Vienna” is a token of a different logical unit of the same logical category: it still functions as a proper name, but it names a different city. In (d), “Vienna” is a token of a logical unit of a different logical category, namely a concept-word that means something like “metropolis.” And in (e), “Vienna” is arguably not the token of any logical unit at all, but only a logically inseparable part of the logical unit “Vienna Cake.”

Even though Frege does not explicitly draw the distinction between logical units and linguistic expressions in full generality, he adopts a number of terminological policies that track specific instances of that general distinction.

For instance, Frege tends to use the terms “concept-word” and “proper name” for items that, on each of their occurrences, are partly identified by the logical content that they express. By contrast, he tends to use the term “word” for items that, on each of their occurrences, appear to be proper names or concept-words, even though such an appearance may be deceptive. Thus, in “On Concept and Object,” Frege asserts that “language often uses the same word now as a proper name, now as a concept-word (TFR, p. 189; emphases added), giving as example the occurrence of the word “Vienna” in propositions such as “Vienna is a metropolis” and “Trieste is no Vienna” respectively. Here Frege appears to construe “proper names” and “concept-words” as species of what I called “logical units,” and “words” as a species of what I called “linguistic expressions.”

Similarly, in a different context, Frege contrasts “propositions proper” (eigentliche Sätze) with items that count as “propositions” only according to grammatical criteria (grammatische Sätze). A proposition proper is a linguistic construction that on each of its occurrences expresses
a complete thought. A grammatical proposition, on the other hand, is a linguistic construction that looks like a proposition proper, even though on some occasions it may not express a complete thought and be, therefore, only a “proposition in the improper sense of the term” (uneigentlicher Satz). The same grammatical proposition may be, on some occasions, an eigentlicher Satz, and on other occasions, an uneigentlicher Satz, just as the same word may be on some occasion a proper name, and on other occasions a concept-word. To take one of Frege’s examples, the grammatical proposition “Something is greater than 1” is an eigentlicher Satz when it is used by itself to express the complete thought that there is something greater than 1, but is an uneigentlicher Satz when it is used as the antecedent of the generalized conditional “If something is greater than 1, then it is a positive number”: in this case, in fact, the grammatical component proposition does not express a complete thought, but only part of a thought. (See “On the Foundations of Geometry: Second Series,” in CP, p. 308-310. Cf. also “Introduction to Logic,” in PW, p. 190-191; “A Brief Survey of My Logical Doctrines,” in PW, p. 199; “Compound Thoughts,” in CP, p. 391-392. Frege’s contrast between an eigentlicher and an uneigentlicher Satz is partly obscured by the available English translations: the former term is variously translated as “real proposition” or “sentence proper,” whereas the latter term is variously translated as “pseudo-proposition” or “quasi-sentence.”) My suggestion, therefore, is that Frege construes eigentliche Sätze as a species of what I called “logical units,” and grammatische Sätze as a species of what I called “linguistic expressions.”

By contrast, I do not think that Frege’s distinction between “signs” (Zeichen) and “figures” (Figuren) should be assimilated to my distinction between logical units and linguistic expressions, or to either of the two more specific Fregean distinctions that I have just mentioned. In particular, one should not construe what I called “linguistic expressions” as Fregean “figures.” Frege never appeals to the notion of a figure in order to lay out his own views, but only in order to formulate and criticize so-called “formal theories of arithmetic.” He emphasizes that the notion of a figure is supposed to be specifiable without any reference to the notion of logical content, whereas the notion of a linguistic expression, as I characterize it, can only be specified by referring to the notion of logical content: a linguistic expression is what passes itself off as a logical unit, and a logical unit is an item that is partly identified by its logical content. If there were no logical units, there would be no linguistic expressions either. Linguistic expressions, unlike Fregean figures, are parasitic on logical units. (On the sign/figure distinction, see especially “On Formal Theories of Arithmetic,” in CP, pp. 114-115; and Grundgesetze, vol. II, §§99-101, in TPW, pp. 172-176”; for some discussion, see Kremer 2010, pp. 254-255 and Heck 2010, pp. 238-362.) I wish to emphasize that I mention here Frege’s distinction between signs and figures for a purely negative reason—namely, for blocking a possible misconstrual of the distinction between logical units and linguistic expressions that I have introduced and that I am going to use in order to elucidate Frege’s understanding of the Context Principle. Frege’s discussion of signs and figures raises a number of delicate issues and may reveal some tensions in his thought. A full account of Frege’s distinction between signs and figures—and of how it relates to the aforementioned distinction between logical units and linguistic expressions—goes beyond the scope of this work.

In Chapter 4, we will see that the formulation of the Context Principle in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus is closely related to a distinction between “symbols” and “signs,” which corresponds in the most important respects to my distinction between logical units and linguistic expressions.
Armed with the distinction between logical units and linguistic expressions, I propose to understand Frege’s dictum that “words really have a meaning only in the context of the proposition” along the following lines:

**Frege’s understanding of the Context Principle.** A linguistic expression (e.g. a word) is, on each of its occurrences, a sub-propositional logical unit only in so far as it makes a logical contribution to the expression of some complete, intelligible propositional content.

This expansion of Frege’s dictum is designed to abstract from his specific views about “sub-propositional logical units” and “propositional contents.” Such views underwent significant changes with the introduction of the sense/reference distinction in 1891. Thus, in order to take into account Frege’s more specific semantic views, we need to provide two variants of the previous expansion of Frege’s dictum: a variant that applies to the pre-1891 theory, and a variant that applies to the post-1891 theory.

An important element of continuity in Frege’s semantic views is that there are two fundamental kinds of sub-propositional logical units: “proper names” (which include definite descriptions) and functional expressions, of which “concept-words” are a species. In the simplest case, a proposition consists of a proper name filling up or “saturating” the argument place of a concept-word. Before 1891, Frege holds that proper names designate “objects,”

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My method, in this chapter, is to take advantage of some of the insights of Wittgenstein’s appropriation of Frege’s Context Principle in order to throw light on Frege’s own views. The other species of functional expressions, for Frege, are term-forming operators such as “The father of ξ” or “ξ².”
concept-words designate “concepts,” and complete propositions express “judgeable contents.” Accordingly, the previous expansion of Frege’s dictum may be restated as follows:

Frege’s understanding of the Context Principle, before the introduction of the sense/reference distinction. A linguistic expression is, on each of its occurrences, a sub-propositional logical unit (e.g. a proper name designating an object, or a concept-word designating a concept) only in so far as it makes a logical contribution to the expression of a complete, intelligible judgeable content.

After 1891, Frege “splits up” his earlier notion of “meaning” (Bedeutung) or “content” (Inhalt) into “sense” (Sinn) and “reference” (Bedeutung), at both the propositional and sub-propositional level. The sense expressed by a complete proposition is called a “thought” and is said to be composed of the senses of the proper names and functional expressions that make up the proposition. The reference of a complete proposition is called a “truth-value” and is considered to be determined by the reference of the proper names and functional expressions that make up the proposition. The whole picture, then, is complicated by the fact that according to Frege’s official view, linguistic expressions may have sense but lack reference. Thus, in terms of this new semantic theory, the Context Principle as I propose to understand it maintains, in the first

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38 As I have already remarked, I am ignoring Frege’s treatment of indexical expressions.
39 This is not to deny that there is a significant strand in Frege’s writings that questions the intelligibility of the notion of sense without reference; but while it may be argued, following Gareth Evans and John McDowell, that this is the line of thought that Frege should have consistently pursued, it would be hard to maintain that it represents his official view. For a discussion of the philosophical merits of the strand in Frege’s writing that puts pressure on the idea that there can be sense without reference, see Evans 1982, chap. 1, and McDowell 1998a, chaps. 8-11. For a discussion of how this line of interpretation affects the interpretation of Frege’s Context Principle, see Conant 2002, p. 431, n. 32.
instance, that words and phrases express sub-propositional senses only to the extent that contribute to the expression of a complete thought. Moreover, since for Frege linguistic expressions can only refer via their senses, it follows that (non-propositional\textsuperscript{40}) proper names and functional expressions refer to objects and functions only in so far as they contribute to the expression of a complete thought. On the other hand, unless we want to maintain that Frege is not really committed to the possibility of sense without reference, I don’t see any reason for denying that, for Frege, (non-propositional) proper names and functional expressions may have a reference even though the significant propositions of which they are logically working parts lack a reference (because not all of their logically working parts have a reference). This leads us to the second variant of my proposed expansion of Frege’s dictum:

*Frege’s understanding of the Context Principle, after the introduction the sense/reference distinction.* A linguistic expression, on each of its occurrences, expresses a sub-propositional sense and refers to an object or a function (if it refers to anything at all) only in so far as it makes a logical contribution to the expression of a complete, intelligible thought.

The specification of these two variants of my proposed expansion of Frege’s Context Principle should help to connect the interpretation that I am going to develop to his texts and to locate it in relation to other existing readings. (Much of the secondary literature on the topic, in fact, has been concerned with the question of whether the Context Principle applies to sense, or reference,\textsuperscript{40} This specification is required because Frege officially treats propositions as proper names of truth-values.

\textsuperscript{40} This specification is required because Frege officially treats propositions as proper names of truth-values.
or both.) I wish to emphasize, however, that my primary concern, in this chapter, is Frege’s general conception of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning, rather than his more specific views about the proper analysis of each type of meaning. Therefore, I will always privilege, whenever possible, the general expansion of Frege’s dictum that I stated above, which abstracts from the differences between Frege’s early and mature semantic views.

My proposed elaboration of Frege’s dictum is framed in terms of “sub-propositional logical units” and of “logical contributions” to the expression of propositional contents. The insistence on the logical character of the phenomena under consideration is an invocation of Frege’s distinction between the logical and the psychological. In order to clarify the import of the Context Principle, we need to have that distinction explicitly in view.41

According to Frege, when we speak of the “meanings of words,” we might want to speak of two very different sorts of thing. On the one hand, we might want to speak about their psychological meanings, i.e. the mental pictures and feelings that we associate with them. (By the time he writes the Foundations, Frege reserves the term “ideas” for these psychological phenomena.) Words can have a psychological meaning quite independently of their occurrence in propositional contexts. There is nothing intrinsically wrong, for Frege, in inquiring about the psychological meanings of words; but we must be clear about the fact that this sort of inquiry is completely irrelevant if we are interested in logical issues—i.e., if we are interested in assessing the truth of propositions and the validity of inferences. If that is our concern, then we should inquire about the logical meanings of words. Having a psychological meaning is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for having a logical meaning. A word, on each of its

41 The account that follows is based especially on the F, Introduction and §§59-60; “On Concept and Object,” in TFR, pp. 181-193.

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occurrences, has a logical meaning in virtue of the *logical function* that it fulfills within the proposition. The psychological meaning of a word (if any) has no bearing on the kind of logical job (if any) that the word is doing within a meaningful proposition. Whereas psychological meanings are atomistically independent from propositional context, the logical meaning of the whole proposition is always already presupposed by the logical meanings of its constituent parts.

To take one of Frege’s examples, the word “MOON,” taken by itself, can give rise to the mental image of a certain irregularly white circle against a dark background; but it is not, as yet, a logical unit, as is dramatized by the fact that the word, while retaining the same psychological meaning, can actually function very differently in different propositions, sometime signifying an object—as in “The MOON moves around the Earth”—other times signifying a concept—as in “Io is a MOON.” In order to see the word “MOON” as a determinate logical unit, say as a singular term designating a certain celestial body, we need to see it as contributing to the expression of some complete thought about that object.42

For Frege, there is no answer to the question of what logical unit the word “MOON” is *in itself*, apart from the logical function that it performs within a proposition. The very question is misguided and presupposes a psychologistic conception of meaning. Atomism and psychologism about meaning are for Frege closely connected: Any atomistic conception of the meanings of words implicitly rests upon a psychologistic approach. This connection is clearly visible in Frege’s response to Benno Kerry in the essay “On Concept and Object.” Frege’s response, in fact, shows that the three “fundamental principles” that he enunciates in the Introduction to the *Foundations of Arithmetic* are all interconnected. The first principle states the distinction

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42 See *F*, §51, p. 64. For an analogous example, see “On Concept and Object,” in *TFR*, p. 189, where Frege points out that the word “Vienna” may function now as a proper name (as in “Vienna is the capital of Austria”), now as a concept-word (as in “Trieste is no Vienna”).
between the logical and the psychological: “Always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective”; the second principle is a formulation of the Context Principle: “Never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but always in the context of a proposition”; and the third principle asserts the categorial distinction between concepts and objects: “Never to loose sight of the distinction between concept and object.” Kerry provides a putative counterexample to the third principle. The proposition “The concept horse is a concept easily attained,” he argues, shows that a concept—namely the concept designated by the expression “The concept horse”—can at the same time be an object, falling under a first-level concept—namely the concept designated by the expression “is a concept easily attained.” Thus, Kerry concludes, there is no absolute distinction between concepts and objects. But according to Frege, this conclusion presupposes a violation of the other two principles. Frege agrees that the expression “The concept horse,” as it occurs in the proposition that Kerry mentions, is logically a proper name, designating an object; “but on that very account,” he adds, “it does not designate a concept”, if we cleave to the logical sense in which he uses the word “concept.” If an expression is functioning as a certain logical unit within a proposition, then it is that logical unit; any other consideration is immaterial for the determination of its logical status. It might very well be that the expression “The concept horse,” as it occurs in Kerry’s example, carries the same psychological associations that the expression “is a horse” elicits when it occurs in a proposition such as “Pegasus is a horse,” where the expression actually functions as a concept-word. If we decide to use the words “concept” and “meaning” to refer to those psychological phenomena, then we can say that the two expressions have in the two propositions the same “meaning” and designate the same “concept.” But as Frege emphasizes, this is not how he uses

these terms. All Kerry has really shown with his putative counterexample is that a linguistic expression that is a logical unit of a given kind in a certain propositional context (say a proper name) can have the same psychological associations as an expression that is, in appropriate propositional contexts, a completely different logical unit (say a concept-word). Kerry has not shown that an expression can designate, at one and the same time, both a concept and an object—and thus that something can be, at one and the same time, both a concept and an object. To think otherwise is to conflate the logical and the psychological (in violation of Frege’s first principle, and to assume that the logical meanings of words are determined otherwise than by the logical functions that they fulfill within meaningful propositions (in violation of Frege’s second principle).

Meaning in the logical sense, according to Frege, is not something that gets “attached” to a word and that the word can subsequently carry along independently of the logical character of its propositional contexts. A word has logical meaning, on any given occasion, if and only if it makes a determinate contribution to the expression of a complete propositional content; and if it works within a proposition as a certain logical unit, then it is, “on that very account,” such a logical unit. Any appeal to prior stipulations, established patterns of use, or speaker’s intentions will not change the heart of the matter. No matter how sincerely Kerry intends to use the expression “the concept horse” to denote a concept—and regardless of the fact that the word “horse” does indeed function as a concept-word in other propositional contexts and may retain the same psychological associations throughout its different logical employments—the expression “the concept horse,” as it actually occurs in the proposition that Kerry uses, is a proper name, not a concept-word.
For Frege, therefore, the importance of attending to how words are used in their propositional contexts is not merely heuristic or epistemological, as it is sometimes maintained. According to a view that many may find appealing, the logical function that a word fulfills within a proposition is nothing more than a reliable indicator of its meaning: since expressions of natural language are often ambiguous (as the “MOON” example brings out), we need to attend to propositional context in order to determine which meaning a given word possesses on a particular occasion. But this meaning, it is maintained, is a property that the word can retain on its own, whether or not, on any given occasion, it is actually fulfilling that logical function. It is evident that a view of this sort can have very little use for the dictum that “it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning.” Indeed, for Frege, such a conception would count as thoroughly atomistic and psychologistic, regardless of its commitment to the heuristic or epistemological importance of “looking at the complete proposition.” For Frege, the logical role that a word fulfills within a proposition constitutes it as the kind of logical unit that it is: we need to look for the meaning of a word in the context of the proposition because that is where sub-propositional logical meaning resides. Sub-propositional meaning, we might say, lives in the proposition. The import of the Context Principle, therefore, is as metaphysical as it is heuristic or epistemological.

A consequence of this reading of the Context Principle is that there is no such thing as nonsensical combinations of meaningful words. Recall Michael Dummett’s example, “Chairman Mao is rare.” According to Dummett, the expression “Chairman Mao,” as it occurs in that proposition, is a proper name designating a certain object, whereas the expression “is rare,” as it occurs in the same proposition, is a second-level concept-word. The proposition as a whole is nonsensical, he maintains, because a proper name is put in the place that belongs to a first-level
concept-word. But what *Frege* would say is that, *if* the expression “is rare” occurs in the proposition as a second-level concept word, then *on that very account* the expression “Chairman Mao” occurs in the proposition as a suitable logical unit—most naturally, as a first-level concept-word, in the same manner in which it occurs in the proposition, “He is no Chairman Mao” (meaning, say, that he is no great politician). Conversely, *if* the expression “Chairman Mao” occurs in Dummett’s proposition as a proper name, then *on that very account* the expression “is rare” occurs in that proposition as a first-level concept-word—in the same manner in which it occurs in the proposition, “The steak is rare.” We have seen that this is precisely how Frege reasons in response to Kerry. If the expression “the concept horse” occurs in Kerry’s example as an expression that fills the argument place of a first-level concept word, then it is, *on that very account*, a proper name, regardless of what Kerry would like it to be. So I submit, *contra* Dummett and other proponents of similar versions of the two-orders-of-priority approach, that Frege’s Context Principle leaves no room for the idea of meaningful sub-propositional components combined in meaningless ways. If the parts of the proposition are meaningful, then the meaningfulness goes all the way up to the propositional whole; and conversely, if the proposition as a whole is meaningless, then the meaninglessness goes all the way down to its component parts.

By the same token, Frege’s Context Principle, as I am proposing to understand it, rules out the idea of a “theory of significance” in Dummett’s sense. In particular, it is incompatible with Dummett’s suggestion that “Frege’s hierarchy of types […] provides a theory of significance.”

Frege, as we have seen, categorizes logical units into different logical types: proper names, first-level concept-words, second-level concept-words, etc. For Dummett, it is

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44 Dummett 1981a, p. 50.
obvious that these distinctions may be used to formulate a theory that specifies, *among all the possible combinations of logical units*, which ones are legitimate (significant) and which ones are illegitimate (nonsensical). But according to the view that I am ascribing to Frege, this cannot be the right interpretation of Frege’s conception of the logical hierarchy. According to such a view, in fact, we have a *combination of logical units* in view—as opposed to a mere concatenation of linguistic expressions that may trigger various sorts of psychological phenomena—only in so far as those units are actually fulfilling some logical function *within a significant proposition*. Thus there is no such a thing as a “possible but illegitimate combination of logical units.” The very idea of a theory of significance in Dummett’s sense is a confusion resting on an atomistic and psychologistic conception of meaning.\(^{45}\)

According to the interpretation that I am recommending, Frege’s Context Principle applies quite generally to *all* sub-propositional logical units. In this connection, it is worthwhile to pause on the potentially misleading character of the figurative talk that Frege employs for elucidating the distinction between functional expressions, which include concept-words, and proper names. Frege characterizes a functional expression (as well as its sense and its reference) as “unsaturated” or “incomplete,” and a proper name (as well as its sense and its reference) as “saturated” or “complete” or “self-standing.”\(^{46}\) This may lead one to think that Frege’s Context Principle

\(^{45}\) This line of argument against Dummett’s interpretation is developed in detail in Diamond 1991, chaps. 2-4. I will come back on these issues in Chapter 5, in the context of a discussion of Wittgenstein’s critique of Russell’s Theory of Types.

\(^{46}\) For the application of the distinction between “saturated” and “unsaturated” components at the level of linguistic expressions, see Frege to Marty, 29.8.1882, in *TFR*, p. 81; “On Schoenflies: *Die logischen Paradoxien der Mengenlehre*,” in *PW*, p. 177; “Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in *TFR*, p. 364; “A Brief Survey of My Logical Doctrines,” in *PW*, p. 201; “Compound Thoughts,” in *CP*, p. 393. For the application of the distinction the level of sense, see “On Concept and Object,” in *TFR*, p. 193; “A Brief Survey of My Logical Doctrines,” in *PW*, p. 201; “Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in *TFR*, p. 364; “Compound Thoughts,” in *CP,*
Principle applies only to “incomplete expressions,” with the exclusion of proper names. But it should be noticed, in the first place, that no such restriction of scope is intimated by any of the formulations of the Context Principle that occur in the *Foundations*, which always speak of “words” quite in general. Moreover, Frege is aware that his figurative talk may encourage this misunderstanding of his position and takes care of stressing that number-words—which for him are proper names—have meaning only in the context of a proposition:

The self-subsistence which I am claiming for number is not to be taken to mean that a number word signifies something when removed from the context of a proposition, but to preclude the use of such words as predicates or attributes, which appreciably alters their meaning.\(^47\)

The point of Frege’s figurative talk of “complete” and “incomplete” expressions is to elucidate the different logical behavior of concept-words and other functional expressions on the one hand, and proper names on the other; his metaphors are *not* meant to suggest that (non-propositional) proper names, unlike concept-words and other functional expressions, can have a meaning outside of propositional contexts.\(^48\) The previous passage, taken by itself, leaves open the possibility that the Context Principle is meant to apply only to a sub-class of proper names, namely expressions denoting numbers; but if the passage is read against the background of...

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\(^{47}\) F, §60, p. 72.

\(^{48}\) This point is emphasized by several commentators; see e.g. Conant 1998, p. 233, p. 15.
Frege’s general formulations of the Context Principle, there is no unprejudiced ground for such an interpretation. *All* words, for Frege, have meaning only in the context of the proposition.\(^\text{49}\)

So far I have focused on Frege’s conception of the dependence of the meanings of propositional parts on the meanings of propositional wholes. Now it is time to look at how, for Frege, the meanings of complete propositions depend on the meanings of their parts. I propose the following interpretation of Frege’s construal of linguistic compositionality, which is formulated in terms of the distinctions introduced at the beginning of this section:

*Frege’s understanding of linguistic compositionality.* Words can be sub-propositional logical units. Whenever a word is a sub-propositional logical unit, it makes a contribution to the meaning of the proposition in which it occurs. Different occurrences of the same word can be occurrences of the same sub-propositional logical unit and make, accordingly, the same contribution to the meanings of the propositions of which they are part.

These statements are fully compatible with the claim that words are sub-propositional logical units only when they make an actual contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition.

At this point, it may seem that the easiness with which I can reconcile the Context Principle and linguistic compositionality is simply due to the fact that I rely on a *very partial* construal of linguistic compositionality, which leaves out a crucial component of what Frege is concerned to emphasize when he discusses the dependence of propositional meaning on sub-

\(^{49}\) For a recent defense of a much more restricted reading of Frege’s Context Principle, see Kim 2011, where it is argued that the principle applies only to singular terms for abstract objects.
propositional meaning. What is missing in my construal of linguistic compositionality is the idea that words have normal and stable meanings in the language which guide our understanding of new propositions. It is this idea, it can be objected, that requires a conception of sub-propositional meaning which is hard to square with Frege’s formulations of the Context Principle—namely, a conception of sub-propositional meaning which leaves room for the occurrence of meaningful words in isolation and in nonsensical combinations.

As I explained in the Introduction, I find it useful to distinguish between (a) the idea that the meanings of articulate propositions depend on the meanings of their parts, and (b) the idea that words have in general normal and stable meanings in the language which guide our understanding of new propositions. I reserve the title “linguistic compositionality” for the former idea, and I refer to the latter idea as “linguistic stability.” In this chapter, I will only be concerned to discuss the relation between Frege’s Context Principle and linguistic compositionality thus understood. In Chapter 6, I will propose an account of linguistic stability which is fully compatible with the understanding of the Context Principle that I am here attributing to Frege.

For Frege, as I am reading him, meaningful articulate propositions are not semantic monoliths: they are composed of parts that make distinctive contributions to the meaning of the whole. But at the same time, meaningful words are not semantic atoms that enter into propositional combinations only incidentally. Moreover, meaningful words are not dependent on complete propositions in a manner that is sufficiently weak to allow for their occurrence in isolation and in nonsensical combinations. Frege’s conception of the relationship between articulate propositional wholes and propositional parts involves a non-atomistic notion of “part” (the parts of the proposition cannot be what they are except as parts of the appropriate wholes), a non-monolithic notion of “unity” (complete articulate propositions are essentially articulated into
logical parts), and a *non-agglomerative* notion of “complexity” (the internal articulation of propositions is not reducible to a mere agglomeration of atomistically conceivable components).

I suggest that Frege’s conception of the relationship between the proposition and its parts can be accurately characterized by employing the British Idealist notion of an “organic unity,” i.e. the notion of a whole for which the following statement holds true:

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\text{[J]ust as the whole would not be what it is but for the existence of the parts, so the parts would not be what they are but for the existence of the whole.}^{50}
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For Frege, the meaningful articulate proposition is an organic unity in this sense. The whole means what it does (and that is the meaningful proposition that it is) in virtue of its parts; but its parts mean what they do (and thus are the meaningful sub-propositional expressions that they are) in virtue of the meaning of the whole, because their identity is determined by the logical function that they actually fulfill within the whole. Articulate propositional wholes and propositional parts can only come together. They are equiprimordial and interdependent. And this interdependence does not have to be pictured as the sum of two unilateral relations of dependence that flow in opposite directions, but belong to different “orders.” It can more simply be pictured as a single relation of interdependence flowing at the same time in both directions, *in the same order*—which can be construed with equal right as the conceptual order of intelligibility, or as the metaphysical order of being.

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\(^{50}\) Moore 1903, §22, p. 33.
6. Organic unities in early analytic philosophy

The British Idealist notion of an organic unity may sound rather exotic to contemporary analytic philosophers. It is appropriate, therefore, to provide some of its historical background and to argue that it is historically sound to invoke it in connection with the interpretation of Frege’s philosophy.

While I focus here on the British Idealist characterization of organic unities, the notion itself has a much longer history, which goes back to German Idealism and, ultimately, to Aristotle. It is well-known that the notion of organic unity, in the hands of the members of the British Idealist tradition, and especially in those of F. H. Bradley, led to extreme and mind-boggling metaphysical positions. Moore and Russell—who are commonly regarded, with Frege, as the founders of analytic philosophy—reacted to what they perceived as the excesses of a holistic and organicistic metaphysics with a radically atomistic philosophy. They did not think that it was enough to identify and correct the abuses of the notion of an organic unity. The notion itself, according to Moore and Russell, was irredeemably flawed and required, accordingly, a wholesale rejection.

The characterization of organic unities quoted at the end of the previous section was actually given by Moore, in the context of fierce critique of that notion. For Moore, that characterization—together with the claim that an organic unity is a whole whose parts are “are inconceivable except as parts of that whole”\(^{51}\)—describes nothing but “a self-contradictory conception due to confusion.”\(^{52}\) Moore sees no way of making sense of the idea of a conceptual

\(^{51}\) Moore 1903, §22, p. 36.  
\(^{52}\) Moore 1903, p. xiv.
interdependence between a whole and its parts. In order to criticize his opponents, he discusses the kind of whole from which, as he notes, “the term ‘organic’ was originally derived—a whole which is an organism in the scientific sense—namely the human body.” 53 He considers a number of Aristotelian claims about the relationship between the living body and its parts—for example, the idea that the whole organism is the “end” of its parts, the idea that the whole contributes to the “nature” or “enters into the definition” of each part, and the idea that an arm that has been cut off from a living human body is an arm in name only. Moore rejects all such claims as confused or unintelligible. 54 The only real sense that he can see behind these doctrines—and all he thinks is required for a correct account of the living body—is the idea of a “mutual causal dependence” between the parts of the body. Of course, he argues, if we cut off an arm from a living body, the arm will undergo some change: the preservation of the properties of the living arm is causally dependent on the other parts of the body. But this is only a contingent matter of fact: there is no contradiction, according to Moore, in supposing the existence of an object that has all the properties of a living arm, but is not part of a living body. The living body, for Moore, is just a set of independently intelligible parts standing in appropriate contingent relations with one another. Thus, by confronting his opponents on their putatively strongest ground, Moore seeks to provide a definitive refutation of the British Idealist notion of an organic unity and the firmest vindication of his purely atomistic metaphysics.

In Moore’s ethical system, as articulated in the Principia Ethica, a certain notion of “organic whole” plays a very significant role. However, Moore is anxious to emphasize that the notion he wishes to employ is different from the British Idealist notion that he rejects. Most

53 Moore 1903, §21, p. 31.
54 Moore 1903, §§21 and 22, pp. 31-36.
importantly, Moore’s own notion of “organic whole” is not meant to undermine his atomistic
metaphysics. The “principle of organic wholes” to which Moore is committed states that “[t]he
value of whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts.” But
this does not mean, according to Moore, that the parts have a different ethical value when they
are parts of some whole and when they subsist in isolation, as the application of the British
Idealist notion of organic unity would entail. To make such a concession would be to give up the
atomistic framework to which Moore is committed. Moore’s principle affirms, in effect, the
existence of a gap between the value of the whole and the values of the parts that compose it.
Such a gap is bound to appear as an anomaly in Moore’s philosophical system, as is shown by
the fact that he initially presents it as a “paradox.” But Moore does not take the anomaly as a
reason for questioning his atomistic assumptions; on the contrary, he is so attached to those
assumptions that he chooses to accept the anomaly as a basic inexplicable fact, turning the
“paradox” into a “principle.”

A different version of the same problematic can be found in Russell’s Principles of
Mathematics. As we saw in Chapter 1, Section 10, Russell has an atomistic conception of the
analysis of the proposition: the proposition is composed of “terms” that are conceptually
independent of the whole of which they are parts. He is explicitly opposed to the idea that the
parts of the proposition cannot be what they are except as parts of the appropriate propositions.
In particular, he rejects the view that the logical function that a propositional part is fulfilling
within a proposition (say, functioning as a “verb,” or as a “relating relation”) is constitutive of its
identity. However, he recognizes the “unity of the proposition”: the proposition is not reducible

55 Moore 1903, §18, p. 28.
56 Moore 1903, §18, p. 27.
to the sum of its independently conceivable components. The proposition, in his terminology, is not an “aggregate,” but a “unity.” \(^{57}\) For Russell, therefore, there is gap between the whole proposition and the sub-propositional constituents of which it is composed. This gap is an anomaly in his logical system—just as the principle of organic wholes is an anomaly in Moore’s ethical system. Like Moore, Russell does not take this anomaly as a reason for revising his atomistic assumptions. On the contrary, he holds on to those assumptions and simply acknowledges the presence of the anomaly. As he puts it, even “though analysis gives us the truth, and nothing but the truth, it can never give us the whole truth.”\(^{58}\) Unlike Moore, however, Russell does not try to normalize the anomaly within his system by granting it the honorific title of a fundamental “principle”: the unity of the proposition remains for Russell a crucial “difficulty,” which must be solved somehow, even though he confesses that he has absolutely no idea of how this could be done.\(^{59}\) We see therefore that Moore and Russell—by recognizing the “principle of organic wholes” and the “unity of the proposition” respectively—acknowledge the difficulties generated by their atomistic assumptions. At the same time, the ways in which they seek to evade these difficulties indicates how strongly they are committed to their atomistic assumptions.

Peter Hylton has written that “the fact that Russell is reacting against neo-Hegelian Idealism, whereas Frege is not, is itself an important point of contrast between the two, and connected to others.”\(^{60}\) I submit that this point of contrast—which applies to Frege and Moore just as much as it applies to Frege and Russell—is crucial to understanding Frege’s view of

\(^{57}\) Russell 1903, §§136-138, pp. 140-141.
\(^{58}\) Russell 1903, §138, p. 141.
\(^{59}\) Russell 1903, §§52 and 54, pp. 49-50.
propositional wholes and propositional parts. Moore and Russell understood their philosophical work as a “rebel[lion] against both Kant and Hegel”\(^{61}\) and as a “revolt” against “the emaciated idealism imported from Germany”\(^{62}\) that they were taught at Cambridge. Frege, on the other hand, regarded Kant as “a genius to whom we must look up with grateful awe,” and when he criticized him, he took care to emphasize that his “agreement with him […] far exceeds any disagreement.”\(^{63}\) If we assume that Frege shares Moore’s and Russell’s disdain for any philosophical claim that does not comply with their atomistic conception of the world, then the portions of Frege’s writings that are concerned with the elucidation of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning will become incomprehensible. In order to be in a position to make best sense of these texts, we need to be open to the possibility that Frege—following a tradition that he deeply respected—is willing to put to philosophical use the notion of a whole that, as Moore puts it, “would not be what it is but for the existence of the parts,” and of parts that “would not be what they are but for the existence of the whole.”

The fact that the notion of an organic unity has largely fallen into disuse in contemporary analytic philosophy is a sign of the long-lasting influence of Moore’s and Russell’s “revolt against Idealism.” But one should not assume as a matter of course that Frege’s work is appropriately approached through the lenses of that philosophical heritage.

\(^{61}\) Russell 1959, p. 54.
\(^{62}\) Russell 1914a, p. 2.
\(^{63}\) \(F, \) §89, p. 101. For a discussion of Frege’s deep respect for Kant, see Diamond 2011a, p. 550.
7. Three analogies

At some points, Frege feels the need of illustrate his conception of propositional wholes and propositional parts by means of analogies. In this section we shall discuss and compare two analogies used by Frege, and an analogy that Wittgenstein employed to elucidate the import of the Frege’s Context Principle. One of the analogies that Frege appeals to is the relationship between the living body and its parts. This is precisely the sort of case that, as Moore observes, occupies a paradigmatic position for the advocates of the notion of an organic unity. Frege also employs a different analogy, comparing the occurrence of significant words within propositions to the occurrence of atoms within molecules. As we shall see, the two analogies are not equally successful, but they are meant to point in the same direction: they are both intended to express Frege’s opposition to the atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning. In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein compared the relationship between a proposition and its parts to the relationship between an artifact and its functional parts. The examination of this third sort of analogy will help to isolate the aspects of the living body analogy invoked by Frege that are relevant for the present discussion.

The molecular analogy, which appears in one of Frege’s early writings, runs as follows:

[I]n the concept-script [the] designations [of properties and relations] never occur on their own, but always in combinations which express contents of possible judgments. I could compare this with the behaviour of the atom: we suppose an atom never to be found on its own, but only combined with others, moving out of one combination only in order to enter immediately into another. A sign for a property never appears without a thing to which it might belong being at least indicated, a designation of a relation never without indication of the things which might stand in it.64

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64 “Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Concept-script,” in PW, p. 17.
In order to understand the point that Frege is making in this passage, we need to attend to the specific way in which he construes the case that he wants to use as a term of comparison. We think of the atom precisely as the sort of thing that can “be found on its own”: atoms can be physically detached from their molecular combinations and subsist in isolation, given the appropriate conditions. Thus it would be easy to take Frege’s passage as the illustration of an atomistic conception of the parts of the proposition, of the kind that we find, for example, in Moore and Russell—who are indeed often said, appropriately enough, to conceive of the analysis of the proposition in analogy with the process of chemical analysis. But Frege is construing the case in a very different way, and he is using it to make precisely the opposite point. He assumes that atoms occur only within molecular contexts: as he says, “we suppose an atom never to be found on its own, but only combined with others.” Moreover, he also assumes that atoms move out of some molecules only to enter immediately into other combinations: there is no instant, during the process of molecular recombination, in which the atom subsists on its own. Thus molecules are essentially structured items: the same atom can occur now in one molecule, now in

65 See for example Griffin 2003, p. 25, n. 31; Hager 2003, p. 326. 66 We need not decide, here, whether these “suppositions” about the behavior of the atom are simply stipulations that Frege makes for the sake of the analogy that he wants to draw, or whether they reflect his understanding of contemporary physical and chemical theories. In either case, the point of the analogy is clear. There is no doubt, however, that Frege’s procedure is more sensible if the second conjecture is true: in general, one cannot expect an analogy to be of any help if it is based on a completely artificial case. Moreover, it is noteworthy that noble gases, whose atoms occur by themselves in normal observable circumstances, were discovered only around the turn of the 20th century. When Frege wrote the essay that we are here discussing (1880/1881, according to the editors of PW), chemists knew only of elements whose atoms were known to occur only in molecular combinations. They knew, for example, that Oxygen and Hydrogen are found in the atmosphere as O₂ and H₂, and didn’t know of elements such as Helium or Argon, which occur in the atmosphere in mono-atomic form (see for example Brock 2000, Chapter 9). So, when Frege says that “an atom [is] never to be found on its own, but only combined with others,” he might be offering a far more accurate representation of the chemical knowledge of his time than it might at first be apparent to a contemporary reader. (In this footnote, I am indebted to conversations with Karen R. Zwier.)
another; but atoms can only occur within molecules. In this sense, molecules are the minimal units of chemical reality. *This* is the picture to which Frege is appealing in order to elucidate the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. Propositions are essentially structured items: they are articulated into sub-propositional semantic components, and the same components can occur in different propositions. But such components cannot occur on their own. In this sense, complete propositions are the minimal units of meaningful language. A concept-script, which is designed to maximize logical perspicuity, should systematically avoid the occurrence of sub-propositional expressions in isolation, since that would foster the illusion that words can have a (logical) meaning independently of their propositional contexts.\(^{67}\)

A quick reading of the previous passage, which fails to appreciate the specific (and perhaps for us eccentric) way in which Frege sets up his analogy, can lead to a misunderstanding of its intended moral. This happens occasionally among commentators. Øystein Linnebo, for example, gives the following reading of the analogy: “[The] representational powers [of words] typically cannot be manifested on their own but only in the context of sentences, much like atoms typically cannot occur on their own but only bound together in molecules.”\(^{68}\) As the context of the remark makes clear, the word “typically,” here, means something like “most of the time.” So understood, Frege’s position allows for the possibility of words retaining their “representational powers” outside of propositional contexts. But an interpretation of this sort is in

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\(^{67}\) In the passage that I have just discussed, Frege refers explicitly only to names of properties and relations (i.e. concept-words), rather than to sub-propositional expressions in general. But there is no reason to take this emphasis as a sign that Frege is committed to a view according to which concept-words have meaning only in the context of propositions, whereas sub-propositional expressions (i.e. proper names and other functional expressions) can have a meaning outside of any propositional context. In terms of Frege’s analogy, this would mean that there are two kinds of atoms: those that occur only in molecular combinations, and those that subsist on their own. But this is not the analogy that Frege is employing.

\(^{68}\) Linnebo, Unpublished A.
fact ruled out by the passage that we have been discussing, since Frege assumes that atoms are “never” to be found on their own.

There remains however an important respect in which the molecular analogy is not fully adequate for Frege’s purposes. Frege takes for granted that atoms cannot occur outside of molecular contexts; but this “impossibility” can only have the character of a brute empirical fact. For Frege, however, the connection between the meanings of words and the meanings of the propositions in which they occur has the character of a conceptual necessity. As Gilbert Ryle once noticed, this is the most difficult but also the most crucial point of Frege’s view:

Frege’s difficult but crucial point [is] that the unitary something that is said in a sentence or the unitary sense that it expresses is not an assemblage of detachable sense atoms, that is, of parts enjoying separate existence and separate thinkability, and yet that one truth or falsehood may have discernable, countable and classifiable similarities to and dissimilarities from other truths or falsehoods. Word meanings or concepts are not propositional components but propositional differences. They are distinguishables, not detachables; abstractables, not extractables […].

According to Frege, meaningful words cannot be “detached” from their propositional contexts because to think of a word as a logical unit is to think of it as a working part of some proposition. Sub-propositional semantic units do not enjoy, in Ryle’s words, “separate thinkability.” But this point does not hold for physical atoms. Even if we granted, for the sake of argument, that atoms occur only in molecular combination, it would still be possible to conceive of atoms in isolation. In this respect, the analogy between significant words and physical atoms breaks down.

Frege’s view of the meaningful proposition is better illustrated by the analogy of the living organism, which he mentions in one of his mature writings:

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69 Ryle 2009, p. 61; see also pp. 191-192.
If we go on and on heaping association upon association until the most complex and elaborate idea is formed, what purpose does it serve? Do we really think we should have a thought as a result? The result would no more be a thought than an automaton, however cunningly contrived, is a living being. Put something together out of parts that are inanimate and you still have something inanimate. Combine ideas and you still have an idea and the most varied and elaborate association can make no difference.\footnote{“Logic” (1987), in \textit{PW}, pp. 144-145.}

Frege compares the relation between a thought expressed by a complete proposition and its parts to the relation between a living body and its parts. According to a philosopher such as Moore, there is no reason why the animate body (\textit{qua} animate body) cannot be ultimately composed of inanimate parts. But Frege is evidently taking for granted a different conception of what the right view of the living organism is—namely, a broadly Aristotelian view which opposes the kind of atomistic and bottom-up approach that we saw championed by Moore.\footnote{Aristotle is well known for the claim that a hand that has been detached from the body is a hand “only homonymously,” since “the whole is of necessity prior to the part” (Aristotle 1984, vol. 2, \textit{Politics}, p. 1988, 1253a19-25). Moore has this very passage in mind when he criticizes the notion of organic unity and takes it as a paradigm of confusion. For a helpful discussion of Aristotle’s application of the “homonymy principle” to the parts of living organisms, see Frey 2007. The sketch of the “broadly Aristotelian view” of the living body that I am going to provide below does not aim, of course, to be an exegetically accurate presentation of Aristotle’s position, but merely to spell out some of the features of the view that Frege is patently taking for granted.}

According to this view, the living organism and its parts can only be understood if we recognize their conceptual interdependence. A living organism is a whole whose parts do not enjoy, as Ryle would say, separate existence and separate thinkability. An organism is complex, made up of parts; but its parts are what they are—namely limbs and organs such as arms, eyes and kidneys—in virtue of the \textit{function} that each of them performs within the whole organism. We identify a piece of matter as, say, a \textit{heart} by attending to the physiological job that it does within the living organism. A physically indistinguishable piece of matter could conceivably fulfill a different function in a
different organism—and be, therefore, in the context of that other organism, a different organ.\textsuperscript{72} Moreover, as long as we describe the “parts” of a living organism and the way they are put together by means of a purely physical vocabulary, we will never be able to get an organism into view: a combination of bundles of physical particles is just a larger bundle of physical particles. As Frege writes, “[p]ut something together out of parts that are inanimate and you still have something inanimate.”

Similarly, according to Frege, a meaningful proposition is essentially complex; but the parts of which it is composed are what they are—namely logical or semantic units that designate objects and concepts—in virtue of the logical function that they perform within the whole proposition. We identify a phonetic or orthographic unit as, say, a concept-word by attending to the logical job that it performs within a meaningful proposition. A phonetically or orthographically indistinguishable sign might fulfill a different logical function in a different proposition—and be, therefore, in the context of that other proposition, a different semantic unit. Moreover, if we describe the parts of a meaningful proposition in terms of their “psychological meanings” (i.e., in terms of the mental images and feeling that may be associated to each individual word independently of the logical character of its propositional context), we will never be able to get a meaningful proposition in view: as Frege says, “combine ideas and you still have an idea and the most varied and elaborate association can make no difference.” A meaningful proposition (i.e. something that expresses a thought, that can be true or false, and that stands in logical relations to other propositions) can only be the combination of logical parts, whose

\textsuperscript{72} For a discussion of some examples, see Thompson 2008, pp. 53-56.
identification involves essential reference to the logical features of the whole to which they belong.

Thus, the analogy of the living organism is better suited to serve Frege’s purposes than the molecular analogy because it highlights not only the structured nature of the meaningful proposition (as the molecular analogy does as well), but also its unity. By taking for granted a specific but authoritative view of the living organism, Frege can clarify the reason why he thinks that words have meaning only in the context of significant propositions, while propositions are articulated into significant parts: this is a matter of conceptual necessity.

The feature of the living-body analogy that is relevant for our purposes is the idea of a conceptual interdependence between a whole and its functional parts. There are other features of the analogy that are indeed relevant for a wider discussion of the nature of language, but from which I wish to abstract in the present context. It is debatable, in fact, whether natural language is more properly conceived as an instrument for the expression and enhancement of thought (in accordance with the view that was predominant among early modern philosophers, of both empiricist and rationalist provenance), or rather as a living organism with a life of its own (as contended by Humboldt and the romantic tradition). Several interrelated issues are at stake in this debate: for example, the relative priority of language and thought; whether natural languages are under anybody’s control (individual or communal) and thus whether (or in which sense) they are “conventional”; and how we should conceive of the evolution of natural languages. Without denying in the least the importance of such questions, we may leave them aside for our present purposes. In fact, the point that we made by elaborating the analogy between meaningful words and the parts of the living organism can equally be made by comparing meaningful words to the functional parts of human artifacts.
This is the sort of analogy that Wittgenstein employed repeatedly for elucidating the import of the Context Principle. In the early Thirties, he wrote:

If we say “A word only has meaning in the context of a proposition,” then that means that it’s only in a proposition that it functions as a word, and this is no more something that can be said than that an armchair only serves its purpose when it is in the room. Or perhaps better: that a cogwheel only functions as such when engaged with other cogs. 73

And again:

A word only has meaning in the context of a proposition: that is like saying only in use is a rod a lever. Only the application makes it a lever. 74

A physical object, say a metal rod, is a functional part of a mechanism, say a brake-lever, in virtue of the function that it fulfills within the context of a certain mechanism. As Wittgenstein later observes in the Philosophical Investigations, something is a brake-lever “only in conjunction with [the whole of the rest of the mechanism], and separated from its support it is not even a lever; it may be anything, or nothing.” 75  

A physically indistinguishable object could work differently in a different mechanical context and be therefore, in that context, a different mechanical part. 76  

A mechanical part cannot be identified by attending merely to its physical properties, just as a sub-propositional logical unit cannot be identified by attending merely to its

73 PR, §12, p. 58. The translation by Hargreaves and White, which I have modified, makes the remark unnecessarily mysterious by translating “im Raum” as “in space,” rather than “in the room.”
74 PR, §14, p. 59.
75 PI, §6, p. 5.
76 Cf. OC, §351, p. 46, where Wittgenstein observes that the same object, which is in a certain context of use a hammer, may be a very different tool in a appropriately different context, “a missile, for example, or a conductor’s baton.”
physical or psychological properties: in either case, we will have the relevant kind of part in view only if we attend to the function that the part fulfills within the whole to which it belongs. At the same time, the overall mechanism serves its purposes in virtue of its internal functional articulation, just as a meaningful proposition means what it does in virtue of its internal logical articulation. At the appropriate level of abstraction, the analogy of the living organism (as Frege construes it) and the analogy of functionally complex artifacts (as Wittgenstein construes it) are equally appropriate for elucidating Frege’s conception of the interdependence between propositional wholes and propositional parts.\textsuperscript{77}

8. Compositionality as a constitutive feature of language

So far I have focused on Frege’s conception of the relation between meaningful articulate propositions and their meaningful parts. Now I want to suggest that Frege’s remarks about linguistic compositionality can be read as involving a commitment to the constitutivist thesis about linguistic compositionality stated in the Introduction (Section 4)—namely, the thesis that meaningful propositions are in the central case articulated into parts which make a contribution to the meaning of the whole. There can be linguistic constructions that deserve to be called “propositions” because they manage to express or convey propositional contents, even if they are not composed of linguistic expressions that make a contribution to the meaning of the whole. But these are parasitical cases, which presuppose (in ways which may vary from case to case) the possibility of expressing propositional contents by means of logically articulate propositions. In

\textsuperscript{77} For a synoptic elaboration of the brake lever analogy and the living organism analogy that is in line with the reading of the Context Principle that I have recommended, see Linsky 1992, p. 269.
so far as language is construed as the totality of meaningful propositions, sub-propositional compositional structure is constitutive of language.

In a passage from a letter to Jourdain quoted in Section 3, Frege claims that without sub-propositional compositional structure “language in the proper sense would be impossible.” He mentions the possibility of non-compositional codes, such as railway signals, which convey complete propositional contents by means of semantically simple signs (say a green light for “The track is clear”); but he doesn’t consider them to be languages “in the proper sense.” In other passages quoted in Section 3, he states that propositions are “in general” complex signs and that their grammatical structure corresponds “by and large” to the structure of the thoughts that they express. In these passages, I suggest, Frege is not making a claim about what happens to be true about the propositions that belong to this or that particular language, but is making a claim about the concept of a proposition. Similarly, I suggest that when he comments on the remarkable achievement on language—i.e. the fact that “[w]ith a few sounds and combinations of sounds it is capable of expressing a huge number of thoughts, and, in particular, thoughts which have not hitherto been grasped or expressed by any man”—he is commenting on some of the features of the concept of language.

If these suggestions are correct, Frege offers a conceptual argument for the compositionality of human natural languages: Human natural languages must exhibit a large degree of sub-propositional compositional structure in order to be recognizable as languages in the proper sense at all. This argument is different from what may be called “standard arguments” for the compositionality of human natural languages. Such arguments assumes that it makes sense to talk of completely non-compositional languages, and then go on to contend, from some more or less plausible empirical hypotheses, that human language must be compositional. The
following passage by Donald Davidson, which is a *locus classicus* in the literature on compositionality, can be taken as a representative example of this sort of argument:

> 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 learned; that man is mortal.\(^\text{78}\)

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 propositions. 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 incoherent*—nothing defying conceivability—in the idea of a non-compositional language in which the meaning of each proposition 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 propositions that can be formed—i.e., infinitely many rules. Since our mind and life is 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), and this suffices to give us the capacity to understand an infinite number of propositions.

\(^{78}\) Davidson 2001, p. 8.
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 propositions is questionable, and that the real motivation for the compositionality of natural languages does not depend on such an assumption.\textsuperscript{79} Here are two possible ways of motivating the compositionality of natural languages that do not depend on Davidson’s assumptions, but that equally belong to the class of the standard arguments:

i) The propositions 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 linguistic rules as the possible propositions of a natural language.

ii) Even if it were possible for our minds to learn and store a rule for each possible proposition of a language that we are able to understand, that is not what *actually* happens. Natural languages are productive. When we encounter a proposition, or want to form a proposition, 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. By contrast, I have suggested that, according to Frege, whatever is mastered by such a “mind” is not a language in the proper sense.

\textsuperscript{79} See for instance Grandy 1990.
I do not claim that there is indisputable textual evidence that Frege rejects the standard sort of argument for the compositionality of human natural languages. My claim is, in the first place, that the textual evidence is compatible, and at some points invites, the attribution of the stronger kind of argument, which involves a commitment to the constitutivist thesis about the compositional nature of language. And in the second place, that since it is possible to attribute to Frege the stronger kind of argument, we have good reason to do so, because in this way we do not have to attribute to Frege a problematic commitment—namely, the commitment to the intelligibility of a creature that can communicate propositional contents, but can only do so by means of signals completely devoid of internal compositional structure.

There is a passage, in a late unpublished writing, which may be taken to show that Frege is in fact committed to the intelligibility of such a creature. Frege maintains that for us humans it is necessary to connect in our mind every thought of which we are conscious to some proposition or other. However, he goes on to claim, “there is no contradiction in supposing there to exist beings who can grasp the same thought as we do but without needing to clad it in a form that can be perceived by the senses.” Some commentators have taken this passage to imply that thoughts are in and of themselves unstructured. But if that is the case, it is difficult to see why there could not be in principle a creature that connects each unstructured thought to a semantically unstructured sign, and why one should insist that the system for the communication of thoughts employed by that creature should not be regarded as a “language in the proper sense.” However, the passage under discussion does not have to be taken to imply that thoughts are in and of themselves unstructured. Frege does not say that there can be beings that grasp

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80 “Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the Mathematical Natural Sciences,” in PW, p. 269.
81 See Chapter 3, note 64.
inarticulate thoughts, but only that there can be beings who do not communicate their thoughts by means of sensibly perceptible signs. While this claim is not without its problems, it does not render the passage incompatible with the constitutivist thesis.

9. Contextually defined expressions as parasitical cases

I have argued that Frege attributes to propositional and sub-propositional meaning a form of interdependence that is ruled out by the Empiricist Framework. This does not mean, however, that Frege’s position assigns no role whatsoever to the unilateral form of contextual dependence that is contemplated by the Empiricist Framework. Frege, in fact, maintains that certain words and phrases of natural language have the status of what we have called “contextually defined expressions,” i.e. sham semantic units that may occur within meaningful propositions, but merely appear to have a meaning of their own. I submit, however, that for Frege these are parasitical cases. For Frege, however, these cases is necessary in order to prevent a serious misconstrual of his general conception of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning.

In order to demonstrate Frege’s recognition of contextually defined expressions, we can consider Frege’s famous analysis of generality in terms of variables and quantifiers. This is in effect a way of paraphrasing away a certain class of sub-propositional expressions of ordinary language that Frege considers to be logically misleading. In English, we express generality by means of words such as “everybody,” “somebody,” and “nothing,” which appear to behave in propositions like singular terms, or by means of words such as “every,” “some,” and “no,” which appear to combine in propositions with concept-words to form singular terms. We have “Everybody loves Mary,” and similarly we also have “Everybody loves somebody.” But the
impression that the word “Mary” and the word “somebody” fulfill the same logical function—an impression generated by the surface-grammatical form of the two propositions—is misleading. This is readily seen when we attend to the different inferential relations of the two propositions. From the former proposition we can infer that Mary is loved by everybody, but it is a fallacy to infer from the latter that somebody is universally loved. By paraphrasing away the words “everybody” and “somebody” in accordance with Frege’s proposal, we can eliminate the misleading grammatical similarities that may seduce us into these fallacious inferences. Once the two propositions are rewritten by means of the variable and quantifier notation, it becomes possible to read off their inferential relation from their surface-grammatical form.82

Words such as “all,” “some,” and “nobody,” for Frege, make no distinctive semantic contribution to the expression of the contents conveyed by the propositions in which they occur. They have the same semantic status that belongs to class-terms, according to the view that Frege considers (and rejects) in one of the passages from the Grundgesetze that we discussed in Section 3. That view proposes to treat expressions such as “{x: Fx}” as “sham proper names” which “have no separate Bedeutung” and which are “parts of signs that [have] a meaning only as wholes.” In order to avoid misleading grammatical appearances, those sham proper names should be paraphrased away. A proposition such as “a ∈ {x: Fx},” for example, should be

82 The misleading grammar of ordinary expressions for generality has attracted the imagination of mankind at least since Homer’s time. Recall the episode of Ulysses who introduced himself to Polyphemus as Mr. Nobody. Polyphemus, after having been blinded by Ulysses, calls for help from his fellows Cyclopes, who can hear him through the closed entry of his cavern; the Cyclopes gather quickly outside the cavern, but decide after all to leave the whimsical Polyphemus to his destiny, since he keeps insisting that NOBODY IS HURTING HIM. Of course, Ulysses could not have succeeded in his trick by introducing himself as Mr. “There is no X such that X is such-and-such,” since this Fregean paraphrase of propositions containing the ordinary word “Nobody” does not even look like a name and could not, therefore, give rise to the potential ambiguity of the ordinary sentence “Nobody is hurting me” (which is understood in two dramatically different ways by Polyphemus and by his fellow Cyclopes).
rewritten as “Fa.” Similarly, according to Frege, the word “everybody” is not a semantic unit on its own right, but a grammatical expression that can be part of signs that have a meaning only as wholes. The proposition “Everybody loves Mary” does have a meaning, but does not mean what it does in virtue of what “everybody” means. The word “everybody” should be paraphrased away and the whole proposition should be rewritten as “∀x(x loves Mary).” In this way, according to Frege, we can reach a form of expression whose manifest grammatical articulation reflects genuine semantic structure.\(^83\)

In some of his early writings, Frege describes the semantic status of the expressions that are used in ordinary language to convey generality by saying that they have sense only in the context of a proposition. In the *Begriffsschrift* (1879), for example, he writes:

> The expression “every positive prime number,” unlike “the number 20,” does not by itself give rise to any independent idea, but only acquires a sense in the context of a proposition.\(^84\)

In another early writing, written before 1884, he remarks in a very similar vein:

> Out of context the word “some” has no sense; it is an auxiliary like “all,” “each,” “none” and so on, which, in the context of a proposition, has a logical function to perform.”\(^85\)

\(^{83}\) As we shall see in Section 10, Frege came to endorse, short before the end of his life, the view of class-terms as sham proper names that he had rejected in the *Grundgesetze*. Moreover, he also came to wonder whether the same view should be adopted for number-words. These late developments of Frege’s thought provide further evidence that he recognized the possibility of contextually defined expressions.

\(^{84}\) *Begriffsschrift*, §9, in *TFR*, p. 67. It should be noticed that in this early work Frege does not use the word “Vorstellung” (here translated as “idea”) in a psychological sense, as he will do in and after the *Foundations*. Just a page earlier in the same book (*TFR*, p. 66), Frege clearly uses the term to refer to the *logical content* of linguistic expressions. The claim that he is making in the present passage, therefore, is that the expression “every positive prime number” does not have an independent logical content.
The language that Frege employs in these passages is strongly reminiscent of the formulations of the Context Principle that occur in the *Foundations* (1884). On the basis of these verbal similarities, some commentators have claimed that these early passages anticipate the Context Principle, which they interpret as extending to *all* sub-propositional expressions (of all languages, natural or not) the semantic status that Frege initially attributes only to words used in ordinary language to convey generality. A clear instance of this interpretation may be found in Michael Beaney’s commentary to the passage from the *Begriffsschrift* that was quoted above:

This could be regarded as the first appeal in Frege’s work to the context principle—here governing only subject terms involving quantifiers such as “every positive whole number” […]. By the time of the *Grundlagen*, however, the appeal to the context principle has become generalized.86

But when this suggestion is thought through, the resulting interpretation will readily appear to be untenable. Expressions such as “every positive prime number” are, for Frege, grammatically *misleading* expressions that, in a logically perspicuous notation, are paraphrased away through contextual definition. To generalize their status to *all* possible sub-sentential expressions would be to claim that there is no such thing as a genuine sub-propositional semantic unit: meaningful propositions would be semantic monoliths that merely appear to be logically articulated. This is the position that I called, in the previous chapter, Radical Benthamite Contextualism. If the contextual dictum that occurs in the *Foundations* expressed such a view, it would be incompatible with all the passages in which Frege emphasizes that meaningful propositions are, 85

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86 *TFR*, p. 67, n. 31. The claim that §9 of *Begriffsschrift* anticipates the formulations of the Context Principle that occur in the *Foundations* is advanced also in Hacker 1979, pp. 215-219.
in general, semantically articulated. However, I have argued that Frege’s dictum is more sensibly read as expressing a form of the contextualism that is centrally concerned to vindicate the truism that words, in general, have their own meanings. While Frege maintains that ordinary language contains several contextually defined expressions, he treats them as parasitical cases. For a proper construal of Frege’s view, we need to sharply distinguish between the form of unilateral contextual dependence that he assigns to contextually defined expressions such as “every positive prime number,” and the form of non-unilateral contextual dependence that he assigns to all sub-propositional semantic units.

The same kind of precaution is called for when we approach some of the writings of Bertrand Russell. After the introduction of the theory of descriptions (which is a way of paraphrasing away by contextual definition some expressions of ordinary language), contextually defined expressions play an increasingly significant role in Russell’s philosophy. Russell’s descriptions of the semantic status of these expressions are strikingly similar to Frege’s formulations of the Context Principle. In “On Denoting,” for example, Russell writes that “denoting phrases” (which include words used in ordinary language to express generality) “are not assumed to have any meaning in isolation, but a meaning is assigned to every proposition in which they occur.”87 And in “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, he writes that “incomplete symbols” (which include denoting phrases) are “things that have absolutely no meaning whatsoever in isolation but merely acquire a meaning in context.”88 Some commentators have taken these remarks to express versions of the Context Principle that differ from Frege’s only in

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87 Russell 1905, p. 42; cf. also pp. 43, 51 and 55.
I am submitting, however, that these commentators have been misled by what are in effect mere verbal similarities. There is a *qualitative* difference between the contextual dependence that Russell attributes to denoting phrases and incomplete symbols (and that Frege himself attributes to expressions such as “every positive prime number”), and the contextual dependence that Frege’s Context Principle assigns to all sub-propositional semantic units.

For the sake of clarity, it is worth noting that when commentators discuss Frege’s treatment of “contextual definition,” they are often concerned with a phenomenon that differs from the one that I have been discussing. In the *Foundations*, §§62-66, Frege considers (and eventually discards) the possibility of defining terms denoting abstract objects such as directions and numbers by fixing the meaning of a certain class of propositions in which they occur. For example, he discusses the proposal to define direction terms by means of the following stipulation: “the proposition ‘Line $a$ is parallel to line $b$’ is to mean the same as ‘The direction of line $a$ is equal to the direction of line $b$.’” In symbols:

$$D(a) = D(b)$$

is to means the same as

$$a//b$$

Similarly, Frege discusses the possibility of defining numbers in terms of equinumerosity by stipulating that “The number of Fs is equal to number of Gs” is to mean the same as “There is a one-to-one correlation between the objects falling under F and the objects falling under G.” These stipulations are usually referred to, legitimately enough, as “contextual definitions” of the relevant terms. But one must notice that Frege is not interested in these stipulations as attempts

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89 See e.g. Klement 2004, p. 12, n. 12.
80 *F*, §65, p. 76.
to *paraphrase away* the apparent singular terms occurring in the propositions on the left-hand side. Frege does not want to show that number-words and direction-terms are *sham* semantic units lacking any meaning of their own. On the contrary, he wants to show that they are genuine singular terms. The aforementioned stipulations, in his view, achieve their goal only in so far as they succeed in *fixing the meanings* of the singular terms occurring in the propositions on the left-hand side by “carving up in a different way” the contents expressed by the propositions on the right-hand side.  

Eventually, Frege discards such definitions on the ground that they fail to determine the meanings of the *definienda* in all their possible propositional contexts.

What matters, for our purposes, is that we need to distinguish between two sorts of contextual definition: (a) contextual definition as a technique for paraphrasing away putatively misleading expressions, showing that they do not really have a meaning of their own; and (b) contextual definition as a method for securing a meaning to certain sub-propositional expressions by fixing the meaning of certain propositions in which they occur. The claim I put forth in this section—to the effect that Frege acknowledges contextually defined expressions as an inherent potentiality of natural languages, but only as parasitical cases—refers exclusively to the former sort of contextual definition. Frege’s discussion of the second sort of contextual definition brings out his view about what sub-propositional expressions are *in the central case* (i.e. words and locutions with a meaning of their own), rather than his view about what sub-propositional expressions are

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91 F, §64, p. 75.
92 See F, §66, pp. 77-78. Frege laments, for example, that the stipulation about directions quoted above does not determine the truth-conditions of a proposition such as “The direction of line a is identical to England.” We need not to be concerned, here, with the soundness of Frege’s complaints. We are only interested in the fact that these are complaints about a failure to *fix the meanings* of the relevant sub-propositional expressions.
in the parasitical case (i.e. words and locutions that merely appear to have a meaning of their own).  

10. A misleading formulation of the Context Principle in the *Foundations*

If we keep in view that some expressions of ordinary language, for Frege, may merely pass themselves off as genuine semantic units, we can approach in the right manner a potentially misleading formulation of the Context Principle that occurs in the *Foundations*:

> It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on its parts also their contents.  

The soundness of this remark crucially depends on how we understand what Frege means by the “parts” of the proposition. Clearly, from the meaningfulness of a proposition, it does not follow that, say, each of its letters has a meaning of its own, and there is no sign that Frege is committed to such a bizarre idea. Moreover, as we have seen, Frege does not believe that everything that looks like a sub-propositional semantic unit is in fact such a unit. So the notion of a “part” that Frege is appealing to must be already characterized in logical terms. The principle does not enable us to determine whether a “part” of a proposition specified in non-logical terms (orthographical, phonetic, or merely grammatical) is or is not a logical or semantic part of the proposition. Sub-propositional meaning cannot be unilaterally derived from the meanings of complete propositions.

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93 For a lucid discussion of the distinction between the two understandings of “contextual definition” that I have contrasted in this last paragraph, see Wright 1983, pp. 68ff.

94 *F*, §60, p. 71.
The aforementioned formulation of the Context Principle occurs in the context of an argument which aims to establish that numbers are logical objects. A mistaken interpretation of that formulation—i.e. one which fails to acknowledge the heavy-duty work that the notion of a “part” is doing in it—may result from a failure to pay due attention to the details of Frege’s argument. A superficial reading of the *Foundations* can lead one to believe that Frege’s argument for the claim that numbers are objects is simply the following: Numbers are objects because number-words occur within meaningful propositions as grammatical proper names. Under this (mis-)construal of Frege’s argument, the formulation of Context Principle that we are discussing does all the work: The meaningfulness of the whole proposition guarantees that its grammatical parts are the logical units that they purport to be—for instance, proper names designating objects. But the actual structure of Frege’s argument is quite different. In §60, Frege invokes the Context Principle in order to counter an objection to the claim that numbers are logical objects; but he takes to have *already* established such a claim in the preceding sections, on grounds that go beyond the observation of merely grammatical facts.

Frege draws the conclusion that numbers are objects from an examination of the logical behavior of number-words within complete propositions. This examination involves a careful scrutiny of the inferential relations of propositions containing number-words. Frege rules out as misleading the ordinary language use of number-words in attributive or predicative position, on the basis of observations of the following sort.\(^95\) Consider these two propositions:

1. Jupiter has four moons
2. Jupiter has large moons

\(^95\) Cf. *F*, especially §§52 and 57.
These propositions can seem to have the same logical structure. The word “four” seems to function logically as the word “large” does: it appears to designate a concept that is attributed to some objects. But that can’t really be the case. If it were the case, then from (1) we could infer:

(3) Some moons of Jupiter are four

just as from (2) we can infer:

(4) Some moons of Jupiter are large.

But (3) makes no apparent sense and there is no more than a simulacrum of inference from (1) to (3). Frege argues that the real logical role of number-words is revealed by mathematical equations and their everyday language equivalents, where number-words manifestly appear as proper names flanking the identity sign. Grammatically misleading propositions such as “Jupiter has four moons” should be rephrased, accordingly, as “The number of Jupiter’s moons is four,” where the “is” is not the copula, but the identity sign, which is used to state that an object is recognized as the same again.\(^9\) The sham concept-word “is four” is paraphrased away from the original proposition, just as the words used in ordinary language to express generality are paraphrased away from the propositions in which they occur by means of the variable-and-quantifier notation. When he wrote the *Foundations*, Frege saw no logical reason for distrusting the grammatical use of number-words as proper names purporting to denote objects (of a non-

\(^9\) Cf. F, §57.
sensible kind), whereas he thought that there were good logical reasons for distrusting the grammatical use of number-words as attributes or predicates purporting to denote first-level concepts.

The potentially misleading formulation of the Context Principle that we are discussing figures in Frege’s argument as a way of setting aside an objection that he considered to have no logical pertinence. The objection is that numbers cannot be non-sensible objects because we can form no “idea” of them, “in the sense of something like a picture.”97 The gist of Frege’s reply—“it is enough if the whole proposition has sense, and that it is this that confers on its parts also their meaning”—may be rephrased as follows: If everything behaves from a logical point of view as if an expression is a proper name designating an object (of either a sensible or non-sensible kind), then the expression is a proper name designating an object (of that kind); metaphysical or psychological objections (about “what there really is,” or about what we can form a mental image of) are logically completely irrelevant.

It is important to see that this point, in and of itself, does not suffice to show that numbers are non-sensible objects. It all depends on whether it is true that everything behaves from a logical point of view as if number-words are genuine proper names. As I have already pointed out, when Frege wrote the *Foundations* he saw no reason to doubt that this is the case. But after several decades, shortly before the end of his life, Frege came to wonder whether the surface grammar of arithmetical equations and their ordinary language equivalents were not, after all, just as misleading as the surface grammar of propositions in which numerals are used in attributive or predicative position. This doubt did not derive from metaphysical or psychological considerations, but from the appreciation of the consequences of the discovery of Russell’s

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97 *F*, §58, p. 69.
paradox, which Frege eventually considered to have undermined the foundations of his philosophy of arithmetic. In his late years, Frege wondered whether there are, after all, genuine logical reasons for thinking that number-words are sham proper names. Perhaps we should reject as equally misleading both “Jupiter has four moons” and “The number of Jupiter’s moons = four.” Frege considered whether the proper way to represent the content of both of these propositions in a logical perspicuous manner (avoiding any kind of sham semantic unit) is to represent it as the subsumption of the first-level concept *moon of Jupiter* under the second-level concept *instantiated four times*—in contemporary logical notation, “∃₄x(x is a moon of Jupiter).” In such a formula, the numeral “4” is not to be understood as a proper name with a meaning of its own, but as a handy notational device that helps to construct concise signs for the relevant second-level concepts. On this view, the numerals that occur in statements of numbers are logically altogether dispensable: the previous proposition about Jupiter’s moon could be rewritten, in turn, by using only normal quantifiers: ∃ₓ∃ᵧ∃z∃u(Jₓ & Jᵧ & Jz & Ju & ¬(x=y ∨ x=z ∨ x=u ∨ y=z ∨ y=u ∨ z=u) & ∀t(Jt → (t=x ∨ t=y ∨ t=z ∨ t=u)). ⁹⁸

⁹⁸ In this paragraph, I have paraphrased the discussion in “Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter” (PW, pp. 256-257), culminating in the following questions, which Frege leaves unanswered:

How can we get from these concepts [i.e. second-order concepts such as ∃₄x…x] to the numbers of arithmetic in a way that cannot be faulted? Or are there simply no numbers in arithmetic? Could the numeral help to form signs for these second level concepts, and yet not be signs in their own right?

Frege had already maintained, in the *Foundations*, that in a statement of number a first-level concept is brought under a second-level concept (see §46), but at that time he also believed that numerals must be recognized as genuine proper names. For the Frege of the *Foundations*, the proposition (a) “¬∃ₓ(x is a moon of Venus)” expresses the same content as (b) “The number of the moons of Venus = 0,” but there is nothing misleading about the surface grammar of the latter proposition: the two propositions expressed the same conceptual content, carved up in a different way. (For the idea of different ways of carving up the same conceptual content, see §64 and my
Late Frege did not take a definitive stance on these issues and did not elaborate any worked-out alternative to his previous attempt to explain what he came to call the “miracle of number.” On the other hand, he did reject in a clear-cut way his previous view about extensions of concepts, which was closely connected to the thesis that numbers are logical objects. Frege, in fact, had sought to define numbers as extensions of concepts, treating extensions of concepts as genuine objects. However, in his late years, Frege argued that the recently discovered “paradoxes of set theory” show that any expression of the form “The extension of the concept $\Phi$” is a sham proper names, merely purporting to refer to an object:

One feature of language that threatens to undermine the reliability of thinking is its tendency to form proper names to which no objects correspond. [...] A particularly noteworthy example of this is the formation of a proper name after the pattern of “the extension of the concept $a$,” e.g. “the extension of the concept star.” Because of the definite article, this expression appears to designate an object; but there is no object for which this phrase could be a linguistically appropriate designation. From this has arisen [sic] the paradoxes of set theory which have dealt the death blow to set theory itself. I myself was under this illusion when, in attempting to provide a logical foundation for numbers, I tried to construe numbers as sets.

We are not interested, here, in whether Frege was right to abandon or to put in question his former views about extensions and numbers. The trajectory of Frege’s position in the philosophy of arithmetic is instructive for our present purposes because it shows that the Context Principle does not establish, in and of itself, whether a grammatical part of a proposition is also one of its logical parts. In order to settle this sort of issue, it is not enough to observe that a linguistic discussion in the previous section). For very late Frege, on the other hand, there are reasons to wonder whether we should distrust the surface grammar of (b) and simply consider it as a grammatical misleading way of saying what is appropriately expressed by (a).

99 “Notes to Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in PW, p. 256.
100 “Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and Natural Sciences,” in PW, p. 269.
expression occurs as a grammatical part of a meaningful proposition—as the formulation of the Context Principle that we have been discussing in this section might misleadingly suggest. One has to determine whether, from a logical point of view, *everything* behaves as if the expression is a logical unit of a certain sort. As Frege’s intellectual biography demonstrates, this is a needy-greedy affair. No general philosophical principle can spare us the trouble of going through the details.

11. Contextualism in Frege, Bentham, and Russell: a synopsis

All the main elements of the contextualist view that I want to attribute to Frege are now in place. We can sum up the differences between Bentham’s, Russell’s, and Frege’s respective forms of contextualism with the help of the following table, which displays alternative ways of understanding the statement that “Words have independent meanings” and the statement that “Words have meaning only in the context of the proposition”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) Words have independent meanings.</th>
<th>=</th>
<th>The meanings of words are in no way conceptually dependent on the meanings of the propositions of which they are parts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2) Words have independent meanings.</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>Words have a meaning of their own; they are semantic units.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Words have meaning only in the context of the proposition.</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>The meanings of words are conceptually dependent on the meanings of the propositions of which they are parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Words have meaning only in the context of the proposition.</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>Words are not semantic units; they do not have any meaning of their own; only the propositions of which they are parts have really a meaning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1. Some verbal twins concerning word-meaning and propositional meaning

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Bentham’s philosophy of language is informed by an atomistic ideal of sub-propositional meaning that is aptly described by (1): if a word is genuinely significant, its meaning is in no way dependent on its possible propositional contexts. But given his metaphysical and epistemological commitments, it turns out that such an ideal can never be satisfied. He is therefore ultimately committed to a view of language that extends to all words the unilateral form of contextual dependence that is expressed by (4). All words, according to Radical Benthamite Contextualism, have the semantic status of contextually defined expressions. Propositions are semantic monoliths that exhibit no more than a merely grammatical articulation.

Russell shares with Bentham the adoption of an atomistic conception of genuine sub-propositional meaning and the recognition of contextually defined expressions. But in virtue of his different metaphysical and epistemological commitments, he is not forced to extend the status of contextually defined expressions to all words. For Russell, the class of words that are contextually defined is amazingly large, but not all-comprehensive. In Russell’s system, all contextually defined expressions can be paraphrased away. Each ordinary proposition, when completely analyzed, is supposed to contain only words that enjoy the semantic status described by (1). Russell, therefore, allows for the possibility of two sets of words, respectively described by (1) and (4). But the form of contextualism that he endorses differs from Bentham’s only in scope, not in quality, since the form of contextual dependence that he attributes to the limited class of “incomplete symbols” is the same sort of contextual dependence that Bentham is committed to extend to all sub-propositional expressions.

Frege’s Contextualism, I have argued, is a completely different animal. Frege rejects the whole Empiricist Framework that Bentham and Russell are equally taking for granted. He opposes the atomistic conception of the meanings of words that is expressed by (1), and attacks
the very idea that we need to choose between (1) and (4). Bentham and Russell work under the assumption that either words have a meaning of their own, in no way dependent on their propositional contexts, or they have no meaning at all, and merely appear to give a determinate semantic contribution to the propositions in which they occur. But according to Frege, this is a false dilemma. As an alternative, he proposes a non-atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning. The crucial feature of Frege’s Contextualism is the idea that the semantic status of words is aptly described, in the central case, by the simultaneous assertion of (2) and (3): words have a meaning of their own, but only in the context of significant propositions. The independence that Frege is here granting to the meanings of words is not the atomistic form of independence envisaged by Bentham and Russell; and conversely, the contextual dependence that Frege assigns to the meanings of words is different from the only form of contextual dependence that Bentham and Russell can allow for—namely, the unilateral dependence that characterizes contextually defined expressions. (Frege, we might say, sees a whole region of the table that Bentham and Russell are blind to.) We have also seen that Frege allows for contextually defined expressions, which are correctly described by (4), but only as parasitical cases.

In the next two sections, I am going to argue that Frege’s Contextualism, in addition to being different from the positions respectively advanced by Bentham and Russell, has also the philosophical advantage of avoiding the difficulties generated by Bentham’s and Russell’s shared commitment to the Empiricist Framework.
12. Frege and Radical Benthamite Contextualism

Given the preceding discussion, it should be clear that there is nothing in Frege’s Contextualism that threatens to trigger anything analogous to the philosophical dialectic that ultimately commits Bentham to Radical Benthamite Contextualism. As we saw in Chapter 1, Bentham’s philosophy of language is informed by an atomistic ideal of the meanings of words, modeled on an understanding of ostensive definition that is characteristic of the empiricist tradition. That ideal, in conjunction with Bentham’s collateral metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, dictates which expressions may be regarded as genuinely significant. Bentham realizes that all “names of qualities” (i.e. predicates and relational expressions) do not satisfy his requirements; consequently, he downgrades them to the status of “names of fictitious entities.” I have argued, however, that even names of substances—conceived as the substratum of qualities—ought to appear problematic from Bentham’s perspective. On the basis of his assumptions, all sub-propositional expressions are names of fictitious entities, devoid of a meaning of their own. But none of Frege’s commitments forces him to maintain, in an analogous manner, that concept-words are, as it were, “second best” in comparison to proper names. Qua sub-propositional semantic units, the two kinds of expression are exactly on the same footing. For Frege, a sub-propositional expression has meaning if it fulfills a determinate logical function within propositions; this is, if you wish, his “semantic ideal.” Proper names and concept-words fulfill equally determinate logical functions; they are, therefore, equally significant. There is no pressure, in Frege’s philosophy, to extend the status of contextually defined expressions to all concept-words, or to all sub-propositional expressions.
At first it might seem that Frege and Russell are in a similar position, since they are both entitled to stop at what I called the *first stage* of the dialectic of Bentham’s contextualism. That is the stage at which one recognizes contextually defined expressions, but admits that they can be effectively paraphrased away. Frege and Russell are both entitled to claim that it is possible to form propositions that do not include any sham semantic unit. But this entitlement has in the two cases completely different grounds. Russell shares Bentham’s atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning, which makes semantics hostage to an independent metaphysics and epistemology. Russell is capable to keep the class of contextually defined expressions under relative control because he adopts suitable metaphysical and epistemological doctrines. Frege, on the other hand, by rejecting the atomistic ideal that Russell and Bentham have in common, frees semantics from the unilateral control of metaphysics and epistemology: no philosophical doctrine about “what there really is” or “what we can be acquainted with” is allowed to dictate in advance which kinds of sub-propositional expression may be regarded as genuinely significant. Moreover, the set of commitments that allows Russell to avoid Radical Benthamite Contextualism draws him into the problem of propositional unity. But as we are now going to see, this is not a problem that we face at all if we adopt Frege’s construal of the Context Principle.

13. Frege and the problem of propositional unity

The very formulation of the problem of propositional unity requires an atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning. We are asked to explain how we can get from a mere list or juxtaposition of significant words, each of which has a sub-propositional meaning, to a unified
proposition, which says something intelligible. But in order to frame this very question, we need to be able to make sense of the idea of a “mere list” of meaningful words, which occur significantly even though they are not “bonded together” in a unified whole. However, the intelligibility of this scenario is precisely what Frege’s Contextualism puts into question. For Frege, a word is significant, on each of its occurrences, in virtue of the logical function that it fulfills within an intelligible proposition. The meaningfulness of the whole proposition—and thus also its unity—is always already presupposed by the meaningfulness of propositional parts. So the question of how it is possible for sub-propositional components to combine into meaningful propositions cannot even arise within Frege’s framework. Frege’s Contextualism provides a dissolution of the problem of the unity of the proposition by undermining the assumptions that are required for its very formulation.

This account of the implications of Frege’s Context Principle for the problem of propositional unity is not uncommon among historians of analytic philosophy. Peter Hylton, for example, formulates the point very effectively by contrasting Frege’s philosophical framework with Russell’s:

From within Russell’s early post-Idealist metaphysics the unity of the proposition can be neither avoided nor explained. Frege, by contrast, is not troubled by any analogous problem. For him there is no issue about how judgments are possible, about how concepts and objects unite. [...] Let us focus on Frege’s context-principle: ‘it is only in the context of a Satzes that words have any meaning’. This principle, as I understand it, implies that the notions of an object, and of a concept, are not to be understood independently of one other, and of the role that concept-expressions and object-expressions have in forming complete sentences. On this kind of reading, Frege presupposes the notion of judgment as fundamental, and understands both concepts and objects in terms of it. For him there thus

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101 This does not mean that if we accept Frege’s Contextualism, we must deny the possibility of lists as such—say, of my list for the grocery store. One can account for these uses of language by applying some of the strategies described in Chapter 6.
can be no question as to how these separate and independent entities can form a unity, since they are not correctly thought of as separate and independent at all.\textsuperscript{102}

Given early Russell’s atomistic metaphysics, the unity of the proposition becomes an unavoidable and unsolvable problem; by contrast, given Frege’s Context Principle, such a problem does not even get off the ground. In a similar vein, Peter Sullivan writes that “Frege’s resolution of the problem of propositional unity […] is entirely contained in his context principle.”\textsuperscript{103}

These remarks of Hylton’s and Sullivan’s occur in articles that are only tangentially concerned with Frege’s response to the problem of propositional unity. Hylton and Sullivan do not discuss, in those articles, the passages where Frege explicitly addresses the issue. But these passages can appear to challenge part of what Hylton and Sullivan are claiming or implying—namely, that Frege’s explicit response to the problem of propositional unity involves an appeal to the Context Principle. Even if Frege’s Context Principle provides the resources for dissolving the problem of propositional unity, there is a question about whether Frege actually availed himself of those resources.

On the face of it, Frege’s official response to the problem of propositional unity does not involve any appeal to the Context Principle. In fact, it is not obvious that such a response is even compatible with his understanding of the Context Principle. Consider this selection of relevant passages:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{102} Hylton 2005, p. 177
\textsuperscript{103} Sullivan 2010, p. 111
\end{flushleft}
[N]ot all the parts of a thought can be complete; at least one must be unsaturated or predicative; otherwise they would not hold together.\textsuperscript{104}

[The] unsaturatedness of one of the components [of a proposition] is necessary, since otherwise the parts do not hold together.\textsuperscript{105}

But the question now arises how a thought comes to be constructed, and how its parts are so combined together that the whole amounts to something more than the parts taken separately. [...] It is natural to suppose that, for logic in general, combination into a whole always comes about by the saturation of something unsaturated.\textsuperscript{106}

Frege’s appears to give an account of propositional unity that hinges on the asymmetry between the “saturated” character of proper names (which corresponds to the saturated character of both the senses they express and the objects they refer to) and the “unsaturated” character of concept-words (which corresponds to the unsaturated character of both the senses they express and the concepts they refer to). Moreover, such a solution appears to presuppose the possibility of combining meaningful propositional components that do not “hold together” and that, therefore, do not constitute a meaningful proposition (for example, the possibility of combining two proper names). And this, in turn, involves a violation of the construal of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege, because it allows meaningful sub-propositional expressions to occur outside the context of significant propositions. There are at least two relatively widespread readings that ascribe to Frege this sort of account of propositional unity.

i) The first reading ignores completely Frege’s commitment to the Context Principle. For Frege, it is assumed, propositional constituents have meaning even when they do not occur in meaningful propositions, and the unity of the proposition is explained by invoking the peculiar metaphysical properties of the items expressed or referred to by its parts. Proper names and

\textsuperscript{104} “On Concept and Object,” in \textit{TFR}, p. 193.
\textsuperscript{105} “On Schoenflies: \textit{Die logischen Paradoxien der Mengenlehre},” in \textit{PW}, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{106} “Compound Thoughts,” in \textit{CP}, p. 390.
concept-words pick out different kinds of items, which “complete” one another—like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The commentators who attribute to Frege this sort of “solution” generally go on to argue that it is quite unconvincing. Here is a passage by David Wiggins which is sometimes quoted as a knock-down argument against Frege’s putative view:\textsuperscript{107}

\begin{quote}
[Frege’s theory of the unsaturated nature of concepts] must encourage the protest that, even if there really exists the incomplete sort of things which Frege wants, it is still unclear how it can help to distinguish a sentence from a list to say that a sentence is unlike a list in mentioning both a complete thing and an incomplete thing. How is it that he who mentions something complete and then something incomplete thereby gets to say something? Or, in Fregean terminology, how can a designation of something complete followed by a designation of something incomplete combine to constitute a subject matter that can be judged or asserted as a truth?\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

The objection is indeed devastating—as an objection against the view that is being attributed to Frege. The view takes for granted the same sort of framework that leads Russell into the problem of propositional unity. For the sake of concreteness, let’s consider the account that Russell puts forth in the \textit{Problems of Philosophy} (1912). According to that account, the parts of a proposition pick out, atomistically, two different kinds of entities: particulars and universals. For Frege, according to the interpretation presupposed by Wiggins’ objection, the parts of a proposition pick out, atomistically, “concepts” and “objects.” Russell is supposed to run into the problem of reducing propositions to mere lists of particulars and universals. But why should Frege be in a better position? Isn’t he reducing propositions to lists of objects and concepts, at the level of reference, and to lists of thought-components, at the level of sense? Even if the items atomistically expressed or referred to by proper names and concept-words were like pieces of a

\textsuperscript{107} See Gibson 2004, pp. 5-6.
\textsuperscript{108} Wiggins 1984, p. 324.
jigsaw puzzle, perfectly fitting into one another (in a sense that, at a certain point, would have to be spell out in non-metaphorical terms), they would not “hold together” in the relevant sense; they would be merely juxtaposed. Similarly, the correlative linguistic expressions would not add up to a unified proposition, but would simply “mention” one thing after another.

ii) Peter Geach has proposed a different reading of Frege’s response to the problem of propositional unity, which confers—like Wiggins’—an essential role to the asymmetry between saturated and unsaturated expressions, but is not liable to Wiggins’ devastating objection. Geach’s proposal turns on a particular interpretation of Frege’s construal of the distinction between proper names and concept-words. For Frege, according to Geach, proper names are “quotable parts of sentences,” which may be displayed on their own, whereas predicates are “sentential patterns”: what designates a concept (and expresses the correlative sense) is not a sequence of sounds or printed letters, but the occurrence of a given sentential pattern.109 This means that there is no such thing as a concept-word “in isolation,” designating a concept and expressing a sense prior to and independently of its contribution to the expression of some complete thought. By endorsing this view of concept-words, according to Geach, Frege gave a satisfactory account of propositional unity: we don’t have to explain how a concept-word can combine with a proper name into a unified proposition, because the occurrence of a significant concept-word is nothing but an aspect of the occurrence of a significant proposition.110 This reading relies on a restricted interpretation of the Context Principle, which is taken to apply only

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109 See Geach and Anscombe 1961, pp. 143-155; Geach 1975, p. 147; Geach 1976a, p. 438; Geach 1976b, pp. 59-60. Geach expresses the difference between predicates and proper name by saying that predicates are functions, “linguistic functions” from names to propositions; for a discussion of this view, see below, Chapter 3, Section 8.

110 See Geach 1975, pp. 149-150.
to concept-words (and functional expressions more generally), to the exclusion of proper names. As Geach puts it at one point,

> [for Frege] what represents the concept is [...] the structure of a clause with a singular subject and with that general term as predicate. (On the other hand, the way a singular term stands for an object is in no way dependent on that name’s occurring in a special sort of clause.)”\(^{111}\)

Whenever we have a meaningful concept-word, we also have a meaningful and unified proposition; but we can have combinations of meaningful proper names that hold aloof from one another and do not constitute a unified proposition.

Wiggins’ and Geach’s respective interpretations have a merit: they do justice to the fact that Frege appears to invoke the asymmetry between saturated and unsaturated expressions as an explanation of propositional unity. In so doing, however, they attribute to Frege a view that allows for at least some kinds of meaningful sub-propositional expressions to occur outside the context of significant propositions. By contrast, commentators such as Hylton and Sullivan point out that Frege’s Context Principle suffices to block the problem of propositional unity; but this contention, taken by itself, leaves us in the dark with respect to the question of how we should understand Frege’s explicit remarks about that problem. By holding that meaningful propositional components occur only in the context of significant propositions, we do indeed dissolve the problem of propositional unity by rejecting its presuppositions; but such a dissolution does not depend on the adoption of a view about the asymmetry between “saturated” and “unsaturated” propositional constituents. An advocate of this contextualist construal of sub-propositional meaning may also hold that any meaningful proposition must comprise both

\(^{111}\) Geach and Anscombe 1961, p. 155; my emphasis.
saturated and unsaturated expressions (or unsaturated expressions of appropriately different levels). However, this claim will require an independent justification—hinging, for instance, on considerations concerning how best to account for the inferential relations of propositions, and how best to describe the logical behavior of different kinds of propositional constituents. In principle, it seems perfectly possible to accept the anti-atomistic conception of propositional parts that I have attributed to Frege (which leads to the dissolution of the problem of propositional unity), while adopting a different account of propositional structure.\footnote{For example, an account that assigns an essential role only to singular terms, as maintained, according to some interpreters, by Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} (see Sellars 1962). Such an account has no use for the figurative talk of “saturated” expressions completing “unsaturated” ones: the mutual relation between the different parts of the proposition is more aptly characterized by invoking the Tractarian image of elements that “hang one in another like the links of a chain” (\textit{TLP} 2.03).}

Our problem becomes therefore the following: Is it possible to give a plausible reading of the passages where Frege addresses explicitly the problem of propositional unity which renders them consistent with the form of contextualism that I have attributed to Frege in previous sections of this chapter? My wishes to the contrary notwithstanding, I don’t see room for a positive answer to this question. By invoking “the saturation of something unsaturated” as an explanation of propositional unity, Frege is \textit{eo ipso} envisioning the possibility of combining meaningful propositional constituents that do not complement each others in the appropriate way and that, therefore, do not occur in the context of a significant proposition.

The inconsistency that I am here attributing to Frege calls for a diagnosis. Some features of the dialectical contexts in which Frege discusses the problem of propositional unity are worth noticing. Frege’s main concern, in those contexts, is not to devise a solution for the problem of propositional unity, but rather to justify his conception of propositional structure and his claim
about the categorial distinction between proper names and functional expressions. The justification he offers can be spelled out as follows: “Propositions are both articulated and unified; but this is possible only if one of their parts is a functional expression whose argument places are saturated by proper names or by the right kinds of lower-level functional expressions.” My suggestion is that Frege, by giving this sort of justification, is trying to take a shortcut. He is trying to do quickly what is accomplished by his logical system as a whole, or by detailed discussions that appear elsewhere in his works. The actual justification of Frege’s function/argument analysis of the proposition lies mainly in the power of his quantificational account of generality. And the actual justification of Frege’s claims about the categorial distinction between proper names and functional expressions lies in his elucidations of their respective logical behavior—for instance, in his remarks about the different kinds of question that it makes sense to ask about concepts and objects respectively. Frege’s shortcut does not really work. As we have noticed, it is far from self-evident that one could not avoid the problem of propositional unity by adopting Frege’s anti-atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning without endorsing Frege’s account of propositional structure. Worse still, Frege’s shortcut introduces a tension in his philosophy, since it involves assumptions that are incompatible with his construal of the Context Principle. However, I wish to suggest that this tension does not derive from pondered and deep-seated philosophical commitments, but from the choice of an infelicitous—and dispensable—rhetorical strategy.

What should be kept in view, for our present purposes, is that the form of contextualism that I have attributed to Frege makes the problem of propositional unity completely disappear.

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113 See the immediate surroundings of the three passages from Frege that I quoted above.
114 See for instance F, §51: “With a concept the question is always whether anything, and if so what, falls under it. With a proper name such questions make no sense.”
This remains true regardless of the difficulties and unclarities that characterize Frege’s actual discussion of the problem. The problem is generated by an atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning which is characteristic of positions developed within the Empiricist Framework. Frege’s Contextualism has the virtue of dissolving that problem by articulating a conception of propositional wholes and propositional parts in which the unity of the whole is always already presupposed by the meaningfulness of the parts. In this respect, therefore, Frege’s Contextualism is philosophically superior to positions such as Bentham’s and Russell’s.

14. Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Frege’s conception of propositional and sub-propositional meaning challenges the construal of the space of possibilities that characterizes the Empiricist Framework. Frege rejects the idea that the meanings of propositional components are unilateral prior to the meanings of the propositions to which they belong, as well as the idea that the meanings of propositions are (in the central case) unilateral prior to the meanings of their parts. In contrast to either of these options, he understands propositional and sub-propositional meaning as interdependent notions. The meaningful proposition is, for Frege, an organic unity in which the parts could not be what they are except as parts of appropriate wholes, while the whole could not be what it is if did not have the appropriate parts. More specifically, Frege’s Contextualism holds that a word, on each of its occurrences, expresses a sub-propositional meaning only in so far as it contributes to the expression of some complete propositional content, while a combination of words, on each of its occurrences, is a meaningful proposition, expressing some intelligible propositional content, in virtue of the meanings of its constituent
parts. I have also argued that Frege, by recognizing contextually defined expressions as a feature of ordinary language, grants some role to the unilateral form of contextual dependence that is envisioned by the Empiricist Framework, but treats it as a parasitical phenomenon. Finally, I have shown that Frege’s approach has the philosophical merit of avoiding the difficulties into which Bentham and Russell find themselves entangled because of their commitment to an atomistic conception of genuine sub-propositional meaning.

While I have argued that there are compelling reasons for attributing to Frege this form of contextualism, I do not wish to deny that there may be various elements of Frege’s philosophy that are in tension with it. We saw that a possible source of tension lies in Frege’s explicit discussion of the problem of propositional unity, which betrays some concession to an atomistic conception of the meanings of words. But there are several other sources of potential tension. A very good candidate, as is well-known, is the assimilation of propositions to complex proper names, which seems to deprive the Context Principle of its rationale. On the basis of that assimilation, in fact, the principle would assert that an expression is a sub-propositional logical unity only in so far as it is part of a more complex expression which, being itself a name, has the same general logical character of the original expression. The whimsical character of such a principle becomes especially evident if we consider its application to proper names, which would run along the following lines: “A proper name that does not happen to name one of two special objects, called ‘The True’ and ‘The False,’ has meaning only in so far as it is part of a more complex name that refers to one of those special objects.” As Peter Geach once commented (referring to a very similar reformulation of the Context Principle), “[t]his is a thesis that would
surely be maintained only because somebody embraced a wider theory necessitating the thesis; it wholly lacks the intuitive appeal of the original formulations e.g. in the *Grundlagen*.”

This is simply meant as an example of a feature of Frege’s philosophy that might be in tension with Frege’ Contextualism, as I have construed it. It is not my aim to establish that there is an actual tension here. (That would involve, among other things, a careful discussion of whether Frege, in his mature writings, does in fact obliterate the categorial distinction between names and propositions, which is a debated issue.) More generally, I will not seek to determine whether the form of contextualism that I have attributed to Frege is in tension with any of his other views. For the purposes of this work, it is enough if I have demonstrated that Frege did endorse that form of contextualism. It is not necessary to show that he was in every respect coherent, or to identify any determinate moment of incoherence.

The next chapter is an excursus on Frege’s doctrine of the multiple analyses. Its aim is to show that a proper appreciation of Frege’s Contextualism can help us to understand how Frege can coherently maintain that a thought, while essentially articulated, may be articulated in many alternative ways. The main thread of this work will resume in Chapter 4, which examines Wittgenstein’s inheritance of Frege’s Contextualism in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

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115 Geach 1976a, p. 441.
116 See for instance the exchange between Tyler Burge (2005, chap. 4) and William Taschek (2008) on whether the role of “the horizontal” in Frege’s mature semantic system is capable of vindicating a categorial distinction between propositions and complex proper names.
1. Resolving a putative tension in Frege’s view

In the previous chapter, I argued that a meaningful articulate proposition, for Frege, is an “organic unity” in which the whole and the parts are interdependent, in the following way: the complete proposition is articulated into parts that make distinctive contributions to the meaning of the whole, but these parts could not be what they are if they were not parts of appropriate wholes, because their identity is determined by the logical function that they fulfill within the wholes in which they occur. Moreover, I have suggested that sub-propositional compositional structure, for Frege, is a constitutive feature of language: while there can be various sorts of parasitical cases, meaningful propositions are in the central case articulated into meaningful parts. The aim of this chapter is to show that a proper appreciation of the character of Frege’s contextualism sheds light on a Fregean doctrine that has puzzled many of its most distinguished commentator—namely, the doctrine that the same thought may be analyzed in different ways, none of which has to be more fundamental of the others. More specifically, it helps us to see that Frege, in spite of what most commentators have maintained, can be coherently committed to the
idea that thoughts lack a unique intrinsic structure, without relinquishing the idea that thoughts are essentially articulated.

The discussion to be carried out in this chapter is relevant for the overall aims of this work in two major respects. In the first place, it provides further evidence in support of the interpretation of Frege’s Contextualism that I have articulated in the previous chapter by showing that it enables us to make good sense of a related region of Frege’s thought. And in the second place, it contributes to elucidate the rationale of one of the claims that I have attributed to Frege—namely, the claim that logical articulation is a constitutive feature of meaningful propositions.

2. The Articulation Thesis and the Multiple Analyses Thesis

On the face of it, Frege is committed to two theses about thoughts and their relation to propositions, which I shall dub the Articulation Thesis and Multiple Analyses Thesis. The Articulation Thesis states that thoughts are articulated into parts that correspond, by and large, to the grammatical parts of the propositions that express them. (“Proposition” and “sentence” will be used interchangeably in this chapter as a translation of Frege’s “Satz.”) As Frege puts it,

[The Articulation Thesis] We can regard a sentence as a mapping of a thought: corresponding to the whole-part relation of a thought and its parts we have, by and large, the same relation for the sentence and its parts.¹

For Frege, as we saw in detail in the previous chapter, a meaningful proposition is generally a logically complex sign: it is composed of parts (words or phrases) that have a sense (and possibly a reference) of their own. The senses expressed by the parts of the proposition are parts of the sense expressed of the whole proposition, which for Frege is a thought. In this way, the part/whole structure of a proposition mirrors in general the part/whole structure of the corresponding thought.

The *Multiple Analyses Thesis*, on the other hand, states that the same thought can be “split up” or “analyzed” or “decomposed” or “carved up” in many ways, none of which must have absolute priority over the others.\(^2\) In Frege’s words,

> [The Multiple Analyses Thesis] We must notice […] that one and the same thought can be split up in different ways and so can be seen as put together out of parts in different ways.\(^3\)

The same thought can result from combining with one another different thought-constituents, i.e. different sub-propositional senses. The analysis of a thought into its parts is not unique: the same thought can be analyzed into different sets of sub-propositional senses. We can also say: Propositions with different semantic structures can express the same thought—where two propositions have different semantic structures whenever they are not composed of expressions with the same senses, put together in the same way. The idea that no particular way of analyzing a thought must have a privileged status over the others is not explicitly stated in the quotation I

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\(^2\) The verbs that Frege uses in this connection are *zerfallen* and *zerlegen*, which are variously translated as “splitting up,” “analyzing,” or “decomposing,” and *zerspalten*, which is generally translated as “carving up.”

\(^3\) “A Brief Survey of my Logical Doctrines,” in *PW*, pp. 201-202. See also “On Concept and Object,” in *TFR*, p. 188.
have given above or in other similar passages, but can be argued to follow from some of the examples that Frege discusses, which will be examined in detail in the next section.

These formulations of the two theses are framed in terms of Frege’s mature semantic view, which is informed by the sense/reference distinction. According to Frege’s earlier view, complete propositions express “judgeable contents” and are composed of argument expressions and functional expressions. Within this earlier framework, the first thesis would be recast as the claim that a judgeable content is composed of parts that correspond, by and large, to the parts of the proposition that expresses it, and the second thesis as the claim that the same judgeable content can be split up in many ways, none of which has to be more fundamental than the others. There are indeed some passages in Frege’s early writings that appear to express quite explicitly this latter formulation of the Multiple Analyses Thesis. For example, he states: “I do not believe that for any judgeable content there is only one way in which it can be decomposed, or that one of these possible ways can always claim objective preeminence.”4 (Further evidence for the fact that Frege does not think that there must be a unique ultimate analysis of a judgeable content, having absolute priority over all the others, is arguably provided by the examples he discusses.) Early Frege is not as explicit about the fact that he regards a judgeable content as composed of the items signified by the argument expressions and functional expressions that compose the corresponding proposition; but such a view can be plausibly seen to follow from some of the ways in which he characterizes judgeable contents. In §2 of Begriffsschrift, for example, Frege describes a judgeable content as a “complex of ideas,” where the term “idea,” in this very early work, denotes the content of a sub-propositional expression; the natural implication is that

4 Frege to Marty, 29.8.1882, in TFR, p. 81. See also Begriffsschrift, §9, in TFR, pp. 66 and 69; F, §64, p. 75.
judgeable contents are made up of the items signified by argument expressions and functional expressions. Moreover, in another early writing, Frege shows how a content of possible judgeable can be “split into a constant and a variable part.” Thus he treats judgeable contents as having parts, and it is clear from his procedure that he takes the segmentation of judgeable contents to mirror the logical segmentation of the corresponding propositions.

To the great majority of commentators it has seemed that the two theses, taken as they stand, are mutually incompatible. Accordingly, it has seemed that a sympathetic interpretation should show that Frege is not really committed to both of them. The debate, then, has tended to polarize into two opposite camps. Each camp argues that Frege subscribes only to one of the theses, and merely appears to subscribe to the other. The two camps differ because they implement this exegetical schema in opposite ways. I shall refer to one of these camps as the Dummettian Camp, because it has been most forcefully championed by Michael Dummett; the opposite camp I shall simply call the Anti-Dummettian Camp, because it has tended to develop as a reaction against Dummett’s interpretation. The two camps may be characterized as follows:

*The Dummettian Camp.* Frege endorses the Articulation Thesis, but is not really committed to the Multiple Analyses Thesis. Thoughts are articulated into parts, in a way that mirrors the internal articulation of the propositions that express them; but each thought is articulated in a unique way. Propositions that have a different semantic structure cannot express the same thought.

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5 “Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Concept-script,” in *PW*, p. 16.
The Anti-Dummettian Camp. Frege endorses the Multiple Analyzes Thesis, but is not really committed to the Articulation Thesis. Thoughts can be analyzed in many ways, because they are in themselves inarticulate. Thoughts, as unstructured wholes, cannot mirror the structure of the propositions that express them.

In this chapter, I will examine Dummett’s position as well as two different proposals that belong to the opposite camp—namely the interpretations advanced by Hans Sluga and David Bell. I will also discuss the interpretation proposed by Peter Geach, arguing that it oscillates unstably between the Dummettian and Anti-Dummettian camp and fails to provide a genuine alternative. The aim of this overview is to show that the debate has been informed by a crucial but unexamined assumption:

The Underlying Assumption. If internal articulation is essential to thoughts, then there must be one articulation which is the single and unique articulation of each thought; and conversely, if each thought can be articulated in more than one way, then it must be in and of itself inarticulate.

This is the assumption that generates the apparent conflict between Frege’s two theses. I will argue, however, that the assumption is not compulsory. The assumption is compulsory only if we conceive thoughts as aggregates of atomistically independent components. But this is not the only option. We can also conceive of thoughts as organic unities that are indeed articulated into parts, but by parts that are individuated by the function that they perform within the whole. When the relationship between a thought and its parts is construed in accordance to this alternative
model, I shall argue, the Underlying Assumption lacks any compulsory character. Moreover, I will give reasons for thinking that Frege did in fact construe thoughts as organic unities—in the same manner in which, as I argued in the previous chapter, he construed meaningful propositions as organic unities. By adopting this view, Frege is entitled to the simultaneous assertion of the Articulation Thesis and the Multiple Analyses Thesis: while it is constitutive of thoughts that they are internally articulated, in a way that mirrors by and large the manifest articulation of the propositions that express them, there is no unique ultimate articulation that a thought must possess in order to be the thought that it is.

Being able to see that Frege can endorse both theses without incoherence is an achievement on both exegetical and philosophical grounds. Exegetically, it allows us to make best sense of Frege’s texts as they stand. As the two sides of the debate have documented, in fact, there are compelling textual reasons for attributing to Frege each of the two apparently incompatible theses. But the exchanges between the Dummettian and the Anti-Dummettian camp of the debate have also brought out that there are good philosophical reasons for accepting each thesis. Dummett, as we shall see, has provided powerful arguments in support of the Articulation Thesis, which hinge on considerations about what it is to speak a language and to express a thought (in the full sense of each term), and about what it is to express a thought (as opposed to merely encoding or referring to it). Commentators of the opposite camp, on the other hand, have pointed out that only philosophical prejudice can lead one to deny the Multiple Analyses Thesis, since the thesis may be seen to be equivalent to the truism that we can, indeed, say the same thing in different ways. Thus it will be of more than merely exegetical interest if it turns out that there is room for a position that incorporates both theses without inconsistency.
3. Frege on multiple analyses: five kinds of cases

Frege’s works contain discussions of several different kinds of examples that can be taken to illustrate his commitment to the Multiple Analyses Thesis. Before we examine the claims of the two opposite sides of the exegetical debate, it will help to have a systematic overview of these examples and to distinguish them from cases that are not candidate exemplifications of the phenomenon of multiple analyses.

It is uncontroversial that, for Frege, “different sentences may express the same thought”: he insists on this point in many different places. But statements of this form, taken in isolation, do not suffice to show that Frege is committed to the Multiple Analyses Thesis. Within Frege’s philosophical framework, in fact, there can be at least three kinds of cases in which the same thought is expressed by different propositions, but is not split up in different ways—i.e., three kinds of (uncontroversial) non-cases of multiple analyses.

First kind of non-case. We can have two different propositions that are composed of perfectly synonymous words, combined in exactly the same way, such as (arguably) the English proposition “John is American” and the German proposition “John ist Amerikanisch.” These are different propositions, made up of different words. But they exhibit the same semantic structure—Carnap would say that they are “intensionally isomorphic”—and articulate the thought they express in exactly the same way.

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6 The sentence I have just quoted appears in “On Concept and Object,” in TFR, p. 188. See also ibid., p. 184; “Logic” (1879-1891), in PW, p. 6; “Logic” (1897), in PW, p. 143; “Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the Mathematical Natural Sciences,” in PW, p. 269.

Second kind of non-case. We can have two different propositions that are composed of words with identical logical meanings, even though some of their constituent words differ in their psychological associations—i.e. in what Frege sometimes calls their “coloring.” For Frege, the two propositions “The dog is barking” and “The cur is barking” fall within this category. These propositions express the same “conceptual content,” the same thought, and articulate it in the same way. In spite of their different psychological associations, the two propositions exhibit the same semantic structure.

Third kind of non-case. According to Frege, some propositions of ordinary language have a misleading surface grammar. The proposition “Everybody loves somebody,” for example, expresses the same thought that would be expressed, in a perspicuous logical notation, by the proposition “∀x∃y(x loves y).” The former proposition appears to share the logical form of a proposition such as “John loves Mary,” and thus it may seem to articulate in a different way the thought that is expressed by its transcription in contemporary logical notation. But this appearance, for Frege, is deceptive (see Chapter 2, Section 9). The difference in surface-grammatical form between propositions of ordinary language containing generality words and their transcriptions in a perspicuous logical notation does not correspond to a difference in semantic structure. This sort of case, therefore, does not suffice to show that the same thought can result from the combination of different sets of thought-components.

If one wants to argue that Frege is committed to the Multiple Analysis Thesis, one must look at his treatment of different sorts of cases. I will distinguish five kinds of relevant cases. As we shall see, there are various similarities and differences between the individual examples that Frege discusses. I do not claim, therefore, that what follows is the only sensible way of

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8 “Logic” (1897), in PW, p. 140.
classifying them. The classification that I provide is designed to facilitate the discussion of the secondary literature, in a way that I hope will become evident in following sections.

First kind of candidate case. Frege maintains that given a meaningful proposition, of either natural language or Begriffsschrift, there are many ways of segmenting it into a functional expression and argument expressions. Each of these segmentations is achieved by regarding one or more parts of the sentence as variable, and the remaining part of the proposition as constant. The constant part will be a functional expression; more specifically, a concept-word. The variable parts will be proper names, if the constant part is a first-level concept-word, or concept-words of first or higher level, if the constant part is a concept-word of second or higher level. In the Begriffsschrift, for example, Frege indicates three different ways of “splitting up” the proposition “Cato killed Cato.”\(^9\) We may regard the first occurrence of “Cato” as variable and the rest as constant: in this case, we regard the sentence as composed of the proper name “Cato” and the concept-word “ξ killed Cato” (where the Greek letter indicates the empty place that needs to be filled up or “saturated” by a proper name). If we regard the second occurrence of the word “Cato” as variable and the rest as constant, then we will regard the proposition as composed of the proper name “Cato” and the concept-word “Cato killed ξ.” Finally, if we regard both occurrences of the word “Cato” as variable, but in such a way that they may only be replaced by two occurrences of the same proper name, then we will regard the proposition as composed of the proper name “Cato” and the concept-word “ξ killed ξ.” Moreover, it seems to follow from Frege’s view that these are only three out of many possible ways of splitting up the proposition. For example, by regarding the concept-word “ξ killed ξ” as variable and the rest as constant, we segment the proposition into a first-level concept-word and a second-level concept-word.

\(^9\) Begriffsschrift, §9.
word, the Cato-quantifier “Cx(Φx).” In fact, some commentators have argued that, by going up in the hierarchy of levels, we can split up any logically articulated proposition in infinitely many ways. In the following table, I provide a synopsis of the alternative ways of splitting up the sentence “Cato killed Cato” that we have explicitly considered. Following Frege’s practice, I associate each alternative method of analysis with an ordinary language paraphrase of the original proposition; the dots on the bottom line indicate that this list of alternative analyses is not meant to be exhaustive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition: Cato killed Cato</th>
<th>Alternative analyses: Cato + ξ killed Cato</th>
<th>Ordinary language paraphrases: Cato killed Cato</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cato killed Cato + Cato killed ξ</td>
<td>Cato killed by Cato</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cato + ξ killed ξ</td>
<td>Cato killed himself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ξ killed ξ + Cx(Φx)</td>
<td>Having killed oneself is a property of Cato</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1. First kind of candidate case of multiple analyses

Frege discusses many analogous examples in his writings. In all such cases, Frege seems to be providing illustrations of the Multiple Analyses Thesis. The alternative segmentations of each proposition, in fact, produce different sets of logical or semantic units; they display, accordingly, different ways of splitting up the content expressed by the proposition. On the other hand, Frege insists that these different analyses need not affect the “conceptual content” expressed by the proposition.

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11 See Begriffsschrift, §9; “Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Concept Script,” in PW, pp. 16-17; Frege to Marty, 28.8.1882, in TFR, p. 81; “On Concept and Object,” in TFR, p. 188.
proposition, but only “our way of grasping it.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus it seems that the same propositional content (“judgeable content” for early Frege, “thought” for mature Frege) may be expressed by propositions with different semantic structures.

Frege’s treatment of this first kind of case is one of the targets of Frank Ramsey’s 1925 paper “Universals,” which contains the earliest well-known attack on the Multiple Analysis Thesis. Ramsey considers the “frequently held” view that a relational proposition $aRb$ may be analyzed in three different ways: as saying that $a$ stands in the relation $\zeta R \zeta$ to $b$, as saying that $a$ possesses the complex property of $\zeta R b$, and as saying that $b$ possesses the complex property of $a R \zeta$. Each analysis, he argues, must be the analysis of a distinct proposition, since it specifies a different set of constituents; and yet, these three different propositions are the same proposition, because they all say the same thing, namely that $aRb$. Such a view, Ramsey charges, postulates “an incomprehensible trinity, as senseless as that of theology.”\textsuperscript{13}

It can be objected that this first kind of case does not really show that Frege was committed to the Multiple Analyses Thesis, because it does not show that thoughts or judgeable contents may lack a unique ultimate analysis. This objection will be examined in detail in the next section.

\textit{Second kind of candidate case.} Frege holds that by applying what is now known as the Principle of Abstraction, we can “carve up” the same propositional content in a different way. Here are three cases that he discusses explicitly:

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Begriffsschrift}, §9.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ramsey 1925, pp. 405-406.
Recarvings of the same content by application of the Abstraction Principle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcriptions in logical notation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$a$ is parallel to $b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The direction of $a$ identical to the direction of $b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Fs are Gs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extension of $F$ is identical to the extension of $G$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a one-to-one correlation between the Fs and the Gs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of Fs is identical to number of Gs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| $a/b$ |
| $D(a) = D(b)$ |
| $\forall x(Fx \leftrightarrow Gx)$ |
| $\epsilon F \epsilon = \epsilon G \epsilon$ |
| $\exists R \{ \forall x(Fx \rightarrow \exists y(Gy \& xRy)) \& \forall y(\exists x(Fx \& xRy)) \& (xRy \rightarrow (Gy \rightarrow x=y) \& (xRy \& xRz) \rightarrow (x=y \rightarrow (Gz \rightarrow y=z))) \}$ |
| $Nx(Fx) = Nx(Gx)$ |

Table 3.2. Second kind of candidate case of multiple analyses

We have here three propositional contents, each of which is analyzed in two alternative ways. Concerning the first case, Frege writes in the *Foundations* that “we carve up the content in a way different from the original way, and this yields us a new concept,” namely the concept of direction.\(^{14}\) Clearly, this consideration is meant to apply to the third case as well, since Frege discusses directions as an analogy for his treatment of numbers. Concerning the second case, Frege writes in “Function and Concept” that each of the two propositions “expresses the same sense, but in a different way.”\(^ {15}\) Since the essay was written in the light of the sense/reference distinction, this remark asserts that the two propositions agree not only in truth-value, but also in the thought that they express.\(^ {16}\)

\(^{14}\) F, §64, p. 75. Other analogous examples are discussed in F, §§64-65.

\(^{15}\) “Function and Concept,” in TFR, p. 136.

\(^{16}\) Frege regards the possibility of “transforming” propositions of the form “All Fs are Gs” into propositions stating the identity of extensions as a fundamental law of logic and includes it among the axioms of his formal system (this is the infamous Basic Law V; see BL, §§3, 9, and 20). In the passage from “Function and Concept” that we have mentioned above, Frege explicitly says that pairs of propositions of this form express the same sense (i.e. that same thought).
There are several differences between these cases and the former ones. The cases of the first kind are characterized by the fact that the different analyses of the same thought are obtained from a single proposition by regarding each time different parts of the proposition as variable and constant. The cases of the second kind, on the other hand, are characterized by the fact that we start from the very beginning with two different propositions, which are thought to exhibit different semantic structures. Moreover, the cases of the former kind display a method for generating an indefinite (and perhaps infinite) number of different analyses of any thought that is initially expressed in an articulate way, whereas the “recarving process” applies only to thoughts of a certain form (namely those involving an equivalence relation) and generates only two alternative analyses. In spite of these differences, however, both kinds of case appear to show that the same thought or judgeable content can result from the combination of different logical components.

Third kind of candidate case. Further evidence of Frege’s commitment to the possibility of multiple analyses is provided, on the face of it, by his discussion of propositions involving truth-functional connectives. Here are some of the cases that Frege discusses:

However, whether Frege held the same view in Basic Laws has been subject of controversy. Some commentators argue that Basic Law V incorporates identity of sense as well as identity of truth-value (see for instance Michael Beaney’s editorial notes in TFR, p. 136, n. 4, and p. 213, n. 26); others argue that it expresses only identity of truth-value (see for instance Dummett 1981b, p. 336).
Alternative expressions of the same thought, by means of propositions involving truth-functional connectives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p &amp; q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q &amp; p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p &amp; p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¬¬p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p → q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¬q → ¬p</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3. Third kind of candidate case of multiple analyses

Concerning the first two pairs of propositions, Frege writes that these are cases “where two linguistically different expressions correspond to the same sense.” Each pair of propositions expresses the same thought. And yet, at least in the second case, it seems that the two propositions, by Frege’s standards, must exhibit different semantic structures. For Frege, the sign for conjunction is a concept-word in its own right: it refers to a concept and expresses a certain sense, which will be part of the thought expressed by the proposition in which it occurs. Thus, the thought expressed by “p & p” will contain a part that is not contained in the thought expressed by “p.” Similar considerations apply to the last two pairs of propositions. About double negation, Frege writes that “not (not B) has the same sense as ‘B’”; and about

---

17 “Compound Thoughts,” in CP, p. 393.
18 “Compound Thoughts,” in CP, p. 399. See also Begriffsschrift, Preface, in TFR, p. 51, where Frege introduces an axiom stating that ¬¬p and p have the same conceptual content; for a discussion of that passage, see Kremer 2010, p. 238. However, Frege might not be completely consistent in his writings about the fact that a sentence and its double negation express the same thought. At the end of the essay “Negation,” for example, he writes that “of the two thoughts: A,
contraposition, he asserts that “[t]he sense is scarcely affected by it.”

Here too it seems that the same thought may result from the combination of different thought-components.

*Fourth kind of cases.* In “On Concept and Object,” Frege states that the two propositions, “There is at least one square root of four” and “The concept square root of four is realized,” express the same thought. Frege argues that in the former proposition the expression “square root of four” is a concept-word, designating a first-level concept, whereas in the latter proposition, the expression “The concept square root of four” is a proper name, designating an object, as indicated by the presence of the definite article (which he takes to be a reliable—though not infallible—indicator of proper-namehood). For Frege, therefore, the two propositions differ in logical structure. The first proposition represents a first-level concept falling within a second-level concept (namely the existential quantifier); the second proposition, on the other hand, represents an object falling under a first-level concept. And yet, in spite of these structural differences, they are said to express the same thought. Similar considerations seem to apply to other analogous examples that Frege discusses in the same essay, such as the pair of propositions “Jesus is a man” and “Jesus falls under the concept man,” and the pair of propositions “2 is a prime number” and “2 falls under the concept prime number.”

In “On Concept and Object,” Frege insists that expressions of the form “The concept *F*” (as they appear in propositions analogous to those that we have been considering) designate objects. Moreover, there is evidence that the kind of objects he has in mind are extensions of

and the negation of the negation of *A*: either both are true or neither is” (*CP*, p. 389): here it would seem that there are two different thoughts which necessarily agree in truth-value.


20 “On Concept and Object,” in *TFR*, pp. 187-188.

21 “On Concept and Object,” in *TFR*, pp. 186 and 193 respectively. See also *FLL*, p. 66.
He writes, in fact, that expressions of the form “The concept F” stand for objects that “go proxy” for concepts, and then, defending a statement that he made in the *Foundations*, he maintains that any expression of the form “The extension of the concept F” may be replaced with an expression of the form “The concept F.” Thus, we may bring out the different semantic structure of the propositions that we have considered in the previous paragraph by means of Frege’s notation for extensions of concepts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative analysis of the same thought, by means of propositions involving extensions of concepts:</th>
<th>Transcriptions in logical notation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is at least one square root of four</td>
<td>$\exists x (x = \sqrt{4})$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The concept <em>square root of four</em> is realized</td>
<td>$R(\varepsilon (\varepsilon = \sqrt{4}))$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is a man</td>
<td>$M_j$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus falls under the concept <em>man</em></td>
<td>$U(j, \varepsilon M \varepsilon); \text{ or: } j \in \varepsilon M \varepsilon$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 is a prime number</td>
<td>$P(2)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 falls under the concept <em>prime number</em></td>
<td>$U(2, \varepsilon P \varepsilon); \text{ or: } 2 \in \varepsilon P \varepsilon$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4. Fourth kind of candidate case of multiple analyses

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22 Tyler Burge has convincingly argued for this point in Burge 2005, chap. 7.
23 “On Concept and Object,” in *TFR*, p. 185.
25 Some commentators have maintained that, for Frege, each of the following pairs of propositions differ merely in *surface* grammatical structure and correspond, accordingly, to a single formula of a proper logical notation (see for instance Heijenoort 1977). However, I cannot see any reason to think that this is Frege’s official view in “On Concept and Object.” At most, one may argue that this is the view that Frege *should* have endorsed in that essay, given his other commitments, or given the nature of the matter.
Fifth kind of cases. There is some reason for believing that the use of the truth predicate generates for Frege another class of cases of multiple analyses. Consider pairs of propositions of the following form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different expressions of the same thought, by means of propositions involving a truth predicate:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( p )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( p ) is true</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5. Fifth kind of candidate case of multiple analyses

Frege is very consistent in maintaining that propositions of the form “\( p \)” and “It is true that \( p \)” express the same thought or judgeable content.\(^{26}\) Moreover, at least on some occasions, he seems to regard the truth predicate as a genuine concept-word. To the extent that it does so, he is committed to the idea that the same thought may be expressed by propositions which differ in semantic structure.\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) See “Logic” (1897), in \( PW \), p. 141; “My Basic Logical Insights,” in \( PW \), pp. 251-252; “Thought,” in \( TFR \), p. 328. Cf. also \textit{Begriffsschrift}, §3, where Frege assumes that propositions of the form “\( p \)” and “It is a fact that \( p \)” express the same judgeable content.

\(^{27}\) The claim that Frege’s conception of truth provides evidence of his commitment to the multiple analyzability of thoughts is made in Bermúdez 2001 and, more incidentally, in Burge 2005, p. 292, n. 16. However, Frege’s view of the nature of truth (and of the role of the truth predicate) is a very delicate issue. At some points, Frege argues that the predicate “is true” should be regarded as a concept-word, even though a \textit{sui generis} one: “All one can say is: the word ‘true’ has a sense that contributes nothing to the sense of the whole sentence in which it occurs as a predicate” (“My Basic Logical Insights,” in \( PW \), p. 252). But it is only with great reluctance that Frege talks of truth as a property. After an inquiry into the peculiar logical features of the truth predicate, Frege concludes: “The \textit{Bedeutung} of the word ‘true’ seems to be altogether \textit{sui generis}. May we not be dealing here with something which cannot be called a
This concludes my overview of the kinds of cases discussed by Frege that seem to express in the most straightforward way his commitment to the Multiple Analysis Thesis. It is worth acknowledging that many of these cases pose special problems. Frege himself held different views about some of these cases at different points of his career. Thus, in view of the inconsistency of Basic Law V, one might argue, as Frege did in his late writings, that any expression of the form “the extension of the concept F” or “ἐFε” should not be treated as a genuine singular terms. Consequently, some of the cases of the second type, and all of the cases of the fourth type, would not count as instances of multiple analyzability.28 Similarly, concerning cases of the fifth type, one might argue that the truth predicate should not be treated as a genuine concept-word, and there is at least a strand in Frege’s writings that appears to pursue this line of reasoning.29 And again, concerning cases of the third kind, one could argue, following Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, that logical connectives should not be treated as concept-words with a

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28 See Frege, “Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and Natural Sciences,” in PW, p. 269. For an account of the evolution of Frege’s view on extensions of concepts, see Burge 2005, chap. 7.

29 See above, note 27.
sense and reference of their own. But considerations of this kind do not show that there is something objectionable in the very idea that the same thought can be analyzed in many alternative ways, none of which can claim absolute priority over the others. Moreover, the fact that Frege, at some point of his career, subscribed to considerations of this sort does not show that he was willing to question his commitment to the Multiple Analyses Thesis. The aforementioned considerations, in fact, do not invoke any general reason for rejecting the possibility of multiple analyses. The question, rather, is always whether the particular case at hand should be taken as an instance of multiple analyzability, given the specific issues that it raises—issues that may have to do with the contradictions that derive from taking the talk of extensions of concepts at face value, or with the philosophical puzzles that derive from taking the truth-predicate as a genuine concept-word, or with the problems that derive from interpreting the logical connectives as a substantive, contentful piece of vocabulary. In principle, one could raise similar objections against all of the five kinds of cases mentioned above, and yet admit that the possibility of multiple analyses may be illustrated by other cases.

In the following sections, we will look at the two opposite sides of the exegetical debate, beginning with Michael Dummett’s attempt to explain away Frege’s apparent commitment to the Multiple Analyses Thesis.

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30 The Tractatus summarizes this view at 4.0312: “My fundamental thought is that the ‘logical constants’ do not represent.” For the Tractatus, “logical constants” (i.e. logical connectives) do not characterize the sense of propositions, but express operations on the senses of propositions. In a perspicuous notation, truth-functionally equivalent propositions are expressed by means of a single sign: for instance, the propositions “p → q,” “¬q → ¬p” and “¬(p & ¬q)” are all expressed in the compact truth-table notation (described in 4.442) as: “(p, q)(TFTT).”
4. Dummett on the “essential structure” of thoughts

According to Dummett, Frege (or anyway Frege at his best) held the view that each thought has a *unique* identifying structure, which corresponds to the unique semantic structure of the propositions that express it. For Dummett’s Frege, each unambiguous proposition is constructed in stages from a set of ultimate constituents. The senses of the constituents, together with their mode of combination, determine the sense of the whole sentence, i.e. the thought it expresses. More specifically, the senses of the constituent parts of the proposition are *parts* of the thought it expresses. The crucial claim, then, is that the identity of each thought is given by the parts of which it is composed, together with the way they are put together. As a consequence, propositions with different semantic structures cannot express the same thought.\(^{31}\)

Dummett is of course well aware of the fact that he needs to account for what Frege says about the different kinds of cases that we considered in the previous section, since Frege’s statements on the matter show, on the face of it, that he held precisely the opposite view. Dummett addresses different cases with different strategies. I will begin with his attempt to deal with the first kind of case by drawing a distinction between “analysis” and “decomposition.”

Dummett argues that in order to understand what Frege writes about the alternative ways of analyzing a proposition such as “Cato killed Cato,” we need to introduce a fundamental distinction (not explicitly drawn by Frege) between the *analysis* and the *decomposition* of a proposition, and a correlative distinction between the *constituents* and the *components* of a proposition. The process of analysis shows how the proposition has been built up, in stages, from

\(^{31}\) The reconstruction of Dummett’s interpretation that I provide in this section is based especially on Dummett 1981a, pp. 27-33; Dummett 1981b, chaps. 15-17; Dummett 1991, pp. 192-195, 289-314.
its ultimate constituents. For each unambiguous proposition there is only one analysis, which
specifies a unique set of ultimate constituents and a unique sequence of construction steps. For
example, the constituents of “Cato killed Cato” are (presumably) “Cato,” “Cato” and “…killed
…,” and the proposition is constructed by filling up the argument places of the first-level
concept-word with the two occurrences of the proper name. Once we have a proposition and
understand its sense as determined by its constituents and their manner of combination, we can
then decompose the proposition (and the thought it expresses) in a variety of different ways,
obtaining in each case a different set of components. The process of decomposition consists in
taking a complete proposition and omitting from it some of its significant expressions, in one or
more of their occurrences. The part that is left over is, for Dummett, a component but not a
constituent of the proposition. Dummett calls it a complex predicate (of first or higher level), in
contrast with simple predicates, which are revealed by analysis. A complex predicate has empty
spaces that need to be filled up with expressions of the same logical type as the expressions that
have been omitted; moreover, all the empty places that have been created by omitting more
occurrences of the same expression must be filled up by occurrences of the same expression.
Dummett indicates the empty places of complex predicates by means of Greek letters (restricting
in this way the application of Frege’s general notation for functional expressions) and signals the
argument places of simple predicates by means of dots (as I did above with the putative simple
predicate “…killed…”). Thus, once we have the proposition “Cato killed Cato,” we can
decompose it in various ways by omitting each time different significant parts of the proposition.
We can decompose it into “Cato” and “Cato killed ξ,” or into “Cato” and “ξ killed ξ,” and so on.
In each case, we obtain a different set of components. Decomposition does not give us the
building blocks out of which the proposition has been constructed, but patterns that the
proposition may share with other propositions. For each proposition (and thought it expresses), there is only one analysis, which reveals its essential structure, but many possible decompositions.

Dummett emphasizes that the distinction between analysis and decomposition should not be confused with the distinction between complete and partial analysis. The components obtained by decomposition need not figure at any stage of the process of analysis. The concept-word “Cato killed ξ” does not figure at any intermediate step of the analysis of “Cato killed Cato”: this is, by Dummett’s standards, an atomic proposition, and its analysis takes place in a single step. We do not reach the constituent “…killed…” by first decomposing the proposition into “Cato” and “Cato killed ξ.” Analysis and decomposition, as Dummett puts it, are two different kinds of process.32

Dummett explains that these two processes fulfill different functions. The aim of analysis is “to reveal the manner in which the sense of a proposition depends on the senses of its parts.”33 In this way, analysis shows also how our understanding a proposition proceeds from our understanding of its ultimate constituents and their manner of combination. Decomposition, on the other hand, serves at least two functions. In the first place, it generates complex predicates that can appear as non-ultimate constituents of quantified propositions and definite descriptions.34 From “Cato killed Cato” we can extract by decomposition the complex predicate “Cato killed ξ”; we can then attach to this expression a quantifier and obtain, say, “∃x(Cato killed x).” The complex predicate, which was only a component of the proposition from which it was extracted, is now a genuine constituent of the quantified proposition, since it figures at one

33 Dummett 1981b, p. 271.
stage of the analysis of the proposition. However, since the complex predicate does not figure at the last stage of the analysis of the quantified proposition, it is not one of its ultimate constituents.

A second function of decomposition, according to Dummett, is to “explain the validity of an inference in which the given sentence figures, or to exhibit such an inference as exemplifying some general pattern.” One way to explain the validity of an inference is to show that it exemplifies some valid general pattern. In order to explain by this method different inferential relations of the same proposition, we may have to decompose the proposition in different ways. Consider for instance these two inferences:

\[
\text{Cato killed Cato} \quad \text{Cato killed Cato} \\
\therefore \text{Cato killed somebody} \quad \therefore \text{Somebody killed Cato}
\]

The two inferences exemplify the same general pattern, namely the introduction rule for the existential quantifier:

\[
Fa \\
\therefore \exists x(Fx)
\]

But in order to show that the two inferences exemplify this very same pattern, we need to decompose “Cato killed Cato” in different ways: in the first case, we will regard it as composed of “Cato” and “Cato killed \(\xi\),” whereas in the second case we will regard it as composed of

“Cato” and “ξ killed Cato.” In many cases, moreover, the same inference may be naturally seen to exemplify more than one general pattern. The choice of one particular pattern will then dictate different decompositions of the relevant propositions. Take the following inference:

If anybody killed Cato, he is an honorable man  
Cato killed Cato  
∴ Cato is an honorable man

If we see in this inference the following pattern (syllogism in Darii),

∀x(Fx→Gx)  
Fa  
∴ Ga

we need to regard the concept-words “ξ killed Cato” and “ξ is an honorable man” as components of the major premise—components that fill up the empty places of the second-level, two-place concept-word “∀x(Φx→Ψx).” But we can also see the same inference as carried out in two steps, each of which exemplifies a different pattern. We first derive “Cato killed Cato” from the first premise by Universal Instantiation, and then get to the conclusion by Modus Ponens:
If anybody killed Cato, he is an honorable man \(\forall x(Fx)\)

\[\therefore\text{If Cato killed Cato, Cato is an honorable man} \quad \therefore Fa\]

**Pattern:**

If Cato killed Cato, Cato is an honorable man \(p \rightarrow q\)

Cato killed Cato \(p\)

\[\therefore\text{Cato is a honorable man} \quad \therefore q\]

If we choose to explain the validity of the inference in this way, we don’t have to see the concept-words “\(\xi\) killed Cato” and “\(\xi\) is an honorable man” as components of the quantified premise; we only need to decompose it into the second-level, one-place concept-word “\(\forall x(\Phi x)\)” and the first-level concept-word “If \(\xi\) killed Cato, then \(\xi\) is a honorable man.”

36 Dummett does not put the issue exactly as I did. However, this seems to me the point that he is making about the connection between decomposition and inference.

37 For a more comprehensive discussion of the distinction, see Sullivan 2010.
Dummett sees very clearly that he cannot deal in the same way with the second kind of case. The different recarvings of the same content that Frege discusses in the *Foundations* and elsewhere are not obtained by decomposition. There is no *single* proposition from which we can obtain both “a/b” and “D(a)=D(b)” by applying to it different methods of decomposition. By analyzing (as opposed to decomposing) these two propositions, we do not reach a single set of ultimate constituents. Analysis shows that the semantic structures of the two propositions are genuinely different; and yet Frege says that they express the same content or sense. Dummett’s way of dealing with Frege’s remarks, here, is quite straightforward: he dismisses them as local aberrations.\textsuperscript{38} Dummett maintains that Frege’s statements—to the effect that by “transforming” a proposition such as “a/b” into a proposition such as “D(a)=D(b)” we “carve up the content in a way different from the original one,” and express “the same sense, but in a different way”—are “too strong”\textsuperscript{39} and “embod[y] an exaggerated claim.”\textsuperscript{40} Dummett argues that Frege was misled by a “false analogy” with cases in which a single proposition (and the thought it expresses) is decomposed in different ways.\textsuperscript{41} Frege should have admitted that “a/b” and a “D(a)=D(b)” (as well as any pair of propositions of the same form) exhibit different semantic structures and express, accordingly, different thoughts. By the time he wrote the *Grundgesetze*, according to Dummett, Frege abandoned his early, incorrect view and got rid of any claim that is incompatible with the idea that thoughts have a unique internal structure.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} Dummett 1991, p. 293.
\textsuperscript{40} Dummett 1981b, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{41} Dummett 1991, p. 295.
\textsuperscript{42} Dummett 1991, p. 293. Dummett rejects, therefore, the view that Basic Law V in *Grundgesetze* expresses identity of sense as well as identity of *Bedeutung* (cf. note 16 above).
In order to address the third kind of case that I distinguished above, Dummett adopts yet a different strategy. He introduces a distinction (not explicitly drawn by Frege) between *essential structure* and *form of representation*.\(^{43}\) The essential structure of a proposition is what accounts for the way in which the sense of a proposition depends upon the senses of its constituents. The form of representation is the particular grammatical construction that we adopt in order to represent a certain essential structure. The idea is that different propositions can have the same essential structure, even though they represent it in a different way. This is what happens, according to Dummett, when we express a material conditional in Frege’s notation, in contemporary logical notation, and in Polish notation:\(^{44}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
q & \quad p \rightarrow q & \quad \rightarrow pq \\
p &
\end{align*}
\]

For Dummett, these formulas have the same essential structure and express the same thought; what changes is merely the form of representation. Dummett claims that Frege treats in the same way sets of propositions of natural language such as “Cato killed Cato,” “Cato was killed by Cato,” and “Cato killed himself.” The surface grammar of these propositions is different. In virtue of this difference, Dummett claims, the three propositions “suggest” alternative decompositions of the same content; but for Frege, they all have the same essential structure, as is shown by the fact that he would translate all of them with a single formula of his logical notation (presumably, “cKc”). Coming now to the sort of cases that are our real concern here, Dummett’s suggestion is that Frege treats them in fundamentally the same way. The propositions

\(^{43}\) Dummett 1981b, pp. 328-332.

\(^{44}\) Dummett 1981b, pp. 328-329.
“p” and “p&p” express, according to Frege, the same thought; and yet they are represented in Frege’s own notation by different formulas. But for Dummett, this simply means that Frege’s logical notation is not yet a perfect logical notation. In a perfect logical notation, “p” and “p&p” would be expressed by a single formula, which would bring out transparently the essential structure that they have in common. In such a notation, there would actually be a single sign for “p” and “p & p,” and a single sign for “p & q” and “q & p.”45 According to Dummett, therefore, these are not cases of multiple analyses, but merely cases in which different propositions, having the same semantic structure, express the same thought.

To my knowledge, Dummett does not address the other cases that I mentioned in the previous section—i.e. double negation, contraposition, transformations involving the introduction of names for extensions, and transformations involving the introduction of the truth-predicate. But it seems that he would either dismiss them as local aberrations (as he does with the second kind of case), or claim that they are cases in which the same semantic structure is given different representations (as he does with propositions such as “p” and “p&p”).

At first sight, Dummett’s attempt to show that Frege is not after all committed to the possibility of multiple analyses might strike us as hopeless, given the number of passages where

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45 Dummett suggests, for the sake of illustration, that this could be done through a notation in which “each conjoint is written on top of one another, as in a monogram, but each only half as bold as their unconjoined counterparts” (Dummett 1981b, p. 332). An analogous notational trick has been proposed for expressing double negation: we could represent the negation of a proposition by writing the proposition upside down, so that the doubly negated proposition turns out to be typographically indistinguishable from the un-negated proposition. But it should be noticed that the two tricks cannot be combined into a single adequate notation. The resulting notation, in fact, would not be able to represent the difference between “¬(p & q)” and “¬p & ¬q”: each proposition would be ambiguously expressed by the half-bold super-impression of “p” and “q,” turned upside down. For an adequate comprehensive notation, we need something like Wittgenstein’s compact truth-table notation (see above, note 30).
Frege seems to allow quite explicitly for such a possibility. However, as we have seen, Dummett is able to go quite far in accommodating those passages within his own interpretation.

The most compelling part of his discussion is perhaps his account of the first kind of case by means of distinction between analysis and decomposition. We can notice, in the first place, that this distinction does justice to the intuitive idea that the various ways of splitting up a proposition (and the corresponding thought) into its logical parts do not all stand on the same level. It seems obvious, for example, that the analysis of a proposition of the form “aRb” into “a” and “ξRb” is less fundamental than the analysis of the proposition into “a”, “…R…,” and “b.” After all, the concept-word “ξRb” contains the simpler concept-word “…R…” and the proper name “b”! The former analysis strikes us as a merely partial one. Dummett’s distinction can explain the different status of these alternative analyses of the proposition, as well as other sorts of contrast that cannot be captured in terms of the distinction between partial and complete analyses. We might want to say, for example, that the analysis of a proposition of the form “Fa” into the “F…” and “a” is more fundamental than the analysis of the proposition into “F…” and the second-level concept-word “Φa,” even though the latter is in no obvious sense “more partial” than the former. According to Dummett’s proposal, the latter way of splitting up the proposition is obtained by regarding one of its significant parts as variable and the rest as constant; but in order to do so, we need to know which significant expressions occur in the proposition; and this is revealed by the former way of segmenting the proposition. Thus the latter way of analyzing the proposition is less fundamental than the former one because it presupposes it.

46 In the rest of this paragraph I will not use the term “analysis” in Dummett’s technical sense.
In the second place, it is worth noting that there are at least two pieces of textual evidence in support of Dummett’s reading of Frege’s treatment of the first kind of case of multiple analyses (both of which are extensively discussed by Dummett). In the *Begriffsschrift*, Frege claims that the different ways of splitting up a judgeable content into function and argument are all on the same level as long as function and argument are “fully determinate,” but if the argument “becomes indeterminate” (i.e., if the argument becomes a variable governed by a quantifier), then “the whole splits up into function and argument according to its content and not merely according to our way of grasping it.” This last remark fits well with Dummett’s claim that complex predicates can only be components of non-quantified propositions, but may be (non-ultimate) constituents of quantified propositions. Moreover, in another early writing, after stressing that he arrives at a concept by splitting up a complete judgeable content, Frege remarks that “[o]f course, if the expression of the content of possible judgment is to be analyzable in this way, it must already be itself articulated.” From this, Frege continues, “we may infer that […] at least the properties and relations that are not further analyzable must have their own simple designations.” The idea that the various ways of splitting up a judgeable content (and the proposition that expresses it) presuppose a pre-existing articulation, together with Frege’s explicit contrast between simple and complex concept-words, may be taken to show that Frege is in fact committed, albeit inchoately, to some version of Dummett’s distinction between the various components of a proposition (obtained through “decomposition”) and its ultimate, simple constituents (revealed by “analysis”).

47 *Begriffsschrift*, §9, in TFR, p. 68.
48 For a criticism of Dummett’s appropriation of this passage and the proposal of an alternative interpretation of it, see Currie 1985, pp. 288-290.
49 Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Concept-script,” in PW, p. 17.
In spite of its merits, Dummett’s way of dealing with the first kind of case has been challenged by several commentators.\(^5\) But even if we raise no objection against Dummett on this point, there are still very strong reasons for resisting his overall approach. As we saw above, Dummett is forced to dismiss Frege’s remarks about the second kind of case, and it seems that this is his only option for the remaining kinds of case—such as double negation, contraposition, and propositions involving the truth-predicate. The analysis/decomposition distinction, in fact, is not applicable to any of these cases and to claim that they merely involve different representations of the same essential structure would require a radical revision of Frege’s views—for example, it would require the abandonment of the idea that logical constants are genuine concept-words. Against this wider background, the claim that each thought, for Frege, has a unique structure appears as a requirement that Dummett imposes on Frege’s texts, rather than a view that Dummett gathers from the texts as they stand. The need for an interpretation that takes seriously Frege’s statements about the possibility of multiple analyses is one of the main motivations that animate the anti-Dummettian camp of the debate. Unfortunately, as we will begin to see in the next section, this other camp assumes that in order to allow for different irreducible analyses of the same thought, Frege must regard thoughts as intrinsically unstructured wholes.

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\(^5\) For a criticism of the claim that Frege is implicitly operating with a distinction between analysis and decomposition, see Levine 2002. For a critique of the attribution to Frege of the correlative distinction between simple and complex predicates, see Sluga 1975, p. 480; Geach 1975, pp. 147ff; Geach 1976.
5. Sluga on the unilateral priority of complete thoughts

The first representative of the anti-Dummettian camp that I shall consider is the interpretation developed by Hans Sluga in open polemic with Dummett.\footnote{The following account of Sluga’s interpretation is based on Sluga 1975; Sluga 1977; Sluga 1980, pp. 90-95, 134-136; Sluga 1987.}

Sluga argues that a central feature of Frege’s philosophy is his opposition to the traditional approach to logic, which begins with “concepts” (here generically understood as sub-propositional contents), construes judgments as combinations of concepts, and finally gets to inferences as combinations of judgments. According to this tradition, which supposedly spans from Aristotle to Boole, concepts are given prior to and independently of the complete thoughts in which they may occur. Similarly, on the linguistic level, sub-propositional expressions are taken to have a meaning prior to and independently of their occurrence in meaningful propositions. The parts are conceived to be unilaterally prior to the whole. As Sluga nicely puts it, the Aristotle-Boole tradition “treats concepts as if they where initially independent of judgments and entered them only incidentally.”\footnote{Sluga 1980, p. 91.} The fact that concepts appear in thoughts or judgments, as well as the fact that words are used in propositions, is treated as a merely accidental feature of concepts and words respectively.

Frege, according to Sluga, replaced this traditional atomistic approach with a form of holism that inherits the Kantian doctrine of the priority of judgments over concepts, of which Frege’s Context Principle is a “logical consequence” or “linguistic version.”\footnote{Sluga 1987, p. 86.} Frege’s contextualism, for Sluga, \textit{reverses} the direction of unilateral priority between the thought and its
parts, as well as the correlative direction of priority between propositional meaning and word-meaning. The traditional logician takes thoughts to arise from the combination of antecedently given thought-components; Frege, on the contrary, takes thought-components to arise from the segmentation or analysis of antecedently given thoughts. As Sluga puts it, Frege “reversed [the] order [of traditional logic] and began his logic with the treatment of propositions […] as unanalyzed wholes whose initially significant feature is their truth or falsity.”\textsuperscript{54} Frege begins with what can be judged true or false, i.e. a complete thought. This is first grasped as an “unanalyzed whole” or “unity”\textsuperscript{55}—where a “unity” is, for Sluga, something intrinsically “simple”\textsuperscript{56} and unstructured: a sense-monolith, we might say. Similarly, on the linguistic level, “sentence meanings precede word meanings.”\textsuperscript{57} The meanings of propositions are first grasped as unarticulated wholes: “sentences are primarily simple.”\textsuperscript{58} According to this account, it would seem, the manifest grammatical articulation of propositions plays no role in the apprehension of their sense.

According to Sluga’s interpretation, once the content expressed by a proposition has been grasped, we may proceed to analyze it into components, which may (but need not) correspond to the grammatical parts of the proposition. The necessity of this process of analysis rests on our need of “making and explaining inference-relations”:\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Sluga 1975, p. 482.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Sluga 1975, p. 483.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Sluga 1975, p. 484.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Sluga 1987, p. 86. Cf. also Sluga 1977, p. 239: “I wish to maintain that for Frege the recognition of the sense of a sentence is primary and that of the senses of the parts of the sentence secondary.”
\item \textsuperscript{58} Sluga 1975, p. 480.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Sluga 1975, p. 480.
\end{itemize}
In logic we must first speak of a judgment in which a whole thought is grasped. When we account for the logical relations that hold between judgments or the thoughts expressed by them, we may be forced to conceive of the judgment as falling apart into constituents. In a particular case, the logical constituents we have to distinguish in a judgment may closely correspond to the words out of which the grammarian sees the sentence as composed.\(^{60}\)

We can grasp the content of each proposition as an unarticulated whole. But in order to recognize and explain the inferential relations between these contents, we need to break them down into logical components, so as to present valid inferences as the exemplifications of some general pattern. Sluga does not explain why this is the case—why the validity of inference is accessible to us only through its formal character. But given Sluga’s commitments, it seems that this can only be a consequence of the limitations and the parochialism of our cognitive capacities. Presumably, the thoughts expressed by our propositions stand already in definite logical relations with one another before we articulate them into logical parts.

This leads, finally, to the introduction of the idea of multiple analyses. According to Sluga, Frege believes that in order to bring out different sets of inferential relations of a given thought, we may need to analyze it in different ways. A Sluga puts it, we might have to “assign” a different “logical structure” to the thought and to the propositions that expresses it:

> […] logical structure is not an absolute property of a sentence, but a relational one involving a sentence and a set of sentences relative to which structure is assigned. We need to assign to a sentence only enough structure to account for the logical relations between it and the other sentences in the set.\(^{61}\)

\(^{60}\) Sluga 1975, p. 483.

\(^{61}\) Sluga 1980, p. 135. See also Sluga 1975, pp. 482 and 484. For the explicit attribution to Frege of the doctrine of multiple analyses, see Sluga 1980, p.182 and Sluga 1987, pp. 89-90.
The possibility of multiple analyses is grounded in the fact that the contents of propositions are in and of themselves unstructured. Internal articulation is something that is merely “assigned” or imposed by us—something that reflects only “our subjective perception and our manner of speaking.” Reversing the remark that Sluga uses to characterize the atomistic tradition that Frege opposes, we can say that for Frege, as Sluga interprets him, thoughts are initially independent of internal articulation and receive such an articulation only incidentally. Different analyses do not alter the identity of a thought, because thoughts are intrinsically inarticulate.

Sluga’s interpretation is informed by two implicit assumptions, whose joint effect is to suggest that the three following commitments come necessarily in a single package: (a) the rejection of an atomistic approach to logic, (b) the view of thoughts as intrinsically unstructured wholes, and (c) the recognition of multiple analyses.

The first implicit assumption that informs Sluga’s interpretation is that (a) requires (b). Sluga proceeds as if the only way to oppose a view of thought and language that accords unilateral priority to the components of thoughts and the meanings of words were to adopt the opposite view—i.e. a view that reverses the direction of unilateral priority between the whole and the parts, thereby construing thoughts and propositions as intrinsically unstructured wholes that may become articulated only at a subsequent (and optional) stage. But this assumption is not innocent. In fact, it assimilates Frege’s contextualism to a position like Radical Benthamite Contextualism, thereby missing what I consider to be a central feature of Frege’s view, i.e. the conception of propositions and thoughts as organic unities in which the whole and the parts are conceptually interdependent.

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The second implicit assumption is that (c) requires (b). Sluga never envisions the possibility of allowing for multiple analyses while maintaining that internal articulation is a constitutive feature of thoughts. For Sluga—even though he never says this in so many words—the possibility of multiple analyses presupposes the unstructured nature of thoughts. Sluga, in other words, is committed to the Underlying Assumption. As we are soon going to see, Dummett argues, on Fregean grounds, that the view of thoughts as intrinsically unstructured wholes is untenable. According to Dummett, any adequate account must regard thoughts as essentially articulated, in the way specified by the Articulation Thesis. If Dummett’s arguments are persuasive (and I’ll try to show that they are), Sluga has failed to show that we can make good sense of the Multiple Analyses Thesis.

Before we turn to Dummett’s arguments against Sluga, however, we will first look at a different kind of “anti-Dummettian” approach, namely the proposal advanced by David Bell. There are several substantial differences between Sluga’s and Bell’s respective accounts. But it will be instructive to see that, in spite of those differences, they share the idea that the possibility of multiple analyses rests on the intrinsically unstructured nature of thoughts. In this respect, I shall argue, they turn out to be equally liable to Dummett’s objections.\footnote{For an interpretation structurally similar to Sluga’s, see Garavaso 1991 and Garavaso 2013. For Garavaso (as for Sluga) thoughts are \textit{in themselves} unstructured and are articulated \textit{by us}, for the purpose (not primarily of understanding inferential relations, as in Sluga, but rather) of grasping and communicating thoughts that have not been previously encountered. Garavaso discusses a passage from a very late and unpublished piece that \textit{might} support the claim that thought, for Frege, are intrinsically unstructured:

The connection of a thought with one particular sentence is not a necessary one: but that a thought of which we are conscious is connected in our mind with some sentence or other is for us men necessary. But that does not lie in the nature of the thought but in our own nature. There is no contradiction in supposing there to exist beings that can grasp the same thoughts as we do without needing to clad it in a form that can be perceived by the senses. But still for
6. Bell and the function/argument model of propositional complexity

David Bell argues that the apparent tension between the Articulation Thesis and the Multiple Analyses Thesis is generated by the fact that Frege is working with two quite different notions of “thought,” which he fails to distinguish. The tension is supposed to vanish as soon as we see that each thesis applies to a distinct notion of “thought.” As Bell puts it, “Frege is involved in no doctrinal inconsistency here: it is only his use of the term ‘thought’ that is inconsistent.”

The suggestion is that we should distinguish between the “linguistic meaning” or “sense” expressed by a proposition, and the “conceptual content” or “thought” (properly so-called) it conveys. The linguistic meaning of a proposition is characterized by part/whole complexity: it is a whole that is composed of the senses of the parts of the proposition. Each propositional linguistic meaning has a unique intrinsic structure that is isomorphic to the structure of the us men there is this necessity (“Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the Mathematical Natural Sciences,” in PW, p. 269).

As Garavaso acknowledges, this passage does not imply that thoughts are in and of themselves unstructured. But by construing thoughts as completely independent from language, it might leave room for this possibility. I shall not try to determine whether this is Frege’s intention. But I take it that if that is Frege’s intention, then the passage is in genuine tension with the Articulation Thesis.

64 I shall focus primarily on Bell 1996, pp. 583-596. Several elements of Bell’s interpretation, as expressed in that article, are already contained in some of his earlier writings. See especially Bell 1981 and Bell 1987.

65 Bell 1981, p. 223. The general strategy of reconciling Frege’s two theses by arguing that they apply to two different sorts of items, which Frege supposedly conflated under the rubric of “thought,” has enjoyed some popularity among commentators, especially in recent years (see for example Penco 2003, Textor 2009, and Kemmerling 2010). Commentators have proposed different ways of implementing that general strategy. Here I address only Bell’s particular proposal. I wish to emphasize, however, that my own proposal differs from all the interpretations that adopt the aforementioned general strategy.

propositions that express it. Structurally different propositions cannot express the same linguistic meaning. This is the notion of “thought” to which the Articulation Thesis applies.

The conceptual content of a proposition, on the other hand, is “the value that a certain conceptual function takes for a certain conceptual argument.”67 At the level of conceptual content, propositions are characterized by function/argument complexity. Propositions with different function/argument structures can unproblematically convey the same judgeable conceptual content. The same judgeable conceptual content, in fact, can be the value of different conceptual functions for appropriate conceptual arguments—just as a number can be the value of different arithmetical functions for appropriate numbers as arguments. Moreover, the functions and arguments that express a given conceptual content are not parts of the conceptual content—just as the number 4 and the function \( x^2 \) are not parts of the number 16. Finally, the function/argument structure of a proposition that expresses a certain conceptual content does not reveal its intrinsic structure—just as the function/argument structure of an arithmetical expression that designates a certain number, say “4^2,” does not reveal the “inner structure” of that number, whatever that might mean. Indeed, according to Bell, a Fregean judgeable conceptual content (or “thought” in the proper sense of the term) has no intrinsic structure: it is a “structureless whole.”68 This is the notion of “thought” to which the Multiple Analysis Thesis applies.

By means of this strategy, Bell can account for all the different kinds of cases of multiple analyses that we reviewed in Section 3. In particular, he can make room for the cases that Dummett is forced to dismiss, i.e. cases of the second type, which include, for example, the

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different recarvings of the same conceptual content by means of the propositions “a//b” and “D(a)=D(b).” The value of the conceptual function expressed by the relational sign “ξ/ζ” for the conceptual arguments expressed by the proper names “a” and “b” is the same judgeable conceptual content that is the value of the conceptual function expressed by the relational sign “ξ=ζ” for the conceptual arguments expressed by the complex proper names “D(a)” and “D(b).” The two propositions have the same truth-value, the same conceptual content, but different linguistic meanings.

Bell is maintaining, therefore, that while Frege explicitly proposed (after the introduction of the sense/reference distinction) a three-stage analysis of language, he was in fact committed to a four-stage view (at least in so far as complete propositions are concerned). Frege held that propositions designate a truth-value, which is their reference, and express a “thought,” which is their sense. For Bell, Frege should have said that propositions designate a truth-value, convey a “thought” or judgeable conceptual content, and express a “sense” or linguistic meaning.

A noteworthy feature of this picture is that, at the level of conceptual content, things function in the same way as they do at the level of reference. Frege came to realize that linguistic expressions, at the level of reference, do not exhibit part/whole complexity, but only function/argument complexity. “The capital of Sweden,” he remarked, is a complex proper name that refers to Stockholm; but neither Sweden nor the function designated by the expression “The

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69 I am borrowing this way of characterizing Frege’s official view from Peter Hylton (2005, chap. 7).

70 It is unclear whether Bell wants to apply this four-stage theory across the board to both propositional and sub-propositional expressions (as Frege does with his official three-stage theory).
capital of ξ are parts of Stockholm. 71 Similarly, the proposition “Stockholm is a capital” is a complex proper name designating The True; but neither Stockholm nor the concept designated by the concept-word “ξ is a capital” are parts of the The True. 72 According to Bell’s account, the same holds of the conceptual content that is expressed by a proposition. In fact, even though Bell normally speaks of judgeable conceptual contents as “expressed” by propositions, it would be more appropriate to say that they are designated or picked out by propositions. Propositions designate (i.e., are names of) truth-values in virtue of the reference of their parts; and similarly, they designate (i.e., are names of) judgeable conceptual contents or “thoughts” in virtue of the conceptual content of their parts. We may speak, accordingly, of judgeable conceptual contents as the immediate referents of propositions, and of truth-values as their ultimate referents. 73 Frege contrasts the realm of reference with the realm of sense: the sense expressed by a proposition, what he calls a “thought,” is in general composed of the senses of the parts of the proposition. But for Bell, this really applies only to the linguistic meaning of the proposition.

In the next section we will see, with Dummett’s help, what is problematic about this elaboration of Frege’s official view.

71 Frege, “Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter,” in PW, p. 255. See also FLL, p. 87: “The meanings [Bedeutungen] of the part of the sentence are not parts of the meaning of the sentence. However: The sense of a part of the sentence is part of the sense of the sentence.”

72 At one point, Frege did hold such a view about the reference of propositions, even though he qualified it by saying that when he speaks of the “parts of a truth-value” he is using “the word ‘part’ in a special sense” (“On Sinn and Bedeutung,” in TFR, p. 159). However, all the evidence suggests that Frege gave up that earlier view.

73 I am borrowing this terminology from Dummett (1981b, p. 44). Dummett uses this distinction to characterize what he calls the “map-reference view of language.” The position that Bell attributes to Frege is in effect a version of the map-reference view.
7. Dummett’s critique of Sluga and Bell

We have seen that Sluga and Bell attempt to make room for the possibility of multiple analyses by regarding thoughts as intrinsically unstructured wholes, which in no way mirror the structure of the propositions that express them. For Sluga, thoughts can be analyzed in alternative ways because internal articulation is completely extrinsic to the nature of thoughts and is always merely imposed by us. For Bell, thoughts are values of conceptual functions; and since the same thing can be the value of different functions for appropriate arguments, the same thought can be “expressed” (or, as I suggested we should say, picked out) by propositions that apply different conceptual arguments to different conceptual functions. The strategies these commentators follow for accommodating Frege’s apparent commitment to the Articulation Thesis differ accordingly. For Sluga, this thesis does not really concern thoughts in themselves, but only what happens to thoughts when we articulate them (after we have grasped them as inarticulate wholes) in order to make perspicuous some of their inferential relations. For Bell, the Articulation Thesis does not really apply to thoughts at all, but only to the “linguistic meanings” of propositions.

Dummett has criticized these interpretations in detail.74 The aspect of his critique that I find more insightful—and that will be our concern in this section—hinges on two mutually related distinctions: the distinction between languages and (mere) codes, and the distinction between expressing a thought and referring to it. Dummett argues that Sluga and Bell conflate these different notions, reducing the former member of each pair to the latter. As a result, they lose sight of the deepest philosophical rationale for the Articulation Thesis and saddle Frege with

74 For Dummett’s criticism of Sluga, see Dummett 1981b, pp. 292-322, 537-551; for his criticism of Bell, see Dummett 1991, pp. 289-314.
an untenable position. This line of critique brings out why we should accept the idea that thoughts are internally articulated in a way that mirrors by and large the internal articulation of the propositions that we use to express them: we must hold on to that idea if we want to be talking about language and thought in the full and proper sense of these terms.\footnote{It is worth remarking that this strand in Dummett’s critique, which I consider to be the most valuable, have received very little attention in the literature.}

Dummett writes:

Sentences do not encode thoughts, but express them: it is only because we can conceive of the thought as having parts corresponding to the parts of the sentence that we can distinguish expressing the thought from a systematic way of identifying it.\footnote{Dummett 1991, p. 290.}

Here Dummett is making a conceptual remark about what it is to be a proposition (or, equivalently, a sentence), belonging to a language, and also about what it is to be a thought. A proposition is something that expresses a thought; a thought is something that may be expressed by a proposition; and a language is something that allows for the expression of thoughts. Dummett claims that the concept of expression that is appealed to in each of these statements is one that requires a by a large correspondence between the parts of the proposition and the parts of the correlative thought. In order to persuade us of this point, Dummett develops a contrast. We speakers of language have the capacity to come up with various ways of encoding rather than expressing our thoughts. For instance, we can devise a code that associates a certain thoughts to semantically simple signs, as we do—to take one of Frege’s examples—when we use a simple signal (say, a green light) to communicate the thought that “The track is clear.”\footnote{Frege to Jourdain, Jan 1914, in TFR, p. 320.} Alternatively, we can devise a way of encoding thoughts in a systematic way, by means of signs that may
exhibit some form of internal semantic complexity. Dummett mentions the way in which the coordinate system is used to pick out any point on the surface of the Earth. The signs of this system are complex, but in a way that does not correspond to the internal structure of the point that they identify: it is hard to see how the sign “41°52′55″N, 87°37′40″W” could be said to reveal the internal structure of the topographic center of Chicago. Similarly, Dummett suggests, we could perhaps device a system that picks out any possible thought by specifying its relative position in the inferential space, without having to reveal its internal articulation.\footnote{See Dummett’s discussion of the “map-reference view of language” in Dummett 1981b, pp. 41-45, 296-304.} For Dummett, however, the possibility of codes of either the former or the latter kind is parasitic on the mastery of a language that complies with the requirements specified by the Articulation Thesis. It is crucial, in fact, that when it is time to specify what is the thought that a certain sign encodes, we need to use a proposition of our language which expresses the thought by displaying its internal structure.\footnote{See Dummett’s discussion of the phrase-book knowledge of a foreign language in Dummett 1981b, pp. 308-311. I discuss this point in more detail in Bronzo 2011.}

Dummett points out that the contrast between expressing a thought and merely encoding it is connected to the contrast between expressing a thought and referring to it. Our language gives us the tools for referring to thoughts without expressing them. We may, for example, refer to the thought expressed by the last proposition of Frege’s \textit{Foundations}, in order to claim, say, that it is true, or insightful, or hasty. But it is significant that when we need to specify what this thought is, we need to use a proposition that expresses it. This shows that the possibility of referring to thoughts is parasitical on the possibility of expressing them. As a matter of conceptual necessity, a thought is the sort of thing that is primarily expressed, and only...
derivatively designated. The phrases that we use for referring to thoughts may certainly exhibit internal semantic complexity; but that is merely the complexity of a complex referring expression, which differs essentially from the complexity of meaningful propositions. We may understand what someone says when she speaks of “The capital of Sweden” without knowing that the capital of Sweden is Stockholm; similarly, we may understand what someone says when she speaks of “The thought expressed by the last proposition of the Foundations” without knowing what thought this is; but if we understand a proposition that somebody is uttering, we thereby know what thought the proposition expresses. Understanding a proposition and knowing which thought it expresses are one and the same thing. The kinds of codes that we discussed above—i.e. codes that can be contrasted with languages—exhibit, at most, the kind of complexity of referring expressions. Their signs, which may be simple or complex, serve to pick out or indicate thoughts, just as Fregean proper names, be they simple or complex, serves to pick out or indicate objects.

We are now in a position to see how these Dummettian ideas afford the materials for a critique of Sluga and Bell. For Sluga, thoughts are devoid of any internal structure, and the same holds for the proposition that convey them. Internal articulation is something that we imposed on both thoughts and propositions only at a subsequent and optional stage—after we have grasped the thought that each proposition conveys. Thus, according to Sluga’s picture, “language” is like one of our simple, completely non-compositional codes (which associate English propositions with semantically simple signs), with the crucial difference that this so-called “language” is supposed to be all there is: it is not taken to be parasitical on any other system of
communication, qualitatively different from it. The Dummettian criticism, at this point, is that Sluga is not really entitled to claim that he is speaking about language and thought.  

The same criticism applies, with some modifications, to Bell’s proposed emendation of Frege’s view. For Bell, propositions are logically articulated, but merely in the way in which a complex referring expression is logically articulated. According to Bell’s picture, propositions are like the complex phrases that we use ordinarily to refer to thoughts without expressing them, with the crucial difference that this is supposed to be the only way in which language is related to thoughts: there is no such thing as expressing a thought in the way specified by the Articulation Thesis. Dummett’s conclusion is, once again, that Bell is not really entitled to claim that what he offering is an account of language and thought.

Bell may try to reply that the view he ascribes to Frege does in fact account for all the notions that Dummett cares so much about. The way in which a proposition is related to its “linguistic meaning,” in fact, satisfies the requirements of the Articulation Thesis. Thus, even though propositions merely pick out “thoughts” or “conceptual contents” (in the same way in which they pick out truth-values), they can still be said to express their linguistic meanings.

But this response does not give Bell what he needs. Recall that what we are trying to understand is how structurally different propositions can express the same thought, where a “thought” is what a proposition says or expresses. Bell purports to explain this phenomenon by pointing out that propositions with different function/argument structures may pick out the same

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80 Even though this criticism is fully Dummettian in spirit, Dummett actually refuses to believe that Sluga can possibly mean what he says when he claims that sentences are primarily and originally semantically simple signs. Dummett argues that Sluga must in fact be attributing to Frege a variant of the “map-reference view of language,” according to which sentence are indeed semantically complex and pick out thoughts by specifying their position in the inferential space, without displaying their internal structure. Thus, Dummett’s actual criticism of Sluga is the same as his criticism of Bell, which I am going to rehearse in the following paragraph.
item, which bears no isomorphic relation with the propositions that pick it out—and is, indeed, intrinsically unstructured. However, Dummett’s considerations show that whatever this “item” might be, it cannot be what propositions say or express. Thus, whatever Bell shows through the appeal to the function/argument model, he does not show how structurally different propositions may say or express the same thing. Here we must not let ourselves be deceived by the fact that Bell calls the items he invokes “thoughts” or “conceptual contents.” In order to really address the question of the multiple analyzability of what Frege calls “thoughts” (i.e., what sentences say or express), Bell should explain how the same item may be expressed by structurally different propositions, where the item in question is both internally structured and by and large isomorphic to the propositions that express it. But the function/argument model, in the form that Bell considers, is not equipped to fulfill this task.\footnote{There are additional problems with Bell’s proposal. Adding a new semantic level or realm to Frege’s theory is no small fix, and Bell gives us very little indication of how the modification is actually supposed to work. To name just a couple of obvious issues: 1) How should we conceive of the relation between sentential “linguistic meanings” and “thoughts”? Perhaps in the same way in which Frege conceives of the relation between sense and reference? That would mean that the linguistic meaning is a mode of presentation of a thought, which for Frege is in turn the mode of presentation of a truth-value. But it is not clear that we can make any sense of the idea of a mode of presentation of a mode of presentation. 2) How should we conceive of judgment, in Bell’s picture? For Frege, to judge is to advance from a thought to a truth-value. Should we say, then, that to judge is to advance from a sentential linguistic meaning to a Bellian “thought,” and from there, to a truth-value? But then, why do we need the intermediary step? Bell’s silence about these and other similar issues makes it difficult to evaluate his proposal. Of course, the fact that Bell does not spell out many important details does not entail that he can’t. There are several commentators who have argued, on the basis of a variety of considerations, that Frege lumps together under the rubric of “sense” (and thus of “thought”) a number of different, heterogeneous semantic notions. (See Burge 2005, chaps. 5 and 6; Penco 2003; see also Bell 1979, pp. 112-125, where Bell distinguishes between two notions of propositional “sense” or “thought,” for reasons that are not directly related to the possibility of multiple analyses). Here I am not concerned to rule out the possibility that Bell, following this wider exegetical trend, might find a coherent manner of filling in the details that are missing from his proposal. What matters, for our present purposes, is that however he decides to further specify his proposal, he won’t be able to explain the possibility of multiple analyses through the
In the next section, we will examine the appeal to a *special* version of the function/argument model, which may initially appear to be a better candidate for making sense of the Multiple Analyses Thesis, because it is not liable to the fundamental criticism that Dummett mounts against Sluga and Bell.

8. Geach and the *special* function/argument model of propositional complexity

Peter Geach was probably the first commentator to maintain that in order to make sense of the possibility of multiple analyses one must adopt a function/argument model (as opposed to a part/whole model) of the semantic complexity of propositions, at the level of sense as well as at the level of reference. His interpretation has sometimes been assimilated to Bell’s. Dummett, in particular, takes Bell and Geach to be equally liable to the fundamental objection that we discussed in the previous section. For Dummett, they both commit the mistake of reducing the semantic complexity of propositions to the complexity of referring expressions, thereby loosing sight of the crucial distinction between expressing a thought and (systematically) encoding or referring to it. But while there are passages in Geach that encourage this assimilation, his interpretation of Frege is significantly different from a position like Bell’s, and deserves a separate discussion, even though Geach himself appears to have been unclear about this difference. When Geach argues that a thought, for Frege, is the value of a sense-function for one or more sense-arguments, he is in fact thinking about a *special* kind of function. The special character of the functions that he appeals to makes his interpretation immune to the Dummettian appeal to the kind of function/argument model that he recommends, for the reason I have given in the main body of the text.

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\[82\] See Dummett 1981b, pp. 264-270.
criticism; but it does not suffice, in and of itself, to make room for the phenomenon of multiple analyses. On the contrary, Geach’s interpretation turns out to be compatible with the Dummettian contention that each thought must have a unique identifying structure.

Let’s begin with an overview of Geach’s official position. In explicit opposition to Dummett, Geach maintains that the Articulation Thesis should not be ascribed to Frege. He admits, of course, that Frege states on several occasions that the thought expressed by a proposition is composed of the senses of the words that compose the proposition. But for Geach, this is a “way of speaking” that should be “charitably expounded, not imitated.” The metaphor of the “composition of thoughts,” which Frege certainly employed, is for Geach just as inadequate at the level of sense as it is at the level of reference. The reference of “Denmark,” Geach observes, contributes to determining the reference of “The capital of Denmark”; but, as Frege himself came to realize, it would be quite absurd to conclude, on that basis, that Denmark is part of Copenhagen. Similarly, the sense of “Copenhagen” contributes to determining the thought expressed by “Copenhagen is a capital”; but according to Geach, it would be equally absurd to conclude, on that basis, that the sense of “Copenhagen” is part of the sense of the proposition in which the expression occurs. In both cases, according to Geach, Frege should have consistently applied the function/argument model of semantic complexity. A Fregean thought, for Geach, is the value of a function from senses to senses:

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83 Geach 1975, p. 149; see also Geach 1976a, p. 444.
84 Geach 1976a, p. 444.
Frege would quite clearly reject Dummett’s doctrine of how the sense of “John hit Mary” is made up; there is not an object, the sense of “hit”, but a function giving the complete thought as its value for the senses of the names as arguments [...].

The sense of a (first level) concept-word such as “ξ hit ζ” is a function that maps senses of singular terms into complete thoughts. In the example at hand, it maps the senses of the proper names “John” and “Mary” into the thought expressed by the proposition “John hit Mary.” This functional understanding of the complexity of propositions at the level of sense provides, according to Geach, a straightforward solution to the alleged puzzle of multiple analyses. After a rehearsal of Ramsey’s formulation of the problem (see above, Section 3), Geach writes:

[O]ne and the same number may be the value of one function for one argument, of another function for another argument, and of a two-argument function for a certain pair of arguments: the number 16 is the value of the square function for the argument 4, the value of the function 4² for the argument 2, and the value of the function ξ x ζ for the arguments 2 and 8. Nobody would now ask which one it is really, or talk of an incomprehensible trinity. And this is the analogy Frege would have us bear in mind. If we suppose definite meanings attached to “a”, “R”, and “b”, then one pattern of propositions is given by “ξRb”—“aRb, bRb, etc.”; a second by “aRζ”—“aRa, aRb, etc.”; and a third by “ξRζ”—all the propositions thus far listed are instances of this pattern: “aRa, aRb, bRa, bRb, etc., etc.” The proposition “aRb” comes on all three lists: it illustrates all three patterns, is a value of three different Fregean functions; why not?

Strictly speaking, this passage does not concern the problem that we have been discussing in this chapter, i.e. the multiple analyzability of thoughts, but a different problem, i.e. the multiple analyzability of what Geach calls “propositions.” Geach is very clear about the way in which he uses this term: “As in other works of mine, I use ‘proposition’ in the medieval sense: for a sentence serving, as grammarians would say, to express a complete thought, to say what is or is

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85 Geach 1976a, p. 445. Cf. also pp. 440 and 444 of the same article, as well as Geach 1975, pp. 149 and 150.
86 Geach 1975, p. 146.
A Geachean proposition is a meaningful sentence, a sentence used to say something intelligible. The problem that Geach is addressing in the previous passage, therefore, is the problem of how it is possible for the same meaningful sentence to be analyzed into different sets of meaningful expressions. But this problem, for Geach, is closely related to the problem of the multiple analyzability of the thoughts that propositions express: the two problems have the same structure, and admit of the same kind of solution. Geach, in fact, argues that concept-words should be conceived as linguistic functions that take (in the simplest case) proper names as their arguments and yield propositions as values. A proposition is the value of a linguistic function. For example, the proposition “aRb” is the value, say, of the linguistic function “ξRζ” for arguments “a” and “b.” Similarly, Geach thinks that the thought expressed by the proposition “aRb” is the value, say, of the sense-function expressed by the linguistic function “ξRζ” for the senses expressed by the proper names “a” and “b.” In either case, according to Geach, the problem of multiple analyses turns out to be a pseudo-problem. There is no mystery in the fact that the same number can be the value of different arithmetical functions for appropriate numbers as arguments. Similarly, the same proposition (i.e. the same meaningful sentence) can be the value of different linguistic functions for appropriate meaningful linguistic expressions as arguments—and the same thought can be the value of different sense-functions for appropriate senses as arguments.

Geach insists that in order to understand the possibility of multiple analyses, we must bear in mind the analogy with arithmetical functions. This strongly suggests that he is anticipating the strategy championed by Bell. But a closer inspection shows that the relationship

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87 Geach 1975, p. 139.  
88 See Geach and Anscombe 1961, pp. 143-157; Geach 1975; Geach 1976a; Geach 1976b.
between Geach’s interpretation and one like Bell’s is more complicated. Geach, in fact, is wrong in maintaining that arithmetical functions can serve as a good analogy for illustrating the view that he ascribes to Frege. The functions with which Geach is working (be they linguistic functions or sense-functions) have special features that do not belong to functions in general and that sort them apart, in particular, from the ordinary arithmetical functions that Geach wishes to employ as objects of comparison.

There are three papers in the literature that I found particularly helpful for getting clear about the special character of the functions discussed by Geach: a paper by Peter Sullivan, which argues that the function/argument model of the complexity of propositions and thoughts can be “reconciled” with “what is right and important” about the part/whole model; a paper by James Levine, which argues, more strongly, that the function/argument model can fully incorporate the part/whole model; and a paper by Peter Hylton, which contrasts Russell’s “propositional functions” with ordinary arithmetical functions. This last paper is relevant for our present purposes because much of what Hylton says about Russell’s propositional functions applies as well to Geach’s linguistic functions and sense-functions. (This is itself an interesting fact: very likely, the functions that Geach had in mind when he discussed linguistic functions and sense-functions were Russellian propositional functions, rather than ordinary arithmetical functions, even though he failed to be clear about the relevant differences.) Drawing on these three papers, I will now single out six interrelated features that belong uncontroversially to “Geachean

90 Levine 2002.
91 Hylton 2005, chap. 7, especially pp. 133-134. See also chap. 8, pp. 143-144; chap. 9, pp. 180-181.
functions” (to be understood as an umbrella term for both Geach’s linguistic functions and
Geach’s sense-functions), but not to functions in general:

   i) The arguments of Geachean functions are parts of their values. The proper names “a”
   and “b” are parts of the propositions “aRb”—and their senses are parts of the corresponding
   thought. This is obviously not the case for functions in general: the number 4 is not part of 16,
   even though there is a function (indeed many functions) whose value is 16 for argument 4.92

   ii) Geachean functions are not fully representable in set-theoretical terms, as sets of order
   pairs, or as mappings between two sets of objects. Such a representation would leave out the fact
   that the values of those functions are always structured items, which contain their respective
   arguments. Again, this is obviously not the case for function in general.93

   iii) All the values of a Geachean function share the same structure. We may also say that
   they share the same form. In the Principle of Mathematics, Russell writes that the constancy of
   form that is exhibited by a certain number of propositions is expressed by the fact that they are
   all values of the same propositional function; he also refers to the values of a propositional

question of whether the values of a Geachean function contain the function itself (in addition to
its arguments) is more controversial. Geach would fiercely oppose that idea. He insists that a
linguistic function is not a “quotable part” of a proposition, but (in the simplest case) what has to
be done to a proper name to obtain a proposition. Similarly, for Geach, a sense-function is not a
thought-component, but (in the simplest case) what has to be done to the sense of a proper name
to obtain a thought, which is not another part or element of the thought. Sullivan appears to side
with Geach on this point when he writes that “[i]f a predicate is a first level linguistic function it
cannot be a literal part of any sentence” (Sullivan 1992, p. 96); but he also writes that “[w]hen
linguistic functions are specified in such a way as to respect intuitions cohering around the part-
whole model [which is precisely what Geach does, according to Sullivan], they can be regarded
as constituent elements of sentences” (p. 101). On the other hand, Levine and Brandom see no
problem in the idea of a function that is part of its own values (Levine 2002, p. 211 and 213;
Brandom 1968, p. 268). Fortunately, we do not need to settle this issue on this occasion. For the
present purposes, it suffices to notice that the values of Geachean functions always contain their
arguments.

function as its “instances,” and says that that a propositional function “typifies” a class of propositions that share a common form.\textsuperscript{94} Moreover, in other writings of the same period, Russell states quite explicitly that analyzing a proposition into argument(s) and propositional function is for him the \textit{same} as exhibiting the proposition as an “instance” or “special case” of a certain “type.”\textsuperscript{95} These remarks of Russell’s on propositional functions apply as well to Geachean functions. This is why Geach can intelligibly say, in the previously quoted passage, that a proposition “illust\textsuperscript{1}rates” the pattern formed by the propositions that are values of the same linguistic function. This would be a puzzling remark if it referred to functions in general, and to ordinary arithmetical functions in particular. Of course, given a bunch a numbers, we may say that we can discern a pattern in them, meaning that they are all values of a certain function. The numbers 1, 4, 16, 64 and 256, for example, form a pattern, in the sense that they are all values of the function $4^\xi$; but it is not clear what it would mean to say that each of those numbers “illust\textsuperscript{1}rates” the pattern that they form when put together. On the contrary, a Geachean proposition, say “aRb,” can properly be said to illustrate the pattern formed by the propositions “aRa,” “aRb,” “aRc” and “aRd,” because it exhibits the structure or form that they all have in common. Those propositions exemplify the same form; they are all instances of the same type. This is at least part of what we bring out by representing them as values of the same linguistic function, “aRξ”; and the same holds, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, for thoughts and sense-functions.

iv) If we know a Geachean function and its argument, we \textit{thereby} know its value.\textsuperscript{96} Conversely, given a Geachean proposition or the corresponding thought, we \textit{thereby} know

\textsuperscript{94} Russell 1903, §§81 and 82.
\textsuperscript{95} See the passages from Russell’s “Fundamental Notions” (written in 1904) quoted and discussed in Levine 2002, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{96} Cf. Sullivan 1992, p. 96.
whether or not it is the value of a Geachean function for a given argument. This does not hold for functions in general. There is an intuitive qualitative difference between determining the value of, say, the linguistic function “aRξ” for argument “b,” on the one hand, and determining the value of the arithmetical function $\xi^2$ for argument 14, on the other. Conversely, there is an intuitive qualitative difference between determining whether or not the proposition “aRb” is a value of the function “aRξ” for argument “b,” on the one hand, and determining whether or not the number 196 is a value of the function $\xi^2$ for argument 14, on the other. One way to articulate this intuitive contrast—and thus, by the same token, to make explicit the precise force of the “thereby” contained in the previous formulations—is to draw on the aforementioned suggestion that a Geachean function exhibits the common form or structure of a class of propositions or thoughts. The specification of the arguments of a Geachean function can then be seen as the specification of the features that belong to a particular instance of a certain type of propositions or thoughts. But once we have specified the form of a proposition or thought (by indicating the linguistic function or sense-function of which it is the value), as well as the features in virtue of which it is a particular exemplification of that form (by indicating the arguments that the function must take in order to yield such a proposition or thought as its value), we have done everything there is to be done for specifying the proposition or thought in question. We have specified, if you like, both its form and its content. Conversely, if we are given a proposition or a thought in a way that displays its internal structure (as opposed to the case in which the proposition or

thought is merely picked out by means of a code or a referring expression), we are *ipso facto* in a position to determine whether it is or it is not an exemplification of a certain form.  

v) In defining a linguistic function or a sense-function, we exploit a domain of objects (in the simplest case, proper names and their senses respectively) to define the function and its range *simultaneously*. For many other kinds of functions, the domain and the range are both specified

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98 The contrast at issue here does not lie in the fact that determining the value of a Geachean function for given arguments—or recovering a Geachean function and appropriate arguments from one of its values—never requires the performance of some kind of operation. It may very well do so. This becomes clearer if, following Geach’s recommendations, we do not confine our attention to the deceptively simple case of linguistic functions of scarcely inflected languages such as English. The Latin translation of “Cato killed Cato,” for example, is “Cato Catonem cecidit.” Each of these two propositions is the value of a linguistic function with two argument places, taking singular terms as arguments and propositions as values. But a proper specification of the Latin linguistic function must indicate not only the “slots” that must be filled with singular terms, but also the grammatical *case* that each singular term must take—nominative and accusative respectively. This means that in order to determine the value of the Latin linguistic function “ξΜ ξΑ cecidit” for arguments “Cato” and “Cato,” we need to carry out some morphological transformations, which require the mastery of a fair amount of grammatical rules. We need to know, for example, that “Cato” is a masculine noun of the third declension, that the stem for its non-nominative cases is “Caton-”, and that the accusative ending for masculine nouns of the third declension is “-em.” There is no reason to suppose, therefore, that determining the value of a linguistic function must in general be easier or somehow more automatic than finding out the value of an arithmetical function such as $ξ^2$ (which may require calculation), or the value of a function such as *The capital of* $ξ$ (which requires knowledge of geographical facts). In fact, even in the case of the English function “ξ killed ξ,” we need to carry out a certain number of operations in order to obtain its value for given arguments: after all, we do have to *substitute* the arguments for the variables, and in order to do that we need to know the conventions of the notation (for example, we need to know that any token of the same variable must be replaced with tokens of the same argument-expression, and that the substitution must follow the order in which the arguments are specified). So, the sense in which it is true that, if we know a Geachean function and the arguments that it takes on a particular occasion, we thereby know its value for those arguments, is not that we don’t have to do anything in order to determine its value for those arguments. The point, rather, is that the operations that we need to carry out in order to make this determination belong to the exercise of the capacity of recognizing the exemplifications of a common form. The relationship between a form and its instances is characterized by a kind of internal connection that does not belong, in general, to the relationship between a function and its values.

99 Sullivan 1992, p. 96. Sullivan points out that Geachean functions possess this feature because they specify instructions for constructing their values out of their arguments. While I
independently of the function to be defined. There would be little point in saying that the function \( \xi^2 \) is the function that maps any number \( n \) into the number \( n^2 \): any adequate definition must employ an independent way of picking out the values of the function, ultimately reducible to a canonical method of representation. A definition of \( \xi^2 \), for example, must ultimately enable us to determine that its value for argument 4 is 16 (perhaps by telling us, as an intermediary step, that \( 4^2 = 4 \times 4 \)). But we do not fall into any form of vicious circularity if we say that the value of the linguistic function “aR\( \xi \)” for any singular term “t” is the proposition “aRt.” On the contrary, any definition of the linguistic function that does not ultimately make available this way of representing its values will be inadequate! Suppose we have a code in which the proposition “aRb” is represented by the simple sign “p”; we could then say that the value of “aR\( \xi \)” for argument “b” is “p”; but that would be satisfactory only to somebody who knows that “p” stands for “aRb.” While the definition of an ordinary arithmetical function relies on a way of specifying its range that makes no reference to the function itself, the definition of a Geachean function relies on a way of specifying its range that makes essential reference to the function that is being defined. The range of a Geachean function, we could say, is nothing but the set of items (propositions or thoughts) that share the form exhibited by the function.

vi) By presenting a proposition or thought as the value of a Geachean function, we describe an aspect of its logical structure.\(^{100}\) The fact that the “Parkinson’s hat is awful” is a value of the linguistic function “\( \xi \)’s \( \zeta \) is awful,” whereas “Parkinson’s disease is awful” is not, tells us something about the logical complexity of each proposition. Moreover, by representing

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100 Sullivan 1992, p. 98.
the same proposition or thought as the value of different Geachean functions for appropriate arguments, we describe different aspects of its logical structure. The fact that “aRb” is both the value of “aRξ” for argument “b,” and a the value of “ξRb” for argument “a,” tells us something about the logical complexity of the proposition: it shows that the signs “a” are “b” occur in the proposition as semantic units of their own. None of this is the case for functions in general. If we are told that Stockholm is the value of the function The capital of ξ for argument Sweden, as well as the value of the function The place where ξ died for argument Decartes, but is not the value of the function The northernmost capital of ξ for argument Europe, we learn various facts about Stockholm, but nothing about its structure or form.

Given these six features that distinguish Geachean functions from functions in general, Geach is immune to the fundamental criticism that Dummett levels against Bell. It is clear, in fact, that for Geach both propositions and thoughts are structured items. Moreover, the internal complexity of propositions mirrors the internal complexity of the thoughts they express. The function/argument model, when developed à la Geach, vindicates at least the spirit (if not also the letter) of the Articulation Thesis, because it incorporates at least the crucial elements of the part/whole model.101 Geach is not culpable of reducing the complexity of propositions at the level of sense to the complexity of referring expression. On the contrary, Geach accounts for the idea that propositions express the thoughts they convey by displaying their internal articulation. The wholesale rejection of the part/whole model so emphatically advocated by Geach is inconsistent with his actual exegetical practice. Even though Geach does not play his cards very well, his interpretation is not liable to Dummett’s criticism.

101 As noted above (note 92), it is debated whether the function/argument model can incorporate the part/whole model completely or only partially. The weaker claim is enough for the point I am making.
The question, now, is whether Geach’s proposal helps in any way to see how the Articulation Thesis and the Multiple Analyses Thesis can fit together, or whether it simply sits in the Dummettian camp of the debate, vindicating the former thesis, but dismissing the latter. It should be noticed, in this respect, that Geach discusses explicitly only the first kind of case of multiple analyses, i.e. the kind of case that Dummett can account for by means of the distinction between analysis and decomposition. Geach says nothing about the cases that pose a real problem for Dummett. In particular, he says nothing about the cases of the second kind, which Dummett is forced to dismiss. Unlike Dummett, Geach does not explicitly assert that the propositions “a//b” and “D(a)=D(b)” cannot express the same thought. Nonetheless, his interpretation does not show how things could stand otherwise. Pointing out that the thought expressed by the proposition “a//b” can be the value of the sense-function expressed by “ζ//b” for the sense of “a” as argument, as well as the value of the sense-function expressed by “a//ξ” for the sense of “b” as argument, does very little service; the real question, in fact, is how the propositions “a//b” and “D(a)=D(b)” may express the same thought. Of course, Geach could provide a straightforward answer to this question by pursuing consistently the analogy with arithmetical functions, as Bell does. But if he chose that option, his interpretation would become genuinely liable to the criticism that Dummett mounts against Bell.

As Peter Sullivan has convincingly argued, Geach’s interpretation, taken as it stands, is fully compatible with the Dummettian contention that each thought has a unique identifying structure. There are many ways of analyzing the proposition “aRb” into arguments and linguistic functions; but one of these analyses—namely the analysis into the linguistic function “ξRζ” and the arguments “a” and “b”—has a privileged status, because it accounts for the

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possibility of all the remaining analyses. Geach does not suggest or provide any reason for supposing that things stand in the realm of thoughts any different than they stand in the realm of propositions. Geach’s proposal, therefore, does not rule out the idea that for each thought there are many possible derivative analyses, but only one fundamental analysis—i.e., the idea that Dummett’s distinction between “analysis” and “decomposition” is designed to capture. I am not claiming that Geach’s account entails this idea; but in order to question it, he would have to show that propositions with different semantic structures (such as “a //b” and “D(a) = D(b)”) may express the same thought. Unfortunately, Geach’s elaboration of the function/argument model does not help to make sense of this possibility. My suggestion, in the next section, is that in order to make progress in this direction without falling back into the anti-Dummettian camp of the debate, we must work on our conception of “part” and “whole.”

9. The multiple analyzability of organic wholes

In the previous sections, I tried to show that there are compelling exegetical reasons for attributing to Frege the Articulation Thesis as well as the Multiple Analysis Thesis. Moreover, I have sought to bring out the good philosophical insights that animate the two opposite sides of the exegetical debate. Dummett is right when he maintains (against Sluga and Bell) that thoughts must be regarded as internally articulated, in a way that mirrors, by and large, the manifest articulation of the propositions that express them. If we give up the Articulation Thesis, he argues, we loose our entitlement to claim that we are talking about thoughts and language in the full sense of these terms. But Dummett provides no comparably convincing independent basis for his additional claim, namely that each thought must have a unique identifying structure, so
that two structurally different propositions cannot express the same thought. In fact, one has the impression that Dummett defends this further claim simply because he thinks he has to, because he thinks, in accordance with the Underlying Assumption, that essential articulatedness implies unique articulation. In any case, Dummett never envisions the possibility of questioning that assumption. By rejecting the Multiple Analyses Thesis, Dummett becomes a target for the legitimate objections of the commentators of the opposite camp. These commentators protest that there is no reason to reject the Multiple Analyses Thesis, which may be seen to be equivalent to the truism that the same thing can be said in different ways. However, they offer no comparably convincing reason for their additional claim, namely that thoughts are intrinsically unstructured. In fact, one has the impression that they defend this further claim simply because they think they have to, because they think, in accordance to the Underlying Assumption, that lack of unique articulation requires lack of any articulation. In any case, they never envision the possibility of questioning that assumption. But by denying the Articulation Thesis, they become liable to Dummett’s objections.

In order to get out of this exegetical and philosophical standoff, we need to reject the Underlying Assumption. Such as assumption may seem, at first sight, inescapable. But I wish to submit that this is the case only because we tend to conceive of the relationship between a thought and its parts in accordance with an atomistic model of the part/whole relation.

There are wholes that can be appropriately characterized by means of what I shall call an atomistic notion of “part” and an aggregative notion of “whole.” Suppose that, having to move my bookshelf, I take the books out of the shelves and arrange them in piles on the desk. Each pile is composed of many volumes; it has “parts.” The fact that a volume belongs to a certain pile is quite accidental. More precisely, there is no conceptual necessity in this fact. Each volume can
be what it is whether or not it happens to belong to a certain pile, and whether or not it happens to belong to a pile at all—or lies instead on the table all by itself. The relation between books and piles is a part/whole relation where the whole is a mere aggregate of independently conceivable components and the parts are atomistically independent from the whole to which they contingently belong. For any whole of this kind, a version of the Underlying Assumption is indeed inescapable. For each pile of books, there will be a unique ultimate analysis into books, specifying the books of which it is composed and the manner they are put together. There is indeed a sense in which we may analyze each pile in many alternative ways: we may describe a 10-volumes pile as composed of two 5-volume parts, or as composed of a 8-volume part and a 2-volume part, and so on. But these are only partial analyses of the pile. For each pile, there can be many partial analyses, but only one ultimate analysis, which accounts for all the partial analyses. Each part singled out by a merely partial analysis is nothing but the combination of some of the parts revealed by the ultimate analysis of the whole. Any aggregative whole, accordingly, can be fully characterized by specifying the set of its ultimate constituents and their manner of combination.

But arguably there are also wholes of a different kind: wholes that can only be characterized by means of what I shall call a functional (as opposed to an atomistic) notion of “part” and an organic (as opposed to an aggregative) notion of “whole.” As we saw in Chapter 2, Sections 6, there is a long tradition in the history of philosophy, ultimately going back to Aristotle, which takes the living organism as the paradigmatic example of this latter kind of whole. According to this tradition, the living organism is essentially articulated into parts: there is no such thing as an unstructured, “monolithic” organism. But its parts—i.e. eyes, kidneys, arms, etc.—are what they are in virtue of the function that they fulfill within the whole. A
physically indistinguishable piece of matter that functions as an arm in the context of one organism can conceivably function in a different way in a very different organism—say, as a reproductive organ—and be, therefore, in the context of that other organism, a different functional part. The living organism is made up of parts that cannot be what they are except as parts of the appropriate wholes. The parts are thus conceptually dependent on the whole, while the whole is conceptually dependent on the parts, since an organism would not be what it is if it did not admit of that decomposition into functional parts. In virtue of this conceptual interdependence between the whole and parts, the living organism has a characteristic form of unity, which sorts it apart from merely aggregative wholes.

Now we need to see that when we are dealing with an organic whole, any relevant variant of the Underlying Assumption looses its compulsory character. Let’s focus on the living human organism. This is composed of many anatomical parts—organs and structures—which are identified in virtue of their physiological functions. Browsing the chapters of an anatomy textbook, we find diagrams that display a great number of anatomical parts in their mutual arrangements, accompanied by descriptions of their form, position, and function. There will be diagrams, say, of the cardiovascular system, of the nervous system, of the visual apparatus, of the digestive apparatus, etc. But we will look in vain for the diagram of the anatomical parts of the organism. The very question of what are the ultimate anatomical parts of the organism is misplaced. Of course, at the end of a good textbook, say of Gray’s Anatomy, we find an index of all the parts that have been discussed in the previous chapters, and an ideal student should be able to say, for each part, what is its function, form, position, etc. But there is no subset of the index which provides a list of the “ultimate anatomical building blocks” of the organism, to which all the other anatomical parts can be reduced. In order to discern different anatomical
structures, we need to carve up the body in different ways; and there is no ultimate analysis of the organism that accounts for all the others. In a description of the digestive apparatus, for example, the mouth will appear as an anatomical part, with its distinctive internal complexity; but it will not figure as a unit at all in a description of the cardiovascular system, even though there are certainly arteries and veins going through the various part of the mouth; and there is no underlying anatomical structure in terms of which both the cardiovascular system and the digestive apparatus can be reduced. More specifically, there is no set of ultimate anatomical units of which we can say: the cardiovascular apparatus and the digestive system are nothing but combinations of parts taken form this set. To point out that all organs and anatomical structures are ultimately made up of atoms would be irrelevant, since at that level of description all anatomical complexity is lost. It is no accident that an anatomy textbook does not include at all a “diagram” that displays the atomic composition of the organism. This is not because the diagram would have to be too big in order to be readable, or because we still lack the relevant knowledge, but because such a diagram would tell us nothing of what anatomy has to tell us. The living organism, as it is studied by anatomy and physiology, is not the sort of thing that can be characterized by specifying a set of ultimate constituents and their manner of combination.

Now, there are independent reasons for believing that Frege did indeed conceive of thoughts as organic wholes. In the previous chapter, I argued that Frege adopted an organic conception of the internal complexity of meaningful propositions, rejecting any atomistic construal of sub-propositional meaning. But there is evidence that Frege applied the organic model of the part/whole relation at the level of thoughts (or judgeable contents) as well as at the level of language. We saw, in fact, that throughout his career Frege opposed the atomistic approach to logic that construes thoughts as aggregates of atomistically independent components,
adopting instead a version of the Kantian doctrine of the priority of judgment (Chapter 2, Section 2). We also saw that such a doctrine may be plausibly seen to entail the anti-atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning expressed by Frege’s Context Principle: if there is no such thing as a thought-component in isolation, then there is no such thing as an isolated word signifying an isolated thought component. But it is difficult to see how the converse could not be true as well: if thought-components were prior to and independent of complete thoughts, then why should it be the case that we can’t express them by means of significant sub-propositional expressions, prior to and independently of the employment of these expressions in complete propositions? The organic conception of the internal complexity of thoughts goes hand in hand with the organic conception of the internal complexity of propositions.

By adopting an organic—as opposed to an aggregative—conception of the relation between a thought and its parts, Frege is entitled to reject the Underlying Assumption. This should become readily visible when we look at thoughts and their parts in analogy with other kinds of organic wholes, such as the living organism. We have seen that according to a plausible view, the same organism can be carved up in many different ways in order to highlights different aspects of its internal anatomical structure. Each different “analysis” of the organism, which may be displayed in a diagram or illustration, brings out an objective feature of the organism: the organism would not be what it is if it did not have such an anatomical structure, or if it had no anatomical structure at all. And yet, there is no such thing as the ultimate, unique anatomical analysis of the organism, which would make perspicuous at one and the same time all its physiological functions, and to which all other analyses could be reduced. Similarly, Frege can maintain that the same thought can be carved up in many alternative ways, each of which highlights an aspect of its internal structure and thus makes perspicuous a certain set of its
inferential relations. Each of these alternative analyses of the thought, which may be displayed by means of a proposition of Begriffsschrift (or even, in most cases, by means of a proposition of ordinary language), brings out an objective feature of the thought: the thought would not be what it is if it did not have such a logical structure, or if it had no logical structure at all. And yet, there is no such thing as the ultimate, unique analysis of the thought, which would make perspicuous at one and the same time all its inferential relations, and to which all the other analyses could be reduced. There is no unique set of ultimate logical building blocks of which each thought is composed, in the same way in which there is no unique set of ultimate anatomical parts of which an organism is built up.\footnote{My proposal agrees in some important respects with the interpretation advanced in Levine 2002. In particular, I fully endorse Levine’s claim that in order to understand Frege’s view about the multiple analyzability of thoughts, we must appreciate the fact that Frege (unlike Russell or Dummett) adopts a “non-atomistic mereology” for the relationship between a thought and its parts (pp. 201-203). However, Levine’s contrast between “atomistic” and “non-atomistic mereologies” differs from the contrast between alternative models of the part/whole relation that I have described. Levine points out that for Frege the same whole can be seen to be composed of different sets of parts, in accordance with the particular sort of part that we take into consideration: the same regiment, say, may be seen to be composed of 3 battalions, 10 companies, or 1000 soldiers, whereas for Russell, Levine claims, “every whole admits of a unique analysis into simple parts.” This distinction is orthogonal to the distinction between “aggregative” and “organic wholes,” since the point that Levine attributes to Frege applies indifferently to both kinds of wholes. Moreover, I cannot see how the distinction drawn by Levine helps to make sense of the idea that the same thought may be analyzed into different (not mutually reducible) sets of parts. This is a case in which the relevant notion of “part” has already been fixed: what we are asking is how the same thought may be composed of different sets of logical parts. The problem, therefore, cannot be solved by pointing out that there is no determinate answer to the question “How many parts compose a regiment?” unless we specify the kind of “parts” that we have in mind (whether battalions, or companies, or soldiers, or something else).}  

Frege was well aware of the fact that the talk of “parts” and “wholes,” when it is applied to thoughts and meaningful propositions, can generate problems or (as he called them) “hitches,” because we naturally tend to have in view only an atomistic notion of “part” and an aggregative
One of the hitches that Frege discussed explicitly has to do with the asymmetry between saturated and unsaturated components of thoughts and propositions: as long as we are working with an atomistic notion of “part,” it is difficult to see how some of the parts of which a proposition or a thought is composed can be “unsaturated” or “in need of completion.” Going beyond what Frege explicitly argued, I submit that another hitch that is caused by the uncritical adoption of an atomistic mereology is the apparent incompatibility of the Articulation Thesis and the Multiple Analyses Thesis. By contrast, if we conceive of thoughts and their parts in accordance with the organic mereology that Frege himself recommended, we can coherently maintain that thoughts, while essentially articulated, may lack a unique ultimate articulation.¹⁰⁵


¹⁰⁵ My claim is that the organic conception of the internal complexity of thoughts makes room for a position that combines the Articulation Thesis with the Multiple Analyses Thesis—not that it necessitates it. One may share Frege’s view of thoughts as organic wholes, and yet maintain, in virtue of subsidiary commitments, that each thought must have a unique ultimate analysis. Arguably, this is the position advanced in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus. The Tractatus, as I shall argue in the next chapter, shares Frege organic conception of propositions and thoughts (even though a “thought,” for the Tractatus, is not something that stands over and above the meaningful proposition, as in Frege; cf. TLP 3ff). However, the Tractatus maintains that each proposition or thought must have a unique ultimate analysis (cf. TLP 3.25). If the propositions “a/b” and “D(a) = D(b)” have the same sense, then for the Tractatus they must have the same underlying logical multiplicity.

Now, which subsidiary commitments lead the Tractatus to hold such a view? This is a difficult question, which I will not attempt to properly address. But as a tentative suggestion, I would indicate the Tractatus’ conception of inferential interconnectedness and its concern for the intrusion of psychology into logic. For the Tractatus, if two propositional signs express the same sense, that must be shown by the signs themselves and cannot be determined by any appeal to “intuition.” If in some cases the sameness of sense is ostensively not shown by the manifest propositional signs (as in the case of “a/b” and “D(a)=D(b)”), then the sameness of sense must be shown by the underlying structure of the propositional signs. Similarly, for the Tractatus, if a proposition follows logically from a set of other propositions, this must be entirely shown by the propositional signs directly involved (cf. TLP 5.1ff). If “D(a) = D(c)” follows logically from “a/b” and “b/c,” then this must be shown by the respective propositional signs; if it is not shown by the signs themselves, then the signs must be further analyzable. In defense of the Fregean...
10. Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that in order to understand Frege’s view about the multiple analyzability of thoughts, we need to appreciate the fact that he construed propositions, as well the thoughts they express, as organic unities. Frege holds that thoughts may be articulated in multiple ways, none of which needs to have absolute priority over the others. He also maintains that thought are essentially articulated into logical parts, in a way that mirrors by and large the semantic structure of the propositions that express them. To the vast majority of commentators, it has seemed that these two theses are mutually incompatible. But I have tried to show that the two theses are in tension with one another only if we conceives of thoughts as mere aggregates of components that are in no way conceptually dependent on the wholes to which they belong. For Frege, however, the relationship between a thought and its parts must be understood in accordance with a different model. For Frege, thoughts are articulated into parts, but by parts that could not be what they are if they were not parts of the appropriate wholes, since they are individuated by the logical functions that they perform within the wholes to which they belong. By discussing some analogies with other kinds of organic unities, I have argued that this alternative conception of the relationship between a thought and its parts entitles Frege to maintain that while thoughts are logically structured, in a way that is in general transparently

view, one could point out, against the Tractatus, that some appeal to “intuition” is involved in any case, even for the Tractarian view. On which basis, in fact, do we assert that the “unanalyzed” proposition expresses the same sense as its “fully analyzed” counterpart? This is a respect in which a critique of the Tractatus from the perspective of later Wittgenstein (who was centrally concerned with what Stanley Cavell called the “de-psychologizing of psychology”) can draw on materials contained in Frege’s philosophy. (Charles Travis (2012) makes a similar claim about the relation between Frege, early Wittgenstein, and later Wittgenstein with the respect to the question of multiple analyzability.)

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displayed by of the propositions that express them, the same thought can be expressed in different ways.
Chapter 4

The Context Principle in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*

1. Inheriting Frege’s Context Principle

In Chapter 2, I gave a reading of Frege’s Context Principle. I argued that the principle, as Frege understands it, encapsulates a view of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning that should be sharply contrasted with the positions advanced by empiricist authors such as Bentham or Russell. Bentham and Russell are often said to endorse some version of Frege’s Context Principle. But in fact, their respective positions are developed within a philosophical framework that Frege was centrally concerned to oppose. For Bentham and Russell, there can be only unilateral forms of priority and dependence between the meanings of propositions and the meanings of their parts. For each word, either it has a meaning that in no way depends on the meanings of the propositions in which it occurs, or it is a sham semantic unit that merely appears to have a meaning of its own. Frege, on the other hand, construes the meaningful articulate proposition as an organic unity in which the whole and the parts are interdependent: articulate propositions mean what they do (and thus are the propositions that they are) in virtue of the semantic contributions of their parts; but propositional parts mean what they do (and thus are the sub-propositional semantic units that they are) in virtue of the logical
function that they actually fulfill within the whole to which they belong. Meaningful articulate propositions and meaningful propositional parts can only come together: neither is unilaterally prior to the other. This chapter discusses the manner in which Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* inherits the form of contextualism that I have attributed to Frege.

The Tractarian inheritance of Frege’s contextualism involves a critique of several elements of Frege’s philosophy. These include (i) Frege’s assimilation of propositions to complex proper names, (ii) Frege’s understanding of the Sinn/Bedeutung distinction, and arguably (iii) Frege’s views about the possibility of irreducibly different analyses of the same thought. In what follows, however, I will not focus on the disagreements between Frege and the *Tractatus*, but rather on the ways in which the *Tractatus* gives a sharper formulation of the position it inherits from Frege and works out with consistency some of its most significant implications. This examination will begin in the present chapter and continue in the next one. In this chapter, I present an interpretation of the Tractarian version of the Context Principle. In the next chapter, I will discuss the relation between the Tractarian understanding of the Context Principle and the Tractarian conceptions of nonsense.

2. The *Tractatus* and “Logical Atomism”

The claim that the *Tractatus* holds a contextualist and anti-atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning may strike many readers as surprising. Since Russell’s 1918 “Lectures on Logical Atomism,” it has become customary to associate Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to a philosophical movement named “Logical Atomism.” The acknowledgment that Russell makes in the preface to the published version of those lectures is partly responsible for this association:
“[These lectures] are very largely concerned with explaining certain ideas which I learnt from my friend and former pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein.”¹ A considerable number of book-length studies of Wittgenstein’s philosophy include at least a section, if not a chapter or a number of chapters, on early Wittgenstein’s “atomism” or “Logical Atomism.”² In the same vein, encyclopedia articles on “Logical Atomism” generally mention Russell and early Wittgenstein as its two major proponents.³ Given this widespread association, one may be especially surprised by the claim that the *Tractatus* is thoroughly opposed to Russell’s atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning.

Such a surprise is due in part to equivocation. When commentators talk about the “atomism” of the *Tractatus*, they often refer to a cluster of commitments about the *logical analysis of propositions*—for example, (a) the idea that each significant proposition has a unique ultimate analysis, (b) the idea that each significant proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions, (c) the idea that elementary propositions are logically independent from one another, and (d) the idea that elementary propositions are combination of “simple names,” each of which stands for a “simple object.” It is not my aim, in this work, to challenge the view that the *Tractatus* is in fact committed to these or other related ideas. So there is a sense in which I am not concerned to deny that the *Tractatus* endorses a form of “atomism.”

However, when commentators talk about the “atomism” of the *Tractatus*, they often also refer to a view about the priority of the meanings of words over the meanings of propositions.

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¹ Russell 1918-1919, p. 177.
³ See for example Ian Proops’ entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on “Wittgenstein’s Logical Atomism” (an enlarged version of which has been recently published as Proops 2011), or Alex Oliver’s entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on “Logical Atomism.”
According to an influential but not unchallenged tradition of *Tractatus* interpretation—sometimes known as the “realist” tradition—the *Tractatus* maintains that the possibility of language rests upon a connection between “names” and “objects” that is set up through some kind of ostensive definition or mental act prior to and independently of the use of names in meaningful propositions. *First* we need to attach names to objects, and *then* we may go on to combining meaningful names in propositions that *say* something about those objects.\(^4\) When the *Tractatus* is read in this way, there is indeed no reason to contrast it with the philosophical approach championed by Russell. In this second sense of the term (which is quite independent from the one described in the previous paragraph\(^5\)), I am indeed going to deny that the *Tractatus* holds a form of “atomism.” In so doing, I will draw on a tradition of *Tractatus* interpretation—

\(^4\) Versions of this reading (which sometimes include substantial qualifications in order to deal with the openly contextualist statements that appear in the *Tractatus*) can be found in Pitcher 1964, pp. 88-93; Hacker 1972, pp. 45-56, 77; Hacker 1975; Malcolm 1977; Hacker, 1986, pp. 73-80, 100; Malcolm 1986; Hintikka and Hintikka 1986, chaps. 3 and 8; Pears 1987, vol. 1, pp. 9, 74-76, 99-114; Hacker 1999. An important feature of some versions of this line of interpretation—i.e. the idea that the correlation between names and objects is set up through some kind of ostensive definition—is anticipated in Schlick 1930, pp. 56-57.

\(^5\) The distinction between these two senses of “atomism” is clearly drawn in Summerfield 1996, p. 127. On the other hand, it is conspicuously lacking in Proops 2011 (which is a version of an article previously published in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Wittgenstein Logical Atomism”). Proops opens his essay with the remark that “Russell and Wittgenstein develop different, though closely related, versions of a position that has come to be known as ‘logical atomism.’” He then goes on to trace the first appearance of the phrase “logical atomism” in a paper by Russell published in 1911 (“Le Réalisme analytique”). In that paper, Proops notices, the term refers to a position which maintains, in explicit opposition to British Idealism, that (a) “the existence of a complex depends on the existence of the simple and not vice versa,” and that (b) “the atomic entities in its ontology (universals and particulars) have their nature quite independently of the relations they bear to one another” (pp. 214-215). After two paragraphs, Proops offers a characterization of the “Tractarian version” of logical atomism which is more or less equivalents to the list of commitments about the logical analysis of propositions that I gave above. But Proops does not seem to notice that the two “versions” of logical atomism that he ascribes to Russell’s 1911 essay and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* respectively are in fact quite independent from one another. On the contrary, he assumes without argument that they are “versions” of a single position.
sometimes known as the “anti-metaphysical” tradition—which has been more sensitive to the contextualist themes that run through the book and to the extreme paucity of passages that could even *merely appear* to express a commitment to an atomistic conception of sub-propositional meaning. Within this broad alternative tradition, I will most heavily draw on the work of a number of commentators—such as Cora Diamond, James Conant, and Michael Kremer—that are associated with the so-called “resolute reading” of the *Tractatus.*

3. Throwing away the ladder

Before I begin my discussion of the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle, I need to make some methodological remarks. One of the most formidable challenges faced by readers of the *Tractatus* is to come to terms with its famous final self-revocation:

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) (6.54)

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6 Criticisms of atomistic interpretations of the Tractarian conception of sub-propositional meaning, as well as attempts to give pride of place to the role of the Context Principle in the *Tractatus*, can be found in Ishiguro 1969, Rhees 1966, Goldfarb ts-1979, Helme 1979, McGuiness 1981, McGuinness 1985, Winch 1987, McCarty 1991, Kremer 1997, Bar-Elli 2005, Diamond 2006, Goldfarb 2011. The importance of the Context Principle for the Tractarian conception of language has been greatly emphasized, in the last two decades, by various resolute readers. As we shall see in the next chapter, the Context Principle is closely connected to the so-called “austere conception of nonsense,” and the idea that the *Tractatus* endorses such a conception of nonsense is one of the core commitments of resolute readers. Reference to individual works of resolute readers will be given in the course of the following exposition. For an overview of the debate between “resolute” and “standard” readings of the *Tractatus*, see Bronzo 2012.
The propositions of the *Tractatus*, according to his author, must eventually be recognized as nonsensical. They form a ladder that we eventually have to throw away. Only at that point we will have understood the author of the book.

How to make sense of these statements is a hotly debated question. In the last twenty-five years, it has been at the center of the debate between resolute readers and so-called standard readers. Part of what this relatively recent debate has brought clearly into view is that the question of how to understand the Tractarian self-revocation is closely connected to the question of how to understand the Tractarian conception of nonsense. Depending on which conception of nonsense one attributes to the *Tractatus*, one will be committed to different sorts of accounts of what it means, for the author the *Tractatus*, to throw away his propositions by recognizing them as nonsensical.

As will become clear in the next chapter, I follow resolute readers in ascribing to the book an “austere” conception of nonsense. But this does not mean that I am going to take a stance on how to interpret the self-revocation expressed in 6.54. In my discussion of the *Tractatus*, I will proceed under the assumption that I can bracket, for my present purposes, what Wittgenstein says in that remark. More brutally put, I am going to ignore the fact that we are supposed to throw away the propositions of the *Tractatus*.

This procedure has its costs. Any complete account of the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle must include a story about the relation between the parts of the *Tractatus* that discuss the Context Principle and 6.54. It could even be a story which tells us that 6.54 is a bad remark and should accordingly be ignored—but it must be a story. Since I am not going to tell any story about this issue, the account of the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle that I am going to offer is at the very least incomplete. In fact, it can be worst than that. One might
argue that, given what is said in 6.54, my account of the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle is partially or fundamentally misguided. Since I am going to ignore 6.54, my account remains potentially liable to this sort of objection.

While I am not going to argue that my present discussion of the Tractatus is not liable to an objection of that sort, I would like to point out that it is not inevitably liable to it. We are supposed to climb the Tractarian ladder before throwing it away (“[The reader] must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it”). Even if abiding by 6.54 were necessary for a proper understanding of the Tractatus, and even if the remarks of the Tractatus which are ostensibly about the Context Principle and related issues belonged to the ladder that we are eventually supposed to throw away, it could still be the case that the account of those remarks that I am going to offer succeeds in taking us up a few rungs of the ladder, and thus in taking us closer to a proper understanding of the book.  

4. The structure of the Tractarian discussion of the Context Principle

In the Tractatus, the main statement of the Context Principle appears in proposition 3.3. The Tractatus numbers its remarks according to a hierarchical system, and 3.3 occupies a relatively high position in the hierarchy: it is a comment on proposition 3, which is one of the seven main propositions of the book. Proposition 3.3 is followed by four sets of comments. These comments

7 The interpretation of Tractarian contextualism that I am going to offer is consistent, for example, with Cora Diamond’s account of would be to climb up on the Tractarian discussion of the Context Principle and eventually throw it away (Diamond, forthcoming C). Diamond’s suggestion is that the Context Principle can be used to introduce forms of descriptions of linguistic expressions which can be employed for clarificatory purposes. Once we have these forms of description, we can throw away the Context Principle and go on with the clarificatory activity.
introduce a number of notions and distinctions that clarify the import of 3.3 and spell out some of its implications. The 3.31s and 3.32s describe the distinction between “symbol” and “sign.” More specifically, the 3.31s define the notion of a symbol, whereas the 3.32s define what signs are, explain how signs are related to symbols, and characterize symbols as signs-in-use. The distinction between signs and symbols, I will suggest, is crucial for a proper understanding of the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle. The 3.33s, then, discuss the consequences of the Tractarian understanding of the Context Principle for the question of the nature of nonsense and the possibility of a theory of significance. This topic is further discussed in the 5.473s—a group of remarks that appear much later in the book, even though, as we shall see, they are philologically closely related to the 3.3s. The last set of comments to 3.3, the 3.34s, offer a further clarification of the distinction between signs and symbols by discussing the difference between the “essential” and the “accidental” features of symbols.

In this chapter, I will focus mostly on the 3.31s and the 3.32s, which may be regarded as the first two “sections” of the Tractarian “chapter” on the Context Principle. In the next chapter, I will concentrate on the 3.33s and the 5.473s.

5. The Context Principle, symbols, and propositional variables

In proposition 3.3, the *Tractatus* gives a reformulation of Frege’s contextual dictum:

Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.
For our present purposes, we can bracket the first part of the remark (which expresses Wittgenstein’s disagreement with Frege’s theory of sense and reference) and focus instead on the version of the Context Principle that is formulated in the second part of the remark. Frege says that words really have a meaning only in the context of a proposition. Here the *Tractatus* does not talk of “words,” but of “names.” In order to understand the claim made in 3.3, we need to have in view the basic tenets of the Tractarian account of language—the so-called “picture theory of the proposition.”

For the *Tractatus*, every proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions, which are truth-functions of themselves (TLP 5). Elementary propositions are combinations of “names” (4.22), each of which stands for an “object” or “thing” (3.202-3.22). Objects combine into states of affairs (*Sachverhalten*; see 2.01, 2.0272). An elementary proposition, by combining its names in a determinate way, represents (*darstellen*) a possible state of affairs and asserts (*behaupten*) that such a state of affairs obtains (see 2.15 and 4.21). A non-elementary proposition represents a possible combination of obtaining and not obtaining state of affairs (see 2.201, 4.1, and 4.2) and asserts that such a possibility obtains. In general, a proposition represents a “possible situation” (*mögliche Sachlage*), i.e. a possible way for things to be, and asserts that things stand as it represents them to be—where the possible situation represented by a proposition is its “sense” (*Sinn*). According to this view, therefore, the possibility of significant propositions rests on the

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8 For the idea that a proposition represents a “possible situation,” see 2.11 and 2.202 (keeping in mind that a proposition, for the *Tractatus*, is a special kind of picture), as well as 3.11, 4.021, 4.03, 4.031, 4.1, and 4.2. For the claim that the possible situation presented by a proposition is its “sense,” see 2.221 (combined with 2.202) and 4.03. For the idea that a proposition asserts or says that things stands as it represents them to be, see 4.022. The same passage, by equating the “sense” of a proposition with “how things stand, if [the proposition] is true,” shows also that a “possible situation” can be glossed, quite simply, as a way for things to be.
fact that names stand for objects. But 3.3 states that the correlation of names and objects is not something that can be set up prior to and independently of the use of names in complete, meaningful propositions: a name stands for an object only in so far as it is part of a proposition that, by expressing a complete sense, says something about that object.

The import of this claim is clarified, in the remarks that follow 3.3, through a discussion of symbols, signs, and use. By the end of this chapter, we will see that the version of the Context Principle stated in 3.3 can be explicitly reformulated in terms of these notions.

In the 3.31s, a “symbol” [Symbol] or “expression” [Ausdruck] is defined as every part of a proposition which characterizes its sense—or, alternatively, as everything that a proposition can have in common with other propositions which is essential to its sense:

Every part of the proposition which characterizes its sense I call an expression [Ausdruck] (a symbol [Symbol]).
(The proposition itself is an expression.)
Expressions are everything—essential to the sense of the proposition—that propositions can have in common with one another.
An expression characterizes a form and a content. (3.31)

This passage implies that the sense of a proposition—which is what symbols characterize—is both form and content. In order to understand what the Tractatus means by “symbol,” we first need to understand the meaning of that assertion.

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9 See 4.0312: “The possibility of propositions is based upon the principle of the representation of objects by signs.”

10 Even though this point is expressed most explicitly in the 3.3s, it can already be discerned in earlier sections of the book. See especially 2.131, “The elements of the picture stand in the picture for the objects” [Die Elemente des Bildes vertreten im Bild die Gegenstände], and 3.22, “In the proposition the name represents the object” [Der Name vertritt im Satz den Gegenstand]. Moreover, as we shall see below, the fact that names cannot represent objects prior to and independently of their occurrence in complete propositions follows from the fact that Tractarian objects, as they are characterized in the 2s, cannot occur in isolation, but only as parts of state of affairs.
The distinction between form and content is first introduced in 2.025, in the context of a discussion of the simplicity of Tractarian objects. The “substance of the world,” we are told, is both form and content. We have already been told that objects form the substance of the world (2.021). Therefore, objects are both form and content. The form of an object consists in the ways in which it can combine with other objects into states of affairs (2.0141). The content of an object, on the other hand, consists simply in its being numerically different from any other object of the same form. Here it is important to notice that Tractarian objects are radically different from anything that in ordinary language, or even in Frege’s logic, would be called an “object.” Tractarian objects have no essential material property. The Tractatus states explicitly that two different objects may share all their material properties in common, thereby rejecting the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (2.02331, 5.5302). Tractarian objects are fully identified by their form (that is by their combinatorial possibilities) and by their being different from other objects of the same form (2.0233); this is the sense in which Tractarian objects are “simple” (2.02). Thus, in the basic case of elementary propositions, the sense of a proposition is form in so far as it is a possible configuration of objects with certain combinatorial possibilities, and it is content in so far as it is a possible configuration of some particular objects, numerically distinct from other objects of the same form. More generally, the sense of propositions is content in so far as it is a particular possible situation (i.e. a way in which a particular set of objects may be configured or not configured into states of affairs), and it is form in virtue of the features that it shares with other particular possible situations.

Now, the Tractatus talks of the sense (Sinn) of propositions, as well as of the meaning (Bedeutung) of names, in two registers. In one register, as we saw, the sense of a proposition is the possible situation it represents. In the same register, the Bedeutung of a name is the object it
stands for.\textsuperscript{11} Call this the \textit{vertical register}. But the \textit{Tractatus} speaks as well of the \textit{Sinn} of propositions and the \textit{Bedeutung} of names as something that propositions and names \textit{have}.\textsuperscript{12} Call this the \textit{horizontal register}. In accordance with this terminological policy, we can say that both names and propositions \textit{have} form and content. A name has form in so far as it stands for an object with certain combinatorial possibilities, and has content in so far as it stands for a particular object, numerically distinct from other objects of the same form. Analogously, a proposition has content in so far as it represents a particular situation, and has form in virtue of the features that the particular possible situation it represents has in common with other particular possible situations.

Going back to 3.31, we should bear in mind that Tractarian propositions (\textit{Sätze}) are \textit{sentences} (written, spoken, signed, etc.) that represent possible situations (see 3.1 and 3.11). Propositions, thus understood, may share a great variety of features with one another; but it is not the case that \textit{any} feature that they can possibly share is a \textit{symbol}. In order to be a symbol, a feature that a proposition can share with other propositions must “characterize” or “be essential to” its sense: it must play a distinctive role in the determination of its sense, which is both form and content. Consider for instance these English propositions:

(1) Socrates is human

(2) Socrates is mortal

\textsuperscript{11} See especially 3.203: “The name means an object. The object is its meaning.”

\textsuperscript{12} See for instance 3.3: “Only the proposition \textit{has} sense; only in the context of a proposition \textit{has} the name meaning” (emphases added). For the sense of propositions, see also 4.031: “One can say, instead of, This proposition has such and such a sense, This proposition represents such and such a situation.”
Conceived as physical objects on the page or screen in front of you, these propositions may have, say, the same chemical composition. But this shared property is not a symbol, because it plays no distinctive role in the determination of the sense of either proposition: the two propositions could have different chemical compositions and express the same sense; and conversely, from the fact that other propositions have the same chemical composition as (1) and (2), it does not follow that their respective senses have anything in common. The chemical composition of (1) and (2) characterizes neither the form nor the content of their sense. Similar considerations apply to the various typographical properties that (1) and (2) happen to have in common, such as font, size, style, and color. Things are more complicated if we consider the fact that the two propositions share the letter “c.” The occurrence of this letter in (1) and (2) does play some role in the determination of their sense: if each of the two propositions did not contain such a letter, it would be composed of different words, and would thus express a different sense, if we ignore happy coincidences or new stipulations. However, the role played by “c” in each proposition is simply to distinguish the word “Socrates” from other words.\[13\] The fact that the two propositions have the letter “c” in common has no bearing on the question of whether their senses have something in common. The orthographic complexity of the word “Socrates” plays no logical role in the determination of the sense of the propositions in which it occurs: we could very well replace it with an orthographically simple sign without obscuring any feature of the senses that they express, or any feature of their inferential relations. The occurrence of the letter “c” in (1) and (2), therefore, is not “essential to their sense.” The same is not true of the word “Socrates,” qua name of a certain philosopher. If (1) and (2) did not contain a name of that philosopher, they

\[13\] Thus letters, in linguistics, are classified as graphemes, which are defined as the smallest semantically distinguishing unit in a written language.
would not express the sense that they do in fact express. The name does not have to consist of that particular sequence of letters—different conventions may be adopted. But if two propositions are to convey the same sense expressed by (1) and (2), then they must have some feature in common whose role is to name that Greek philosopher. Thus “Socrates,” as it occurs in (1) and (2), is a Tractarian symbol.\footnote{Even though, as we shall see, it is not a Tractarian name.}

We can already see the connection between the notion of a symbol and the Context Principle. Meaningful propositional components are symbols, and symbols are common features of complete propositions, something that “propositions can have in common with one another.” Using Ryle’s terminology (see Chapter 2, Section 7), meaningful propositional components are something \textit{abstractable}, but not \textit{extractible}, from complete significant propositions.

In the remarks that follow 3.31, Wittgenstein goes on to describe a notation that makes clear the relation between propositional and sub-propositional meaning:

\footnotesize{An expression presupposes the forms of all propositions in which it can occur. It is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions. (3.311)}

\footnotesize{It is therefore presented \textit{[dargestellt]} by the general form of the propositions which it characterizes. And in this form the expression is constant and everything else variable. (3.312)}

\footnotesize{An expression is thus presented by a variable, whose values are the propositions which contain the expression. (In the limiting case the variables become constants, the expression a proposition.) I call such a variable a “propositional variable”. (3.313)}

\footnotesize{An expression has meaning only in a proposition. Every variable can be conceived as a propositional variable. (Including the variable name.) (3.314)}
If we change a constituent part of a proposition into a variable, there is a class of propositions which are all the values of the resulting variable proposition. This class in general still depends on what, by arbitrary agreement, we mean by parts of that proposition. But if we change all those signs, whose meaning was arbitrarily determined, into variables, there always remains such a class. But this is now no longer dependent on any agreement; it depends only on the nature of the proposition. It corresponds to a logical form, to a logical prototype [logischen Urbild]. (3.315)

Complete significant propositions may share various logically relevant features—i.e. various symbols. We saw that one of the symbols that the propositions (1) and (2) have in common is the word “Socrates,” \textit{qua} name of a certain philosopher. This symbol can be “presented” (or displayed, or exhibited) by a “propositional variable,” whose values include (1) and (2). That is, we take one of those propositions, keep the symbol “Socrates” constant, and replace the predicate expression with a variable. Working, for the sake of illustration, with the Fregean model of propositional structure (which ties the copula to the predicate and categorizes the basic sub-propositional logical units into proper names and concept-words), we can write:

\[
3) \quad \Phi(Socrates)
\]

This variable displays a sense-essential feature that (1) and (2) have in common. This is a feature that they have in common with all the propositions which apply a simple predicate to Socrates. In fact, (3) exhibits more than one logical feature that this class of propositions have in common: not only the fact that they say something about Socrates, but also the fact that they apply to Socrates a \textit{simple predicate}—as opposed, say, to an n-place relation, or to a predicate that exhibits internal logical complexity. There is however something even more abstract that (1) and
(2) have in common, namely the fact that they combine a simple predicate with a simple name. This feature can be represented by replacing the constant element in (3) with another variable:

4) $\Phi(x)$

The feature displayed by this propositional variable is purely formal. We started out with a proposition such as (1), which has both form and content; in (3), we abstracted from some of its content; and in (4), we abstract from all of its content. What we obtain is a pure propositional form—a “logical prototype.” Such a prototype counts as a symbol, according to the definition of symbols given in 3.31: “Expressions [= symbols] are everything—essential to the sense of the proposition—that propositions can have in common with one another” (my emphasis). The same procedure, when applied to other propositions, may bring out different prototypes. For example, from the proposition,

5) Socrates loves Plato

we obtain the prototype,

6) $\Psi(x, y)$

So far, we have used variables for abstracting from content; but we may also want to abstract from some of the formal features of propositions, and we may agree on a correspondent use of variables. For example, one of the sense-essential featured shared by (1) and (5) is that, in each
of them, the word “Socrates” functions as a name of the same Greek philosopher. This is not shown, however, by (3), for we agreed to use “Φ” as something that stands for a *simple predicate*; thus, (1) and (5) do not have the symbol “Φ(Socrates)” in common. We need therefore to introduce a notation for a variable whose values are *all* the meaningful propositions in which “Socrates” functions as the name of the same Greek philosopher, regardless of the particular propositional form that they exemplify. Following a suggestion by Michael Morris,\(^{15}\) we can write this propositional variable as follows:

7) …Socrates…

The same notation can be used to represent other sub-propositional symbols. For example, we can write the propositional variable whose values are *all* the propositions—of whatever particular logical form—that share with (1) the simple predicate “is mortal” in this manner:

8) …is mortal…

Similarly, we can write the propositional variable whose values are *all* the propositions—of whatever particular logical form—that share with (1) and (2) *a* simple Fregean proper name—regardless of its particular content—as follows:

9) …x…

\(^{15}\) Morris 2008, p. 173.
We see here what Wittgenstein means when he says that “every variable can be represented as propositional variables…[i]ncluding the variable name” (3.314).

There is also something that a proposition has in common with all other propositions, regardless of its content and of any feature of the form that it exemplifies: any proposition is the representation of a possible situation. In order to present this maximally abstract sense-essential feature that propositions can have in common with one another, we can use a “propositional variable” in the contemporary sense of the term, that is a simple letter such as “r.” The Tractatus itself uses at times the Greek letter “ξ” (5.5, 6.1203) or the ordinary language variable: “Such and such is the case” (4.5). On the opposite side of the spectrum, if we abstract from none of the sense-essential features of a proposition, then we are simply left with the proposition itself, which can be seen as the “limiting case” of a propositional variable: the case in which “all the variables become constant” (3.313). It is in this sense that “the proposition itself is an expression [or symbol]” (3.31), where a symbols is something “presented by a variable” (3.313).

This is a good place to pause for a few comments and qualifications.

16 For the Tractatus, there is a more specific formal feature that all propositions have in common: They are all truth-functions of elementary propositions. This formal feature is presented by the propositional variable given at TLP 6: [ \( \overline{p}, \text{ } \xi, \text{ } \text{N}(\xi) \)]. The values of this variable are all the propositions that are obtained by applying the N-operator (i.e. the joint negation of an arbitrary number of proposition; see 5.5-5.51) to any arbitrary subset of the union of the set of elementary propositions and the set of propositions obtained through previous applications of the N-operator. However, this is a different kind of propositional variable from those described in the 3.31s and the formal feature it displays is not a “symbol” in the sense defined by the 3.31s. For the Tractatus, the N-operator and other signs signifying the application of truth-operations do not “characterize” the sense of propositions (5.25; see also 4.0621) and are not, therefore, “symbols” in the sense described in the 3.31s. The propositions “p” and “\( \overline{\overline{p}} \),” for the Tractatus, have the same sense and thus share the same logical prototype, displayed by the same propositional variable in the sense described in the 3.31s. This is a consequence of the “fundamental thought” of the Tractatus, according to which logical constants, unlike names, do not stand for things (4.0312).
i) As I said above, the Fregean analysis of the English propositions that I have used as examples is only an illustration. I do no wish to suggest that the Tractatus would agree that, for example, the English proposition “Socrates is human” exemplifies the logical prototype “Φ(x).” In the first place, it is certain that the Tractatus would not regard “…Socrates…” as a name, because it does not stand for a “simple object,” fully identified by its combinatorial possibilities and by its numerical difference from other objects with the same combinatorial possibilities. (If “Socrates” named an object that has none of the properties of the Greek philosopher except its purely formal, combinatorial possibilities—say an object that is not a philosopher, is not Greek, is not even a human being, etc.—we would ordinarily say that it does not name the same object.) For the Tractatus, the logical form of “Socrates is human” must be very different from its surface-grammatical form and would not include any simple name corresponding to the word “Socrates.” In the second place, there is a question about whether the Tractatus would admit at all the idea that some linguistic expressions stand for anything analogous to Fregean concepts. Commentators have divided here into three camps: some have argued that Tractarian objects include only individuals (objects in Frege’s sense, if we abstract from the fact that Fregean objects need not be “simple” in the Tractarian sense); others have argued that Tractarian objects include also properties and relations (concepts in Frege’s sense); and another group of commentators have argued that Tractarian objects are categorically indeterminate. According to the third approach, the Tractatus holds that the logical forms of elementary propositions—and thus the logical categories of sub-propositional components—cannot be determined a priori, but only through the “application of logic” (5.557), which lies outside the scope of the book.  

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17 For an overview of the debate and a defense of the third approach, see Johnston 2009 and Campbell 2014.
our present purposes, we do not have to take a stance on this issue. Whatever a “fully analyzed proposition” looks like according to the Tractatus, its symbols will be presented by means of propositional variables in a manner analogous to what I have indicated.

ii) The Tractatus says that in order to construct a propositional variable, we need to “change a constituent part of a proposition into a variable” (3.315). This might give the impression that in a propositional variable such as “Φ(Socrates),” it is really only the “Φ” that is variable. But it is actually the whole expression that is a variable. The variable is obtained by replacing a symbol occurring in “Socrates is human” with another symbol; and symbols are propositional features, properly presented by means of propositional variables. Therefore, when we transform the proposition “Socrates is human” into the propositional variable “Φ(Socrates),” what we are really doing is replacing the symbol presented by the propositional variable “…is human…” which occurs in “Socrates is human” with the symbol presented by the propositional variable “…Φ…”

iii) Symbols are initially introduced as “parts” [Teile] of propositions (3.31); they are said to “occur” [vorkommen] in propositions (3.311); and propositions are said to “contain” [enthalten] them (3.313). These characterizations apply quite naturally to symbols such as “Φ(Socrates)” or “…Socrates…”; but it wouldn’t be as natural to say that a symbol such as the logical prototype “Φ(x)” is a part of, and occurs in, and is contained in, the proposition “Socrates is human.” Here it is important to keep in view the more general characterization of symbols given in 3.31: A symbol is “everything—essential to the sense of the proposition—that propositions can have in common with one another.” Symbols that can be naturally described as

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18 Commentators have sometimes failed to see this point. See for instance Griffin 1964, p. 133.
“parts” of propositions are *special cases* of symbols in general, which include also pure propositional forms and, as limiting cases, specific propositions.

iv) Given the general characterization of symbols offered in 3.31 and the recommended notation for the presentation of symbols described in the 3.312-3.318, it is clear that when the *Tractatus* refers to certain symbols as “parts” of propositions it is appealing to a *non-atomistic* notion of “part.” The ordinary name “…Socrates…” is not a component that may enter into propositional combinations only incidentally, but rather one of the logically relevant *features* that complete propositions can have in common with one another.

v) The non-atomistic notion of “part” that Wittgenstein employs in relation to sub-propositional symbols is at work also at the corresponding ontological level, which is discussed in earlier sections of the book. The objects or things designated by names are “parts” of state of affairs. But they do not enter into such combinations only incidentally. Just as a name is a feature that a proposition can have in common with other propositions, so an object is a feature that a state of affairs can have in common with other states of affairs:

The thing is independent, in so far as it can occur in all possible situations, but this form of independence is a form of connection with the state of affairs, a form of dependence. (It is impossible for words to occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition.) (2.0122)

The parenthetical remark makes clear the connection between 2.0122 and the 3.3s.19 There is no such thing as an object “in isolation,” outside of any states of affairs—even though the same object can occur in different states of affairs. Similarly, there is no such thing as a meaningful name in isolation, outside of any meaningful proposition—even though the same meaningful

19 For further evidence about the connection between the opening sections of the *Tractatus* and the discussion of the Context Principle in the 3.3s, see *L 1930-32*, pp. 119-120.
name can occur in different propositions. Just as the “[t]he world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1.1), so “language” is “the totality of propositions,” not of names (4.001).

vi) The *Tractatus* does not explicitly invoke the notion of “abstraction” in its explanation of the nature of symbols. I have however systematically appealed to such a notion in my exposition of the Tractarian view. The legitimacy of this procedure is confirmed by the opening paragraph of an essay that Wittgenstein wrote in 1929, when his views were still in many respects very close to those expressed in the *Tractatus*:

Every proposition has a content and a form. We get the picture of the pure form if we abstract from the meanings of the single words, or symbols (in so far as they have independent meanings). That is to say, if we substitute variables for the constants of the proposition.20

This is, in effect, a compressed summary of the 3.31s, and abstraction is explicitly mentioned in connection with the use of variables. Propositional variables are devices that allow us to exhibit sense-essential features that are common to a certain class of propositions, while abstracting from other sense-essential features that are not common to that class of propositions.

In the next section, I transition to the 3.32s, where the *Tractatus* introduces the notion of a “sign” and discusses the relationship between signs, symbols, and use.

6. Symbols, signs, and use

The 3.32s open with the definition of a sign:

20 “Some Remarks on Logical Form,” in *PO*, p. 29.
The sign is what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol [Das Zeichen ist das sinnlich Wahrnehmbare am Symbol]. (3.32)

It is noteworthy that signs are here defined after and in terms of symbols.\textsuperscript{21} The same order of presentation and definition occurs in an earlier part of the book, where the notion of a sign is introduced for the first time:

In the proposition the thought is expressed perceptibly through the senses. (3.1)
We use the sensibly perceptible sign (sound or written sign, etc.) of a proposition as a projection of the possible situation. […] (3.11)

Propositional signs are introduced, from the very beginning, as the sensibly perceptible signs of propositions, after propositions have already been characterized as the sensibly perceptible expressions of thoughts, i.e. as sensibly perceptible logical pictures of possible situations. In the next section, I will argue that the order of presentation and definition consistently followed by the Tractatus is philosophically significant.

The Tractatus goes on immediately to notice that two different symbols may share the same sign:

Two different symbols can therefore have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common—they then signify in different ways. (3.321)

The same sign can fulfill different logical functions in different propositions—can characterize their sense in different ways—and be therefore, in each proposition, a different symbol. The point can be expressed in terms of the distinction between types and tokens (which, as Michael

\textsuperscript{21} A rare locus in the literature where this point is explicitly emphasized is Bar-Elli 2005, pp. 13-14.
Kremer has noticed, is orthogonal to the distinction between symbols and signs\(^{22}\): different tokens of the same sign may be tokens of different symbols. In other words, signs can be ambiguous. Ambiguity, for the *Tractatus*, is a pervasive feature of ordinary language; and a special kind of ambiguity leads to nothing less than “the most fundamental confusions” of philosophy, which can be prevented through the adoption of a systematically unambiguous symbolism:

In the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways—and therefore belongs to two different symbols—or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition. Thus the word “is” appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence; “to exist” as an intransitive verb like “to go”; “identical” as an adjective; we speak of something but also of the fact of something happening. [...] (3.323)

Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full). (3.324)

In order to avoid these errors, we must employ a sign-language [Zeichensprache] which excludes them, by not applying the same signs in different symbols and by not applying signs in the same way which signify in different ways. A sign-language [Zeichensprache], that is to say, which obeys the rules of logical grammar—of logical syntax.

(The symbolism [Begriffsschrift] of Frege and Russell is such a language, which, however, does still not exclude all errors.) (3.325)

We may distinguish between intra-categorial and trans-categorial ambiguity. Intra-categorial ambiguity, which is very common in ordinary language, arises when the same sign (e.g. the same word) belongs to symbols that share the same form, but have a different content. “Socrates,” for example, is the name of a Greek philosopher and also, among many other things, of a Brazilian

\(^{22}\) See Kremer 1997, p. 102.
soccer player. This sort of ambiguity can certainly lead to miscommunication: we may understand the token of a sign as the token of a certain symbol, whereas it is in fact the token of a different symbol.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) There are passages in the *Tractatus* that have been taken by some commentators to show that the Tractarian notion of a “symbol” does not allow for intra-categorial sign/symbol ambiguities. According to such an interpretation—which I shall call the “purely syntactic interpretation of Tractarian symbols”—the identity of a symbol depends exclusively on the identity of the sign and on its logical category: difference in semantic content do not suffice to determine difference in symbol. Thus, for example, the sign “Mr. Green” is the same symbol whenever it names a man, regardless of which man it names. (The most thorough defense of this interpretation is offered in Johnston 2007, but see also Morris 2008, pp. 158-169. The passages that are quoted in support of this interpretation often include 3.13, 3.323c, 3.33, 4.5, 5.4733c.)

The disagreement between the purely syntactic interpretation of Tractarian symbols and the line of interpretation that I espouse is partly terminological, partly substantial. The terminological component of the dispute concerns the question: Does the *Tractatus* allow for a notion of “symbol” which includes semantic content among the conditions of identity of symbols? Notice that the interpretation that I have offered in the text, based on a close reading of the 3.31s, does not maintain that semantic content is part of the conditions of identity of any Tractarian symbols. The *Tractatus*, I have argued, admits “purely formal symbols,” i.e. symbols that characterize the form, but not the content, of the propositions in which they occur; but symbols of this sort constitute only a special case. A symbol, in general, may be identified by its specific content as well as by its sign and logical form. For the purely syntactic interpretation, by contrast, the content of a symbol may never suffice to distinguish it from other symbols.

If the disagreement between the two interpretations concerned only the terminology of the *Tractatus*, it would be of rather limited interest. But the disagreement concerns also a quite substantial issue, namely the Tractarian conception of the relation between syntax and semantics. According to the line of interpretation that I favor, a sign is a symbol—even a purely formal symbol—only in so far as it characterizes the sense of propositional symbols that have both form (or syntax) and content (or semantics). Purely formal symbols can only be singled out by abstraction from meaningful propositional symbols that represent possible ways in which things might stand. Syntax, therefore, is strongly dependent on semantics. By contrast, according to the purely syntactic interpretation, a sign can be a symbol even when it does not characterize the sense of propositional symbols having both form (or syntax) and content (or semantics). Thus syntax is at best much more weakly dependent on semantics. In fact, according to the version of the purely syntactic reading proposed by Colin Johnston, syntax is in no way dependent on semantics: there can be “symbols,” understood as purely syntactic items, even though they are part of a “language,” understood as a purely syntactic system, that cannot possibly acquire a semantics, because it does not mirror the logical form of reality (see Johnston 2007, pp. 388-389).

In support of my favored line of interpretation, I can cite the 3.31s (which I think create serious problems for the purely syntactic interpretation) and the external evidence marshaled in
However, as Wittgenstein’s examples make clear, this is not the sort of ambiguity with which he is concerned in the passages that I have just quoted. Wittgenstein is concerned instead with cases of trans-categorial equivocation, which arise when the same sign belongs to symbols of different logical categories. As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, the *Tractatus* maintains that this latter sort of ambiguity is the source of a much more radical form of misunderstanding: it may lead to us to believe that the token of a sign which is purportedly used to express a sense is a the token of a contentful symbol, whereas in fact it is merely a feature of a “nonsensical pseudo-proposition” (4.1272). In other words, trans-categorial equivocations may lead us into *illusions of meaning*, of which the “most fundamental confusions” of philosophy are characteristic instances.

Let’s take a closer look at trans-categorial ambiguity. The *Tractatus* distinguishes two kinds of case. First, there are cases in which “the same word signifies in two different ways.” The first example given in 3.323 illustrates this kind of case. Consider these propositions:

10) Socrates is human

11) Socrates is Plato

Kremer 2012, p. 213, n. 19. A proper defense of such a reading, however, would require a detailed exegesis of the several passages that may seem to support the purely syntactic interpretation. This is a task, however, that I am not going to undertake in this work.

My topic, in this chapter, is the Tractarian conception of the relation between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. My presentation is indeed informed, in some respects, by a construal of the sign/symbol distinction (and of the Tractarian conception of the relation between syntax and semantics) that differs from the account given by the purely syntactic interpretation; but this disagreement does not bear on the main exegetical thesis defended in this chapter—i.e. the thesis that a sign, for the *Tractatus*, is a *contentful* sub-propositional symbol only in so far as it occurs in a contentful propositional symbol. It is worth emphasizing that an advocate of the purely syntactic interpretation of Tractarian symbols may fully agree with this claim, even though she will disagree with some of the details of my construal of the sign/symbol distinction.
12) There is a philosopher

Each of these propositions contains the English word—i.e. the sign—“is.” But the sign, in each propositional context, is a different kind of symbol. This is one of the “mistakes” of ordinary language that the Begriffsschrift devised by Frege and Russell excludes. In the modern version of their symbolism, those three propositions would be expressed, employing obvious abbreviations, by the following formulas:

\[
10^* \) \text{H(s)} \\
11^* \) \text{s = p} \\
12^* \) \exists x (Px)
\]

Here the different kinds of logical role played by the word “is” in the original English propositions are perspicuously expressed by different kinds of signs. In (10*), the “is” that in (10) works as the copula is made to disappear and its role is fulfilled by a way of arranging predicate letters (written in uppercase) and singular-term letters (written in lowercase). In (11*), the “is” that in (11) works as the sign of identity is replaced with a relational sign flanked by singular terms.\(^{24}\) In (12*), the “is” that in (12) works as the sign of existence is paraphrased away by means of the variable and quantifier notation.

\[^{24}\text{This is actually a respect in which the Begriffsschrift of Frege and Russell, according to the Tractatus, contains some residual errors. In that symbolism, in fact, identity statements appear to have the same form of relational statements. The Tractatus proposes to avoid this “error” by adopting a symbolism that dispenses altogether with the sign of identity. The proposal is to express the identity of objects by designating them with the same sign, and the difference of objects by designating them with different signs (see 5.53ff).}\]
The second sort of trans-categorial ambiguity mentioned by the *Tractatus* concerns cases in which “two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition.” Most of the examples given in 3.323 are of this sort. Consider for instance these two propositions:

13) Socrates and Plato are wise  
14) Socrates and Plato are identical

These two propositions appear to have the same form. The words “wise” and “identical” are both, grammatically speaking, adjectives; and each proposition appears to attribute a property to some objects. However, the words “wise” and “identical” are in fact signs that symbolize in different *kinds* of way. These differences in symbolization become evident if we attend to the inferential relations of the two English propositions: from (13) we may infer that Socrates is wise, but it is not even clear what it would mean to “infer” from (14) that “Socrates is identical.” The symbolism of Frege and Russell makes clearer (even though, for the *Tractatus*, not yet fully clear\(^{25}\)) the categorial differences between the symbols that occur in (13) and (14) by representing “wise” as a predicate, and “identical” as a two-place relation:

\[
13^*) \ W(s) \ & \ W(p) \\
14^*) \ s = p
\]

---

\(^{25}\) See above, note 24.
The “errors” of ordinary language, according to the *Tractatus*, are sins of ambiguity—and in particular, of trans-categorial ambiguity. An ideal sign-language, accordingly, is one that avoids any such ambiguity. In such a language, signs would bear their manner of symbolizing on their sleeve. A language that satisfies these conditions, for the *Tractatus*, is governed by “logical grammar” or “logical syntax,” as opposed to ordinary or surface grammar.

In languages that are not governed by logical syntax, we cannot reliably tell the symbol by the sign. In order to identify a symbol, we need to attend to the logical function that it fulfills within the proposition whose sense it characterizes—a function that may be disguised by its surface-grammatical form. In order to identify the symbol, we need to look at how the sign is actually *used* within the meaningful proposition in which it occurs.26 “Language disguises the thought” (4.002); but “[w]hat the signs conceal, their application [Anwendung] declares” (3.262). We broach therefore the topic of the last segment of the 3.32s:

In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use [*sinnvollen Gebrauch*]. (3.326)

The sign determines a logical form only together with its logical syntactical application [*logisch-syntaktischen Verwendung*]. (3.327)

If a sign is *useless* [*nicht gebraucht*] then it is meaningless. That is the meaning of Occam’s razor.

26 At a certain level, this is true even in the case of an ideal sign-language which avoids any sign/symbol ambiguity. It is always possible, in fact, to have sign-symbols ambiguities across different languages. From the fact that a person is uttering a sign that looks like a sign of a certain ideal sign-language L, it does not automatically follow that the sign, on that occasion, symbolizes as it does in L. It all depends on whether the person is actually employing L, rather then some other sign-language L* which may overlap with L in many significant respects. After all, as the *Tractatus* emphasizes, the sign is arbitrary. *Which* language a person is speaking on each particular occasion is settled only by the way in which she is making her signs symbolize in complete propositions. Thus, there is a sense in which, in order to recognize the symbol in the sign, we *always* need to look at the way in which the sign is actually used.
In order to recognize the symbol in the sign, we must consider how the sign is used to characterize the sense of a significant proposition (sinnvoller Satz). We must consider, in other words, how the sign is put to “significant use” (sinnvoller Gebrauch). 27

There is a question, here, about how to understand the relation between the “significant use” mentioned in 3.326 and the “logico-syntactical application” mentioned in 3.327. I read “significant use” as “use in a significant proposition” (i.e. in a proposition having both form and content) and I take “logical-syntactical application” to be a synonym of “significant use,” understood in that manner. By contrast, proponents of the purely syntactical interpretation of Tractarian symbols (see above, note 23) read “logico-syntactical application” as “purely syntactical application” (as opposed to applications that involve a semantic dimension along with a purely formal dimension) and take “significant use” to be a synonym of “logico-syntactical application,” understood in that manner (see e.g. Johnston 2007, pp. 383-385).

The reading I am espousing entails that a sign is a symbol only when it is used to characterize the sense of propositions having both form and content. On the other hand, the purely syntactic reading entails that a sign can receive “logico-syntactical application,” and be therefore a symbol, even when it is used in a manner that involves nothing more that pure logical form.

The proponents of the purely syntactic reading often claim that their reading of 3.326-3.327 is supported by a passage from a letter to C. K. Ogden in which Wittgenstein comments on the English translation of 3.326:

> I think “significant” is alright here. The meaning of this proposition is: that in order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must look at how this sign is used significantly in propositions. I.e. we must observe how the sign is used in accordance with the laws of logical syntax. Thus significant here means as much as “syntactically correct.” (LO, p. 59)

This passage establishes the equivalence of “significant use” and “syntactically correct use.” But crucially, it does not state or entail that “syntactically correct use” (or “logico-syntactical application”) is meant to contrast with the sort of application that involves not only pure syntactical form, but also semantic content. The passage, therefore, does not supply explicit textual evidence in favor of the purely syntactic interpretation.

As I have already observed (note 23), this is not the place to demonstrate that the account of the sign/symbol distinction that I am offering is more adequate than the account given by the purely syntactic interpretation. But I wish to indicate that there is room for a reading of 3.327 and of the passage from the letter to Ogden that is fully consistent with the construal of the sign/symbol distinction that I favor. Instead of assuming that the Tractatus contrasts “logical syntax” with “logical syntax cum semantic content” (as it is common to do in contemporary discussions of “syntax”), we can maintain that the Tractatus contrasts “logical syntax” with ordinary (or surface) grammar. In fact, this is clearly the contrast actually drawn by the
Since every symbol is also a sign, and since difference in use suffices to determine
difference in symbol, a symbol may be characterized as a *sign-in-use*. The textual support for
this characterization of Tractarian symbols is not restricted to the 3.32s. Earlier in the book, in
the 3.1s, Wittgenstein describes a proposition as a propositional sign that is *used* as a projection
of a possible situation:

We use the sensibly perceptible sign (sound or written sign, etc.) of a proposition as a
projection of the possible situation. [...] (3.11)
[...] The proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world. (3.12)

The same idea is reasserted at the conclusion of the 3s:

The applied [...] proposition sign is the thought. (3.5)
The thought is the significant proposition. (4)

By cutting out the middle term that connects these last two remarks (which appear consecutively
in the text), we obtain the claim that a significant proposition is an *applied* propositional sign.
The 3.3s, by introducing the notion of a symbol, provide the terminology for rephrasing more
perspicuously the idea expressed in these two sets of remarks, which frame the whole discussion
of the 3s. A contentful propositional symbol is a propositional sign that is used to represent a
possible situation. And more generally, a symbol (whether propositional or sub-propositional,

*Tractatus* when the notion of “logical grammar” or “logical syntax” is first introduced in 3.325.
The point made in 3.326, 3.327, and in the passage from the letter to Ogden can thus be
construed in the following way: In order to recognize the symbol in the sign it is not enough to
look at the *surface-grammatical application* of the sign; we need to look, instead, at its *logical
application*. Two signs may be given the same sort of surface-grammatical application but
different sorts of logical application, in which case they are different sorts of symbol; and a sign
may be given a surface-grammatical application but no sort of logical application, in which case
it is not a symbol of any sort.
and whether contentful or purely formal) is a sign that is put to use for characterizing the sense of a significant proposition.28

In the next section, I will look in more detail at the relation between sign and symbol. Then, in the Section 8, I will use the distinction between sign and symbol to clarify the import of the Tractarian version of the Context Principle.

7. A disjunctivist interpretation of the sign/symbol relation

We have seen that the Tractatus gives at least two characterizations of the relation between signs and symbols:

a) A sign is the sensibly perceptible aspect of the symbol.

b) A symbol is a sign in use.

We have also seen that the relation between signs and symbols is governed by a fundamental constraint:

28 According to a widespread account of the evolution of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, the idea that the meaning of an expression is given by its use belongs exclusively to the philosophy of later Wittgenstein and marks a fundamental break with the Tractatus (see for instance Dummett 1959, p. 348 and Kripke 1982, pp. 71-75). This account has been challenged by several commentators who have pointed out that the notion of “use” plays already a central role in the Tractarian conception of language (see for instance Ishiguro 1969, Conant 1998, Kremer 1997, Kremer 2002, Livingston 2004, Bar-Elli 2005). According to this latter line of interpretation, which I am here endorsing, the relevant differences between early and later Wittgenstein’s concern instead their respective conceptions of language-use.
c) The same sign can be common to different symbols, possibly belonging to different logical categories.

Finally, we emphasized a fact about the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*:

d) The notion of a sign is defined *after* and *in terms of* the notion of a symbol.

In this section I will present an interpretation of the relation between signs and symbols that is consistent with (a), (b), and (c) and attributes philosophical significance to (d), holding that signs are, in a sense to be specified, conceptually dependent on symbols. Moreover, I shall contrast such an interpretation with two alternative proposals: first, a proposal that is consistent with (a), (b), and (c) but attributes no philosophical significance to (d); and secondly, a proposal that attributes great philosophical significance to (d) but is inconsistent with (c).

Let’s begin with the first kind of proposal that I wish to reject. One might think that the notion of a symbol can be obtained by combining two independently intelligible notions: the notion of a “sign” and a relevant notion of “use.” According to this account, symbols form a species of the genus *sign*, where both the genus and the differentia that singles out the species (i.e. “use”) can be specified without any reference to the species to be singled out. Given a set of signs, we can ask which ones are symbols, and the answer is given by specifying the *extra feature* that must be added to a sign in order to obtain a symbol, i.e. a relevant sort of “use.” We
may refer to this sort of interpretation as the *Extra-Feature Account of Sign/Symbol Relation* and visualize it by means of the following genus/species diagram:  

![Genus/Species Diagram](image)

**Figure 4.1. Extra-Feature Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation**

It is essential to this account that the relevant notion of “sign” and the relevant notion of “use” do not presuppose, in the order of intelligibility, the notion that is supposed to be generated from their combination—i.e. the notion of a symbol. So signs are construed, for example, as geometrical shapes (in the case of written language), sound-patterns (in the case of spoken language), or patterns of bodily movements (in the case of signed language). The relevant notion of use, on the other hand, will be specified in different ways by different advocates of the Extra-Feature Account, in accordance with their additional exegetical commitments. Advocates of the Extra-Feature Account who sympathize with the “realist” tradition of *Tractatus* interpretation will tend to construe the sort of use that must be added to a sign in order to obtain a symbol as some sort of ostensive or mental act correlating signs with determinate features of reality.  

By contrast, advocates of the Extra-Feature Account who sympathize with the “anti-metaphysical”

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29 In this paragraph, and in the rest of this section, I am heavily indebted to Anton Ford’s discussion of different forms of the genus-species relation (Ford 2011). In his terminology, the Extra-Feature Account construes *symbols* as an “accidental species” of the genus *sign*.

30 The “realist” interpretations proposed by Peter Hacker (1972, 1986, 1999), Norman Malcolm (1977, 1986), and David Pears (1987, vol. 1) are arguably good examples of this sort of approach.
tradition of *Tractatus* interpretation will construe the relevant notion of use along formalist lines, in terms of rules for the manipulation of signs or actual patterns in the manipulation of signs.\(^{31}\)

An advocate of the Extra-Feature Account can also combine these two different ways of spelling out the relevant notion of use. For instance, she might opt for a formalist construal of the sort of use that must be added to a sign in order to turn it into a *purely formal* symbol (i.e. a symbol that characterizes the form, but not the content, of the propositions in which it occurs), and for a “realist” construal of what must be added to a purely formal symbol in order to turn it into a *contentful* symbol (i.e. a symbol that characterizes both the form and the content of the propositions in which it occurs).\(^{32}\)

A considerable part of the literature on the Tractarian conception of language focuses on the question of which particular implementation of the Extra-Feature Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation should be properly ascribed to the book. But the claim that the *Tractatus* is trying to give an account of that sort carries already substantial—even though not always noticed—exegetical commitments. On the one hand, it assumes that the *Tractatus* endorses a formalist, post-Hilbertian conception of a “sign” as an item that can be specified without any appeal to the notion of meaning. On the other hand, it assumes that the *Tractatus* is engaged in the philosophical project of reconstructing the notion of a symbol or meaningful sign from conceptually independent ingredients.

It would take a very extensive discussion to properly challenge these two exegetical assumptions. Here I will only indicate some considerations that should suffice to raise doubts

\(^{31}\) Certain passages in Winch 1987 may perhaps be taken to provide an example of this sort of reading.

\(^{32}\) An account of this sort is compatible with the reading advanced in Johnston 2007, which gives a formalist construal of (what I call) purely formal symbols and leaves open the question of the “constitution of reference” (p. 388).
about those assumptions and to justify the consideration of some alternatives. Concerning the first assumption, it should be noticed that the *Tractatus* never characterizes “signs” as mere geometrical shapes or sound patterns. On the contrary, the fact that it defines the notion of a sign after and in terms of the notion of a symbol—a fact that the Extra-Feature Account is forced to dismiss as philosophically insignificant—can be adduced as evidence that the *Tractatus* does not work with a post-Hilbertian notion of sign. With regard to the second assumption, the tormented history of the interpretation of the passages that have been taken by various commentators to show that the *Tractatus* is committed to some implementation of the Extra-Feature Account gives us reason to ponder whether the book is actually committed to any version of the Extra Feature Account.

Admitting that there are reasons to resist the Extra-Feature Account, what are the alternatives? One option is to adopt the quite opposite view that a Tractarian “sign” is a conceptually inseparable aspect of a Tractarian symbol: we have a sign only on those occasions in which we have a symbol, and we have the same sign only on those occasions in which we have a symbol.

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33 The records of some of the lectures that Wittgenstein delivered in the early Thirties contain characterizations of the sign/symbol distinction that appear to presuppose a commitment to the Extra Feature Account. See for example *L 1930-32*, p. 26, where a sign is defined as “the written scratch or noise,” and a symbol is defined as a sign together with “all the conditions that are necessary to give it sense or meaning.” But it is not unreasonable to treat such texts, which are based on students’ notes, as less reliable and authoritative than the *Tractatus*, which Wittgenstein actually wrote, revised, and agreed to publish.

34 The history of the interpretation of passages such as 3.11b and 3.263 is particularly instructive in this connection. Compare the mentalistic interpretations of 3.11b defended in Malcolm 1977, Malcolm 1986, and Hacker 1999 with the anti-mentalistic readings of the very same passage given in Winch 1987 and McGuinness 1981. Similarly, compare the readings of 3.263 given in Schlick 1930 and Hacker 1975 (according to which the passage purports to explain how language gets on its feet through ostensive definitions fixing the meanings of simple names prior to and independently of their use in significant propositions) with the quite different readings of the same passage given in Ishiguro 1969, Helme 1979, and McGuinness 1981 (according to which the passage is an attack on the idea that simple signs can acquire a meaning prior to and independently of their use in inerentially interconnected significant propositions).
have the same symbol. This account—call it the *No-Distance Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation*—has the advantage of giving a philosophical explanation for the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*. Moreover, it is fully compatible with the Tractarian characterization of the sign as “what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol.” But it is incompatible with the constraint that any account of the sign/symbol relation—if it aims to have any exegetical plausibility—must satisfy: namely, the fact that the same sign may be common to different symbols. Moreover, the No-Distance Account is incompatible with an idea that, while not explicitly stated in the *Tractatus*, is naturally implied by its characterization of symbols as signs in use—namely, the idea that a sign, on some of its occurrences, may be put to no logical use, and belong therefore to no symbol, amounting to nothing more than a mere sign.

The proposal that I wish to ascribe to the *Tractatus* shares with the No-Distance Account the commitment to attribute philosophical significance to the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*, but posits a greater distance between signs and symbol, allowing signs to be common to different symbols, and leaving room for occurrences of signs that are not occurrences of any symbol.

The account runs as follows. The notion of a symbol is primitive and irreducible. It can be elucidated: a symbol can be described as a *sign-in-use* or as a *sensibly-perceptible-mark-of-the-sense-of-significant-propositions*; but it cannot be reconstructed from independent conceptual ingredients. In particular, it cannot be reconstructed in terms of a prior and independent notion of “sign” and a prior and independent notion of “use,” as the Extra-Feature Account maintains. Given the notion of a symbol, the notion of a mere sign is defined as *what merely appears to be a symbol*, and the notion of a sign *simpliciter* is defined disjunctively as *what is either a symbol*
(i.e. a sign-in-use) or a mere sign. The account can be visualized by means of the following genus-species diagram, where the order of definition proceeds counterclockwise from the primitive notion of a symbol:

![Genus-Species Diagram]

Figure 4.2. Disjunctivist Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation

Since the general notion of a sign is here defined as a disjunction, this may be dubbed the Disjunctivist Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation. The term “sign” figures all by itself in the designation of the genus, and in combinations with other expressions (i.e. “-in-use” and “mere”) in the designations the two species; but it does not stand in each case for a single notion that could serve as an ingredient for generating the notions designated by the compound expressions “sign-in-use” and “mere sign.” (The hyphenation of the expression “sign-in-use” is meant to help preventing this impression.) An item does not belong to the genus by possessing a prior of independently intelligible property (“being a sign”) and does not belong to one of the two species by possessing some additional independently intelligible extra feature (“being in use” or “not

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35 The property of “appearing to be a symbol,” or “looking like a symbol,” is here to be understood as primitive: a mere sign does not merely appear to be a symbol because it possesses some independently specifiable property (such as geometrical shape, sound structure, etc.).

36 According to the Disjunctivist Account, the term “sign” that figures in the compound expression “sign-in-use” designates a notion that is correctly described by the No-Distance Account. In that sense of “sign,” only a symbol can be a sign, and different symbols cannot have the sign in common.
(being in use”). On the contrary, an item belongs to the genus in virtue of being either a sign-in-use or what merely passes itself off as a sign-in-use.37

This account construes signs as conceptually dependent on symbols, while leaving room for occurrences of signs that are not occurrences of any symbol. It remains to be shown how it leaves room for the idea that the same sign can be common to different symbols. According to the Extra-Feature Account, this is a consequence of the fact that different occurrences of the same “sign” may be put to a different “use,” where both the “sign” and the “use” are specifiable independently of the resulting symbols. For the Extra-Feature Account, a sign is defined in terms of properties such as geometrical shape and acoustic structure, and the various occurrences of a given sign can be sorted out into various species with respect to the way in which they are “used” (or not “used”), as shown in the following diagram:

37 The conception of the sign/symbol relation that I am here attributing to the Tractatus is structurally analogous to the disjunctivist views advanced in recent decades by John McDowell in several different areas of philosophy (see e.g. McDowell 1998a, essays 11 and 17, and McDowell 2010). With regard to the philosophy of perception, for instance, McDowell opposes the view that perceptual appearances that disclose how things stand on the one hand, and deceptive perceptual appearances on the other hand, share a independently intelligible common factor in virtue of which they both count as appearances, and are distinguished from one another by an independently intelligible extra feature. In place of this sort of account, McDowell recommends a conception of perceptual experiences according to which “an appearance that something is the case can be either a mere appearance or the fact that something is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone,” where the former disjunct is conceptually parasitic on the latter (McDowell 1998a, essay 17, p. 386).

As I already had the occasion to notice, in developing my understanding of the Tractarian conception of the sign/symbol relation I have been helped by Anton Ford’s discussion of different forms of generality (Ford 2011). In his terminology, the Disjunctivist Account holds that symbols constitute the essential species—as opposed to an accidental species—of the genus comprising all signs. Similarly, one can reformulate McDowell’s disjunctivist conception of perception as the view that the experiences that make the facts perceptually manifest to the subject constitute the essential species—as opposed to an accidental species—of the genus comprising all perceptual appearances.

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According to this view, whether an item is an occurrence of a certain sign $S$ can be determined prior to and independently of the question of whether it is an occurrence of any symbol. Mastery of the language—which involves the capacity to identify symbols—is not in principle required for the identification of signs. By contrast, according to the Disjunctivist Account, the notion of a sign that is common to different symbols (and to certain mere signs) is defined disjunctively in terms of its species. We must begin with the conceptually primitive notion of a plurality of symbols that merely appear to be the same symbol; we can then define the notion of a mere sign that looks like each of those symbols without being any of them; and finally, we can define the notion of a sign that is either one of those symbols or the correspondent mere sign.

Figure 4.4. Disjunctivist Account of Sign/Symbol Ambiguity
According to this view, different occurrences of the same sign may be occurrences of different symbols or of no symbol: and in this sense, the same sign can “be common” or “belong” to different symbols as well as to mere signs. But the occurrences of the different same-looking symbols and of the correspondent mere sign are not occurrences of the same sign because they possess some independently specifiable property, such as geometrical shape or acoustic structure. To take one of the *Tractatus’* examples, the word or sign “is” is common to at least three different symbols: the copula, the sign of existence, and the sign of existence. But the sign that is common to these different symbols is what, on each of its occurrences, is either an occurrence of one of those misleadingly same-looking symbols, or an occurrence of an item that merely appears to be an occurrence of one of those symbols. Thus only a master of the language—i.e. somebody who knows how to make signs symbolize and how to recognize the way in which signs symbolize—can know when she has to do with occurrences of the same sign.

Unlike the Extra-Feature Account, this reading of the sign/symbol relation construes signs as conceptually dependent on symbol, in a manner that confers philosophical significance to the order of presentation and definition followed by the *Tractatus*; but at the same time, unlike the No-Distance Account, it preserves sufficient distance between signs and symbols to avoid any conflict with the fact that the *Tractatus* explicitly allows for the possibility of sign/symbol ambiguities and suggests that a sign, on some of its occurrences, may not belong to any symbol.38

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38 While I submit that the Disjunctivist Account enables us to make best sense of the discussion of signs and symbols that occurs in the 3.3s (i.e. of the most explicit Tractarian discussion of those notions), I must admit that it is not obviously consistent with every aspects of the text.

A part of the text that might cause problems for the Disjunctivist Account is the discussion of “propositional signs” in the 3.1s. The *Tractatus* states that a “propositional sign is a fact,” i.e.
8. A reformulation of the Tractarian version of the Context Principle

I suggest that the version of the Context Principle stated in 3.3 can be clarified by explicitly recasting it in terms of the distinction between sign and symbol:

“the fact that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way” (3.14). For the Tractatus, every fact has a determinate logical form, and a fact can be used to represent only those facts that share its form (cf. 2.16-2.17, 2.18). It follows that a propositional sign can be used to represent only possible situations of a certain sort—i.e. those that share its logical form. This leaves room for the idea that different significant propositions may share the same propositions sign; but it does not leave room for the idea that the same propositional sign may be common to significant propositions of different logical form; and a fortiori, it does not leave room for the idea that a “propositional sign” may be common to significant propositions and to non-propositional symbols (e.g. names). So, for example, the proposition “British left waffles on Falkland Islands,” saying something about breakfast food, and the proposition “British left waffles on Falkland Islands,” saying something about a political party, do not share the same “propositional sign”; and similarly, the propositional sign that belongs to the proposition “The cat is on the mat,” saying something about a certain cat, does not belong at all to the proposition “The cat is on the mat makes excellent expresso,” understood as saying something about a certain coffee shop. From here one may go on to suggest that a Tractarian “sign” is in general always characterized by a determinate logical form; and the consequence of this suggestion is that the Tractatus does not leave room for trans-categorial sign/symbol ambiguities. (For a reading of this sort, see Potter 2009a, especially pp. 273-274: “Signs […] are individuated not merely according to the objects they are made up of, but according to the relationship that holds between those objects. A sign is thus an inscription parsed in such a way as to exhibit its grammatical structure.”)

If this reading of the 3.1s is correct, it poses a problem for the Disjunctivist Account, since that account is meant to make room for sign/symbol trans-categorial equivocations. But this, more than a refutation of the Disjunctivist Account, would amount to a demonstration that the Tractarian discussion of “signs” is inconsistent—unless, of course, one could explain away, somehow, the explicit recognition of the possibility of trans-categorial sign/symbol ambiguities contained in the 3.32s. It seems to me that a coherent reconstruction of the Tractarian notion of a sign, if at all possible, must come from a reading of the discussion of “propositional signs” in the 3.31s that renders it consistent with the possibility of trans-categorial sign/symbol ambiguities. A suggestion worth exploring (but not without its difficulties) seems to me the following: That what the 3.1s call a “propositional sign” is in fact, according to the terminology introduced in the 3.3s, a kind of symbol, i.e. the purely formal symbol presenting what is common to all the propositions that represent possible situations of a certain form.
Reformulation of the version of the Context Principle given in TLP 3.3. A sign is a meaningful name-symbol, standing for a particular object, only on those occasions in which it is used as the representative of that object in the context of a combination of signs that is used to represents, truly or falsely, a possible way in which things might stand.

This reformulation brings out the sense in which the Context Principle, for the Tractatus, is concerned with the “meanings” of names. Symbols, like signs, can reoccur; but unlike signs, all the occurrences of a given symbol are actually used in the representation of reality. All the occurrences of the same meaningful propositional symbol are actually used, on specific occasions, to represent a possible situation; and all the occurrences of the same name-symbol are actually used, on specific occasions, to stand for a certain object. Thus, in proposing the aforementioned reformulation, I suggest that the Tractarian version of the Context Principle is concerned with what I called in the Introduction the “actual logical meanings” of linguistic expressions, as opposed to the “established logical meanings.” The principle applies to the relation between signs that are actually used, on specific occasion, to represent possible situations, and signs that are actually used, on specific occasions, to stand for objects.

We have seen that for the Tractatus a sign may have a variety of different established uses in a given language. A language, for instance, may include an ambiguous sign that is used to stand for different objects. The fact that such a sign is used, on a given occasion, as the representative of a certain object does not, so to speak, cancel out of existence the fact that according to the standing conventions of the language the sign may also be used as the representative of another object. Similarly, the fact that a sign, on a given occasion, is not used
as the representative of any object does not entail that in the language there is no established way of using the sign in such a manner. Given the standing conventions of the language, a sign may have the potentiality of standing for a certain object. The Tractarian version of the Context Principle, as I am interpreting it, does not state that a sign can carry such a potentiality only when it occurs in the context of a meaningful proposition. It states, instead, that a sign can actualize the potentiality of standing for a certain object only when it occurs in the context of a meaningful proposition.

9. Conclusion

A significant proposition, for the Tractatus, is a combination of “names” which is actually used, on specific occasions, to represent a possible way in which things might stand. I have argued that the Tractarian version of the Context Principle states that propositional components, or “names,” actually have a meaning (as opposed to having a meaning merely as a potentiality) only on those occasions in which they are used to characterize the sense of significant propositions. In the next chapter, I will discuss the manner in which the Tractatus spells out the consequences of this view for the question of the nature of nonsense.
Chapter 5

The *Tractatus* on Nonsense

1. The Context Principle and nonsense

The versions of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege and the *Tractatus* have implications on the question of the nature of nonsense. If words really have meaning only the context of significant propositions, as Frege maintains, then there is no such thing as a linguistic construction that is nonsensical *because it consists of meaningful words combined in a logically illegitimate way*: the meaningfulness of the whole proposition is always already presupposed by the meaningfulness of its parts. Similarly, if propositional components (or “names”) have meaning only in the context of significant propositions, as the *Tractatus* maintains, then there is no such thing as a combination of propositional components which is nonsensical *because it consists of meaningful propositional components put together in a logically illegitimate way*. Conversely, a view according to which linguistic expressions may express sub-propositional meanings prior to and independently of the meanings of the significant propositions in which they occur is compatible with—and in indeed strongly invites—the idea that the nonsensicality of certain linguistic constructions may be due to the meanings of their parts and to the manner in
which their parts are put together. The question of the relation between propositional and sub-propositional meaning is thus closely related to the question of the nature of nonsense.

The author of the *Tractatus*, unlike Frege, discusses in detail the question of the nature of nonsense. As we are going to see in this chapter, there is strong evidence that the *Tractatus* rejects the view that the nonsensicality of a linguistic construction may derive from the meanings of its parts and the way they are combined. Moreover, the fact that the *Tractatus* formulates its conception of nonsense either in passages that comment on 3.3 or in passages that are philologically related to the 3.3s shows that Wittgenstein had a lucid appreciation of the relation between his views about nonsense and his understanding of the Context Principle.

My most immediate reason for discussing the Tractarian conception of nonsense is that it provides further evidence for the understanding of the Context Principle that I attributed to the *Tractatus* in the previous chapter. But there is also a more general reason. The question of the nature of nonsense plays an important role in the architecture of this work as a whole. The contrast between different conceptions of nonsense helps to bring out differences between alternative understandings of the Context Principle that would otherwise be rather difficult to discern. As we shall see in Chapter 7, there are several influential readings of the Context Principle—both as it figures in Frege’s writings and as it figures in the *Tractatus*—which posit *some* form of interdependence between the meanings of words and the meanings of propositions. Such readings can therefore appear to converge with the versions of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege and the *Tractatus*. But in so far as those readings are meant to leave room for the possibility of linguistic constructions that are nonsensical *because* they combine meaningful expressions in a logically illegitimate way, the convergence is merely apparent. My claim, in fact, is that the Context Principle, as understood by both Frege and Wittgenstein,
expresses a view about the conceptual interdependence between propositional wholes and propositional parts which is *strong enough* to rule out the idea that the nonsensicality of a linguistic whole may result from the meanings of its parts and their mode of combination.

2. Two conceptions of nonsense: substantial and austere

Cora Diamond, James Conant, and other resolute readers of the *Tractatus* have discussed in detail Wittgenstein’s conception of nonsense, introducing a number of distinctions—and a correlative terminology—that have become common currency in *Tractatus* scholarship. The putative kind of nonsense which is incompatible with the understanding of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege and Wittgenstein has been variously referred to as “category-clash”\(^1\) or “positive”\(^2\) or “substantial”\(^3\) nonsense. I will here stick to the last (and more popular) piece of terminology, to be understood in accordance with the following definition:

*Substantial nonsense*: A linguistic construction that does not say anything intelligible because it consists of meaningful propositional parts combined in a logically illegitimate way.\(^4\)

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1 Diamond 1991, p. 78.
2 Diamond 1991, p. 106.
4 I follow here almost verbatim the stipulative definition given in Conant 2000, p. 176: “Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way.” (A difference between the two definitions is that Conant’s, by referring generically to “intelligible ingredients” rather than to “meaningful propositional parts,” can cover a wider class of cases, including cases that putatively involve the logically illegitimate combination of meaningful expressions and contexts of utterance; for a discussion of these other forms of “substantial nonsense,” see Conant 1998 and Conant 2004.) Conant goes on to gloss such a
This putative kind of nonsense has been contrasted with “negative” or “garden-variety” or “mere” nonsense. Again, following widespread practice, I will adopt the last piece of terminology, under the following construal:

**Mere nonsense:** A linguistic construction that does not say anything intelligible simply because it contains linguistic expressions to which we have assigned no determinate meaning.

Whereas substantial nonsense is supposed to arise from the presence of the wrong sort of meaning, mere nonsense always arises from an absence of meaning. On the basis of this contrast,

definition with the statement that substantial nonsense “expresses a logically incoherent thought.” (For a similar gloss, see Diamond 1991, pp. 104-105.) Several critics of resolute readers have contrasted the notion of a logically illegitimate combination of meaningful propositional parts with the notion of a linguistic construction that expresses a “logically incoherent thought,” arguing that the latter is not only distinct from, but also more controversial than the former. Moreover, they generally take “substantial nonsense” to refer to the allegedly more problematic notion, and sometimes refer to the allegedly more innocent notion as “combinatorial nonsense.” (See for instance Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp. 106-108; Schönbaumsfeld 2013, p. 85; Mezzadri 2013, pp. 734-735; on “combinatorial nonsense,” see also Glock 2004.) Now, Conant provides an argument to the effect that whoever is committed to the possibility of logically illegitimate combinations of meaningful propositional parts is also committed to the idea that such linguistic constructions express “logically incoherent thoughts” (2000, p. 191). The gloss that Conant appends to his definition of “substantial nonsense” (which coincides with what his critics call “combinatorial nonsense”) is meant to bring out the internal incoherence of that notion. For our present purposes, we do not have to take a stance on the soundness of Conant’s argument. Accordingly, we shall stick to Conant’s un-glossed definition of “substantial nonsense.” Commentators who disagree with Conant’s argument can substitute “combinatorial nonsense” (or their favorite label for a logically illegitimate combination of propositional parts) for any occurrence of “substantial nonsense” appearing in the following pages.

5 Diamond 1991, p. 111.
6 Conant & Diamond 2004, p. 44.
7 Diamond 2000, p. 150; Conant 2000, p. 176; Conant 2002a, p. 380.
Resolute readers have distinguished two conceptions of nonsense. On the one hand, the “natural” or “substantial” conception of nonsense:

Substantial conception of nonsense: There is such a thing as substantial nonsense, over and above mere nonsense.

On the other hand, we have the “Frege-Wittgenstein” or “negative” or “austere” conception of nonsense. It is not clear whether different resolute readers have used these terms to refer exactly to the same view. I will speak of the “austere conception of nonsense” in accordance with a minimal definition specifying commitments that clearly belong to all the possibly different views that resolute readers have designated by means of the aforementioned expressions:

Austere conception of nonsense: There is no such thing as substantial nonsense. All nonsense is mere nonsense.

In the next section, we will see that this definition can be supplemented with different additional commitments, generating different versions of the austere conception of nonsense.

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8 Diamond 1991, p. 95.
11 Conant & Diamond 2004, p. 60.
Resolute readers have argued that the *Tractatus* endorses the austere conception of nonsense, at least in the minimal sense defined above.\(^\text{13}\) Later on in this chapter, I will examine two portions of the *Tractatus* which provide compelling textual evidence in support of this ascription. Before I proceed, however, it will be helpful to illustrate the distinction between the substantial and the austere conception of nonsense with some examples.

An advocate of the substantial conception may regard the following linguistic constructions as instances of substantial nonsense:

1) Caesar is a prime number.

2) Chairman Mao is rare.

It may be argued, with Carnap, that (1) is nonsensical *because* it predicates of a man a property that can significantly be ascribed only to numbers: “Caesar” appears in it with the same meaning that it has when it occurs in propositions such as “Caesar is a Roman general”; “is a prime number” occurs in it with the same meaning that it has when it occurs in propositions such as “3 is a prime number”; but these meanings belong to logical categories that don’t fit together; and *thus* the linguistic construction as a whole amounts to a piece of nonsense.\(^\text{14}\) Analogously, it may

\(^{13}\) Resolute readers have also explicitly emphasized the connection between the austere conception of nonsense and the Context Principle, as understood by Frege and Wittgenstein (see for instance Diamond 1991, pp. 77-79, 97ff; Conant 2000, pp. 189-195; Witherspoon 2000, p. 323-325). This is one of the respects in which I am here following their lead.

be argued, with Dummett, that (2) is nonsensical because it subsumes an object under a second-level concept, which in fact can significantly take as arguments only first-level concepts.\footnote{See Dummett 1981a, p. 51. For a discussion, see Diamond 1991, p. 87, 96-97 and Conant 2002a, p. 397.}

A feature of both (1) and (2) is that they appear to be syntactically well-formed: they both appear to instantiate a subject-predicate propositional pattern. An advocate of the substantial conception of nonsense, however, may maintain that substantial nonsense can be exemplified also by linguistic constructions that do not even appear to be syntactically well-formed, i.e. by mere word salads such as the following:

3) Caesar us and

This string, it may be argued, involves a number of clashes in logical categories: each of the words that compose it carries one of the meanings that it expresses when it occurs in significant propositions—but these meanings don’t fit together, and for this reason the string as a whole does not make any sense. According to this view, the difference from cases of apparent propositions such as (1) and (2) lies simply in the fact that in word salads the presence of category clashes is revealed by the surface-syntactical form of their constituent expressions. Hence, the codification of the rules of legitimate logical combination—i.e. the formulation of a theory of significance—can have more interesting applications in cases such as (1) and (2), which can conceivably be mistaken for significant propositions, than in cases such as (3), which would never be suspected to be significant.\footnote{Cf. Carnap 1959, pp. 67-68, and the discussion of Carnap’s view in Witherspoon 2000, pp. 318-321 and Conant 2001, pp. 22-23.}
According to the austere conception of nonsense, by contrast, the nonsensicality of a linguistic expression is always due to a lack of meaning—i.e. to the sort of reason that is manifest in each of the following examples:\textsuperscript{17}

4) Socrates is crapple

5) Piggly wiggle tiggle

6) Ab sur ah

We cannot recognize any apparent clash of logical categories in these constructions. They do not make sense simply because they contain one or more manifestly meaningless word. All the words of an alleged piece of substantial nonsense appear to be meaningful, because—unlike “crapple” or “piggly” or “sur”—they have established uses in the language. But according to the austere view, if they are nonsensical, they contain words that, \textit{in the context at hand}, have been given no determinate meaning. Thus, if on a given occasion of use “Caesar is a prime number” is nonsensical, at least some of its constituent expressions are, \textit{on that occasion}, as meaningless as “crapple.”

While the austere view holds that nonsense always arises from a lack of meaning, it can allow for a variety of distinctions between different kinds of nonsense. Some of these distinctions, in fact, are essential to the plausibility of the austere account of alleged cases of substantial nonsense. Thus, (6) contains expressions that lack any established use in the language, it does not exhibit any grammatical structure, and some of its constituent expressions

\textsuperscript{17} I am taking the second and third example from, Diamond 2000, p. 151, and \textit{L 1932-35}, p. 64 respectively. The first example is a modification of an example discussed in Diamond 1991, p. 197.
do not even appear to be English words. All the expressions composing (5), by contrast, look and sound like English words, even though some of them lack any meaning in contemporary English (at least according to the Oxford English Dictionary) and their combination does not obviously exemplify any grammatical pattern. In (4), we do have an expression with no established meaning in English; but this expression looks like an English word, and more specifically like a word that could be an English adjective; moreover, the remaining words have established meanings in English and the construction as a whole appears to exemplify a familiar grammatical pattern—i.e. the pattern that we have in meaningful propositions such as “Socrates is wise.” In word salads such as (3), as well as in putative instances of substantial nonsense such as (2) or (1), all the words have established uses in English. According to the austere view, this contributes to explain why we might mistakenly think to have actually assigned a meaning to each of the words composing those constructions, and thus why we can mistakenly think that such constructions are meaningless because they combine meaningful expressions of the wrong logical categories. Finally, putative instances of substantial nonsense such as (2) and (1) are not only composed of words with established uses in English, but are constructed in accordance with English surface-grammatical rules; and this, according to the austere view, contributes to explain why those proposition-like constructions can be mistakenly taken to express some sort of propositional sense.

For the austere view, there is no such thing as the (manifest or hidden) logically illegitimate combination of meaningful propositional parts, but only the (self-conscious or unwitting) use of linguistic expressions to which, in the relevant context, we have assigned no determinate meaning—even though the same expressions might have been given perfectly determinates meanings on other occasions. There is no such thing as the patent or latent
transgression of the proscriptions of a theory of significance delimiting the bounds of sense, but only the willful or unwitting employment of empty expressions.

3. Three versions of the austere conception of nonsense

I gave above a minimal characterization of the austere conception of nonsense. Whenever I speak, in the following pages, of “the austere conception of nonsense” without qualifications, I shall refer to the view that is fully identified by that minimal characterization. However, in order to clearly state the exegetical claims that I want to defend in this chapter, I need to distinguish stronger and weaker versions of the austere conception of nonsense, which differ with respect to their additional commitments about the nature of nonsense.

Weak version of the austere view. Nonsense can only arise from a lack of meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. But the parts of a piece of nonsense can have both form (or logical syntax) and content (or semantics). Some of its expressions may have a determinate meaning, and all of its expressions may belong to determinate logical categories. (Nonsense may contain both purely formal and contentful symbols.)

Moderate version of the austere view. Nonsense can only arise from a lack of meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. The parts of a piece of nonsense cannot have content (or semantics), but they can have form (or logical syntax). None of the expressions that compose a piece of nonsense have determinate meanings, but each of
them may belong to a determinate logical category. (Nonsense may contain purely formal symbols.)

*Strong version of the austere view.* Nonsense can only arise from a lack of meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. The parts of a piece of nonsense can have no form (or logical syntax) and no content (or semantics). The expressions that compose it have no determinate content and they do not belong to any determinate logical category. (Nonsense contains only signs, not symbols, whether contentful or purely formal.)

According to the weak version, all the words in “Socrates is crapple” may belong to determinate logical categories, including “crapple,” and the first two words may have not only the form, but also the content that they have when they occur in significant propositions. According to the moderate version, if “Socrates is crapple” is nonsensical, *all* its words lack content, but they may possess the same logical form that they have when they occur in significant propositions, so that the linguistic construction as a whole may exhibit the same logical form possessed, say, by a significant proposition such as “Socrates is wise.” Finally, according to the strong version, if “Socrates is crapple” is nonsensical, *none* of its words has *either* form *or* content: it is a combination of mere signs, which can only *look* like signs having form but no content, or both form and content. There are commentators who have ascribed to the *Tractatus* the weak version of the austere view;¹⁸ commentators who have ascribed to the book a version of the austere view

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¹⁸ See Johnston 2007 (especially pp. 375-385 and note 27) and Mezzadri 2013.
which is at least as strong as the moderate one;\(^{19}\) and commentators who have explicitly attributed to the book the strong version of the austere view.\(^{20}\)

Notice that the weak version of the austere view leaves room for the occurrence of meaningful propositional parts outside the context of significant propositions. Hence, it is incompatible with the construal of the Context Principle that I ascribed to the Tractatus in the previous chapter. On the other hand, that construal of the Context Principle is compatible with both the moderate and the strong version of the austere view—even though it demands only the moderate version. The strong version of the austere view is demanded only by a version of the Context Principle which applies not only to contentful symbols, but to symbols in general, including purely formal symbols. If a sign is a symbol (whether contentful or purely formal) only in the context of a significant proposition, then no sign can be a symbol (whether contentful or purely formal) in the “context” of a piece of nonsense.

I believe that there are good reasons for attributing to the Tractatus the strong version of the austere conception of nonsense and a version of the Context Principle which is sufficiently strong to demand it. However, in accordance with the limited goals of this work, I am only going to argue that the Tractatus is committed to the moderate version of the austere view. This is all I need in order to support my “organic” reading of Tractarian contextualism, according to which meaningful articulate propositions and meaningful propositional parts necessarily come together.

\(^{19}\) See for instance Diamond 1991, p. 100: “On the Frege-Wittgenstein view, if a sentence makes no sense, no part of it can be said to mean what it does in some other sentence which does make sense—any more than a word can be said to mean something in isolation.”

\(^{20}\) So Conant, for example, defines “mere nonsense” (i.e. the only kind of nonsense admitted by the austere conception of nonsense) as “a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax” (Conant 2000, p. 191, my emphasis).
With this agenda in mind, let’s now turn to the actual Tractarian discussion of the nature of nonsense.

4. Nonsense and the Theory of Types

The Tractatus addresses most explicitly the question of the nature of nonsense in the 5.473s. These remarks provide also the most direct textual evidence for the claim that the Tractatus is committed to the austere conception of nonsense. But the nature of nonsense is discussed also in the 3.33s, in connection with Wittgenstein’s critique of Russell’s Theory of Types. This earlier discussion is quite significant for our purposes, because it shows that the author of the Tractatus was aware of the connection between the Context Principle and the austere conception of nonsense. As the numbering system suggests, in fact, Wittgenstein understood his views about the Theory of Types as a consequence of his commitment to the Context Principle. We shall first look at this earlier discussion, and then, in the next few sections, consider the 5.473s.

Russell devised various version of the Theory of Types in order to solve a family of paradoxes, including the paradox that bears his name (about the class of classes that are not members of themselves). The Theory of Types is a theory of significance. It is supposed to block the relevant paradoxes by entailing that the premises from which they seem to be deducible, appearances notwithstanding, are meaningless or nonsensical. More specifically, the theory assigns each entity we can talk about (“things,” “properties,” “relations,” “propositions,”

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21 See Russell 1903, Appendix B; Russell 1908; Russell and Whitehead 1910-13, vol. 1, especially chap. 2. In what follows, I am only concerned to present and discuss Russell’s Theory of Type as it struck Wittgenstein, leaving open the question of whether such an understanding is faithful to Russell’s actual views. Moreover, I will consider, for the sake of illustration, only the Simple Theory of Types.
etc.) to a certain logical type. Such types form a hierarchy. The theory states general principles specifying which combinations of entities are logically possible and which ones are logically impossible, depending on the types of the entities involved and their mode of combination. On the basis of these principles, which are supposed to track objective possibilities and impossibilities, the theory formulates rules governing the significant combination of meaningful linguistic expressions. Possible combinations of entities correspond to meaningful combinations of linguistic expressions, and impossible combinations of entities correspond to meaningless or nonsensical combinations of linguistic expressions. Thus, if a linguistic construction combines meaningful simple expressions (i.e. expressions designating determinate entities) in a manner that violates the proscriptions of the theory, it must be considered meaningless or nonsensical.

In 3.333, the *Tractatus* considers how the Theory of Types is supposed to solve a version of Russell’s paradox formulated in terms of propositional functions. The paradox is supposed to arise as follows. It seems that there are some propositional functions that apply to themselves and some that do not. For instance, it seems that the propositional function *x is a man* does not apply to itself (since a propositional function is not a man), whereas the propositional function *x is not green* does apply to itself (since a propositional function is not green). Thus, it seems possible to define a propositional function that applies to each propositional function that does not apply to itself:

7) Def: \( F(fx) = \sim f(fx) \)
(In this definition, “x” and “f” are variables ranging over objects and first-level propositional functions respectively, whereas “F” is the constant to be defined.) According to this definition, for example, the propositional function *x is a man* is not F, whereas the propositional function *x is not green* is F. Now, it seems that we can ask whether the propositional function F(fx) is F. But this leads to contradiction. By definition, if F(fx) applies to itself, it is not F, and thus does not apply to itself; conversely, if it does not apply to itself, it is F, and thus does apply to itself:

\[
8) \quad F(F(fx)) \leftrightarrow \sim F(F(fx))
\]

The Theory of Types purports to block this paradox by legislating that linguistic constructions such as “f(fx)” or “F(F(fx))” are *meaningless*, because propositional functions cannot take themselves as arguments. Propositional functions, according to the theory, form a hierarchy of types, and they may not take arguments of the same logical type. Here is the *Tractatus’* response:

A function cannot be its own argument, because the functional sign already contains the prototype of its own argument and it cannot contain itself. If, for example, we suppose that the function F(fx) could be its own argument, then there would be a proposition “F(F(fx)),” and in this the outer function F and the inner function F must have different meanings; for the inner has the form φ(fx), the outer the form ψ(φ(fx)). Common to both functions is only the letter “F,” which by itself signifies nothing. This is at once clear, if instead of “F(F(u))” we write “(∃φ) : F(φu) . φu = Fu”.

Herewith Russell’s paradox vanishes. (3.333)

The *Tractatus* agrees with Russell that “F(F(fx)),” understood in the manner required to generate the apparent contradiction, is nonsensical, so that we ultimately only have the semblance of a

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22 Here and in what follows I’ll try to follow as closely as possible the notation used in the parts of the *Tractatus* that address the Theory of Types.
contradiction here; but it disagrees with Russell about the reason why such a linguistic construction is nonsensical—and the disagreement has implications for the question of the coherence of the very idea of a Theory of Types.

According to Russell, the linguistic construction “F(F(fx))” is nonsensical because it tries to say that a propositional function applies to itself, and that is something that the Theory of Types rules out: propositional functions cannot take arguments of the same (or higher) logical type. Thus, the linguistic construction is supposed to be nonsensical because of the meanings of its constituent elements and the logically determinate manner in which they are put together. In other words, it is supposed to be an instance of substantial nonsense, logically distinct from the more trivial kind of nonsense that arises when a linguistic construction means nothing because we have not decided what to mean by it. This account assumes that the meaning that a sign has on each of its occurrences may be given independently of the logical function, if any, the sign actually fulfills in the expression of some complete propositional content. The letter “F,” in particular, is supposed to designate a determinate propositional function even though the linguistic construction in which it occurs is nonsensical; and it is supposed to designate the same function, on both of its occurrences, even though it is expected to take as argument expressions of different type.

For the Tractatus, in “F(F(fx))” we have indeed two occurrences of the “letter” (or sign) “F.” But are these occurrences of a contentful symbol, designating a certain propositional function? According to the Tractarian understanding of the Context Principle, this will be the case only if “F(F(fx))” is a significant proposition whose sense is characterized by each of the occurrences of the sign “F.” So either “F(F(fx))” is nonsensical, in which case none of the occurrences of “F” is a contentful symbol; or “F(F(fx))” is a combination of contentful symbols,
in which case the whole proposition is perfectly meaningful, not nonsensical. There is no room for the alleged possibility envisioned by Russell—namely, a combination of *contentful symbols* that violates type restrictions.

But then, how does the *Tractatus* manage to block the paradox? How can it ensure that “F(F(fx)),” if meaningful, does not apply a function to itself? For the *Tractatus*, the idea of a “function being applied to itself” is not a dangerous possibility that needs to be ruled out by a theory of significance, but the *illusion* of a possibility, generated by unclarity on our part about what we want to mean by our signs. The formulation of the paradox does not involve a logically illegitimate combination of meaningful signs, but a combination of signs to which, unbeknownst to ourselves, we have failed to assign, in the relevant context, any determinate meaning. The paradox vanishes as soon as we become aware of this failure. The Tractarian response to the paradox, as expressed in 3.333, can be unpacked as follows.

Suppose we want to use the inner “F” in “F(F(fx))” as a symbol designating a second-level propositional function, applying to first-level propositional functions. Remember that a symbol is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions and is perspicuously presented by means of a propositional variable. So the use that we want to make of the inner “F” is properly presented by the propositional variable “F(fx)” (where the first letter is a constant and the others are variables). This means that we want to use the inner “F” in “F(F(fx))” to characterize the sense of propositions that are values of—and that share the form presented by—the propositional variable “φ(fx)” (where all the letters are variables). But now, how do we want to use the outer “F”? The unclarity involved in the idea of a “propositional function that applies to itself” is the unclarity of the desire to use the inner and the outer “F” both in the same way and in a different way. On the one hand, we want the outer “F” to apply to the second-level
propositional function “F(fx).” That is, we want to use it as a symbol designating a third-level propositional function. Such a symbol is perspicuously presented by the propositional variable “F(φ(fx))” and it serves to express proposition that are values of—and thus share the form presented by—the propositional variable “ψ(φ(f x)).” Of course, we could use the outer “F” in such a manner, in the same way in which, one level below in the hierarchy of propositional functions, one may intelligibly say “Rare is rare,” using the first occurrence of “rare” as a symbol designating a second-level propositional function, and the second occurrence of “rare” as a symbol designating a first-level propositional function. (Imagine the sentence uttered by a person who is complaining about the difficulty of finding a restaurant where they don’t overcook her steak.) But if that is the use that we want to make of the outer “F,” we need to decide which third-level function we want to mean by it. However, we think that we do not have to fulfill that obligation, because we have already given a meaning to the inner “F” and the construction “F(F(fx))” looks no less grammatically well-formed than the construction “F(fx)”—in the same way in which we might think that the sentence “Rare is rare” is significant simply because there is an established use of the word “rare” as a first-level concept-word and the proposition looks no less grammatically well-formed than the proposition “This stake is rare.” Of course, we could use the outer “F” as a second-level propositional function; but that would involve using the inner “F” as a first-level propositional function, which would involve, in turn, a different understanding of the innermost variable “fx.” Thus, we would need to decide what exactly we want to mean by the inner “F.” In all this business, there is nothing we can’t do: we simply have to make up our mind. It is not that we have assigned perfectly determinate meanings to the signs composing “F(F(fx))” and have combined them in a logically illegitimate way, as Russell maintains. The problem, instead, is that we haven’t assigned them any determinate meaning.
For the *Tractatus*, therefore, Russell’s paradox is not “blocked” by a Theory of Types that banishes some linguistic constructions from the realm of significance, but vanishes with the realization that the idea of a “propositional function which applies to itself” is confused. The aim of the Tractarian response to the paradox is to help us to become aware of this confusion. The *Tractatus* seeks to achieve this goal by giving us, among other things, a notation that presents perspicuously the various ways in which we might want to use sub-propositional expressions—namely, the notation of propositional variables, which is informed by the Tractarian understanding of the Context Principle. Eventually, we should become able to realize that the linguistic constructions that are supposed to generate the paradox are either perfectly significant but in no way conducive to the paradox (in the same way in which “Rare is rare,” said by the frustrated lover of raw meat, does not generate any paradox), or strings of signs that are not put to any determinate significant use (which are no more conducive to paradoxes than “Socrates is crapple” or “Piggly wiggle tiggle”).\(^{23}\) In either case, there is nothing to be excluded by the proscriptions of a “Theory of Types.” The very idea of a Theory of Types is thus revealed to rest on the same sort of confusion that generates the apparent paradoxes that such a theory is designed to forestall. Russell’s paradox vanishes together with Russell’s purported solution to it. There is no such thing as nonsense arising from the illegitimate combination of meaningful linguistic components, and no such thing as a theory of significance that draws the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate combinations of meaningful linguistic expressions.\(^{24}\)

\(^{23}\) Several years after completing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein comes to the same conclusion: “We merely have a game that leads to something that looks like a contradiction. You can either say ‘f(f)’ is meaningless, or that ‘f’ outside the bracket stands for a function of higher order” (*L 1932-35*, p. 224).

\(^{24}\) This reconstruction of the Tractarian critique of the Theory of Types draws in various ways on existing literature. The central role of the Context Principle in Wittgenstein’s approach
5. The philological connection between the 3.3s and the 5.473s

The main ideas that emerge in the course of the critique of Russell’s Theory of Types elaborated in the 3.33s are further developed in the 5.473s. Even though these remarks occur much later in the book, they are in fact philologically closely related to the 3.3s. There are at least three pieces of textual evidence from the pre-Tractarian writings which show that the ideas expressed in the 5.473s were elaborated in close connection with those expressed in the 3.3s.

i) In the manuscript known as Prototractatus, the cluster of remarks that correspond roughly to TLP 5.473-5.4733 (where Wittgenstein describes his views about the nature of nonsense) precede immediately those that correspond roughly to TLP 3.32-3.328 (where Wittgenstein explains the sign/symbol distinction). As Michael Potter has documented, this is the place where Wittgenstein first introduced the sign/symbol distinction. In fact, the corrections present in the manuscript suggest that Wittgenstein was led to introduce such a distinction precisely by the need of giving an adequate formulation of his views about nonsense.

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25 See pp. 52-55 of the manuscript reproduced in PT.
26 Potter 2009a, pp. 273-276. See also Potter 2000, pp. 164-166 and Kremer 1997, p. 120, n. 121.
ii) In the 1914-16 Notebooks, the observations that will subsequently be incorporated in TLP 5.473 and 5.47433 are explicitly connected to the critique of the Theory of Types, which in the Tractatus, as we have seen, is discussed in the 3.33s.\(^27\)

iii) In the Notes Dictated to Moore, there is a discussion of the nature of nonsense which anticipates the ideas formulated in TLP 5.473-5.4733, and such a discussion is explicitly connected to the critique of the Theory of Types.\(^28\)

There is therefore strong textual evidence that Wittgenstein’s views about the nature of nonsense, the sign/symbol distinction, and the Theory of Types were developed in close connection with one another. This leaves us with the question of why the remarks actually numbered TLP 5.473-5.4733 are not placed among the 3.3s. The same sort of question can be asked about the correspondent remarks in the Prototractatus: Why do the PT 5.306s occur at such a distance from the PT 3.2s? I am not sure whether it is possible to give a satisfactory answer to these questions. But a conjecture worth-exploring is that the answer must be looked for in the connection between Wittgenstein’s response to the Theory of Types and his sharp distinction between “functions” and “operations” (5.2-5.254).\(^29\) Proposition 5, in both PT and TLP, states that propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions. Remarkably, in PT this statement is followed immediately by the following claim: “The Theory of Types now becomes clear” (PT 5.00). What does the Theory of Types have to do with the idea that propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions? Here we need to think about the fact that a perfectly significant proposition such as “~~p” might appear to be a case in which a

\(^{27}\) NB, p. 2.
\(^{28}\) NB, p. 116.
\(^{29}\) For a helpful discussion of this region of the Tractatus, see Hylton 2005, chap. 8.
propositional function is applied to itself, as in “The property of not being green is not green.”

But if this were the case, then we would need a Theory of Types which blocks Russell’s paradox by telling us that “~~p” is significant, whereas “f(fx)” is meaningless. So Wittgenstein, in order to hold on to his views about the confused nature of the Theory of Types and the conception of nonsense that it presupposes, must be able to show that the use of signs as truth-functional connectives is completely different from the use of signs as propositional functions. And this is precisely what the 5s, in both PT and TLP, set out to do.

6. Nonsense and the attempt to take care of logic

The discussion of nonsense in the 5.473s opens with a statement that is described in the pre-Tractarian notebooks as an “extremely profound and important insight”:

Logic must take care of itself.
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 [unsinning] because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol is in itself unpermissible.)
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.)
Thus “Socrates is identical” says nothing, because we have given no meaning to the word “identical” as adjective. For when it occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way—the symbolizing relation is another—therefore the symbol is in

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30 Cf. NB, p. 116.
the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign in common with one another only by accident. (5.4733)

In the rest of this section, I outline an interpretation of these remarks; in the next two sections, I will defend it from some objections and make it more precise with respect to the question of the specific version of the austere conception of nonsense that I wish to ascribe to the *Tractatus*.

What would it be to try to take care of logic, rather than letting logic take care of itself? The Theory of Types, and a theory of significance more generally, is a paradigmatic expression of such an attempt. A theory of this sort tries to demarcate the logically legitimate combinations of meaningful signs from the logically illegitimate ones. But for the *Tractatus*, there is no such thing as a logically illegitimate combination of meaningful signs. Either we are making our sign symbolize—in which case they are in perfect logical order; or we have mere signs on which we have failed to confer any determinate method of symbolizing—in which case there is nothing that could possibly violate the proscriptions of a theory of significance. There is no such thing as making our signs symbolize in the wrong way; no such thing as “giv[ing] a sign the wrong sense”; no such thing as an “intrinsically unpermissible symbol.” If by a “logical mistake” we mean an impermissible combination of symbols, we need to say that “we cannot make mistakes in logic.” The sense in which we can make mistakes in logic—and, of course, there is such a sense—is that we may believe that we have assigned a meaning to our signs, while we have actually failed to do so. Logical mistakes are not violations of principles codifiable by a theory of significance, but illusions of meaning.

The discussion of “Socrates is identical” illustrates the contrast between the attempt to take care of logic and Wittgenstein’s own attempt to let logic take care of itself. Wittgenstein takes for granted that the proposition “Socrates is identical” (on the occasion of use that he is
considering) is indeed nonsensical and opposes a certain account of the reason why it is nonsensical. This discussion parallels the contrast between, on the one hand, the attempt to block the various versions of Russell’s paradox through a Theory of Types that legislates certain combinations of meaningful signs out of the realm of significance, and on the other hand, Wittgenstein’s own attempt to show that Russell’s paradox involves an illusion of meaning.

In 4.003, Wittgenstein mentions the question of “whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful” as a paradigmatic example of a philosophical pseudo-problem—that is, as an example of problems that cannot be answered in any meaningful way, but must be simply recognized as nonsensical.\(^{32}\) According to the account that the *Tractatus* opposes, questions of that sort cannot arise because propositions such as “Socrates is identical” are nonsensical, where their nonsensicality consists in the fact that they combine meaningful expressions in an illegitimate way. The proposition “Socrates is identical,” it is maintained, is nonsensical because it predicates of the man Socrates what is designated by the word “identical” when it is used as the sign of identity (as happens, for instance, in propositions such as “Socrates and the teacher of Plato are identical”)—and that is something that cannot be done. The claim, in other words, is that all the parts of “Socrates is identical” have been given a meaning, but the wrong kind of meaning. According to this account, therefore, the relevant philosophical problems are to be treated in the same way in which Russell sought to block the paradox of the “function that applies to all the functions that do not apply to themselves”: namely, by formulating a theory of significance that categorizes certain alleged combinations of meaningful signs as nonsensical.

\(^{32}\) The connection between the 5.473s and 4.003 is discussed in detail in Kremer 2012.
According to Wittgenstein’s alternative account, the only reason why a linguistic construction can be nonsensical is “because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts.” Philosophical problems such as the one mentioned in 4.003 are properly treated when we come to see that they are no problems at all (cf. 4.003), because linguistic constructions such as “Socrates is identical” involve signs to which we have failed to give any determinate meaning, “[e]ven if we believe that we have done so.” Wittgenstein’s sketch of the structure and source of the illusion of meaning generated by “Socrates is identical” can be spelled out as follows. On the one hand, we want to use “identical” as the sign of a property, in the same way in which we use “wise” in “Socrates is wise.” Of course, nothing prevents us from doing so: we only need to decide which property we want to ascribe to Socrates. We need, as the *Tractatus* puts it, to give a meaning to the word (i.e. the sign) “identical” as an adjective. On the other hand, we don’t think that we have to fulfill that obligation, because the word “identical” has already an establish use as the “sign of equality” (for instance, in propositions such as “Socrates and Plato are identical”). We simply want to use the word “identical” in that way, without giving it any new meaning. Again, nothing prevents us to do it; but in that case, we need to decide what we are saying Socrates is identical to. However, we don’t feel that we have to fulfill that obligation either, because the proposition “Socrates is identical” looks in perfect grammatical order as it is—no less than a perfectly significant proposition such as “Socrates is wise.” We are thus trapped in a state of confusion, indeterminately dithering between different things we want to do with our words, without being able to see that we need to make up our mind.

Such illusions of meaning, according to the *Tractatus*, are made possible by sign/symbol ambiguities. If we replace the word “identical” in “Socrates is identical” with a sequence of letters that has no established use in the language (say “crapple”), nobody will be tempted to
think that the resulting linguistic construction says something, and nobody will be tempted to think that we need a theory of significance to tell us that the resulting linguistic construction is nonsensical. However, if “Socrates is identical” is nonsensical (as the Tractatus assumes), it is nonsensical for the same reason for which “Socrates is crapple” is nonsensical: it is a sign that does not say anything intelligible because of an absence of meaning, not because of the presence of the wrong sort of meaning. According to the interpretation that I have outlined, therefore, the idea that “logic must take care of itself”—and the correlative illustrative account of the reason why “Socrates is identical” is nonsensical—involves a commitment to the austere conception of nonsense.

7. Does the Tractatus really endorse the austere conception of nonsense?

Several commentators have argued that the Tractatus does not actually endorse the austere conception of nonsense. Some of these commentators have conceded that “Socrates is identical,” for the Tractatus, is nonsensical because of a lack of meaning, but have maintained that the book envisions also a different kind of nonsense, which arises when we combine meaningful expressions belonging to the wrong logical categories. Thus, for instance, Edward Kanterian has contrasted the Tractarian treatment of “plainly nonsensical sentences” such as “Socrates is identical” to the Tractarian treatment of “propositions containing formal concepts or ascribing formal properties” such as “A is an object.” Propositions of the latter sort, according to Kanterian’s reading, “try to express what can only be shown,” i.e. “necessary, metaphysical

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33 This point is made explicit in the Notes Dictated to Moore (NB, p. 116), where Wittgenstein contrasts “Plato Socrates” (which can give the impression that it “might have a meaning”) with “Abracadabra Socrates” (which “would never be suspected to have one”).
truth[s],” and they are not nonsensical because they contain meaningless expressions. They are nonsensical, on the contrary, because they combine meaningful expressions belonging to logical categories that do not fit together, as becomes clear when we translate them into “the notation of logical analysis.” Such a notation will show, for example, that “‘There is an (object) x, such that x is a table and x is an object’ is misconstrued.” The proposition “A is object,” accordingly, is nonsensical because it predicates a bound variable of an object—and that (whatever “that” might be!) is something that we cannot do.34

At first sight, it might seem that a reading of this sort, which attributes to the Tractatus the substantial conception of nonsense, is ruled out by one of the passages that I have already had the occasion to quote:

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. (5.4733; first emphasis added)

Resolute readers have often quoted this passage as evidence that the Tractatus endorses the austere conception of nonsense. Yet, as Pasquale Frascolla has recently shown, the passage can be read in a manner that renders it compatible with the substantial conception of nonsense.

Frascolla charges resolute readers—and James Conant in particular—of ignoring the fact that the passage refers to “possible propositions,” not to “propositions” tout court:

[W]ith an almost imperceptible change, Wittgenstein’s original assertion, namely that “every possible proposition is legitimately constructed” (my emphasis), is turned by Conant into the assertion that “every proposition is legitimately constructed,” with the consequence that the only conceivable kind of nonsense will now consist in propositions

34 All quotations in this paragraph are from Kanterian 2001, p. 380.
containing meaningless constituent parts. In my view, the disappearance of the adjective “possible” is the conjuring trick that clears the way to the austere conception of nonsense.\textsuperscript{35}

For Frascolla, the \textit{Tractatus} does indeed say that all \textit{possible} propositions are legitimately constructed and that the only way in which \textit{they} can be nonsensical is by containing meaningless parts; but “possible propositions,” he contends, should be taken to contrast with items that are \textit{not} legitimately constructed—to wit, \textit{impossible} propositions. More specifically, as Frascolla goes on to explain, a “possible proposition” is to be understood as a linguistic construction that, by conforming to the general form of the proposition, is “potentially capable of conveying a sense”: it is an item that has the right form for expressing a sense and that \textit{will express a sense if} a specific meaning is assigned to each of its constituent parts. Thus “Socrates is identical” is a “possible proposition” because it does not “actualize [its] semantic potentiality”: it \textit{has} a semantic potentiality, because it complies with the general form of the proposition, but does not \textit{actualize} that potentiality, because it contains an adjective—to be understood as an item belonging to a determinate logical category—to which no specific meaning has been assigned. By contrast, there are linguistic constructions that do \textit{not} conform to the general form of the proposition and that, therefore, are \textit{not} well fit to expressing a sense: unlike “possible propositions,” they “cannot express a sense.”\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{36} All quotations in this paragraph are from Frascolla 2011, p. 202, my translation.
It is not completely clear how Frascolla construes the expressions that, by not conforming
to the general form of the proposition, are not “legitimately constructed.” According to one way
of understanding what he is claiming, he is reading the passage in a manner that renders it
compatible with the substantial conception of nonsense; according to another way of
understanding what he is claiming, he is not.

The fact that illegitimately constructed expressions, for Frascolla, “cannot express a
sense” suggests that he construes them as possessing a determinate logical form, even though the
form in question is of the wrong sort: they are composed of parts belonging to determinate
logical categories, but in virtue of the way in which their parts are put together, they exhibit a
logical form that does not comply with the general form of the proposition. Even if we assigned a
specific meaning to each of their parts, they would still fail to express a sense, because their
meaningful parts would belong to logical categories that do not fit together in the right way.
Understood in this manner, Frascolla’s reading shows that the passage is compatible with the
substantial conception of nonsense.

However, the fact that Frascolla characterizes the expressions that are not “legitimately
constructed” as “mere gibberish,” as “completely unintelligible combinations of signs,” and as
cases in which “we abandon language altogether,”37 suggests that he does not contrast “possible
propositions” with linguistic constructions possessing the wrong logical form, but rather with
mere signs possessing no logical form—in the way in which “Ab sur ah” can be thought to be
devoid of any logical form. If this is the view that Frascolla is advocating, then it is hard to
understand why he claims that such constructions “cannot express a sense”—i.e. why it should
be the case, from his perspective, that we can’t turn “Ab sur ah” (or pretty much anything else!)

into a “possible proposition” by assigning it an articulate propositional form. But what is significant for our present purposes is that, if Frascolla were recommending this second construal of “illegitimately constructed propositions,” he would not be objecting to the claim that the *Tractatus* endorses the austere conception of nonsense, but only to the claim that the *Tractatus* endorses what I called in Section 3 the strong version of the austere conception of nonsense. His contention, in other words, would not be that the *Tractatus* allows not only for mere nonsense (which says nothing because it contains meaningless expressions), but also for substantial nonsense (which supposedly says nothing because it combines meaningful expressions in logically illegitimate ways). His claim would be, instead, that the *Tractatus* admits two kinds of mere nonsense: “possible propositions” such as “Socrates is identical,” which contain some meaningless expressions but supposedly possess a logical form; and mere signs such as “Ab sur ah,” which possess neither form nor content.38

My aim, here, is not to determine whether Frascolla advocates the former or the latter construal of “illegitimately constructed expressions.” Moreover, since I am not arguing in this work that the *Tractatus* endorses the strong version of the austere conception of nonsense, I will not question the second variant of the Frascollian reading. In accordance with my agenda, I am going to question only the first variant of the Frascollian reading, which holds that the passage from 5.4733 does not rule out the substantial conception of nonsense.

Such a reading has the merit of showing that the passage does not provide undisputable evidence for the claim that the *Tractatus* is committed to the austere conception of nonsense. The passage can be read in manner that leaves room for substantial nonsense. But this does not mean

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38 Understood in this manner, Frascolla’s reading is similar to the one defended in great detail in Johnston 2007.
that such a reading is mandatory—or that it is the most plausible. In spite of what Frascolla might be suggesting, it is not the case that in order to read the passage as an endorsement of the austere conception of nonsense one has to ignore the adjective “possible” in the phrase “possible propositions.” There are, on the contrary, at least two ways of understanding the phrase that accord with the austere conception of nonsense.

One is the understanding provided by the second variant of the Frascollian reading, according to which a “possible proposition” contrasts, on the one hand, with full-fledged propositions expressing a sense, and on the other hand, with combinations of mere signs (or sign-looking constructions) having neither form nor content. This leaves no room for the idea of linguistic constructions that are nonsensical because they combine meaningful expressions belonging to the wrong logical categories. According to this reading, therefore, the passage rejects the substantial conception of nonsense and is compatible with both the weak and the moderate version of the austere view—even though it rules out the strong version of the austere view.

But one can also read “possible propositions” in a manner that makes the passage compatible even with the strong version of the austere view. Instead of taking the phrase to refer to linguistic constructions that already have a logical form and that would become significant propositions if something else were done to them (namely, if a specific meaning were assigned to each of their logical parts), we can take it to refer to propositions in general, whether they happen to be actual or merely possible, where a “proposition” is nothing less than a representation of a possible situation, i.e. a significant proposition. A merely possible proposition, according to this reading, is never an actual item that would become a significant proposition if something else were done to it—in the way in which one might speak of a mixture
of cream and sugar as “possible ice cream,” or of a bike frame as a “possible bike.” It is, instead, an item that is not actual and that, if it were actual, would just be a significant proposition. So the force of the claim that “All possible propositions are legitimately constructed” is that it is of the essence of propositions that they are legitimately constructed: being legitimately constructed is not a feature belonging to some particular class of propositions (say, those propositions that we happened to come across so far), but a feature belonging to anything that really deserves the title of a proposition. In the same way, one can say “All possible ice cream is frozen,” meaning that it is of the essence of ice cream to be frozen: anything not frozen is not ice cream proper.

A disadvantage of this reading, it may be objected, is that it requires a less that straightforward interpretation of the anaphoric pronoun linking the two parts of the sentence: “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” (first emphasis added). If “Every possible proposition” refers to every significant proposition (be it an actual item or a merely possible item), then what “has no sense” cannot be one of the “possible propositions” (as it would admittedly be natural to suppose), otherwise the sentence would be inviting us to consider the paradoxical scenario in which a significant proposition has no sense. But implicit shifts in the reference of anaphoric pronouns (or, equivalently, ambiguities in the scope of quantified conditionals) are not uncommon in natural languages, as is shown by sentences such as “Every possible ice cream is frozen, and if it is not frozen, it is not ice cream proper.” This sentence does not invite us to consider the paradoxical scenario in which what is essentially frozen is not frozen, but states that ice cream is essentially frozen and that whatever is not frozen is not ice cream proper. Similarly, we can read our sentence from 5.4733 as follows: “Propositions are essentially well-formed, and if something lacks sense, this can only be because
we have not assigned a meaning to some of its constituent parts.” According to this reading, the passage rules out the idea that a linguistic construction can be nonsensical because it combines meaningful expressions in a logically illegitimate way, and achieves this result without any commitment to the idea that a linguistic construction may possess a propositional logical form while failing to express a propositional sense.

The outline of these two exegetical options should suffice to show that it is perfectly possible to read the passage from 5.4733 as an endorsement of the austere conception of nonsense. It should be noted, moreover, that a reading of 5.4733 that makes it compatible with the substantial conception of nonsense is rather difficult to square with what else is going on in the 5.473s—and in particular, with the claim that “we cannot give a sign the wrong sense,” that “in a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic,” and that “we cannot think illogically” (5.4731). For if there were such a thing as the logically illegitimate combination of meaningful expressions, wouldn’t that amount to a logical mistake, and as a case in which we have given a sign the wrong sense, managing to think illogically? So it is not merely the case that it is possible to read 5.4733 as an endorsement of the austere conception of nonsense. Given the context of the remark, there are positive reasons for privileging such a reading.

8. Does the Tractatus endorse the moderate version of the austere conception of nonsense?

So far I defended the claim that the Tractatus endorses the austere conception of nonsense. I have already noticed that the understanding of the Context Principle that I have ascribed to the
*Tractatus* is incompatible with anything weaker than the moderate version of the austere conception of nonsense. In this section, I am going to argue that the *Tractatus* is committed to a version of the austere conception of nonsense which is at least as strong as the moderate one.

As some commentators have pointed out, the discussion of nonsense contained in the 5.473s can be taken to show that the *Tractatus* endorses only the weak version of the austere conception of nonsense. In the passage that we examined at length in the previous section, Wittgenstein says that “every possible proposition is legitimately constructed,” and that “if it has no sense that can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts” (5.4733; second emphasis added). He does not say that, when we utter a piece of nonsense, we have given no meaning to all its constituent parts. Moreover, in his discussion of “Socrates is identical,” Wittgenstein seems to assume not only that the linguistic construction exhibits a determinate logical form, but also that its first two words possess a determinate meaning. He says, in fact, that it “means nothing because there is no property which is called ‘identical!’” (5.473), that it “is nonsensical because we have not made an arbitrary determination” (5.473); and that it “says nothing because we have given no meaning to the word ‘identical’ as adjective” (5.4733). The problem with “Socrates is identical,” it would seem, is that its last word is meaningless, not that all its words are meaningless.\(^{39}\)

But this is not the only possible reading of these passages. We can understand the fact that Wittgenstein mentions our failure to give a meaning to some of the constituent words of a nonsensical pseudo-proposition as part of his account of the structure and origins of illusions of meaning. As we have seen in Section 7, the story that Wittgenstein sketches about “Socrates is

\(^{39}\) On this line of interpretation, see Johnston 2007 (especially pp. 375-385 and p. 392, n. 27) and Mezzadri 2013. The sort of reading that I am going to defend, by contrast, is advocated in Witherspoon 2000, p. 324 and p. 347, note 18.
identical” holds that the illusion of meaning generated by this form of words arises because (a) the sign “identical” has an established use as the sign of equality, and because (b) the same sign has a surface-grammatical form in virtue of which it can occur in what look like perfectly significant subject-predicate propositions. Wittgenstein’s assumption, in 5.473 and 5.4733, is that no equally compelling story about the structure and source of the illusion of meaning generated by “Socrates is identical” can be told by focusing on other parts or features of the proposition—say, on the occurrence of word “Socrates.” In general, there are determinate routes into illusions of meanings. But this is perfectly compatible with the fact that our dithering about what we want to do with a constituent part of a linguistic construction—in the case at hand, our wanting to use “identical” both as the sign of identity and as the sign of a property—ultimately results in our failure to put to a determinate logical use any part or feature of the linguistic construction.

This reading renders the 5.473s consistent with the moderate version of the austere conception of nonsense and, by the same token, with the understanding of the Context Principle that I have attributed to the Tractatus. By contrast, if one reads the 5.473s as an endorsement of the weak version of the austere view, one renders the passages inconsistent with the understanding of the Context Principle that I attributed to the Tractatus. Consequently, if my account of Tractarian contextualism is correct, there is good reason to prefer the reading of the 5.473s that I have outlined.

Some of the commentators who ascribe to the Tractatus the weak version of the austere view of nonsense agree that such a view is in tension with the Tractarian formulations of the

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40 In fact, the reading I offered renders the 5.473s consistent even with the strong version of the austere view; but my present argument does not depend on this point.
Context Principle and propose to resolve this tension by offering a “non-literal” interpretation of those formulations—one that allows words to have a meaning not only when they occur in the context of significant propositions, but also when they occur in nonsensical constructions. In response to these commentators, I submit that there is no need for this sort of emendation of the Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle: contrary to what they appear to assume, it is perfectly possible—as I hope to have shown—to read the 5.473s as an endorsement of the moderate version of the austere conception of nonsense, which is fully compatible with the letter of the Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle.

There are however also commentators who attribute to the Tractatus the weak version of the austere conception of nonsense, but do not think that such a view is in tension with the Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle. Such commentators adopt a reading of the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle that differs from the one that I am defending. The difference concerns the question of what the Tractatus means by a “proposition” when it says that a name has meaning “only in the context of a proposition” (3.3) and that “an expression has meaning only in a proposition” (3.314). I have taken “proposition” to mean a representation of a possible situation, i.e. a significant proposition (sinnvoller Satz). The commentators I am considering, by contrast, take the term “proposition” to refer to a combination of signs that has the logico-syntactical form, but not necessarily the content, of a significant proposition: a “proposition” may actually express a sense, or may merely be an item that is capable of expressing a sense—i.e. an item that would express a sense if we assigned a specific meaning to each of its constituent logical parts. Significant propositions, according to this reading, are just a proper subset of propositions. The Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle, accordingly,

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41 See Mezzadri 2013.
are taken to assert that linguistic expressions have sub-propositional meaning only in the context of linguistic constructions that exhibits a propositional form. But these linguistic constructions do not *have* to express a sense: meaningful propositional parts may occur also in linguistic constructions that have propositional logical form but express *no* sense because they contain at least one meaningless part. Hence, the Tractarian construal of the Context Principle is taken to be fully compatible with the weak version of the austere conception of nonsense.\(^{42}\)

I will not try, on this occasion, to give a thorough refutation of this interpretation. This would involve a comprehensive account of the use of the term “proposition” in the *Tractatus*, as well as a critique of the “purely syntactic” reading of Tractarian symbols, of which propositions are special cases (see Chapter 4, notes 23 and 26). My efforts will be confined, instead, to defending the *plausibility* of my alternative reading of the Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle, which takes the term “proposition” (as it occurs in those formulations) to be synonymous with “significant proposition.” I have three considerations to offer.

i) Even if one conceded that *sometimes* the *Tractatus* speaks of “propositions” as logico-syntactical items that do not necessarily express a sense, it would still be the case that, on some other occasions, it *clearly* speaks of “propositions” as *significant* propositions.\(^{43}\) In several passages, the *Tractatus* characterizes a “proposition” (without qualifications) as a “picture” (see e.g. 3.1 together with 3, as well as 4.01, 4.011, and 4.021), and a “picture” is something that “represents a possible situation in logical space” (2.202), i.e. something that represents a “sense” (2.221). The *Tractatus* emphasizes that the assignment of specific meanings to the elements of a

\(^{42}\) For a sustained defense of this interpretation, see Johnston 2007. For a similar construal of the contrast between “propositions” and “significant propositions,” see Griffin 1964, pp.129-131 and Morris 2008, p. 158-169.

\(^{43}\) This is conceded even by some of the advocates of the contrast between “propositions” and “significant propositions” that I am resisting; see Griffin 1964, p. 132.
picture is *constitutive* of the picture: “[T]he representing relation which makes it a picture, also belongs to the picture. The representing relation consists of the coordination of the elements of the picture and the things” (2.1513-2.1515). In accordance with this view, the elements of pictures, as well as the elements of those special pictures that the *Tractatus* calls “propositions,” are said to stand for specific objects: “The elements of the picture stand, in the picture, for the objects” (2.131); “In the proposition the name represents the objects” (3.22). Significantly, the *Tractatus* says without qualifications that a “proposition” expresses a sense: “The proposition shows its sense. The proposition shows how things stand, if it is true. And it says, that they do so stand.” (4.002) Moreover, pictures and propositions are repeatedly said to be true or false (see e.g. 2.17, 2.21, 4.022, 4.024, 4.25ff) and this entails that pictures and propositions express a specific sense. It is unquestionable that the *Tractatus* commonly uses the term “proposition” as a synonym of “significant proposition” and I am aware of no convincing argument which shows that the term cannot be taken to have *that* meaning when it occurs in the passages that state the Context Principle.

ii) One of the passages that are regularly presented as smoking-gun evidence in favor of the “syntactic” interpretation of Tractarian propositions is, in fact, no such evidence. Here is the passage:

To the proposition belongs everything which belongs to the projection; but not what is projected. Therefore the possibility of what is projected but not this itself. In the proposition, therefore, its sense is not yet contained, but the possibility of expressing it. (“The content of the proposition” means the content of the significant proposition.) In the proposition the form of its sense is contained, but not its content. (3.13)
This is taken to show that “propositions” must have a propositional form, but need not express a propositional content.\textsuperscript{44} Such an interpretation strikes me as mistaken. It seems clear to me that the \textit{Tractatus} is here using the term “sense” in what I called the vertical register (see Chapter 4, Section 5), in accordance with the definition given only one page earlier in the text (2.221 and 2.202): the sense of the proposition is the possible situation it represents. Now, \textit{if} the proposition contained \textit{both} the form \textit{and} the content of the possible situation it represents, it would just \textit{be} that situation. The elements that compose the proposition would not \textit{stand for} the objects composing the possible situation represented by the proposition, but would just \textit{be} those objects. Hence, the proposition would not \textit{represent} any possible situation. It would not be a picture at all, but just a fact (i.e. a configuration of objects) laying no claim on reality. The \textit{Tractatus} insists that any picture must share the \textit{form} of what it pictures (2.16-2.171). But at the same time, it insists that there must be a \textit{distance} between a picture and what it pictures, otherwise the picture would not represent how things stand truly or falsely: “The picture represents its subject from without […]], and this is why the picture represents its subject rightly or falsely” (2.173). There must be something in common between the picture and what it pictures: the elements that compose the picture must share the form of the objects they deputize. But the picture and what it pictures may not have \textit{everything} in common: the elements that compose the picture must be \textit{numerically different} from the objects they stand for. \textit{Both} conditions are necessary for the possibility of representation. I submit that 3.1 is simply applying this general point to the special case of propositions.

iii) It is sometimes maintained that the “syntactic” interpretation of Tractarian propositions has the advantage of explaining why the \textit{Tractatus} can speak, without any

misleading ambiguity, not only of “significant propositions,” but also of “nonsensical propositions” (4.003, 5.473, 5.4733, 6.54) and of “propositions” containing meaningless signs (6.53). Now, it is indeed the case that, according to the interpretation that I favor, the term “proposition” is used ambiguously when the *Tractatus* says, for example, that expressions have meaning only in the context of the proposition, and when it discusses “nonsensical propositions.” But in the first place, the interpretation I oppose must also posit an ambiguity in the Tractarian employment of the term “proposition”—even though the ambiguity in question is of a different sort. As I hope to have shown, in fact, on some occasions the *Tractatus* clearly employs the term “proposition” to refer to significant propositions rather than to combinations of signs that have propositional form but bear semantic significance only inessentially (assuming that the *Tractatus* allows for such a thing). In the second place, at one point the *Tractatus* speaks of “nonsensical pseudo-propositions” (4.1272). According to the interpretation I endorse, this is a more accurate manner of referring to what the *Tractatus* calls elsewhere “nonsensical propositions.” By contrast, it is hard to see how the interpretation I oppose could account for the use of that locution.

On the basis of these considerations, I conclude that it is sensible to read the Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle as expressing a view which entails a version of the austere conception of nonsense that is at least as strong as the moderate one. And as I have shown earlier in this section, it is perfectly possible to read the Tractarian discussion of nonsense as an endorsement of such a view.

For the substantial conception of nonsense, but also for the weak version of the austere conception of nonsense, there can be a semantic common factor between significant propositions

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(or other complete and intelligible uses of language) and nonsensical combinations of words. Even when we fail (or do not even try) to use our words to make sense, we may still succeed in making our words signify. By contrast, according to the view that I have attributed to the *Tractatus*, the failure to make sense results in *complete* semantic failure.

9. Compositionality

The *Tractatus* contains explicit statements not only about the Context Principle and the nature of nonsense, but also about linguistic compositionality. Here is a selection of relevant passages:

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 the 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)

The significant proposition is not a semantic monolith, but is essentially articulated into meaningful parts, which may occur in an indefinite number of *other* propositions. The meaningful proposition is a complex symbol, and “a characteristic of a composite symbol” is that “it has something in common with *other* symbols” (5.5261). While the meaning of a simple propositional constituent has to be explained to us if we are to understand it (see 4.026), we
understand the sense of a proposition as soon as we understand the meanings of its parts and their mode of composition; the proposition, as the *Tractatus* puts it, “shows its sense” (4.022). The sense of each proposition is not determined by a separate stipulation, as happens with simple propositional constituents. On the contrary, a proposition says what it does in virtue of the meanings of its parts and the way they are put together.

It is sometimes maintained that the Tractarian commitment to linguistic compositionality is in tension with its commitment to the Context Principle and to the austere conception of nonsense. It can seem, in fact, that compositionality is possible only if meaningful propositional parts can occur in isolation. This would conflict, on the one hand, with the Tractarian formulations of the Context Principle, and on the other hand, with the austere conception of nonsense. For if meaningful propositional parts can occur in isolation, why shouldn’t they be able to occur in logically illegitimate combinations? On this basis, some commentators have claimed that the *Tractatus* can be coherently committed to linguistic compositionality only if it embraces a very weak version of the Context Principle—one which leaves room for the occurrence of meaningful words in isolation and in logically illegitimate combinations.46

But as I argued in Chapter 2, a construal of the Context Principle which is sufficiently strong to rule out the occurrence of meaningful propositional components in isolation and in nonsensical combinations is not incompatible with compositionality *per se*, but only with more or less thoroughly *atomistic understandings* of linguistic compositionality. One is fully entitled to maintain that the meanings of propositions depend on the meanings of their parts, which may occur with the same meanings in an indefinite number of different propositional contexts, while denying that meaningful propositional parts can ever occur in isolation and in nonsensical

46 See Glock 2004.
combination. As I noticed in Chapter 2, part of what can appear to demand an understanding of compositionality which leaves room for these possibilities is the need of accounting for linguistic stability. But in the next chapter I will argue that this is a misleading appearance.

As I have already done with Frege, I suggest that the Tractatus is committed to the idea that sub-propositional compositional structure is a constitutive feature of language, in so far as language is understood as the totality of meaningful propositions. In contrast to standard-style arguments for compositionality (see Chapter 2, Section 8), the Tractatus never tries to ground its claims about the compositional nature of language on empirical hypotheses. When Wittgenstein claims, “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 proposition 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 desiderata that must be met if we want to account for our linguistic capacity without appealing to implausible empirical assumptions. Wittgenstein is rather unfolding the concepts of “proposition” and “understanding a proposition.” A combination 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.

In the Tractatus, the claims about the compositionality of language are closely connected to the picture theory. Propositions, for the Tractatus, are pictures, and pictures are facts: they consist of elements standing in determinate relations to one another, and the fact that the elements of the picture stand in such-and-such a relation to each others says that the elements of
reality represented by the elements of the picture stand in such-and-such a relation to each others. Thus there is a sense in which the articulate nature of the proposition, and thus the compositional nature of language, follows from the picture theory.\textsuperscript{47} I wish to suggest, however, that it would be misleading to claim that the \textit{Tractatus} seeks to \textit{justify} its views about the compositional nature of language through an appeal to the picture theory—as if the picture theory could really cut any deeper. Rather, we can see the picture theory as an attempt to articulate (among other things) the insight that sub-propositional logical structure is a constitutive feature of anything that we would be inclined to call a language in the full and sense of the term—as opposed, say, to mere codes, or to the very limited systems of non-compositional signals used by some non-human species. There is no reason to make this Tractarian insight hostage to the specific tenets of the picture theory. On the contrary, one may retain the insight without having to subscribe to the picture theory.

There are indeed philosophers who agree with the \textit{Tractatus} about the fact that language is constitutively compositional, even though they are in no way committed to the picture theory of the proposition. One such example is Michael Dummett, who insists on the conceptual distinction between \textit{languages} and \textit{codes}, and on the conceptual priority of \textit{expressing} a thought over merely \textit{encoding} or \textit{referring} to a thought (see Chapter 3, Section 7). Another good example is Stanley Cavell, who certainly does not think that the following statements depend on the acceptance of the picture theory of the proposition:

That a word can recur is analytic of “word”. That there are more things to be said in language that there are words to say them is analytic of “language.”\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} For a more detailed discussion of this connection, see Sullivan 2001.
\textsuperscript{48} Cavell 1999, p. 78.
We don’t need a new sign for any new thing to be said, and this is part of our concept of language. We have here, as with Dummett and the Tractatus, a conceptual argument for the compositionality of language, which does not rely—as standard arguments do—on empirical premises.

10. Conclusion

In Chapter 4, I argued that the Tractatus inherits the fundamental tenet of Frege’s construal of the Context Principle, according to which words have actual sub-propositional logical meaning only when they occur as logically working parts of meaningful propositions. In this chapter, I have argued that the Tractatus endorses a conception of nonsense that is consistent with that understanding of the Context Principle. For the Tractatus, there is no such thing as the occurrence of actually meaningful words in nonsensical linguistic constructions. If a form of words does not make sense, then its constituent words, as they occur in that construction, are also meaningless. When we fail to use our words to make sense, we also fail to give a meaning to each of the words that we purport to be using—even if we may undergo the illusion of giving them a meaning. I further argued that the Tractatus, following Frege, recognizes linguistic compositionality and conceives of it as a constitutive feature of language. The capacity to use meaningful words to make sense, and the capacity to use meaningful words to make sense, are just two aspects of a single capacity—namely, the capacity for articulate language.
1. Putative counterexamples and other objections

In the previous chapters, I have supplied detailed interpretations of Frege’s and early Wittgenstein’s respective understandings of the Context Principle. As I pointed out in the Introduction (Section 4), there is a level of abstraction at which I want to attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein the same understanding of the Context Principle:

*The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle.* Words have actual sub-propositional logical meaning only on those occasions in which they make a contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition.

I have already shown some of the advantages of this position and addressed some of the perplexities that it may elicit. I argued that it manages to avoid the difficulties respectively encountered by Bentham and Russell, who work within a philosophical framework which admits
only of unilateral forms of dependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. Moreover, I argued that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle does not rule out linguistic compositionality per se (as it is often maintained), but only an atomistic construal of linguistic compositionality. In this chapter, I will defend the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle from a number of other objections and discuss a possible emendation.

On the face of it, it doesn’t seem difficult to exhibit counterexamples to Frege’s and early Wittgenstein’s respective formulations of the Context Principle. There are many cases in which words appear to be perfectly meaningful even if they occur outside the context of a meaningful proposition. Such apparent counterexamples, however, are very heterogeneous. In Sections 2-4, I distinguish three kinds of putative counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle and show that they can be dealt with by invoking the distinctions that I drew in the Introduction (Section 2) in order to delimit the topic of this work. In Section 5, I isolate a range of cases that, on the background of some plausible assumptions, pose a genuine problem for the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. I formulate a generalized version of the Context Principle which can deal with those cases. However, I do not argue that the assumptions that create the need for this emendation are inescapable. Finally, in Sections 6 and 7, I address the concern that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle rules out two obvious facts about language: the fact that words have stable meanings across different employments, and the fact that the acquisition of language is a gradual process.
2. The dictionary meaning of isolated words

The claim that “words have meaning only the context of meaningful propositions” seems to fly in the face of the fact that we can identify the dictionary meanings of words even when they are not used in the context of complete propositions. We can be given a list of words or word-looking constructions “in isolation” and we can tell, possibly with the aid of a dictionary, which ones have a meaning in a given language, and what their meanings are. Consider for example this list:

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apple
crapple
bosh
fosh
posh
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“Apple” is an English word, with several related meanings; “crapple,” on the contrary, has no meaning in English (at least according to the OED). If we are uncertain about some of these cases, we can look them up in a dictionary. Does “bosh,” for example, have a meaning in English? The dictionary will tell us that it does. It will give us an explicit definition (“bosh: something regarded as absurd, nonsense”), as well as examples of how the word is used in complete sentences (What do you think about that dissertation by Silver Bronzo?—Oh, I think it’s a load of bosh). The dictionary meanings of words, it would seem, can be identified quite
The undeniable fact that we can do such a thing does not refute the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. What we identify in such cases are the established logical meanings of words, as opposed to their actual logical meanings. But the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is a thesis about actual logical meanings of words (see Introduction, Section 2.). Words retain the semantic potentialities established by the existing linguistic conventions independently of propositional context. But whether these potentialities are actualized on any particular occasion depends on how the words are used in complete meaningful propositions.

3. Isolated words with non-logical meaning

Consider the following scenarios. I am hammering a nail, I miss the nail, I hit my finger, and I shout: “Damn.” I am playing Peekaboo with a baby and I utter, with the appropriate movements and expression, “Peekaboo.” We are on the beach, looking at the sunset; the colors are stunning, and one of us utters: “Wow.” It would be preposterous to deny that these utterances are “meaningful” in any sense of the term; and the words one utters on such occasions do not occur in the context of meaningful propositions. In order to deal with such cases, we cannot appeal, as before, to the distinction between the established and the actual logical meanings of words. These are cases in which words are actually used. So, whatever sort of “meaning” they happen to

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1 It is not uncommon to adduce the possibility of identifying the dictionary meaning of isolated words, or the bare existence of dictionaries, as a straightforward falsification of any literal reading of the Context Principle; see for instance Glock 2004, p. 226.
have on those occasions, it is an actual meaning—i.e. a meaning that the words have in actuality, and not merely in potentiality. But there is another distinction that can be invoked in this context, namely the distinction between the logical and the non-logical meanings of words (see Introduction, Section 2). Arguably, the words uttered in the aforementioned scenarios do not carry (on those occasions) a logical meaning. It can be plausibly maintained, in fact, that none of those words makes a contribution to the expression or assertion of a thought about how things stand. If this is correct, none of the aforementioned cases is a genuine counterexample to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, which is silent about the conditions under which words can have non-logical meanings.

My aim here is not to recommend a particular analysis of the aforementioned cases—one according to which they involve only the expression of non-logical meanings. I have used those cases as illustrative examples in order to make the general suggestion that there may be apparent counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle which can be accommodated by appealing to the distinction between logical and non-logical meaning.

4. Ellipsis

In cases of ellipsis, a word or phrase may have actual sub-proposition logical meaning even if it does not manifestly occur “in the context of a proposition.” Suppose a teacher asks the class, “Who killed Julius Caesar?,” and a diligent student answers, “Brutus.” Here the word “Brutus” is not part of a linguistic construction that expresses a meaningful proposition. And yet, it seems perfectly natural to say that the word, on that occasion, actually expresses a sub-propositional meaning—the same meaning that it expresses, say, when it is used in the proposition “Brutus
was Caesar’s son.” But even if the word “Brutus,” as spoken by the student, is not preceded and followed by other words, its propositional context is clearly implied. What the student meant, of course, is that Brutus killed Caesar. He said only “Brutus,” leaving out the rest of the proposition, because the rest of the proposition could easily be retrieved from the context of utterance, in accordance with a well-established linguistic practice. Cases of ellipsis, therefore, may constitute a problem for the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle only if this is taken to state that the propositional context of linguistic expressions having actual sub-propositional logical meaning must be explicitly expressed. But there is no reason to favor this restrictive interpretation. The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle can be more charitably taken to state that linguistic expressions having actual sub-propositional meaning must occur in complete propositional contexts, where these propositional contexts may be either fully expressed or merely implied.

5. One-word propositions

There can be cases in which a single word or expression is used to express or convey a complete propositional content, even if the word or expression is not implicitly used in conjunction with other words (as in the case of ellipsis), and the word or expression is itself devoid of internal propositional structure. I am not referring to the so-called “sentence-words” of polysynthetic languages, where the propositional articulation that is expressed in languages such as English at the level of syntax is expressed instead at the level of morphology. I am referring to a range of

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2 I gather, for example, that in one of the Yupik languages (spoken in Alaska and eastern Siberia), the sentence-word “untussuqatarniksaitenggiggtuq” means “He had not yet said again
rather heterogeneous cases which include the use of signals for encoding the contents of articulate propositions of natural languages, and the use of single words (devoid of internal propositional structure) for expressing, in accordance with the conventions of a natural languages, propositional contents that could also be expressed by means of articulate propositions. So, for example, a red light outside of a parking lot can be used to communicate that the parking lot is full; the word “fire” can be used in English, with the appropriate intonation, to communicate to other people that there is fire in the building; and the word “clear” can be used by the front passenger of a car in order to communicate to the driver that there is no car coming from her side of the intersection. Arguably, these are cases in which isolated words have actual logical meaning. But they are not cases in which isolated words have actual subpropositional logical meaning. Thus, they are not counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, which concerns the conditions under which linguistic expressions can have actual sub-propositional logical meaning.

The cases that I have just mentioned can be invoked to attack—not the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, but rather—the constitutivist thesis about linguistic compositionality that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein. It should be noticed, however, that such a thesis admits of parasitical cases (see Introduction, Section 4). And it can be argued that the various uses of language which may at first appear to falsify that thesis are in fact parasitical on the use of linguistic constructions exhibiting some degree of manifest

that he was going to hunt reindeer.” More familiar but less amazing examples can be found in languages such as Latin or Italian. The syntactically complex English proposition “I walk” is expressed in Latin and Italian by means of morphologically complex one-word propositions, “Ambulo” and “Cammino” respectively.
propositional logical articulation. This can be done in different ways, depending on the specific features of the case at hand and on one’s subsidiary philosophical commitments.

The use of simple signals for encoding articulate propositions of natural language wears its parasitical status on its sleeve. The logically simple signals of the code mean what they do in virtue of explicit conventions—the “keys” of the code—correlating each simple signal with an articulate proposition of a natural language. Of course, this correlation would not be possible if the propositions of the relevant natural language were not already in place—and propositions of natural language exhibit, as a rule, a large degree of manifest sub-propositional logical articulation. So, for example, a red light outside of a parking garage can indeed express a complete propositional content; but it can do so because we have agreed to use it in place of the proposition “The garage is full,” whose meaning does manifestly depend on the meanings of its parts.

If we consider cases such as the utterances of “Fire!” and “Clear!” described above, which do not involve the use of codes in the literal sense, but employs expressions of a natural language without having to introduce any new linguistic convention, one may take a variety of different routes for defending the constitutivist thesis. I’ll mention three representative strategies.

One option (1), in cases involving the utterance of an isolated expression having established sub-propositional meanings, is to argue that the utterance is actually elliptical. This move brings us back to the sort of case discussed in the previous section. According to this analysis, for example, by uttering “Clear!” the front passenger expresses a sub-propositional content and leaves out its propositional context (say, “The road is …. on this side”), which must be filled out by the driver on the basis of the context of utterance.
If, by contrast, we do not regard utterances such as “Clear!” and “Fire!” as elliptical, but as cases in which *complete propositional contents* are expressed by means of words lacking internal propositional articulation, we have at least two options. According to one of these other strategies (2), the utterances under discussion should be regarded as *analogous* to the employment of a code. By the implicit linguistic conventions of the English language, for example, the word “fire” is used in certain circumstances to stand for the logically articulate proposition “There is fire in the building.” A familiar way of elaborating this thought is to claim that while the utterance “Fire!” is logically simple at the level of its *surface-grammatical* form, it is *really* logically articulate at the level of its underlying logical form, which can be brought out by analysis. According to this strategy, therefore, one-word propositions such as “Fire!” and “Clear!” are parasitical on articulate propositions in the sort of way in which the signals of a code are parasitical on the openly articulate propositions of natural language that they encode.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is a good example of a work which follows this strategy in order to account for manifestly inarticulate one-word propositions. When the *Tractatus* claims that “[t]he proposition is articulate” (3.141), it means that every meaningful proposition is *actually* articulate, even though possibly not *manifestly* articulate. For the *Tractatus*, virtually *none* of the propositions of ordinary language exhibits on the surface its “real” logical articulation. The real logical structure of propositions is buried beneath the surface through “enormously complicated” implicit conventions:

Man possesses the capacity of constructing languages, in which every sense can be expressed, without having an idea how and what each word means […].
From [colloquial language] it is humanly impossible to gather immediately the logic of language.
Language disguises the thought […].
The silent adjustments to understand colloquial language are enormously complicated. (4.002)

Even though we are not immediately aware of the “silent adjustments” of ordinary language, it is really *through* these adjustments that ordinary propositions can signify. Such adjustments or conventions, if made explicit, would take the form of definitions, where “[e]very defined sign signifies via those signs by which it is defined, and the definitions show the way” (3.261). To
If one is suspicious of all this readiness to dig beneath the surface of linguistic appearances, one may opt for yet a different strategy. One may claim (3) that utterances such as “Fire!” and “Clear!” are limiting cases of the exercise of the capacity to form and understand logically articulate propositions. In certain circumstances, uttering a logically inarticulate propositions may just be what the exercise of this capacity comes to. If the building is on fire, the room is noisy, and there is no time to waste, shouting “Fire!” instead of “There is fire in the building!” may be the most appropriate way of exercising our capacity to form and understand articulate propositions. This view can take the form of an elaboration of Frege’s contention about the multiple analyzability of thoughts. As we saw in Chapter 3, for Frege we may carve up the same thought in different ways and express it by means of propositions having different and mutually irreducible logical structures. This procedure, according to Frege, allows us to highlight different sets of inferential relations of the same thought. One can endorse Frege’s doctrine of multiple analyzes while adopting a richer conception of the kinds of consideration that are relevant for the choice of a particular way of carving up and expressing a thought—so as to include not only the fact that it is important to be able to highlight different sets of inferential relations of the same thought, but also, for example, the apparently more mundane fact that it is important to put our interlocutor in the position to hear what we say. In this way, one can claim that it is possible to say the same thing by means of propositions having different logical structures—or, as a limiting case, no logical structure. We may use one-word propositions that are devoid of any manifest logical structure, have no “underlying” logical structure, and are not bring out the implicit conventions of ordinary language—and in this way, the “real” logical form of propositions—is the task of “analysis.” Arguably, this appeal to analysis and the correlative tendency to distrust linguistic appearances is one of respects in which the Tractatus struck the later Wittgenstein as a work informed by philosophical prejudices (cf. PI, §§90-92).
elliptical expressions of articulate propositions; and yet, such utterances may be exercises of our
capacity to form and understand logically articulate propositions, differing qualitatively from the
signals delivered by a creature that lacks such a capacity.

It not necessary, for our present purposes, to determine which of the three
aforementioned strategies should be adopted. My aim, in this section, has been to show that
there are several different moves that one can make in order to defend the constitutivist thesis
about the articulate character of meaningful propositions from different kinds of apparent
counterexamples. Thus, simply pointing out that expressions lacking internal propositional
structure can be used to express or convey complete propositional contents does not amount to
an objection against the constitutivist thesis—and amounts even less to an objection against the

6. A generalized version of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context
Principle

I have shown that several apparent counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the
Context Principle can be defused by invoking a number of distinctions—i.e. the distinction
between actual and established logical meaning, the distinction between logical and non-logical
meaning, and the distinction between propositional and sub-propositional logical meaning. But
there are cases which—on the background of some plausible (even though not irresistible)
assumptions—require an emendation of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context
Principle.
Consider, to begin with, questions (“Is the door open?” or “Who opened the door?”), orders (“Open the door!”), and what may be called “propositional exclamations” (“The door is open!”). It can be argued that when words are used in each of these contexts, they retain the same sub-propositional actual logical meanings that they have when they occur as parts of meaningful propositions expressing or asserting thoughts about how things stand. And yet—it may be further argued—in such contexts words do not contribute to the assertion or to the mere expression of thoughts about how things stand. They contribute, instead, to determining the contents of questions, orders, and exclamations. If this is a correct description of the cases under examination, they are genuine counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle.

It can also be argued—perhaps more controversially—that similar considerations apply also to a different sort of case, namely the use of isolated proper names in acts of greeting or calling. Such uses of language, one may want to maintain, involve logically meaningful words: the word “John,” when it is used for greeting or calling John, retains the same actual logical meaning that it has when it occurs in a meaningful proposition such as “John is smart.” Of course, something more is going on in the use of “John” for greeting or calling John than the mere expression of a sub-propositional content. When we greet or call John, we do not, say, merely refer to John, or merely express a sub-propositional sense associated with John. But this “something more”—so the argument goes—is not the expression or assertion of a thought about what is the case; it is, instead, a greeting, or a call. As before, if this is a correct analysis of the cases at hand, the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is in trouble.

I suggest, however, that the previous sorts of putative counterexamples—and other similar cases—can be accommodated by an emended version of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal
of the Context Principle which generalizes its fundamental tenet. In order to formulate this emendation, I first need to specify a certain notion of “speech act.” The notion that I am going to introduce overlaps to a large extent with that described by J. L. Austin in his classical discussion of the topic. However, I am ready to concede that such a notion might be in several respects un-Austinian, depending on how one interprets Austin.

A speech act, as I am going to use the expression, is a complete and intelligible use of language. Instead of trying to give an explicit to definition of “complete and intelligible use of language,” I will clarify the notion by mentioning some paradigmatic examples. Assertions, questions, orders, exclamations, curses, greetings, calls, are all speech acts. By contrast, the mere expression of a sub-propositional content (say, the mere act of referring to something or of expressing a sub-propositional sense) does not count as a complete and intelligible use of language, and is not therefore a speech act in the present sense. I shall also stipulate that the mere expression of a thought about what is the case—if there is such a thing—counts as a speech act. (This is one of the respects in which the notion that I am characterizing might be un-Austinian, since it can be argued that Austin rejects as unintelligible the idea of “merely expressing a thought.”) Thus, to the extent that speech acts such as assertions and questions are construed as involving mere expressions of thoughts, they will be describable, according to the present terminology, as primary speech acts involving subsidiary speech acts, where the subsidiary speech acts may also be performed in isolation. When I make an assertion, for example, I perform a primary speech act, i.e. an assertion, and a subsidiary speech act, i.e. the expression of a thought, which I can also perform without simultaneously performing any other speech act. I am not suggesting that this is a correct analysis of the phenomena: as I have already emphasized,

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4 See Austin 1975.
in this work I aim to remain neutral with respect to the intelligibility of the notion of merely expressing a thought. My goal, here, is simply to clarify the terminology that I have introduced by spelling out some of its implications.

Armed with the notion of a speech act that I have just characterized, I can now formulate a generalized version of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle:

*The generalized version of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle.*

Words have actual sub-propositional logical meaning only on those occasions in which they make a contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition, *or* contribute to the performance of some other complete, intelligible speech act.

One thing to notice about this position is that it does not entail that all complete speech acts which are not assertions or expressions of thoughts about what is the case involve words having actual sub-propositional logical meaning. It simply implies that there may be *other* complete speech acts, in addition to assertions and expressions of thoughts, in which words have actual sub-propositional logical meaning. This is all we need in order to account for cases such as questions, commands, exclamations, greetings, and calls.

When I began to discuss these cases, I pointed out that they pose a problem for the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle *only on the background of some assumptions.* One must hold that (i) these cases involve words having actual sub-propositional logical meaning, and that (ii) such words, in these contexts, do not contribute to the expression of thoughts about how things stand. One may try to argue that these assumptions do not jointly apply to any of the putative counterexamples. If one succeeds in this endeavor, one may simply
stick to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, without the need of any supposed emendation. A couple of illustrations will help to render this option less speculative. Concerning yes/no questions, orders, and propositional exclamations, one may argue (following a widespread view) that on those occasions words are used in the first instance for expressing thoughts about what is the case. And with regard to cases such as the use of proper names for greeting or calling someone, one may argue that proper names, on those occasions, do not really have actual logical meanings, but actual non-logical meanings that are systematically related (but not identical) to the actual logical meanings that they have when they occur in the context of meaningful propositions.

I will leave open the question of whether the cases that appear to be genuine counterexamples to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle can be accommodated without the need of appealing to the more general principle stated above. I present that generalization, accordingly, only as a possible emendation of the view I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

7. Linguistic stability

It is sometimes maintained, and often assumed, that any version of the Context Principle that is sufficiently strong to entail the austere conception of nonsense carries the paradoxical implication that words cannot have “normal meanings.” The worry is that any such version of the Context Principle forces us to deny that the past uses of words place any sort of constraint on their present or future employments. Whenever we utter or encounter a form of words—so the

worry goes—we have, as it were, to arbitrarily set up an entire new language from scratch, which may overlap with the “languages” spoken on other occurrences of the same words only by accident.

The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is among the targets of this objection, since it is sufficiently strong to rule out the substantial conception of nonsense. The objection can take the form of the charge that such a construal of the Context Principle cannot vindicate a sufficiently robust notion of linguistic compositionality. That construal of the Context Principle, we have seen, leaves room for the idea that propositions can be articulated into parts which make a contribution to the meaning of the whole and may occur with same meaning in an indefinite number of other propositional wholes. We have also seen that such a construal of the Context Principle is compatible with the idea that sub-propositional compositional structure is constitutive of propositions, so that propositions manifestly lacking internal logical articulation should be regarded as parasitical cases. But according to the objection under consideration, all this is not enough.

The objector holds, in the first place, that this vindication of linguistic compositionality does not suffice to rule out the idea that whenever we use or encounter a form of words, we proceed by arbitrarily assigning meanings to the whole and to the parts in such a manner that the meaning of each part turns out to make a logical contribution to the meaning of the whole. In other words, the objector holds that the view of logically articulate propositions as “organic unities” which are what they are in virtue of their parts, while their parts are what they are in virtue of the whole, is fully compatible with the idea that the correlation between particular occurrences of linguistic constructions and such “organic unities” is left to our whim. The objector also claims, in the second place, that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context
Principle mandates this utterly implausible idea. Any occurrence of a word is like its first occurrence.

But the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle mandates no such idea. By endorsing that construal of the Context Principle we remain perfectly entitled to maintain that when we encounter a new proposition, or an old proposition on a new occasion, we assume by default that its words are used in conformity with some of their established meanings. The advocate of the Frege-Wittgenstein view must simply maintain that this assumption is always defeasible. Whether a word, on a particular occasion, is actually used in conformity with one of its established meanings can be conclusively settled—metaphysically as well as epistemologically—only by the logical function, if any, that the word actually fulfills in the meaningful proposition in which it occurs.6

The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, therefore, does not rule out linguistic stability. In fact, it is compatible not only with the thesis that stability is a possible feature of language, but also with the stronger thesis that stability is one of the constitutive features of language. It is instructive to have in view some of the considerations that support this stronger thesis.

There is a sense in which, as the Tractatus puts it, “the sign is arbitrary” (3.322): by appropriate stipulations, one can decide to use one’s words in new and unpredictable ways. I can stipulate, right now, that I will henceforth use the word “cat” to mean cup—can’t I? But there must be reasons for introducing new stipulations, and care must be taken to inform our

6 If I am not mistaken, this is an elaboration of a view proposed by Cora Diamond, who argued that the syntactic and semantic rules of the language are rules for making sense which apply to particular cases only “conditionally,” i.e. only in so far as they allow us to make sense of the whole linguistic construction (see Diamond 1991, pp. 109-111; for a discussion of her view, see Dain 2008).
interlocutors of our terminological policies. Arguably, the *Tractatus* is right to maintain that “[a] proposition must communicate a new sense with old words” (4.03): the fact that there are *old words*—i.e. words carrying the same meaning on new occasions—is plausibly part of the very concept of language. It can be maintained that, if every time I spoke, I used my words in completely new and arbitrary ways, I wouldn’t be speaking each time a different “idiolect,” but I wouldn’t be speaking at all. My verbal performances would simply amount to the utterance of random combinations of words. And if *all* of us, in the past, present, and future, behaved in that way, we wouldn’t even be uttering random combinations of *words*, but only random combinations of *sounds*. After God confused the tongues of the people of Babel, the people split into several groups that went on to speak different languages, such as Greek and Persian and Phoenician. It is only *in retrospect*, given *that* outcome, that God can be said to have confused the *tongues* of the people of Babel. If God were *continuously* “confusing our tongues,” He would be doing something considerably more radical than preventing the possibility of interpersonal linguistic communication: He would be depriving His creatures of the faculty of language.

These issues are nicely thematized in an often-quoted (but perhaps rarely fully appreciated) exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking Glass*:

“[…] There’s glory for you!”
“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I mean ‘There’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”
“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected. “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be Master—that’s all.”

Wittgenstein remarks that a grammatical joke has a specific kind of “depth,” which is due to the fact that it trades on a misunderstanding of the logic of our concepts (PI §111). The exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, I would like to suggest, involves a grammatical joke in this sense, trading on a misunderstanding of our concept of language. Humpty Dumpty’s purported use of the word “glory” is completely arbitrary: it does not conform to any established meaning of the word, and it is not even a derivative application of one of the established meanings of the words (say, a case of metaphor, irony, or sarcasm) or a natural extension of one those established meanings. Moreover, Humpty Dumpty has no good reason for introducing a new stipulation positing that “glory” means “a nice knock-down argument” and makes no effort to inform Alice in due time of his linguistic idiosyncrasy.

There are weaker and stronger ways of interpreting Alice’s protest that one cannot mean by one’s own words whatever one pleases. First, we can take her to be claiming, rather modestly, that one cannot change by arbitrary stipulation the established meanings of words: even if we suppose that Humpty Dumpty succeeds in meaning “a nice knock-down argument” by “glory,” he cannot change in this manner the lexical rules of the English language. Secondly, we can also take Alice to be claiming, also rather modestly, that one “cannot” mean by one’s own words whatever one pleases if one wishes to be understood by other people. But we can also take Alice to be making the much stronger claim that one really cannot mean by one’s own words whatever one pleases. This stronger claim becomes plausible, and I would say even compelling, if we consider what happens when we try to generalize Humpty Dumpty’s linguistic behavior.

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7 Carroll 2002, chap. 6, p. 185.
Suppose that Humpty Dumpty used *all* his words, on each of their occurrences, as whimsically as he purports to be using the word “glory” in the actual story. Arguably, we wouldn’t have merely to do with a very irrational speaker who is willing the face the great pragmatic inconvenience of being systematically unintelligible to other people—but rather with a *babbling loon* who is not really using his words to mean anything at all. According to this line a thought, linguistic stability is not a feature that a language must possess in order to be a convenient instrument for interpersonal communication, but a feature that a language must possess in order to be recognizable as a language in the first place.

For our present purposes, we do not have to establish that linguistic stability is a constitutive (as opposed to an accidental) feature of language. What is crucial is that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is fully compatible even with this strong vindication of linguistic stability. And this shows how misplaced is the worry that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle forces us to deny the obvious fact that words have stable or normal meanings.

8. Language acquisition

A source of resistance to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is that it may seem incompatible with some obvious facts about language acquisition. Human beings acquire natural languages, and they do it gradually: no human being is born with the full mastery of a natural language, and no human being begins to manifest such mastery all at once. Moreover, it seems uncontroversial to say that the first things children say are not complete articulate propositions, but single words: a child, as a norm, will say “cat,” in the context of various
activities, before she will say “The cat is on the mat.” And these facts—so the objection goes—undermine the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. Children begin by learning the sub-propositional logical meanings of words, and only subsequently learn how to use such words in complete propositions. But this is possible only if words can have actual sub-propositional logical meaning whether or not they occur as working parts of meaningful propositions. So the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is false.

Language acquisition is a complex topic, from both an empirical and a conceptual perspective. My aim, here, is not to give a positive account of how human beings come to master a natural language, but merely to reply to the previous objection. I will grant, for the sake of argument, the factual claims invoked by the objection—namely, the claim that (1) human beings acquire language, (2) do it gradually, and (3) utter isolated words before they utter articulate propositions. (For my present purposes, I do not have to endorse these claims; but for all the complexities of the topic, it is actually hard to imagine how they could turn out to be false.) My contention is that, even if those claims are true, they do not undermine the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle. The fact that children’s first steps into language involve the utterance of single words, rather than complete articulate propositions, does not show that children first learn the sub-propositional logical meanings of words, and only later learn how to use such meaningful units in complete propositions. The question, in fact, is how to describe those initial utterances. To describe them as manifestations of the capacity to understand sub-propositional logical meanings, prior to the acquisition of the capacity to understand how such meanings contribute to the contents of complete propositions, is not to “take the facts into

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8 For an overview of the terrain, see Tomasello 2003.
account”: it is to describe the facts in the light of a particular philosophical picture, which we are in no way forced to accept.

We may contrast two general philosophical views of the nature and acquisition of the mental capacities of mature human beings: an additive view, and a transformative view. According to the additive view, such capacities can be factorized into a number of conceptually independent components. The overall capacity is acquired by acquiring some components before others, where the addition of each new component leaves the components already in place unaltered. By contrast, according to the transformative view, our mature mental capacities cannot be factorized into independently intelligible components. Each of those capacities can only be learned as a whole. There may be things that must be learned before acquiring the final capacity, but what we learn in such cases are not separable components of the final capacity. The final stages of the acquisition of a mature human mental capacity transform the character of what is already in place.9

This contrast applies also to the capacity to form and understand articulate propositions. The objection under discussion takes for granted an additive view of the nature and acquisition of this capacity. The idea is that the whole capacity can be broken down into two ingredients, (a) the capacity to know the sub-propositional logical meanings of words and (b) the capacity to use meaningful words in complete propositions, where the former capacity can be acquired before the acquisition of the latter capacity. By contrast, according to the transformative view, the capacity to form and understand articulate propositions can only be acquired as a whole. Of course, there may be things that children do before acquiring that capacity which are necessary for eventually acquiring it. Moreover, those necessary “preliminaries” may resemble in various

\[9\] Cf. Boyle, forthcoming.
ways some of the things that children will do with language when they will have learnt how to form and understand articulate propositions. But this does mean that when children are not yet able to form and understand articulate propositions, they may possess a separable component of that capacity—namely, the capacity to use and understand sub-propositional logical units.

The picture that I am recommending is structurally analogous to the view of the acquisition of empirical knowledge described by Wilfrid Sellars in this famous passage:

[W]hile Jones’ ability to give inductive reasons today is built on a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations, and, in particular, the occurrence of verbal episodes, e.g. “This is green,” which is superficially like those which are later properly said to express observational knowledge, it does not require that any episode in this prior time be characterizable as expressing knowledge.\(^1\)

Sellars rejects the empiricist claim that general empirical knowledge (i.e. knowledge expressed in general statements such as “Most leaves are green”) is founded on a prior and independent sort of knowledge, i.e. observational knowledge (which is expressed in statements such as “This is green”). The two kinds of knowledge, for Sellars, come in a single package: they mutually presuppose each other, so that in order to have either of them one must have both of them. The acquisition of empirical knowledge, for Sellars, involves “a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations” which resemble expressions of observational knowledge. But such a resemblance is only “superficial.” Similarly, I am suggesting, it is possible that the acquisition of the capacity to form and understand articulate propositions is built on a history of manifesting verbal habits which resemble the use of sub-propositional logical

\(^1\) Sellars 1997, §37, p. 77.
units. But the acquisition of that capacity does not require that this resemblance be anything more than superficial.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have defended the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle from a number of objections. I have also argued that a certain class of apparent counterexamples may be dealt with by adopting a more general version of that construal of the Context Principle. In the next chapter, I am going to criticize a weaker construal of the Context Principle which is often attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein.
Chapter 7

The Hybrid View

1. The Hybrid View

In this chapter I am going to criticize an interpretation of the Context Principle which posits some form of dependence of sub-propositional meaning on propositional meaning, but not as strong a dependence as the one posited by the construal of the principle that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein. As I am going to show, this weaker understanding of the principle has often been presented as an interpretation or charitable emendation of what Frege and Wittgenstein actually wrote. I will refer to it as the “Hybrid View.” (The reasons for this admittedly contentious labeling will emerge in the course of the chapter.) The view is committed to the following claims:

*The Hybrid View:* The meanings of words are conceptually dependent on the meanings of propositions, but only in a general way. We can only make sense of word-meaning as a possible contribution to propositional meaning. But a word may actually have a logical meaning, on particular occasions, prior to and independently of the actual logical meanings of the propositions in which it occurs on those occasions.
The differences between the Hybrid View and the construal of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein (to which I shall here continue to refer, as I did in the previous chapter, as the “Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle”) become clearly visible if we look at their respective accounts of the following related issues.

1) The meaning of isolated words. The Hybrid View allows words to actually have a sub-propositional logical meaning even on those occasions in which they occur in isolation. Words may retain the same meaning that they have when they are logically working parts of meaningful proposition even when they are not logically working parts of any meaningful proposition. By contrast, according to the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, an isolated word may retain only its established logical meanings (which are however mere potentialities) and its non-logical meanings (which may be actualities, but are not the sort of meaning with which the Context Principle is concerned, i.e. the sort of meaning that is relevant for understanding the truth conditions and inferential relations of propositions).

2) The nature of nonsense. The Hybrid View leaves room for the substantial conception of nonsense and for the weak version of the austere conception of nonsense, as these views were defined in Chapter 5. Words may actually have a sub-propositional logical meaning even when they occur in nonsensical combinations. By contrast, the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle rules out the substantial conception of nonsense and requires at least the moderate version of the austere conception of nonsense, according to which, if a combination of words lacks actual propositional logical meaning, all of its parts lack actual sub-propositional logical meaning too.

3) The understanding of new propositions and the nature of linguistic stability. As we saw in Chapter 6, Section 6, for the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle we
may proceed under the reasonable assumption that words, by default, are used on new occasions in conformity with their established meanings. But this assumption is always defeasible. We can say to have \textit{conclusively} identified the sub-propositional logical meaning that a word actually has on a particular occasion only when we have identified the contribution that the word makes, \textit{on that occasion}, to the expression of a complete propositional content. By contrast, according to the Hybrid View, we may conclusively identify the sub-propositional logical meaning that a word actually has on given occasion \textit{without} having to draw on our understanding of the complete propositional content, if any, that the word contributes to express on that occasion. And this leaves room for the possibility of \textit{unilaterally deriving} the meaning of at least \textit{some} propositions from the meanings of their parts.

It is worth emphasizing that the Hybrid View differs not only from the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle, but also from the more general version of Context Principle that I discussed in the previous chapter (Section 6). According to that version of the principle, words can have actual sub-propositional logical meanings even when they do \textit{not} contribute to the meaning of a complete proposition, but only if they make an actual contribution to the performance of some \textit{other} kind of complete speech act, different from the assertion or mere expression of thoughts about what is the case. For the Hybrid View, on the contrary, words may have actual sub-propositional logical meaning regardless of whether they make an actual contribution to the performance of \textit{any} kind of complete speech act.

The motivations and attractions of the Hybrid View become clear when it is placed in its dialectical context.
2. The Hybrid View in dialectical context

The Hybrid View seeks to occupy a middle ground between the two extreme positions that I described in the Introduction (Section 3), i.e. Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism, which admit only of unilateral forms of dependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. Unlike Unilateral Contextualism, the Hybrid View recognizes that the meanings of articulate propositions depend on the meanings of their constituent words: words have a meaning of their own and make a contribution to the meanings of the propositions in which they occur. But unlike Semantic Atomism, the Hybrid View does not maintain that meaningful words occur in meaningful propositions only *accidentally*. As we have seen, for the Hybrid View the meaning of a word can only be specified in terms of its *possible* contribution to the meanings of complete propositions. In this sense, for the Hybrid View the meanings of words depend on the meanings of complete propositions. Thus, like the view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein, the Hybrid View posits a form of interdependency between propositional and sub-propositional meaning, even though it is a weaker form of interdependency.

The main attraction of the Hybrid View is that it seems to give us *everything* that we get from the view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein, *plus* some extra payoff. By construing propositional and sub-propositional meaning as *interdependent*, the Hybrid View seems to avoid the implausible implications of Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism, doing justice to all the compositionalist and contextualist truisms that are vindicated by the stronger interdependency thesis. But by positing a *weaker* form of interdependency, the Hybrid View seems to be able to retain *some* of the bottom-up explanatory ambitions of Semantic Atomism.
The Hybrid View cannot retain all the bottom-up explanatory ambitions of Semantic Atomism. By recognizing that the meanings of words are dependent on the meanings of complete propositions, albeit only in a general manner, the Hybrid View rules out any bottom-up account of how language in general can “get off the ground”: since word-meanings can only be specified as possible contributions to propositional meanings, meaningful propositions must be already in place, at least as a potentiality, if there are going to be such things as meaningful words. The Hybrid View appears also to rule out bottom-up explanations of how children acquire their first language. If word-meanings can only be specified as possible contributions to propositional meanings, then to know the meaning of a word must be to know how to use it in complete propositions; but if that is the case, it seems that one cannot learn the meaning of a word before one also learns the meanings of some propositions in which the word fulfills its function. In spite of these limitations, however, the Hybrid View is designed to leave room for a bottom-up account of our capacity to understand new propositions. As we have seen, in fact, for the Hybrid View we may unilaterally derive our understanding of at least some new propositions from our prior understanding of their parts, whose meanings may be fixed on those occasions prior to and independently of the meanings of the complete propositions.

I am going to argue that this alleged additional payoff is only a mirage. But before I do that, I want to show that I am not attacking fictional opponents
3. Proponents of the Hybrid View: Dummett, Gaskin, Glock

The Context Principle has often been taken to express some version of the Hybrid View. I will consider three interpretations of the principle that exemplify this general tendency—namely, those proposed by Michael Dummett, Richard Gaskin, and Hans-Johann Glock respectively.

Dummett’s monumental corpus contains several discussions of the Context Principle, written in the course of more than four decades and embedded in a great variety of broader discussions. Whether all the things that Dummett says about the Context Principle fit together into a coherent picture is not a trivial issue, and is not our concern. Our aim, here, is only to discuss a particularly influential aspect of Dummett’s interpretation of Frege’s Context Principle—namely, his proposal for “reconciling” Frege’s commitment to the Context Principle and Frege’s recognition of linguistic compositionality. As we anticipated in Chapter 2, Section 4, Dummett’s proposal hinges on the distinction between different “orders of priority.” For Dummett, Frege’s Context Principle should be understood as stating the priority of propositions “in the order of explanation,” whereas Frege’s remarks about linguistic compositionality should be understood as stating the priority of words “in the order of recognition”:

Frege’s account, if it is to be reduced to a slogan, could be expressed in the following way: that in the order of explanation the sense of a sentence is primary, but in the order of recognition the sense of a word is primary. [...] We [...] derive our knowledge of the sense of any given sentence from our previous knowledge of the senses of the words that compose it, together with our observation of the way in which they are combined in that sentence. It is this which I intend to express by saying that, for Frege, the sense of a word is primary, and the sense of a sentence secondary, in the order of recognition [...]}. But, when we come to give any general explanation of what it is for sentences and words to have a sense, that is, of what it is for us to grasp their sense, then the order of priority is reversed. For Frege, the sense of a word or of any expression not a sentence can be
understood only as consisting in the contribution which it makes to determining the sense of any sentence in which it may occur.\textsuperscript{1}

This view holds, contra Unilateral Contextualism, that the meanings of sentences depend on the meaning of their constituent words. It also holds, contra Semantic Atomism, that meaningful words do not occur in meaningful sentences only accidentally: what it is for a word to have a meaning can only be specified in terms of the contribution that the word makes to the meanings of the complete sentences in which it may occur. This requirement rules out a bottom-up account of language in general—i.e. an account according to which the possibility of meaningful sentences rests on the prior and independent possibility of meaningful words. Moreover, as Dummett clarifies elsewhere, the view he attributes to Frege is equally meant to rule out a bottom-up account of how particular individuals acquire their first language:

It would be absurd to maintain that we gain an understanding of any expression in advance of acquiring an ability to use sentences containing it. […] If the expression is simple and primitive […] we can only say that an understanding of it is acquired simultaneously with an understanding of some sentences containing it; anything else would be in conflict with the context principle […].\textsuperscript{2}

To know the meaning of a word is to be able to use it in complete propositions, and the meaning of indefinable expressions can only be acquired \textit{simultaneously} with an understanding of some propositions containing it. We first get into language by understanding words and propositions \textit{together}. But there is good evidence that Dummett’s interpretation, in spite of these qualifications, is meant to incorporate as much as possible the bottom-up explanation of our capacity to understand new propositions that is promised by Semantic Atomism. The meanings

\textsuperscript{1} Dummett 1981a, p. 4. See also Dummett 1981b, pp. 545-547.
\textsuperscript{2} Dummett 1981b, p. 313.
of some—and indeed most—of the propositions that we come across can be unilaterally derived from their structure and from the meanings of their parts, which are in no way dependent on the meanings of those particular propositions. Words can carry their meanings, on particular occasions, quite independently of their propositional contexts, and can be identified as meaningful units, at least on some occasions, without considering the logical contribution that they actually make, on those occasions, to the expression of complete propositional contents. That this is an intended feature of Dummett’s interpretation is shown by the fact that he attributes to Frege the substantial conception of nonsense, in the sense defined in Chapter 5. For Dummett’s Frege, “Chairman Mao is rare” is nonsensical because it illegitimately combines a proper name with a second-level concept-word. The parts of the nonsensical proposition carry the same meaning that they have on those occasions in which they are working parts of meaningful propositions; and those meanings, together with the way in which the words are combined, explain the nonsensicality of the proposition. Similarly, after we have learned the meaning of a word, we can recognize it in an indefinite number of propositional contexts prior to and independently of the recognition of the meanings of the propositions in which it actually occurs. According to Dummett’s Frege, therefore, the meaning and meaningfulness of some particular propositions can be derived from the meanings of their parts and their mode of combination in a much stronger sense than the one allowed by the construal of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

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3 See Dummett 1981a, pp. 50-51.
4 For a reconstruction of Dummett’s understanding of Frege’s Context Principle that is essentially in line with the presentation that I have offered, see Cozzo 2008, pp. 9-13. Cozzo emphasizes that words, according to Dummett’s interpretation of Frege, have “distinguishable” and “stable” meanings, and it seems clear that he attributes to Dummett’s Frege a hybridist construal of linguistic stability. According to Cozzo’s reconstruction, in fact, we can identify the
Dummett’s hybridist “two-order of priority” interpretation of Frege’s Context Principle has been extremely influential, not only as a reading of Frege, but also—and especially—as a reading of the Context Principle more generally. For many, the view that Dummett lays out is the only plausible way of construing the dictum that words really have a meaning only in the context of meaningful propositions. Any stronger or stricter understanding of that dictum—such as a view which actually holds that words really have a meaning only in the context of significant propositions!—is taken to fly in the face of the facts.

Gaskin’s recent discussion of the Context Principle testifies to the long-lasting influence of Dummett’s interpretation. Gaskin rejects as “unacceptably extreme” any version of the Context Principle that is strong enough to rule out the possibility of substantial nonsense (or “categorial nonsense,” in his terminology). Gaskin assumes that any such understanding of the principle is incompatible with the compositionality and the stability of language. Thus, he finds “ironic” that the Tractatus, to which he attributes the austere conception of nonsense, stresses the meaning of a word even when it occurs in sentences that we do not understand because they contain some words of which we do not know the meaning (p. 12), and there is no sign that Cozzo wants to talk of anything less than the actual logical meaning that the word has on those occasions.

As I warned at the beginning of this discussion, Dummett’s treatment of the Context Principle is complex and might pull at times in different directions. So, for example, in a relatively late writing, Dummett interprets Frege’s views in the light of a distinction between the “dispositional” and the “occurrent” notion of “grasping the sense of a linguistic expression” (Dummett 1993, p. 101; for a discussion of Dummett’s distinction that connects it explicitly to the question of the relation between the Context Principle and linguistic compositionality, see Picardi 2002, p. 5). Such a distinction might be a variant of the distinction that I have introduced between the identification of the established logical meaning(s) of a word and the identification of its actual logical meaning. If that is case, the view that Dummett attributes to Frege in that relatively late writing might actually be compatible with the construal of the Context Principle that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

Gaskin 2008, p. 256. For his definition of “categorial nonsense,” as opposed to “ordinary nonsense,” see p. 250.
compositionality and creativity of language. Gaskin advocates a weaker construal of the principle, according to which “sentences are metaphysically prior to words,” in the sense that “words are made for sentences.” Moreover, he explicitly draws on Dummett in order to show how the recognition of this form of sentential priority can be reconciled with the “priority” ascribed to words by the principle of compositionality:

[We] should relativize the different priorities to distinct projects or points of view. Dummett provides us with a handy characterization of the needed relativization, noting that “in the order of explanation the sense of a sentence is primary, but in the order of recognition the sense of a word is primary.” Sentences are, by definition, the smallest unit of language by means of which we can say anything, so that we must treat word-meaning as conceptually dependent on sentence-meaning: what it is for a word to have meaning is for it to be fitted to play a certain role in a sentence. That is what Dummett means by ascribing explanatory priority to sentences. But […] if we are to understand the phenomenon of creative language use […] we must regard sentence-meaning as a function of the meanings of the words composing it, and speakers’ ability to comprehend new sentences as functionally dependent on their understanding of the meanings of old words and their familiarity with grammatical modes of composition. That is what Dummett means by ascribing recognitional priority to words.

Gaskin emphasizes that this construal of the Context Principle is meant to leave room for the possibility of identifying the meanings of words “regardless of the particular sentences they occur in.” This recognition, for Gaskin, blocks the risk of rendering “mysterious” the “learning of language” and “the phenomenon of creative language use”—and by the same token, it “makes theoretical room for a peculiarly syntactic kind of nonsense distinct from ordinary nonsense”, i.e. for a kind of substantial nonsense.

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7 Gaskin 2008, p. 256.
9 Gaskin 2008, p. 258. Notice that Dummett’s Frege, as we saw above, does not appear to share Gaskin’s anxiety about language acquisition.
Finally, a very similar interpretation of the Context Principle has been recommended by Glock in the context of an examination of Wittgenstein’s conception of nonsense. He concedes that the versions of the Context Principle formulated by Frege and early Wittgenstein, under a literal interpretation, entail the austere conception of nonsense.\(^\text{10}\) However, he maintains that such a “restrictive” construal of the Context Principle is untenable, because it rules out the compositionality of language and the possibility of identifying the dictionary meanings of isolated words.\(^\text{11}\) He recommends instead a construal of the Context Principle that leaves room for substantial nonsense (or “combinatorial nonsense,” in his terminology). For the restrictive version of the principle, words “only have a meaning when they actually occur in propositions.”\(^\text{12}\) By contrast, for the non-restrictive version of the principle that Glock recommends, words must merely be 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. | The kernel of truth in contextualism is that the meaning of a word is determined by how it can be used within sentences. But it does not follow that the word has meaning only in the context of a sentence.\(^\text{13}\)

There is only a “general dependency” of the meanings of words on the meanings of propositions, and this means that words may carry the same meanings that they have when they are working

\(^\text{12}\) Glock 2004, p. 228.  
\(^\text{13}\) Glock 2004, p. 229.
parts of meaningful propositions even when they occur in isolation or in nonsensical combinations.

Notice that for none of the three variants of the Hybrid View that I have discussed there is any sense in which it is literally and strictly correct to say that words have a meaning only in meaningful propositions. As exegetical proposals, therefore, these variants of the Hybrid View—like any other variant of the Hybrid View—have the disadvantage of implying that neither Frege nor early Wittgenstein could have meant what they said when they stated their respective versions of the Context Principle. But even apart from questions of exegesis, the Hybrid View is philosophically inadequate, because inherently unstable. Or so I am going to argue.

4. The instability of the Hybrid View

My argument for the instability of the Hybrid View proceeds here in two parts. The first part aims to show that the commitment of the Hybrid View to a merely general dependency of word-meaning on propositional meaning is completely ad hoc. The second part seeks to show that there is no way in which the Hybrid View can avoid this ad hoc requirement without collapsing either into Semantic Atomism or into the strong interdependency view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

For the Hybrid View, as we have seen, a word may actually have a meaning, on particular occasions, even though it does not contribute, on those occasions, to the expressions of any complete propositional content. Thus, for the Hybrid View, the actual meaning of a word does not consist in the actual contribution that it makes, on particular occasions, to the
expression of some complete propositional content. But then it is mysterious why, in order to specify what it is for a word to actually have a meaning, we must make any sort of reference to the meanings of the propositions in which the word may occur. (This last sentence is italicized because it expresses what I take to be the crucial step of the whole argument.) The Hybrid View posits this requirement in order to avoid the implausible tenet of Semantic Atomism, namely the idea that the occurrence of meaningful words in meaningful propositions is purely accidental. But the requirement lacks any independent justification. It is completely *ad hoc*.

From this result we can now proceed to the second part of the argument, which brings out the *instability* of the Hybrid View. In order to avoid the implausible idea that the occurrence of meaningful words in meaningful propositions is purely accidental without invoking *ad hoc* requirements, the Hybrid View would have to endorse the strong interdependency view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein. But in that case, it would also have to *completely* give up the bottom-up explanatory ambitions of Semantic Atomism, thereby fully collapsing into the strong interdependency view. Conversely, in order to retain some of those bottom-up explanatory ambitions without appealing to *ad hoc* requirements, the Hybrid View would have to embrace the strong priority thesis of Semantic Atomism, according to which the meanings of words are *in no way* conceptually dependent on the meanings of the propositions in which they may occur. But in that case, it would also have to embrace the problematic idea that the occurrence of meaningful words in meaningful propositions is purely accidental, thereby fully collapsing into Semantic Atomism. The Hybrid View seeks to reject the idea that meaningful words occur in meaningful propositions only accidentally while retaining some of the bottom-up explanatory ambitions of Semantic Atomism. But there is no coherent way in which it can simultaneously satisfy these desiderata without resorting to *ad hoc* requirements.
I order to clarify what I take to be the crucial step in this argument, let’s consider the occurrence of the word “Socrates” in the proposition “Socrates is wise,” used on a particular occasion to say that Socrates is wise. The word “Socrates” makes here a logical contribution to the meaning of a complete proposition. The proposition as a whole does a certain job—it asserts that something is the case—and “Socrates” does its part: it makes a contribution to the meaning of the whole. For the Hybrid View, this contribution is not only distinguishable, but also extractible: the word “Socrates” may continue to do “its part” not only in an indefinite number of other propositional contexts (as admitted and indeed emphasized by the strong interdependency thesis that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein), but also when it occurs in isolation or in nonsensical combinations. We can visualize the Hybrid View’s account of the matter by means of a geometrical representation:

1) Socrates is wise
   a--------b--c----d

2) Socrates
   a--------b

The segment _ad_ represents the job done by the whole proposition, and the segment _ab_ represents the job done by “Socrates”—a job that it may continue to do even when it occurs all by itself. But now it is difficult to see why, in order to specify what it is for “Socrates” to “do its job,” we need to invoke the job done by _any_ complete proposition containing it—in the same way in which it would be rather difficult to see why, in order to specify what the segment _ab_ is, one should _necessarily_ refer to some longer segment of which it is a part.
5. Conclusion

Due to its instability, the Hybrid View is ultimately incapable of doing what it sets out to do—namely, to incorporate into a stable and coherent position the good insights that motivate Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism, while continuing to hang on to the idea that the meaning of at least some propositions can be unilaterally derived from the meanings of their parts and their mode of combination in the manner described by Semantic Atomism. The Hybrid View does not in fact fulfill this bottom-up explanatory ambition. Moreover, it fails to vindicate the compositionalist and contextualist truisms that motivate Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism. The Hybrid View, therefore, is in all respects less satisfactory than the stronger interdependency view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein: not only it does not offer any extra payoff, but it does not even offer the payoffs provided the alternative view. By contrast, if we endorse the view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein, we have to forego the bottom-up explanatory ambition retained by the Hybrid View. But as I have argued in previous chapters, giving up that ambition does not result in the denial of any obvious fact about language.
Conclusion

According to the view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein and defended (with a possible emendation) in my own voice, the capacity to use meaningful words, and the capacity to use words in meaningful propositions, are two inseparable aspects of the unitary capacity for articulate language. Meaningful articulate propositions are composed of parts that make their contributions to the meaning of the whole; but these parts actually have a meaning only when they are used in the context of meaningful propositions. I will conclude with some remarks connecting this position with more general philosophical issues and explaining the sense in which it can be regarded as a form of holism and anti-foundationalism.

The view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein is an application to the particular question of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning of a philosophical approach that may be called, borrowing a phrase from Clinton Tolley, *elucidatory holism.*¹ This approach holds that there are notions that cannot be *reconstructed* in terms of more primitive and independent conceptual ingredients, but can only be *elucidated* by spelling out the place that they occupy in a web of notions that are all conceptually interdependent, so that the elucidation is bound to be ultimately circular. According to the view that I have ascribed to Frege and early Wittgenstein, the notion of a meaningful articulate proposition, as well as the correlative notion of the capacity for articulate language, are among those that admit only of

¹ Tolley 2011.
elucidation, as opposed to rational reconstruction. The notion of a meaningful articulate proposition cannot be reconstructed from a prior and independent notion of “meaningful word” and a prior and independent notion of “logical combination,” as maintained by Semantic Atomism; and it cannot be reconstructed from a prior and independent notion of “meaningful proposition” and a prior and independent notion of “logical segmentation,” as maintained by Unilateral Contextualism. Rather, the relevant notions of meaningful articulate proposition and meaningful word are conceptually interdependent.

When the reconstructive approach is applied to concepts that pertain to our mental capacities, it creates maximally hospitable conditions for the development of foundationalist positions; and conversely, the hope of foundationalist positions often provides part of the motivation for pursuing reconstructive analyses of the concepts involved in the specification of our mental capacities.

The term “foundationalism,” as I am here using it, applies generally to accounts of the exercises of our mental capacities. We can have, for example, foundationalist accounts of perceptual experience, or of intentional action, or of singular thought. A foundationalist account of a given capacity holds that its exercise involves the exercise of simpler and less problematic capacities that serve as the basis or foundation for the exercise of the more complex and problematic capacity—where the simpler and less problematic character of the capacities that fulfill the foundational role is given by the fact that they can be successfully exercised regardless of whether the more complex and problematic capacity is also successfully exercised. Accounts of this sort invoke a notion of foundation that is analogous to the sense in which a building has foundations: a building presupposes the foundations on which it stands, and these foundations are more solid that the building they support, because they may stay in place even when the
building collapses, but not the other way around. Thus, for example, a foundationalist account of perceptual experience may hold that the capacity of entertaining perceptual experiences disclosing how things stand in our surroundings (e.g. the experience of seeing that there is a red car in front of me) rests on the capacity of entertaining relevant types of “inner states” (e.g. empiricist “ideas” or “sense data”), where the latter capacity can be successfully exercised even when the former is not (regardless of whether I succeed or not in seeing a red car in front of me, I can succeed anyway in entertaining certain sense data). Similarly, a foundationalist account of intentional action may hold that our capacity to act intentionally (e.g. raise our hand) rests on the capacity to carry out inner actions (e.g. “tryings”), where the latter capacity can be successfully exercised even when the former is not (regardless of whether I succeed in raising my hand, I can succeed anyway in “trying” to raise my hand).²

Foundationalist accounts presuppose that the notions involved in the specification of the capacities that are supposed to serve as foundations are at least to a certain extent independent of the notions involved in the specification of the more problematic capacity that is supposed to be in need of foundations. If a “sense datum” were a conceptually inseparable aspect of an episode of perceptual experience disclosing how things stand in our surroundings, it could not serve as the desired sort of “foundation” for perceptual experiences, because one could have it only by also having the relevant perceptual experience: the capacity to enjoy sense data would be as problematic (or unproblematic), and as fallible, as the capacity to enjoy perceptual experiences disclosing features of our surroundings. In order to figure in any sort of foundationalist account of perceptual experience, sense data must be capable of presenting themselves to a subject, at

² Notice that the term “foundationalism,” as I am using it, has a much wider application than other common employments of the word. In particular, a foundationalist theory in the present sense does not have to concern epistemological issues.
least on some occasions, even though the subject is not entertaining any relevant perceptual experience. Thus, even if the notion of a sense datum were conceptually dependent on the notion of a perceptual experience, the dependence would have to be sufficiently weak. It is clear, however, that foundationalist accounts can fully flourish and pursue their highest ambitions when they assume that the notions involved in the specification of the capacities that are supposed to fulfill the role of foundations are in no way conceptually dependent on the notions specifically involved in the characterization of the capacities that are supposedly in need of foundation. And here we see that reconstructive analyses of notions pertaining to our mental capacities are optimally suited for foundationalist projects.

Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism adopt reconstructive analyses of the notion of a meaningful articulate proposition and promise foundationalist accounts of our capacity for articulate language. Exercises of this capacity are supposed to rest on exercises of prior, independent, and putatively less problematic capacities. According to the bottom-up account proposed by Semantic Atomism, the more fundamental capacities are the capacity to use and understand meaningful words, and the capacity to use and recognize modes of logical combination of meaningful words. According to the top-down account proposed by Unilateral Contextualism, the more fundamental capacities are the capacity to use and understand meaningful propositions, and the capacity to segment meaningful propositions into logical parts.

The Hybrid View acknowledges a certain form of conceptual interdependence between meaningful words and meaningful propositions, and thus rejects the bottom-up and top-down reconstructive analyses proposed by Semantic Atomism and Unilateral Contextualism. The Hybrid View, just like the view that I have attributed to Frege and Wittgenstein, does not purport to give anything stronger than an elucidation (as opposed to a reconstruction) of the notion of a
meaningful articulate proposition in terms of the notion of a meaningful word and the notion of a logical combination of meaningful words. But the form of interdependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning that it posits is sufficiently weak to leave room for the hope of carrying out at least part of the foundationalist project pursued by Semantic Atomism. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Hybrid view seeks to show that the capacity to form or understand at least some articulate propositions can be based on the prior and independent capacity to recognize the meanings of their parts, together with the prior and independent capacity to identify the way in which their constituent words are put together. By contrast, the elucidation of the notion of a meaningful articulate proposition advanced by the view that I have attributed to Frege and early Wittgenstein posits a conceptual interdependence between the meanings of proposition and the meanings of their parts that is sufficiently strong to undermine any foundationalist account of our capacity to form and understand complete articulate propositions. Our capacity for articulate language cannot be factorized into—and is not founded on—any set of putatively simpler and less problematic capacities.

One of the most sustained attacks on reconstructive and foundationalist accounts of our mental capacities has been offered, in recent decades, by John McDowell. McDowell is especially concerned with the understanding of capacities that involve relations between the inner and the outer, such as the capacity for perceptual experience (which, when successfully exercised, makes facts of our surroundings perceptually present to us), or the capacity for singular thought (which, when successfully exercised, makes objects of reality present in our thought). McDowell argues that in modern, post-Cartesian philosophy there is a tendency to analyze these capacities by implementing a general strategy that he characterizes as a retreat to the internal. Such capacities are taken to involve prior and independent subjective components
that are supposed to be much less problematic than the more comprehensive capacities, and thus suitable for fulfilling the role of foundations. McDowell’s diagnosis is almost Nietzschean in spirit. Frustrated by the fallibility of our capacities for rationally engaging with the world, we try to win an inner space within whose bounds we are infallible, hoping that the achievements attainable within this safer realm can provide a basis for our forays into the external world and reassured by the fact that, if such forays turned out to be impossible (as the skeptic maintains), we would at least be granted a reasonable consolation: Maybe we are incapable, say, of gaining any knowledge of the external world, but at least we have the infallible capacity to know how things appear to us! 3

Now, the problematic that I examined in this work—i.e. the relation between meaningful words and meaningful propositions—does not directly involve questions concerning the relation between the inner and the outer, and the safer grounds invoked by foundationalist accounts of our capacity for articulate language are not presented as exercises of infallible capacities. But these differences do not render inappropriate a similar diagnosis. The firmer ground invoked by a foundationalist view does not have to be unshakable in order to serve as a foundation: it only has to be more solid than what it is supposed to support. In fact, some of the foundationalist accounts criticized by McDowell, such as the attempt to ground our knowledge of other minds on the prior and independent knowledge of their behavior, appeal to foundations that are supposed to be neither interiorized nor infallibly attainable, but only relatively less problematic. 4 Foundationalist accounts of this sort can still be considered to arise from a certain disappointment with the fallibility of the putatively more problematic capacities. I suggest, accordingly, that part of what

3 See for example McDowell 1998a, essays 8-12 and 17-18.
4 See McDowell 1998a, essay 17.
motivates foundationalist accounts of our capacity to form and understand articulate propositions—including Semantic Atomism, Unilateral Contextualism, and the Hybrid View—is the desire to alleviate the fallibility of that capacity.

The view that a certain notion is not reconstructable from independent conceptual ingredients, as well as the view that a certain capacity does not admit of foundations, cannot be deduced from any general methodological principle—say, from an adherence to “quietism,” understood as a dogmatic aversion to “constructive philosophy.” Views of this sort can only be established, in each particular case, by doing the actual work of showing, to put it crudely, that they work and that the alternatives don’t. Thus, for example, McDowell justifies his rejection of internalizing accounts of perceptual experience by arguing, in the first place, that those accounts, far from securing a foundation for empirical knowledge, inevitably lead to the skeptical conclusion that empirical knowledge is impossible (since they leave no room for the idea that perceptual appearances can make the facts perceptually present to the subject, providing undefeasible warrant for belief)—and by arguing, in the second place, that those accounts render the very idea of contentful perceptual appearances unintelligible (since the notion of a misleading perceptual appearance presupposes the notion of a perceptual appearance that discloses to the subject how things are). Similarly, I have not sought to defend the view that I attribute to Frege and Wittgenstein by showing that it complies with certain methodological or meta-philosophical principles. Rather, I have argued that such a view gives us a plausible account of propositional and sub-propositional meaning which does justice to all the relevant truisms, whereas the alternative views that I have considered are not only incapable of fulfilling their alluring foundationalist promises, but end up rendering completely unintelligible both propositional and sub-propositional meaning (as happens with Semantic Atomism and Unilateral
Contextualism), or avoid that unbearable outcome by resorting to *ad hoc* requirements that amount, at bottom, to the postulation that one can have one’s cake and eat it too (as happens with the Hybrid View). In so far as this work has a methodological moral, it can only take the form of a general advice: When we do philosophy, or try to understand the work of other philosophers, we should not forget that an elucidatory and anti-foundationalist approach is one of the options.
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