Wittgenstein, Theories of Meaning, and Linguistic Disjunctivism

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Abstract. This paper argues that Wittgenstein opposed theories of meaning, and did so for good reasons. Theories of meaning, in the sense discussed here, are attempts to explain what makes it the case that certain sounds, shapes, or movements are meaningful linguistic expressions. It is widely believed that Wittgenstein made fundamental contributions to this explanatory project. I argue, by contrast, that in both his early and later work, Wittgenstein endorsed a disjunctivist conception of language which rejects the assumption underlying the question that such theories seek to answer—namely, the assumption that the notion of a meaningful linguistic expression admits of non-circular analysis. Moreover, I give two arguments in favor of the view I ascribe to Wittgenstein: one based on later Wittgenstein’s discussion of meaning skepticism, and one based on considerations concerning the identity of linguistic expressions.

1. Introduction

I am sitting in a park, and I can hear a lot of sounds, including the gurgles of a fountain. At a certain point, my friend looks at the sky and says: ‘It is going to rain’. In uttering these words, she produces sounds. But the sounds she produces have a linguistic meaning, whereas the sounds coming from the fountain do not. What accounts for the difference? In virtue of what are certain sounds (or shapes, or movements, etc.) meaningful linguistic expressions?

This is thought to be one of the fundamental questions of the philosophy of language. Theories that try to answer it are often called ‘theories of meaning’ or (in order to distinguish them from other theoretical undertakings that go by that name) ‘foundational theories of meaning’.

The aim of such theories is to give a non-circular analysis of the notion of a meaningful linguistic expression, i.e. to reconstruct it from a number of independently intelligible conceptual ingredients. It is generally assumed that one of these ingredients is the notion of a linguistic expression, construed as a pattern of sounds, shapes, movements, etc. The real challenge—and the real locus of disagreement
between competing theories—is generally taken to lie in the identification of what must be added to a linguistic expression, construed in that manner, in order to render it meaningful.

Wittgenstein is widely considered to have made fundamental contributions to this philosophical project. Moreover, he is often taken to have made radically different contributions to that project in his early and later works. Thus, for example, some maintain that the *Tractatus* presents a *mentalistic theory of meaning*, whereas the *Investigations* champions a *use theory of meaning*.

There are commentators who have opposed this line of interpretation. For some, the fact that Wittgenstein does not aim to put forth a theory of meaning is just a consequence of the fact that he does not try to put forth any sort of theory. Others have argued that Wittgenstein is explicitly concerned to attack the idea of a theory of meaning by showing that the notion of a meaningful linguistic expression is not susceptible of non-circular analysis. This is the exegetical thesis that I will defend in this paper—as a thesis that applies to the *Tractatus* as well as to the later writings. My contribution to the debate is to defend this thesis by focusing on Wittgenstein’s conception of the relation between *meaningful linguistic expressions*, *mere linguistic expressions* (by which I here mean occurrences of linguistic expressions that lack any meaning), and *linguistic expressions in general*. For Wittgenstein, I shall argue, both the notion of a mere linguistic expression and the generic notion of a linguistic expression depend conceptually on the primitive notion of a meaningful linguistic expression. Such a notion does not admit of non-circular analysis, but only of what might best be termed *elucidation*: While we may distinguish various elements in its structure, each element is intelligible only in light of the unitary notion under elucidation.\(^2\) I will show that Wittgenstein, in both his early and later writings, construes meaningful linguistic expressions as ‘signs in use’, but does not maintain or assume that the relevant notions of either *sign* or *use* can be specified independently of the prior and unitary notion of *sign in use*. The conception of language that I will attribute to Wittgenstein, I shall argue, can be characterized as a form of disjunctivism and is structurally analogous to the forms of disjunctivism defended by John McDowell in the philosophy of perception and other areas of philosophy.
I will begin with an examination of the Tractarian construal of the relation between ‘signs’, ‘symbols’, and ‘use’ (§§2-3), and then consider some remarks from the Blue Book and the Investigations about the relation between ‘dead signs’, ‘living signs’, and ‘use’ (§4). I will then outline two arguments in support of the view I attribute to Wittgenstein (§§5-6), and conclude with some observations about the evolution of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and the shape that a philosophical investigation of language can take when it forgoes the attempt to develop a theory of meaning (§7).

2. The Tractatus on signs, symbols, and use

In the Tractatus, the relationship between a linguistic expression (such as a word, phrase, and sentence) and a meaningful linguistic expression is discussed under the heading of the distinction between ‘sign’ (Zeichen) and ‘symbol’ (Symbol) respectively. The distinction is drawn in two sets of remarks that comment on 3.3, which contains a reformulation of Frege’s Context Principle.

3.3 Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.

Immediately after this remark, Wittgenstein goes on to introduce, in the 3.31s, the notion of symbol. Then, in the 3.32s, he defines the notion of sign, discusses how signs are related to symbols, and explains the role of use in constituting the relationship between signs and symbols. As we shall see, this order of presentation can be taken to have great philosophical significance.

The starting point of Wittgenstein’s discussion of the sign/symbol distinction is the notion of a significant proposition, i.e. the notion of a logically articulated picture of reality, which presents a possible way in which things might stand, and says that they do indeed so stand (4.021-4.022). The starting point, in other words, is language fully at work. Symbols are defined in terms of significant propositions:

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

Significant propositions may share with one another various features that are essential for their sense, namely various features that characterize their form and content. Two propositions, for example, may share a name that refers to a certain object; such a name characterizes both their form and their content, and is therefore a symbol. A name, and a sub-propositional symbol more generally, is the ‘common characteristic mark of a class of propositions’ (3.311). For the sake of illustration, let’s suppose that the word ‘Socrates’, understood as the name of a certain philosopher, counts for the *Tractatus* as a name. This name, then, is what is common to *all* the possible propositions in which the word ‘Socrates’ fulfills the logical function of standing for that specific person. As such, it is properly presented by a ‘propositional variable’ (3.312-3.315), i.e. a variable—say ‘…Socrates…’—whose values are all the significant propositions in which the word ‘Socrates’ fulfills the same logical function. A contentful sub-propositional symbol can be singled out for special attention only by *abstracting* from the features that all the propositions in which it may occur do *not* have in common. In accordance with the Context Principle, sub-propositional meaning presupposes propositional meaning.

The name of a certain object characterizes both the form and the content of the propositions in which it occurs. However, among the features that propositions can have in common with one another which are essential for their sense, there are also *purely formal* features. Two propositions, for example, may be characterized by the fact that they contain a name (standing for an object), even though they do not contain the *same* name (standing for the *same* object). Similarly, two propositions may exhibit the same propositional form or ‘logical prototype’ (3.315). These features, like contentful sub-propositional symbols, are properly presented by propositional variables; but the variables in questions will not contain any constant expression. The purely formal feature shared by all subject-predicate propositions, for example, will be presented by a variable such as ‘Φ(x)’; similarly, the purely formal feature shared by all the propositions that contain a name will be presented by a variable such as ‘…x…’. Purely formal
propositional features can be singled out for special consideration only by *abstracting* from the other logical features of the propositions whose sense they characterize, and are therefore as dependent on significant propositions as contentful sub-propositional symbols. I will refer to them as ‘purely formal symbols’.7

According to 3.31, complete propositions are themselves symbols. As we are told in 3.313, they are ‘limiting case[s]’ of symbols. Significant propositions are the starting points of the process of abstraction through which we can single out for special consideration contentful sub-propositional symbols and purely formal symbols. Propositions are, in effect, symbols that involve a zero degree of abstraction from the logical features of significant propositions.

By drawing on the already introduced notion of symbol, the *Tractatus* eventually defines the notion of sign:

3.32 The sign is what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol.

The same order of presentation and definition appears in an earlier part of the book, where signs are first mentioned:

3.1 In the proposition the thought is expressed perceptibly through the senses.

3.11 We use the sensibly perceptible sign (sound or written sign, etc.) of a proposition as a projection of the possible situation. […]

Propositional signs are characterized, from the very beginning, as sensibly perceptible items *belonging to propositions*, only after propositions themselves have already been characterized as sensibly perceptible expressions of thoughts, i.e. as sensibly perceptible logical pictures of reality.

After the official definition of sign given in 3.32, the *Tractatus* goes on to claim that the same sign may belong to different symbols:

3.321 Two different symbols can therefore have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common—they then signify in different ways.
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. In other words, signs can be ambiguous. One of the examples given by the *Tractatus* is the English word ‘is’, which symbolizes in at least three different ways: as the copula, as the sign of identity, and as the sign of existence (3.323).

Since identity of sign does not suffice to determine identity of symbol, we cannot read off the symbol directly from the sign:

3.326 In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use.

In order to identify a symbol, we need to consider how the sign is used to characterize the sense of the significant proposition in which it occurs. The *Tractatus* contrasts ordinary language, which is characterized by sign/symbol ambiguities, with an ideal language specifically designed to avoid such ambiguities (3.323-3.325). The introduction of a language of this sort would ease considerably the difficulty of telling the symbol by the sign, but would not dispense altogether with the need of attending to significant use. From the fact that a person utters a sign that appears to belong to a certain ideal 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 than some other language L*, which may overlap with L in many significant respects. *Which* language a person is speaking on a particular occasion is fully settled only by the way in which her signs symbolize in complete propositions. Thus, in accordance with the completely general statement made in 3.326, we always need to look at significant use if we want to identify the symbol in the sign.

Since every symbol is also a sign, and since difference in use suffices to determine difference in symbol, a symbol may be described 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:
3.11 We use the sensibly perceptible sign (sound or written sign, etc.) of a proposition as a projection of the possible situation. [...]  
3.12 [...] The proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.

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

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

By cutting the middle term of these last two remarks (which appear consecutively in the text), we obtain the statement that a significant proposition is an applied propositional sign. The 3.3s, by introducing the sign/symbol distinction, provide the terminology for rephrasing more sharply the idea expressed in the two sets of remarks that I have just quoted, which frame most of the discussion of the 3s. A contentful propositional symbol is a propositional sign that is used to picture reality. And a symbol more generally—whether propositional or sub-propositional, and whether contentful or purely formal—is a sign that is used to characterize the sense of a significant proposition.

Our question, now, is how to understand the characterization of symbols as signs in use. Is it meant as a non-circular analysis of symbols—and thus as part of a theory of meaning in the sense specified in §1? Or does it belong to an elucidation that is meant to be ultimately circular?

3. Three accounts of the sign/symbol relation

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

a) A sign is what is sensibly perceptible in 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:
c) The same sign can be common to different symbols.

Furthermore, there is good reason to ascribe to the Tractatus an idea that follows naturally from (b) and (c):

d) A sign, on some of its occurrences, may not belong to any symbol.  

Just as a sign can be put, on different occasions, to a different significant use, and belong therefore to different symbols, so a sign can be put, on some occasions, to no significant use, and belong therefore to no symbol. What we have in such cases are mere signs, i.e. occurrences of signs lacking both form and content. (I take it that examples of mere signs, for the Tractatus, are signs occurring in ‘nonsensical pseudo-propositions’; cf. 4.1272 and 5.473-5.4733.) Finally, we noticed a fact about the order of presentation and definition followed by the Tractatus:

e) The notion of sign is defined in terms of the already introduced notion of symbol.

I am going to contrast three accounts of the Tractarian construal of the sign/symbol relation. First, an account that is consistent with (a)-(d), but attributes no philosophical significance to (e). Secondly, an account that attributes philosophical significance to (e), but is inconsistent with (c) and (d). And lastly, the account I want to recommend, which is consistent with (a)-(d) and attributes philosophical significance to (e).

According to the first account, the Tractatus analyzes the notion of symbol into two independently intelligible conceptual ingredients: the notion of sign and a relevant notion of use. Symbols form a species of the genus comprising all signs, where both the genus and the differentia that singles out the species (i.e. the property of being-in-use) can be specified without any reference to the species to be singled out. Given the set of all sign-occurrences, we can ask which ones are occurrences of symbols, and the answer is given by indicating the extra feature that the occurrence of a sign must possess in order
to be the occurrence of a symbol, namely the property of being put to significant use. Sign-occurrences that lack this extra feature are mere signs. Among all the occurrences of a particular sign, those that receive the same significant use are occurrences of the same symbol, and those that receive a different significant use are occurrences of different symbols. I shall refer to this interpretation as the *Extra-Feature Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation.*

It is essential to this interpretation that the relevant notions of sign and significant use do not presuppose what is supposed to be generated from their combination—namely, the notion of symbol. So Tractarian signs should be construed, say, as geometrical shapes, in accordance with a formalist, post-Hilbertian perspective which has been very influential in the philosophy of language of the last century. The Tractarian notion of significant use can be specified very differently by different advocates of the Extra-Feature Account, depending on their additional exegetical commitments. Here it is helpful to distinguish two versions of the Extra-Feature Account, which I will call (stipulatively) the ‘Realist Reading’ and the ‘Formalist Reading’ (with the initial letters capitalized):

**Realist Reading.** A simple symbol is a sign that has been correlated, through appropriate mental acts or ostensive definitions, to a determinate feature of reality—where the sign, the act of correlation, and the feature of reality can be specified independently of the notion of symbol. Complex symbols are combinations of such items.

**Formalist Reading.** A simple symbol is a sign that is combined with other signs in accordance with a certain set of combinatorial rules—where the sign, the combinatorial rules, and the actual combinatorial patterns can be specified independently of the notion of symbol. Complex symbols are combination of such items.

Thus, according to the Realist Reading, a simple contentful symbol (i.e. a meaningful Tractarian name) is something like a geometrical shape that has been attached to an
object, whereas according to the Formalist Reading, it is something like a geometrical shape that is combined with other shapes in accordance with a set of combinatorial rules, so as to exemplify a certain combinatorial pattern.

The Extra-Feature Account informs some influential interpretations of the *Tractatus*. At least some of the commentators belonging to the so-called ‘realist’ tradition of *Tractatus* interpretation have defended some version of the Realist Reading.\(^{10}\) David Pears, for example, insists that the *Tractatus* aims to explain ‘how language can get off the ground’ (Pears 1987: 100, 101, 109, 110). Any interpretation that attributes to the *Tractatus* an account of language that is ultimately ‘circular’ is not even considered as a possible candidate.\(^{11}\) Language gets off the ground, according to Pears’ reading, thanks to an ‘initial act of attachment’ of names to objects (Pears 1987: 103). This act fixes, at one and the same time, both the logico-syntactical properties of names (i.e. their logical categories and combinatorial possibilities) and their specific content (i.e. the objects they stand for). As Pears puts it, ‘Once a name has been attached to an object the nature of the objects takes over and controls the logical behavior of the name, causing it to make sense in some sentential contexts but not in others’ (Pears 1987: 88).\(^{12}\) The *Tractatus*, to be sure, does say that ‘[t]he possibility of propositions is based upon the principle of the representation of objects by signs’ (4.0312). But it says notoriously very little, if anything, about how the correlation between names and objects is supposed to be established.\(^{13}\) Pears is less inclined than other realist readers to fill out the Tractarian view with ideas that are not explicitly mentioned in the book.\(^{14}\) But he does hold that for the *Tractatus* ‘a name may first be attached to an object in something like the way envisaged by Russell’ (Pears 1987: 102-103), where Russell thought that primitive signs have a meaning by standing for entities with which the speaker is immediately acquainted. Moreover, Pears asserts that the *Tractatus* is vulnerable to later Wittgenstein’s critique of ‘isolated ostensive definition’ (Pears 2007: 16), with the implication that the *Tractatus* is committed, however inchoately, to the idea that language is founded on ostensive definitions.

Realist readings have been criticized by commentators belonging to the so-called ‘anti-metaphysical’ tradition of *Tractatus* interpretation.\(^{15}\) These commentators emphasize the parts of the *Tractatus* that discuss the connection between meaning and
use and read in their light the remarks about the name-object correlation. Consider for example these passages from a paper by Peter Winch:

What distinguishes an expression which has a meaning (and is, therefore, a name) from one which does not can only be something to do with its role in language. (Winch 1987: 7)

To learn the meanings of names is to learn how they combine in sentences. (Winch 1987: 11)

The discussion of what it is for a name to function in a certain way in a symbolism is a discussion of what it is for it to have a reference. […] [It is a] misunderstanding to suppose that a name’s meaning is something other than and prior to its logico-syntactical role. (Winch 1987: 10)

If one assumes that some version of the Extra-Feature Account must be correct, passages like these will naturally appear to express a commitment to the Formalist Reading.\textsuperscript{16} Whether this is an accurate interpretation of Winch and other anti-metaphysical readers, or whether their view is that the Tractatus seeks only to elucidate the notion of a meaningful sign (where the elucidation is supposed to be ultimately circular), is not a question that we need to settle on this occasion.

For any version of the Extra-Feature Account, the fact that the Tractatus defines signs after and in terms of symbols is philosophically insignificant. But what would it be to think otherwise? One option is to hold that a sign, for the Tractatus, is a conceptually inseparable aspect of a 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 the same symbol. Call this the No-Distance Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation. Such a reading fits well with the Tractarian characterization of a sign as ‘what is sensibly perceptible in the symbol’. But it rules out the possibility of mere signs, and 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.

The No-Distance Account is not the only way of according philosophical significance to the order of presentation and definition followed by the Tractatus. It is possible to hold that signs are conceptually dependent on symbols, but in a manner that
allows signs to be common to different symbols and leaves room for occurrences of signs that are not occurrences of any symbol. This takes us to what I shall call—for reasons that will become evident in a moment—the *Disjunctivist Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation*.

The account runs as follows. The notion of 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 maintained by the Extra-Feature Account. Given the notion of symbol, the notion of mere sign is defined as what *merely appears* to be a symbol, and the generic notion of sign is defined disjunctively as what is *either* a symbol (i.e. a sign in use) *or* a mere sign. Symbols and mere signs are species of the genus comprising all signs; but such species are not defined in terms of the genus and an independently intelligible differentia. Rather, the genus is defined as the disjunction of the species, and the species of mere signs is conceptually dependent on the species of symbols, since nothing could *merely appear* to be a symbol if nothing could actually *be* a symbol. The notion of an ambiguous sign is also defined disjunctively in terms of its species. We begin with the conceptually primitive notion of a plurality of symbols which misleadingly appear to be the same symbol; we then define the notion of a mere sign which looks like each of those symbols without being any of them; and finally, we define the notion of a sign which is either one of those symbols or the correspondent mere sign.

This account is analogous to the disjunctivist positions advanced by John McDowell in several different areas of philosophy. With regard to the philosophy of perception, for example, McDowell opposes the view that *perceptual appearances which disclose how things stand* on the one hand, and *deceptive perceptual appearances* on the other hand, share an independently intelligible ‘common factor’ in virtue of which they both count as *appearances*, and are distinguished from one another by some independently intelligible extra feature. In place of this sort of account, McDowell proposes 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’ (McDowell 1998a: 386), where the former disjunct is conceptually dependent on the latter, since a mere appearance is what merely looks like a disclosing appearance, and nothing could merely look like a disclosing appearance if nothing could actually be such a thing.18

According to the Disjunctivist Account, different occurrences of the same sign may be occurrences of different symbols or of no symbol. In this sense, a sign may ‘be common’ or ‘belong’ to different symbols, as well as to mere signs. But this does not mean that a sign may belong to different symbols and to mere signs as an independently intelligible, conceptually separable common factor. The occurrences of 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. Rather, the sign that is common to different symbols and to mere signs is defined disjunctively in terms of what it is common to. Thus, to use a Tractarian example, the word or sign ‘is’ is common to at least three different symbols: the copula, the sign of identity, 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 item that merely appears to be an occurrence of each of those symbols.

The Disjunctivist Account does not deny that each occurrence of a sign may be described by means of a conceptual apparatus that makes no reference to symbols—say, in terms of purely geometrical or acoustic properties. And it does not deny that, for some or any given sign, there might be properties specifiable independently of any symbol (such as the property of exemplifying a certain geometrical shape or acoustic pattern) which belong to all and only the occurrences of the sign. But the existence of such properties, for the Disjunctivist Account, does not follow a priori from the existence of signs. All the occurrences of a sign have the property of appearing (either misleadingly or non-misleadingly) to be occurrences of each of the symbols to which the sign belongs; but this does not entail that there is a set of symbol-independent properties which single out all the occurrences of the sign.

So far we have seen that for the Disjunctivist Account, the Tractarian characterization of a symbol as a sign in use involves a notion of sign that presupposes
the notion of a sign in use. The same holds for the other element figuring in the characterization—namely, the notion of use. The Disjunctivist Account opposes in this respect both the Formalist and the Realist Reading. Against the Formalist Reading, it holds that the sort of use that belongs to symbols cannot be specified in non-semantic terms. All symbols, in the *Tractatus*, are defined in terms of significant propositions. These are signs in use. But the relevant sort of use consists in *making inferentially interconnected, truth-evaluable claims about reality*. According to the Disjunctivist Account, no set of rules for the manipulation of, say, geometrical shapes, and no actual pattern in their manipulation, can turn a combination of geometrical shapes into something that is *true or false*, or into something that is *inferentially related* to other propositions, or into something that *refers* to an object. Rule-governed combinations of geometrical shapes are as devoid of semantic properties as, say, the decorative motifs printed on a piece of wallpaper—which may indeed have been designed by combining items belonging to a basic set of decorative patterns in accordance with a certain set of combinatorial rules. At the same time, the Disjunctivist Account holds, against the Realist Reading, that semantic properties such as truth, reference, and validity cannot be secured to signs through acts of correlation which do not presuppose the use of signs in significant propositions. The Disjunctivist Account does not deny that, for the *Tractatus*, we may give a new meaning to an already existing sign, or give a meaning to a newly introduced sign. The *Tractatus* allows explicitly for stipulative definitions (4.241). But stipulative definitions, like other kinds of definition, are for the *Tractatus* ‘symbolic rule[s]’ (4.241), i.e. ‘rules for the translation of one language into another’ (3.343). A stipulative definition draws on our pre-existing capacity to put a sign to significant use and tells us that we may use a different sign to do the same job. If one wishes, one may say that stipulative definitions of simple signs ‘correlate signs with objects’. But such ‘correlations’, far from being what allows language to ‘get off the ground’, presuppose the use of signs in significant propositions.

Similar points, according to the Disjunctivist Account, hold for the sort of use that belongs to purely formal symbols. We may introduce, say, a set of geometrical shapes, sort them out into categories, lay down rules for their combination, and combine them accordingly. But this kind of ‘use’ does not give the shapes a logical syntax: it does not
turn them into names, predicates, etc. Purely formal symbols cannot be analyzed in the way envisioned by the Formalist Reading. Nor can they be analyzed, as the Realist Reading maintains, in terms of acts of correlation intelligible independently of signs in significant use. We may stipulate that we shall use a certain sign as, say, a name, standing for an object, even though we have not decided yet which object it is to stand for. But such stipulations work as rules of translation, presupposing the use of signs in significant propositions. They ask us to abstract from the manner in which certain signs are used to characterize the content of significant propositions, focusing exclusively on the manner in which they are used to characterize their form; and then they tell us that we may use the sign under definition in that way. The sort of use that belongs to a purely formal symbol cannot be specified independently of the notion of a sign that is used to characterize the form but not the content of significant propositions, which in turn is just an abstraction from the notion of a sign that is used to characterize both the form and the content of significant propositions.

This concludes my presentation of the three alternative accounts of the relation between signs and symbols in the Tractatus. The No-Distance Account is not a live exegetical option, because it rules out sign/symbol ambiguities and mere signs. But the Disjunctivist Account provides a viable alternative to the Extra-Feature Account. The Disjunctivist Account is supported by the order of presentation and definition of the Tractatus, and by the fact that the Tractatus never refers to signs as shapes or sounds, or otherwise in terms that can be uncontroversially taken to be intelligible independently of symbols. In §5 and §6, I will present two arguments in favor of a disjunctivist conception of language—and those arguments, via the principle of charity, should give further support to the Disjunctivist Account. Before we look at those arguments, however, I want to suggest that Wittgenstein continued in his later work to oppose theories of meaning and to endorse a disjunctivist conception of language.

4. Later Wittgenstein on living signs, dead signs, and use
Later Wittgenstein often refers to meaningful linguistic expressions as ‘living signs’ and discusses their relation to ‘dead signs’ and ‘use’. The following passages, from the *Blue Book* and the *Investigations* respectively, are representative:

Frege ridiculed the formalist conception of mathematics by saying that the formalists confused the unimportant thing, the sign, with the important thing, the meaning. Surely, one wishes to say, mathematics does not treat of dashes on a bit of paper. Frege’s idea could be expressed thus: the propositions of mathematics, if they were just complexes of dashes, would be dead and utterly uninteresting, whereas they obviously have a kind of life. And the same, of course, could be said of any proposition: Without a sense, or without the thought, a proposition would be an utterly dead and trivial thing. And further it seems clear that no adding of inorganic signs can make the proposition live. And the conclusion which one draws from this is that what must be added to the dead signs in order to make a live proposition is something immaterial, with properties different from all mere signs.

But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use. (Wittgenstein 1958: 4)

Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life?—In use it is alive. Is life breathed into it there?—Or is the use its life? (Wittgenstein 2001: §432)

The relation between these passages and Frege’s views is a complex issue and exceeds the scope of this paper. Our question, here, is how to understand Wittgenstein’s characterization of a living sign as a sign in use.

One option is to hold that a living sign, for Wittgenstein, is the result of the combination of two ingredients, the ‘dead sign’ and its ‘use’, each of which is intelligible independently of the notion of a living sign. This reading has the same structure of the Extra-Feature Account of the relation between Tractarian signs and Tractarian symbols. The point of Wittgenstein’s characterization, according to this reading, is to answer the question: What must be added to a dead sign in order to give it semantic life?

This approach to the philosophy of language of later Wittgenstein is not uncommon among commentators. It is clearly exemplified, for instance, by Paul Horwich’s account of Wittgenstein’s so-called ‘use-theory of meaning’. Horwich draws the following lesson from the *Blue Book* passage that I have quoted:
[Wittgenstein] wants to explain how ‘life’ is injected into signs that are otherwise ‘dead’. And his answer, to put it bluntly, is that meaning-facts reduce to underlying non-intensional facts of word use. Therefore, [...] the use of a word is not supposed to include such properties as ‘used to refer to so-and-so’ or ‘used to express such-and-such concept’; rather, it must be restricted to non-semantic aspects of use (including physical, behavioral, and certain psychological aspects). (Horwich 2010: 19)

What ‘injects’ life into the dead sign is ‘use’, construed in a way that does not presuppose linguistic or mental content. For Horwich, later Wittgenstein was ‘pretty clearly […] aiming to demystify the concept of meaning (and derivative intensional concepts such as belief and desire) by specifying, in comparatively unproblematic terms, what meaning is’ (Horwich 2010: 19).20 The ‘comparatively unproblematic terms’ to which meaning is to be reduced, according to Horwich’s ‘dispositionalist’ interpretation, are propensities to utter and internally assent to sentences in conformity with certain regularities, plus feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction issuing in acts of self-corrections.21 All the elements that figure in the base of reduction (including the notions of ‘sentence’, ‘utterance’, ‘internal assent’, ‘feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction’, and ‘self-correction’) are here supposed to be fully specifiable without any invocation of linguistic or mental content—otherwise the attempted ‘demystification’ would be unsuccessful.

It is worth noting, however, that in the passage from the Blue Book that I have quoted (or anywhere else) Wittgenstein does not actually say what Horwich claims he says—namely, that he wants to ‘explain how “life” is injected into signs that are otherwise “dead”’. For Horwich, this is obviously what Wittgenstein means. But other commentators have argued that this is not at all obvious. Ed Minar, for instance, has defended a completely different reading of the two passages quoted above. Minar notes that in the passage from the Investigations, Wittgenstein ‘does not straightforwardly affirm some thesis that […] use is the life of the sign’, but asks a question, ‘Or is the use its life?’, and does so ‘haltingly, as if to say that the answer is clearly that it depends on how you conceive of, on the one hand, the life of the sign, and on the other hand, use itself’ (Minar 2012: 288). A similar consideration can be made about the Blue Book passage, where the claim that the life of the sign is its use is not straightforwardly asserted, but is framed and put forth hesitatingly, as it were out of compulsion (‘If we had
to name something…’), so as to alert the reader that the claim may easily turn out to be misleading. The correctness of the dictum that ‘the life of the sign is its use’ depends crucially on how one construes the notions of sign and use and their mutual relationship. For Minar, the point of the two passages is not to indicate ‘a solution to the problem of the life of the sign’ (Minar 2012: 288)—by gesturing, say, to the sort of ‘use-theory of meaning’ envisioned by Horwich—but to question the idea that the life of a sign can be conceived as any sort of extra ‘ingredient’ that has the power of turning a dead sign into a living one:

[Wittgenstein] is not thinking of life as a force that closes the gap [between sign and application]; rather, he questions what one has to have done to the sign—as the sign it is, in its use—to have killed it, to have come to think that it must be resurrected. In other words, he questions the role that the life-giving ingredient would play. (Minar 2012: 288)

According to this alternative reading, later Wittgenstein is not trying to show how a living sign can be obtained from independently intelligible ingredients, namely a ‘dead sign’ and some sort of ‘use’. On the contrary, he is vindicating the irreducible unity of the living sign.22

Here I endorse Minar’s approach. And since I see no reason for holding that Wittgenstein, in his later writings, rejected the notion of a sign that can have, on different occurrences, different meanings or no meaning at all, I suggest that he continued to accept the disjunctivist conception of language that I have ascribed to the Tractatus. A meaningful sign can be described as a sign in use; but this is an elucidation, not a non-circular analysis. Given the primitive notion of a sign in use, we can make sense of a mere sign as something that merely appears to be a sign in use, and of a sign in general as what is either a sign in use or a mere sign.

A terminological clarification will be useful at this point. As in earlier parts of this paper, I refer to occurrences of signs which lack any meaning (i.e. both form and content) as ‘mere signs’. For the disjunctivist view, mere signs are items that merely look like meaningful signs. Since Wittgenstein speaks of meaningful signs as ‘living signs’, it would be natural to refer to mere signs as ‘dead signs’. Just as we may construe the generic notion of a body as what is either a living body or a dead body, conceived in turn
as what used to be (not too far in the past) a living body, so we can say that, according to the disjunctivist interpretation, Wittgenstein construes the generic notion of a sign as what is either a living sign or a dead sign, defined in turn as what merely appears to be a living sign. While this terminology has its merits, it does not reflect the way in which Wittgenstein actually speaks of ‘dead signs’ in the passages considered above. In those passages, Wittgenstein gives voice to a philosophical mood which employs the living/dead contrast in a peculiar register—one in which it makes sense to say that something alive may be considered as dead. For example, you may consider the sentence that you are now reading as a ‘dead complex of dashes’, or a living body as a dead bundle of atoms. While this register is not exclusive to philosophy, it differs from more common ways of talking about living and dead things. In the sense in which we speak of a corpse as a dead body, we may not consider a living body, or a stone, as dead. That would simply amount to ‘considering’ something as what it is not—namely, to mistake it for something else. Similarly, under the disjunctivist construal of mere signs, you may not consider the words that you are now reading as ‘mere signs’, because they are not (hopefully!) items that merely look like meaningful signs. By contrast, any particular occurrence of a sign may be considered as a ‘dead sign’ in Wittgenstein’s sense—i.e., it may be truly described by employing a conceptual apparatus that makes no reference to meaningful signs. Thus what Wittgenstein calls, in the quoted passages, ‘dead signs’ (or, equivalently, ‘mere signs’) should not be equated to what the disjunctivist view calls ‘mere signs’. (In what follows, I will always employ the phrase ‘dead sign’ in Wittgenstein’s sense.)

Minar’s appeal to the image of ‘killing the sign’ might strike some readers as histrionic; but there is a sense in which it helps to bring out an important feature of the view that, following Minar, I am ascribing to Wittgenstein. That image emphasizes the fact that giving up the conceptual resources that allow us to describe something as a sign is our choice. The sign becomes dead because of our doing. In certain contexts, we may sensibly decide to look at the occurrence of a sign as a geometrical shape or a physical object—in the same way in which, in certain contexts, we may sensibly decide to look at a person as an object that falls at a rate of 9.8 m/s\(^2\). But if we want to get the sign back into view, we need to lift these self-imposed conceptual restrictions; we need to go back,
so to speak, to the moment that preceded the killing of the sign. According to the position I am ascribing to Wittgenstein, no sign (whether meaningful or only apparently meaningful) will come into view—will be ‘resurrected’—if we persist in our determination to employ only conceptual apparatuses that do not involve the primitive notion of meaningful sign.

5. Meaning skepticism

Supposing, now, that it is plausible to ascribe to early and alter Wittgenstein the disjunctivist conception of language that I have described, why should one think that it is true? One reason for taking it seriously is that it is difficult to see how theories of meaning could ever meet the skeptical challenge raised by later Wittgenstein in his discussion of ostensive definition and rule-following, and forcefully elaborated in the first part of Kripke’s classical work on the topic. Wittgenstein’s skeptical arguments can be taken to show that once signs have been conceived as dead, nothing will enable us to make sense of how they could possibly acquire semantic life.

In order to see how Wittgenstein’s skeptical arguments bear on the question of the possibility of theories of meaning, it is helpful to divide such theories into two families. On the one hand, we have theories according to which signs acquire semantic properties, and correspondent proprieties of use, if and only if they are interpreted, where interpreting a sign consists in setting up a semantic relation (such as a relation of ‘meaning’ or ‘referring’ or ‘expressing’) between the independently specifiable sign (construed, say, as a geometrical shape or acoustic pattern) and some independently specifiable item (such as an ‘object’ or ‘function’ or ‘sense’). The theory ascribed to the *Tractatus* by the Realist Reading, for example, falls within this category: each name acquires a meaning as soon as it is made to ‘stand for’ an object. The challenge faced by theories belonging to this first family, according to Wittgenstein’s skeptical arguments, is that they embark in an infinite regress of interpretations. Once we adopt a perspective from which signs appear to be semantically alive only in so far as they have received an interpretation, any imaginable item that is supposed to carry out the required interpretation will itself appear to be capable of fulfilling its interpreting function only if
interpreted in turn; and the same for whatever is supposed to interpret the interpreting item, \textit{ad infinitum}. It seems, therefore, that these theories are incapable of explaining how anything could ever acquire semantic life.

Theories belonging to the other family avoid the problem of the regress of interpretations by foregoing any appeal to interpretations setting up semantic relations. An example of such theories is the ‘skeptical solution’ that Kripke attributes to later Wittgenstein, according to which the notion of meaningful sign (in so far as it is a legitimate notion at all) is to be analyzed in terms of natural inclinations to verbal behavior, plus patterns of acceptance and rejections from the members of one’s ‘linguistic community’. Another example of such theories is the dispositionalist theory of meaning that Horwich, as we have seen, attributes to later Wittgenstein. The problem with theories belonging to this second family is that they simply appear to offer a \textit{redescription} of the skeptical scenario in which there is no such thing as a meaningful sign. In most cases, this is not immediately clear, because the formulations of these theories generally involve a number of terms (such as ‘utterance’, ‘acceptance’, ‘agreement’, ‘linguistic expression’, ‘linguistic community’) that in many of their ordinary uses presuppose the concept of a meaningful sign. But when all the vocabulary employed by these theories is construed in accordance with their own commitments, it is difficult to see how they could ever claim to get into view something deserving the title of meaningful language.

The dialectic in which theories of meaning are caught exemplifies a familiar pattern in modern philosophy. In the philosophy of perception, for example, we find theories that accept the Cartesian conception of perceptual appearances as episodes that, in and of themselves, can provide only defeasible warrant for belief, and then look for extra ingredients capable of turning these episodes into bases for empirical knowledge. The challenge raised by Cartesian skepticism is that nothing can do the trick. Phenomenalist theories try to escape the skeptical challenge by arguing that there is no need to go ‘beyond’ appearances, because when we talk about ‘the external world’, we are \textit{really} talking about our subjective appearances. Few have been convinced that this does not simply restate, in a tone that tries to be reassuring, the skeptic’s conclusion. Similarly, in the epistemology of other minds, we find theories that accept the Cartesian
conception of the movements of the human body as events that, in and of themselves, can provide only defeasible warrant for belief about other minds, and then look for extra ingredients capable of turning these events into bases for knowledge of other minds. The skeptic holds that nothing can fulfill that function. Behaviorist theories try to escape the skeptical challenge by arguing that there is no need to go ‘behind’ the movements of other people’s bodies, because when we talk about ‘the states of other people’s minds’, we are really talking about the states of their bodies. Again, few have been convinced that this is not skepticism about other minds packaged in a different wrap.

There are of course many different theories of meaning, some of which differ significantly from the examples mentioned above. Pointing out that any such theory must meet the skeptical challenge (where meeting the skeptical challenge requires showing how the theory can avoid the regress of interpretations without simply embracing the skeptical conclusion) does not amount to a proof that it cannot meet that challenge. Yet, since it is far from obvious that any theory proposed so far has succeeded in that task, and since it is questionable that we have any idea of what could possibly count as successfully carrying out that task, it is reasonable to take into consideration the disjunctivist approach, which completely avoids the skeptical challenge by treating the notion of meaningful sign as primitive and irreducible.

6. The identity of signs

So far I have given one reason for adopting the disjunctivist conception of language that I have attributed to Wittgenstein: In light of later Wittgenstein’s sceptical arguments, it is doubtful that the notion of meaningful sign can be reconstructed from an independently specifiable notion of sign and any set of independently specifiable extra ingredients. Now I would like to indicate a second reason: Without presupposing the notion of meaningful sign, we can’t even vindicate the notion of what has meaning—namely, the notion of sign.

A sign or linguistic expression, in the sense that is here relevant, is something that can reoccur and have, on different occurrences, different meanings, or no meaning. A theory of meaning sets out to explain what makes it the case that certain spatio-temporal
phenomena are occurrences of meaningful signs; but in order to fulfill this task, it must
also explain what makes it the case that certain spatio-temporal phenomena are
occurrences of signs. To go back to our initial example, a theory of meaning must tell us
not only why the sounds produced by my friend, unlike the noises emanating from the
fountain, convey a certain meaning, but also why they amount to the occurrence of a
certain *spoken English sentence*—the *same* sentence that would now occur if you read
out the words ‘It is going to rain’. Theories of meaning seem to assume that it is possible
to specify criteria of identity for signs—tracking the pre-theoretical judgments of
competent masters of the language—by mentioning only properties such as geometrical
shape or acoustic structure, without any invocation of the notion of meaningful sign. But
this assumption is unfounded.

In the first place, it is clear that signs are not *just* geometrical shapes or acoustic
patterns, because there are a lot of geometrical shapes and acoustic patterns that are not
signs. The sounds emitted by a fountain during a certain time interval exemplify a certain
acoustic pattern, which may also be exemplified, within a chosen range of approximation,
by other physical events. But the exemplifications of that pattern are not signs; they are
not elements of a language. It seems uncontroversial that in order to make sense of the
idea of a linguistic sign—even if, in accordance with our present terminological policy,
we admit of ambiguous signs and mere signs—we need to have in view the role, or roles,
that it plays in significant uses of language.

In the second place, it is far from obvious that one can specify even merely
*extensionally* adequate criteria of identity for signs without any invocation of meaningful
signs. There is no reason to suppose that there is, in general, any set of properties
specifiable independently of semantic notions (such as geometrical, acoustic, or
articulatory properties) which singles out uniquely what a competent speaker of the
language would identify as occurrences of the same sign.

We get the contrary impression when we look at language from a very partial
perspective with no explicit awareness of its partiality. *If* we think of languages spoken
by cultures that have developed literacy as opposed to languages spoken by purely oral
cultures; and *if* we think of languages used by cultures that employ printed texts; and *if*
we think of languages that have undergone a long process of standardization under the
pressure of the administrative and ideological needs of modern states; and if we think of written, indeed typed, forms of linguistic communication; and if, even more specifically, we think of words typed in the small number of similar fonts that are currently used by major publishing houses—then it is indeed natural to think that all the occurrences of a particular linguistic expression are identified by properties such as purely geometrical shape. (‘Here is an occurrence of the word “rain”, and here is another one, “rain”; isn’t it obvious that they have the same geometrical shape?’) But as we widen our perspective on language, that idea loses its initial plausibility.

Let’s consider, to begin with, written language. The same word can be typed in fonts that look quite different from one another, as we can see by glancing at the drop-down menu of the fonts of our word processor. Moreover, type and graphic designers come up continuously with new fonts, which may differ remarkably from familiar ones, but can nonetheless be recognized by masters of the language without any need of special explanations. The same word may, of course, be handwritten; and the fact that we generally consider handwriting to be characteristic of people, the way gait is, should remind us of its extreme variability. But it is not merely the case that the same word may be typed and handwritten in an indefinite and open-ended variety of different ways. It is also the case that inscriptions exemplifying geometrically indistinguishable shapes may be occurrences of different linguistic expressions. A capital ‘I’ in one font is a lower case ‘l’ in a different font, and a person’s handwritten ‘d’ is another person’s handwritten ‘a’. We should not forget, furthermore, that the same written word, even in highly standardized languages such as contemporary American or British English, admits sometimes of different spellings; and over centuries, words have generally been spelled in many different ways. As David Kaplan has noticed in the context of a critique of what he calls the ‘orthographic conception of words’, there are no less than twenty recorded spellings of the English word ‘color’ (Kaplan 2011: 511). The coexistence of alternative equally acceptable spellings was more the norm than the exception before the relatively recent introduction, in the 17th and 18th century, of monolingual dictionaries aiming to include ‘all’ the words of a given language. When we look beyond some very specific contemporary uses of written language, the identification of written linguistic expressions is highly context-sensitive, where the relevant context includes facts about what the
occurrence of a given expression is supposed to \textit{mean} and how it is supposed to relate to other meaningful expressions.

We reach similar conclusions if we consider spoken language. Some utterances of the same expression may be described by a phonologist as exemplifications of the same sequence of phonemes and may receive, accordingly, the same transcription in phonetic alphabet. But even in these cases, one should bear in mind that there seems to be no strict correlation between phonological items (such as phonemes) and purely physical items (such as acoustic and articulatory patterns). In any case, the same word may be pronounced in different ways and call for different phonological analyses. This is true even for some words of standard American or British English. But if we consider regional and foreign accents, there seems to be no pre-established limit to the different ways in which the same word may be pronounced. Describing some pronunciations as dialectal or idiolectal would simply restate the point, since dialects and idiolects are \textit{variants of a language}: in order to pronounce a word in ‘Boston dialect’, one must pronounce the \textit{same} English word that could \textit{also} be pronounced, say, in ‘Chicago dialect’ or in ‘standard spoken American English’ (if there is such a thing). The identification of spoken linguistic expressions is highly context-sensitive and patently depends, as a norm, on considerations concerning their intended or actual meaning.

Only a master of the language can tell, reliably and authoritatively, when the same linguistic sign occurs again. We can develop criteria for the individuation of signs in a conceptual apparatus that does not presuppose the notion of meaningful sign; such criteria will have a certain reliability if we look only at some very \textit{particular} ways of using language; and they will have a very high reliability (surprise, surprise!) if we choose to engage with language in a manner that is explicitly designed to make them reliable. But those criteria are not \textit{generally} reliable. And in any case, whether they lead to the correct answer in any particular case is decided by whether they match the judgments of competent users of the language.

Advocates of theories of meaning may respond to these consideration by holding that the ‘signs’ mentioned in their respective analyses of meaningful signs should be understood in a very non-committal manner. They should simply be understood as repeatable items specifiable independently of meaningful signs—say, as geometrical
shapes or acoustic patterns. Once it has been shown how the occurrences of these repeatable items can have a linguistic meaning—so the response continues—one can go on to define more committal notions of ‘sign’, better suited to match the pre-theoretical judgments of competent users of the language about when the same ‘sign’ occurs again.

However, given the skeptical arguments discussed in the previous section, it is doubtful that theories of meaning can carry out the first step of this explanatory project, which consists in showing how occurrences of repeatable items such as geometrical shapes or acoustic patterns can ever acquire a linguistic meaning. Moreover, even if theories of meaning were able carry out that crucial step, they would still be far from an adequate account of linguistic signs. Such theories would be able to vindicate the notion of a repeatable item fully specifiable in non-semantic terms which, on some of its occurrences, has a linguistic meaning. But it would remain to be shown why one should hope to be able to define, in terms of such items, the sorts of signs that are recognized by competent users of language—whose occurrences, as we have seen, may not share any distinctive set of properties specifiable in a conceptual apparatus that eschews all semantic notions.

In light of these difficulties, one should be excused for finding attractive the disjunctivist account of language that I have attributed to Wittgenstein, which construes the generic notion of sign in terms of the primitive notion of meaningful sign and avoids any commitment to the idea that there must be a set of independently specifiable properties which single out all the occurrences of the same sign.

7. Concluding remarks

Let’s now go back to my initial question: What accounts for the difference between the sounds emitted by my friend, which have a linguistic meaning, and the sounds emitted by the fountain, which have no linguistic meaning? From the perspective of the disjunctivist conception of language that I have attributed to Wittgenstein and defended in my own voice, this is a bad question. What has meaning are not the sounds my friend emits, but the words she speaks. Each occurrence of a word, and of a linguistic expression more generally, can be described in purely acoustic terms. But a linguistic expression is not a
sound possessing properties specifiable independently of meaningful linguistic expressions. On the contrary, the notion of a linguistic expression can only understood in terms of the conceptually primitive notion of a meaningful linguistic expression.

A possible source of resistance to this view is the impression that it leaves us with no fundamental philosophical question about language to investigate and debate about. This perplexity can be addressed by answering a different objection, which concerns the exegetical claims advanced in this paper. If we maintain that neither the Tractatus nor Wittgenstein’s later writings advance a theory of meaning, aren’t we committed to denying—in spite of much prima facie textual evidence to the contrary—that Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language underwent a significant evolution? In response to this objection, I submit that according to the exegetical framework defended in this paper, Wittgenstein’s views about language may have evolved along at least two different dimensions. On the one hand (a), his later discussion of ostensive definition and rule-following can be taken to show that he came to a deeper understanding of why theories of meaning should be rejected. And on the other hand (b), it can be argued that he offered, at different points of his career, different elucidations (as opposed to non-circular analyses) of the notion of a meaningful linguistic expression. It can be plausibly maintained, for example, that Wittgenstein’s conception of what is involved in the significant use of language changed with respect to each of the following issues: (i) what is common, if anything, to all significant uses of language; (ii) the role of the context of utterance; (iii) the relation between meaningful uses of language and the broader activities in which they are embedded; (iv) the social nature of language; and (v) the role of our natural inclinations. The fact that there was room for Wittgenstein’s views to evolve along each of these dimensions should suffice to demonstrate that we are not forced to choose between constructing theories of meaning and indulging in philosophical torpor.28

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NOTES

1 See Speaks 2014.

2 Elucidations of this sort are ultimately circular; but as I hope to show in what follows, this does not entail that they are trivial or useless.

3 In what follows, I will disagree with commentators who construe Tractarian symbols as expressions that are identified by the way in which they contribute to determine the logical form, but not the content, of the propositions in which they occur (see especially Johnston 2007). For a partial response to that interpretation, see Kremer 2012: 213n19 and 215n21. Even if one adopts that interpretation of Tractarian symbols, one can still agree with part of what I am going to argue: namely, that the *Tractatus*
rejects non-circular analyses of the items that contribute to determine the logical form, but not the content, of the propositions in which they occur.

4 I will generally use the Ogden-Ramsey translation of the *Tractatus*, with occasional unmarked modifications.

5 The order of presentation of this material has rarely attracted the attention of commentators. For an exception, see Bar-Elli 2005: 13-14.


7 This choice of terminology is supported by the Tractarian characterization of a symbol as ‘everything—essential for the sense of the proposition—that propositions can have in common with one another’ (3.31, emphasis added). Admittedly, it does not fit well with other things the *Tractatus* says about symbols. Purely formal features of propositions are in no straightforward sense ‘parts’ of propositions, as symbols are said to be in 3.31. Moreover, a symbol is said to ‘characterize a form and a content’ (3.31), and this can be taken to say that each symbol characterizes both the form and the content of the propositions in which it occurs. There are therefore reasons to think that the *Tractatus* reserves the term ‘symbol’ for what I call ‘contentful symbols’. One may speak this way and use some other locution—such as ‘logico-syntactical item’—for what I call ‘purely formal symbols’. Nothing substantial hinges on these terminological choices. The substantial point is that contentful and purely formal propositional features are both abstractions from significant propositions.

8 An ‘occurrence’ of a sign, as I use the term in this paper, is a particular, such as an utterance or inscription taking place at a given time and place. I will not use the term in a manner that contrasts with tokens of types (as e.g. in Wetzel 2008). I will also avoid the terminology of types and tokens, in order to leave open the debated question of whether the type/token distinction—or which version of it—is best suited for thinking about linguistic expressions (for a discussion of these issues, see Kaplan 1990, 2011, and Hawthorne and Lepore 2011).

9 In this paragraph, and in the rest of this section, I am indebted to Anton Ford’s discussion of different forms of genus-species relation (Ford 2011). In his terminology, the Extra-Feature Account construes symbols as an ‘accidental species’ of the genus comprising all signs.


11 See Pears 1987: 75.

12 Notice that one may adopt a Formalist account of what determines the logico-syntactical properties of names and a Realist account of what fixes their specific content.

13 The only remark in the *Tractatus* that can even appear to address this issue is 3.263—which, however, has been read in opposite ways by different commentators, sometimes as evidence for realist readings (see e.g. Hacker 1975, 1999), sometimes as evidence against realist readings (see e.g. Ishiguro 1969, Helme 1979, McGuinness 1981).

14 Peter Hacker, for instance, has argued that for the *Tractatus* it is ‘a mental act (albeit of a transcendental self, not of the self that is studied by psychology) that injects meaning or significance into signs’ (Hacker 1986: 75).

Winch has sometimes been accused of failing to account for the fact that two names belonging to the same logical category can stand for different objects (Hacker 1999, Diamond 2006). For this reason, his reading has sometimes been described as ‘formalist’ (Diamond 2006). But this is a different kind of formalism from the one that I am here concerned to discuss. It does not necessarily involve a commitment to the Formalist Reading.

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16 For McDowell’s disjunctivist conception of perceptual experience, see McDowell 1998a: essays 17-18, and McDowell 2010. For his disjunctivist conception of singular thought, see McDowell 1998a: essay 11. For his disjunctivist conception of expressive behavior, see McDowell 1998a: essay 17.

17 McDowell’s disjunctivist conception of perceptual experience can be rephrased, using the terminology introduced in Ford 2011, as the view that disclosing appearances constitute the essential species—as opposed to an accidental species—of the genus comprising all perceptual appearances. Similarly, the Disjunctivist Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation can be formulated as the view that symbols constitute the essential species of the genus comprising all signs.

18 In Wittgenstein’s lectures from the early Thirties, a sign is defined as ‘the written scratch or noise’, whereas a symbol is defined as a sign together with ‘all the conditions that are necessary to give it sense or meaning’ (Wittgenstein 1980: 26). This may be treated as external evidence that the Tractatus adopts the Extra-Feature Account. However, it is not unreasonable to treat this later text, which is based on students’ notes, as less authoritative than the Tractatus.


20 See also Horwich 2012: 109-112.


25 See also Kaplan 1990. For instructive discussions and elaborations of Kaplan’s views, see Ebbs 2009: chap. 4, and Hawthorne and Lepore 2011.

26 For an engaging overview of the history of dictionaries, see Bellos 2011: chap. 9.

27 See Bromberger & Halle 1986.

28 I am grateful to James Conant, Cora Diamond, Anton Ford, Michael Kremer, Tom Lockhart, Shawn Standefer, and some anonymous referees for helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions.