The Context Principle says that words have a meaning only in the context of meaningful propositions. Versions of this dictum can be found in the writings of central figures of the analytic tradition. The principle, however, seems to deny obvious linguistic facts and its proper interpretation is a highly debated issue. The agenda of this dissertation is historical as well as systematic. It proposes detailed accounts of how the principle was construed by Bentham, Russell, Frege, and early Wittgenstein. Challenging the received historical narrative, it argues that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the principle should be sharply contrasted with the forms of contextualism propounded by Bentham and Russell. Moreover, it argues that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the principle, with a possible emendation, sets necessary constraints for an adequate account of the relationship between meaningful propositions and meaningful propositional parts.

1. The topic

This work is concerned with the Context Principle only in so far as it expresses a thesis about the relationship between meaningful propositions and meaningful propositional parts. What this topic exactly is requires clarification. A proposition is here to be understood as a linguistic entity. In languages such as English, it is typically a combination of words. In order to specify what is meant here by “meaningful proposition” and “meaningful propositional part,” it is necessary to introduce two distinctions: the distinction between logical and non-logical meaning, and the distinction between actual and established logical meaning.

Logical meaning is here specified in truth-conditional and inferential terms. A logically meaningful proposition is a linguistic construction which 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. Non-logical meaning is here defined in purely negative terms. It includes anything that can be sensibly called the “meaning” of a linguistic expression, but falls short of satisfying the previous characterization of logical meaning.

In order to further clarify the notion of logical meaning, we need to introduce the second distinction mentioned above. 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 (call it L-potentiality). 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.

Actual logical meaning stands to established logical meaning as actuality stands to potentiality. These are not two “kinds” of meanings 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. According to Aristotle, for example, 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 same time a second potentiality, because it is a potentiality to act virtuously, which is a second actuality. By applying this distinction to the case at hand, 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.
The **topic** of this work can now be delimited more precisely as the **relationship between actually logically meaningful propositions and actually logically meaningful propositional parts.**

Part of the task of this work is to demonstrate that, contrary to what is often maintained, the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle is fully compatible with linguistic **compositionality**. This expression should here be understood to refer to the truistic idea 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 expression “linguistic compositionality” is often used to refer to a much stronger and more controversial idea—namely, the idea that 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. 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. This work seeks to remain neutral with respect to their resolution and is exclusively concerned with the truistic notion of compositionality that was stated above.

2. The problematic

The relationship between meaningful propositions and meaningful propositional parts becomes an *issue* when we appreciate the need of vindicating, at one and the same time, two different sets of truisms. On the one hand, we have what I call the **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.
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.

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

Words, in general, mean on new occasions what they always meant.

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

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

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.

This dissertation shows that the attempt to vindicate these two sets of truisms generates a dialectic of equally unsatisfactory positions, which I dub Semantic Atomism, Unilateral Contextualism, and The Hybrid View.

Semantic Atomism 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. By contrast, Unilateral Contextualism holds that meaningful words are obtained by segmenting prior and independent meaningful propositional monoliths that are in no way conceptually dependent on the meanings of their parts. The former view appears to give a strong vindication of the compositionalist truisms, whereas the latter view appears to give a strong vindication of the contextualist truisms. But I argue that the two views fail to vindicate either set of truisms. By conferring a unilateral form of priority on either the meanings of propositions or on the meanings of propositional parts, they end up rendering unintelligible both propositional and sub-propositional meaning. The Hybrid View seeks to occupy a middle ground between those two extreme views by positing a form of interdependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning. For the Hybrid View, we can only make sense of word-meaning as a possible contribution to propositional meaning. Thus sub-propositional meaning depends on propositional meaning. But this is only a general form of dependence. On some of their occurrences, words may have actual logical
meanings prior to and independently of the meanings of the propositions in which they occur \textit{on those occasions}. The Hybrid View can appear to vindicate both sets of truisms. Moreover, it can appear to fulfill some of the bottom-up explanatory ambitions of Semantic Atomism. According to the Hybrid View, in fact, the actual logical meanings of at least some propositions are unilaterally dependent on the actual logical meanings of their parts. But I argue that these appearances are misleading. The Hybrid View is inherently unstable and collapses either into Semantic Atomism or into the view that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein.

Frege and early Wittgenstein, I argue, posit a stronger form of interdependence between meaningful propositions and meaningful propositional parts. The Context Principle, as they construe it, articulates one of the directions of this interdependence. Their view, I argue, resolves the aforementioned dialectic by vindicating without any incoherence both the compositionalist and the contextualist truisms.

3. The Frege-Wittgenstein view

I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein the following construal of the Context Principle:

\textbf{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 actual logical meaning of a complete proposition.

While this claim is incompatible with the construals of compositionality offered by Semantic Atomism and by the Hybrid View, it is compatible with the construal of compositionality that I ascribe to Frege and early Wittgenstein:

\textbf{The Frege-Wittgenstein construal of linguistic compositionality:} The meaning 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.

Meaningful articulate propositions mean what they do (and thus are the meaningful propositions that they are) in virtue of the meanings of their parts; but these parts mean what they do (and thus are the meaningful propositional parts that they are) in virtue of the meaning of the whole,
because their meaning is determined by the function that they actually fulfill in the propositional whole to which they belong. There is therefore a form of interdependence between meaningful articulate propositional wholes and meaningful propositional parts. The construals of the Context Principle and of compositionality that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein articulate the two directions of this form of interdependence.

I argue that the Frege-Wittgenstein view can be aptly formulated in terms of the British Idealist notion of an organic unity. This is the notion of a whole that is what it 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 appropriate wholes. For Frege and early Wittgenstein, I suggest, the meaningful articulate proposition is an organic unity in the British Idealist sense.

The construal of linguistic compositionality that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein can appear to be too weak to vindicate one of the compositionalist truisms mentioned above—namely, the idea that words have normal and stable meanings which guide our understanding of new propositions. I refer to this idea as “linguistic stability,” distinguishing it from the bare notion of linguistic compositionality. I suggest that the aforementioned appearance contributes to motivate the accounts of compositionality given by Semantic Atomism and by the Hybrid View. But I argue that the appearance is misleading. We can vindicate linguistic stability in a manner that is fully compatible with the construal of the Context Principle that I ascribe to Frege and early Wittgenstein:

**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 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 issue is fully settled only by the role that the word actually fulfills within the meaningful proposition in which it occurs.

There is another thesis that I attribute to Frege and early Wittgenstein which is related to their shared construal of the Context Principle:

**Constitutivist thesis about linguistic compositionality.** Sub-propositional logical articulation is constitutive of meaningful propositions. There can indeed be linguistic constructions which deserve the title of “meaningful propositions” because they express or convey complete propositional contents, even though they are not manifestly composed of parts that make a contribution to the meaning of the whole. But these are parasitical cases.

In so far as language is a system for the construction of meaningful propositions, sub-propositional compositional structure is constitutive of language. The point here is not to legislate about the manner in which we should use the words “proposition” and “language,” but to draw a qualitative distinction. There is a qualitative distinction between, on the one hand, systems of communication which exhibit a large degree of sub-propositional compositional structure (such as human natural languages), or which presuppose systems of communication exhibiting a large degree of sub-propositional compositional structure (such as human non-compositional codes), and on the other hand, systems of communication which are in no way dependent on sub-propositional compositional structure (such as the “language” that has been ascribed to certain monkeys, which is supposed to consist entirely of four simple signals). By endorsing this thesis, I argue, Frege and early Wittgenstein avoid the “deeper problem” of Unilateral Contextualism mentioned above—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. Moreover, I argue that Frege and early Wittgenstein use the constitutivist thesis to give a conceptual argument for the compositional nature of human natural languages. A human natural language must be compositional in order to be recognizable as the kind of language that it is. This argument, I show, is significantly stronger than the standard, Davidson-style arguments form learnability and productivity.
I show that the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle can deal with several different kinds of apparent counterexamples. I maintain, however, that on the background of some plausible assumptions, it is indeed liable to some genuine counterexamples. I formulate a generalized version of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle which accommodates those problematic cases. It does so by invoking a notion of “speech act” which admits among its species meaningful propositions (i.e. linguistic constructions that are used to assert or merely express thoughts about what is the case), but also an indefinite number of other species. However, I don’t defend the assumptions that demand such a generalization and I present it, accordingly, only as a possible emendation of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context Principle.

4. Summary of the chapters

The Introduction delimits the topic of the work and describes the dialectic involving Semantic Atomism, Unilateral Contextualism, the Hybrid View, and the position that I ascribe to Frege and early Wittgenstein. The subsequent chapters reconstruct one of the ways in which that dialectic has unfolded historically.

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 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 opposes 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 superficial. 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. 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 envisioned that Unilateral Contextualism ascribes to all sub-propositional units, but I claim that Frege treat 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 strengthen the case for my interpretation of Frege’s construal of the Context Principle by arguing that it supplies a new and more satisfactory solution to 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 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 ways. 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 second chapter.

Chapter 4 argues that Wittgenstein’s Tractatus inherits Frege’s construal of the Context Principle. It is widely believed 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 the implications of its construal of the Context Principle for the question of 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. I distinguish, more specifically, three versions of the austere conception of nonsense on the basis of different understandings of the relation between syntax and semantics—a “strong,” a “moderate,” and a “weak” version. Even if I believe that the *Tractatus* endorses the strong version of the austere conception of nonsense, I confine myself to arguing that it is committed to the moderate version, which is entailed by the construal of the Context Principle that I attribute to the book in the fourth 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 that 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, of linguistic stability, and of 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 my generalized version of the Frege-Wittgenstein construal of the Context principle.

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 issue—namely, the attempt to supply *foundations* for the exercise of our mental capacities. 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.