

The Augustinian conception of language

1. *Augustine's picture*

The *Investigations* opens with a quotation from Augustine's autobiography in which he describes how he thinks he learnt his mother tongue. The child, Augustine holds, perceives adults naming objects and moving towards things. Accordingly the child infers that such-and-such an object is signified by a given sound. So, as the child hears words used in sentences, he progressively learns what objects words signify, and in due course comes to use them to express his own desires. Wittgenstein detected in this description a picture or conception of the essence of human language: namely, that (i) words name objects, and (ii) sentences are combinations of words. It is evident that he thought this conception of naming as the essence of language to be of the first importance (see Exg. §1). It is the natural way to think about language (MS 141, 1). After all, we teach our children that *this* is a horse, that *this* ■ colour is called 'black', that doing *this* is what 'run' means, and so forth; and these are respectively names of an animal, of a colour and of an action. Pointing at an appropriate thing is a natural way of explaining what a given word means, and is widely used in teaching children. Further, we encourage the child to string words together in sentences, e.g. to say 'The horse is black' and 'The black horse is running'. This pre-theoretical picture is manifest in the works of countless writers. Wittgenstein chose Augustine not because of the uniqueness of the conception, but because he was an exceptionally clear-thinking man, who belonged to a culture far removed from ours (MS 111 (Vol. VII), 15). If he too advanced this conception, then it *must* be important (see Exg. §1, n. 5).

What makes it so important? It exhibits the roots from which numerous philosophical conceptions of meaning grow. It shows from what primitive picture or 'world-picture' a large range of *misconceptions* about language and linguistic meaning flow (MS 111 (Vol. VII), 18).¹ Moreover, such an idea of meaning was something which he, Wittgenstein, had 'taken over' (MS 114 Um. (Vol. X), 35), presumably from Frege and Russell. It informed the *Tractatus*, and was a source of many of its confusions. And it provides the counterpoint

¹ This is not to say that Wittgenstein did not *accept* some of the points Augustine made. For elaboration, see Exg. §1.

to the new conception of language and meaning advanced in the *Investigations* (see sect. 3 below).

Being a natural way of thinking about language and language-acquisition, Augustine's picture shapes the background presuppositions of much reflection on language by philosophers and linguists alike. It produces what Wittgenstein calls 'a primitive philosophical conception of language' or 'a primitive philosophy of language' (BT 25; MS 114 Um. (Vol. X), 35). How is this 'primitive philosophy' to be characterized? Above all, it conceives of naming as the essence of language (ibid.; MS 111 (Vol. VII), 15f.), and of the meanings of words as the foundation of language (MS 152, 38). In the *Investigations*, having characterized Augustine's picture of language, Wittgenstein immediately moves on to a more self-conscious conception, which, he suggests, is rooted in Augustine's pre-theoretical picture. According to this,

- (i) every word has a meaning,
- (ii) this meaning is correlated with the word,
- (iii) the meaning of a word is the object it stands for.

This may be termed not 'Augustine's picture of language', since Augustine made no such claims in the *Confessions*, but 'the Augustinian conception of language'. It provides the point of departure for Wittgenstein's investigations, and is a muted *leitmotiv* throughout his whole book. For although Augustine's picture is not mentioned again after §32, the misconceptions associated with the ideas that the essential function of words is to name and that the meaning of a word is an entity for which a word stands are a recurrent theme not only in the *Investigations* but also in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (see Volume 2, 'Two fruits upon one tree').

Is anything further associated with the Augustinian conception? Elsewhere explicitly, and in the *Investigations* implicitly (PI §6), Wittgenstein linked the Augustinian conception with a fourth claim:

- (iv) the form of explanation 'This is . . .', i.e. ostensive explanation, constitutes the foundations of language (BT 25; cf. PLP 94f.).

This *idea* is another extension of Augustine's picture, but, as already suggested, it is part of its natural appeal that we commonly teach children the meanings of words by pointing and saying 'This is a so-and-so'. Finally, in *Investigations* §32, Wittgenstein links Augustine's picture of language learning with a further idea:

- (v) the child can think, i.e. talk to itself (in the language of thought, as it were), before it learns its mother-tongue from its parents.

Although the proposition that sentences are combinations of names is part of Augustine's picture, it is striking that Wittgenstein does not incorporate any

further claims about sentences into the ‘idea’ which he says is rooted in it. There can be no doubt that as far as Wittgenstein was concerned, the importance of Augustine’s picture lay in the conception of word-meaning which it presupposes. Nevertheless, Augustine’s idea of words as names and sentences as combinations of names, coupled with Wittgenstein’s elaboration, suggests a further step, which is no less fundamental to Wittgenstein’s early thought, and hardly less of a target of his later reflections (cf. PI §§27, 292, 317, 363, 577, 585): namely, that just as the essential function of words is to name things, so

(vi) the essential function of sentences is to describe how things are.

After all, he had once argued that the general propositional form is ‘Thus-and-so is how things stand’ (TLP 4.5). The idea that describing is part of the essence of language is a natural corollary of the thoughts that the essence of words is to name things and that sentences are combinations of names. So although Wittgenstein himself did *not* explicitly incorporate this idea into the Augustinian conception,² it will be explored later in this essay.

The Augustinian conception of the essence of human language has moulded centuries of reflection. It is not itself a ‘theory of language’, let alone a ‘theory of meaning’. It is, rather, a framework of thought, a conception commonly taken for granted prior to systematic reflection. It is, as it were, the gravitational field within which much European speculation on the nature of language has operated. Against the background suppositions that the essential function of words is to stand for things, that the things words stand for are what they mean, and that words are correlated with their meanings by ostension, which connects language to reality, many questions arise and are given a variety of different, often incompatible, answers. What they have in common is the unchallenged framework. In altogether characteristic manner, it is primarily this that Wittgenstein attacks — not so much the various doctrines and theses propounded by different, conflicting philosophies throughout the ages, but the common presuppositions. This will become evident in subsequent essays in this Commentary. But prior to examining Wittgenstein’s criticisms of such presuppositions, it is worth investigating some of the ways in which full-blown and

² One reason why he may have omitted (vi) is that a magical aura and power surround the notions of names and naming, but not the ideas of description and describing. (Cf. MS 110 (Vol. VI), 177, quoted in Exg. §1, 2(i).)

It should be noted that the fact that language-game (2) concerns only one-word imperatives (which are not descriptions), rather than corresponding one-word assertions, does not indicate that the idea that the essence of sentences is to describe is excluded from Wittgenstein’s account. For language-game (2) is deliberately tailored to fit Augustine’s *description* in the *Confessions* (quoted in PI §1), not the ideas that Wittgenstein finds to be rooted in Augustine’s picture of the essence of language. For while language-game (2) is indeed ‘right’ for Augustine’s description, it is far from right for the Augustinian conception of language. *Inter alia*, the meanings of the names (‘block’, ‘pillar’, etc.) are *not* the building-stones — otherwise one might say that some meanings are cuboid and others cylindrical (see Exg. §2).

articulate accounts of language can, according to Wittgenstein, be developed within this framework of thought.

2. *The Augustinian family*

The following family of ideas is determined by two guidelines. First, the propositions advanced should be natural extensions of the more primitive picture. It is not that anyone who unreflectively cleaves to some or all of the above six principles will also adopt this whole family of ideas. Far from it. Indeed, some are inconsistent with others, being alternative lines of thought. Rather, these ideas can be considered to reflect a range of commitments indicative of a thinker's operating under the influence of the principles of the Augustinian conception. Secondly, they should be directly related to arguments in Wittgenstein's writings. The illustrations and exemplifications in the footnotes are chosen to add substance and colour to the bare list of doctrines (many other authors could have been cited). Frege, Russell and Schlick apart, these quotations are not from authors Wittgenstein read (or, in some cases, could have read). They are meant to demonstrate the seminal importance of this conception of language — it is a seedbed from which numerous philosophies and theories of language grow.

(a) WORD-MEANING

- (i) Every significant word *names* (or *signifies*) something.³
- (ii) To have a meaning *is* to name some entity.⁴ To name something is to stand for or represent it. Of course, there may be words in a sentence that do not stand for anything, but they play a different role, e.g. a purely syntactical one (like 'it' in 'It is raining').
- (iii) The entity a word stands for is what it means. So the meaning of a word is the thing it represents.⁵
- (iv) What kinds of entities word-meanings are is variously answered according to different pressures to which thinkers succumb. Certain pressures may induce one to think that words stand for various entities *in reality* — objects, properties, relations and so forth.⁶ Other pressures have inclined many

³ J. S. Mill: 'It seems proper to consider a word as the *name* of that which we intend to be understood by it when we use it' (*System of Logic*, Bk. I, ch. ii, sect. 1).

⁴ e.g. B. Russell: 'Words all have meaning, in the simple sense that they are symbols which stand for something other than themselves' (PrM 47).

⁵ e.g.: 'A name means an object. The object is its meaning' (TLP 3.203); or, put differently, 'The meaning of Words, [are] only the *Ideas* they are made to stand for by him that uses them' (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. III, ch. iv, sect. 6).

⁶ e.g.: names 'link the propositional form with quite definite objects' (NB 53), 'relations and properties, etc. are *objects* too' (NB 61).

thinkers to suppose that words stand for *ideas in the mind of the speaker*⁷ (a tradition going back to Aristotle and made prominent by Locke and the British empiricists). Yet other pressures induce some theorists to hold that words stand for *meanings* conceived as abstract or psychological entities.

(v) Words belong to different grammatical categories, e.g. proper names, common nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. What category a given word belongs to is sometimes conceived to be determined by its meaning, i.e. by the kind of entity the word stands for. For surely the rules for the use of a word are answerable to the ontological category of what the word stands for.⁸

(vi) The grammatical category to which a word belongs determines its combinatorial possibilities in sentences. So its combinatorial possibilities are mediately determined by its meaning, by the entity for which it stands. It is as if a word were the coloured surface of a three-dimensional glass solid, the other surfaces of which are colourless and invisible. The visible forms that can be produced by their combination will be determined by the combinatorial possibilities of the invisible solids behind the visible surfaces. So too, the combinatorial possibilities of a word in sentences can readily seem to be determined by its invisible ‘meaning-body’ (*Bedeutungskörper* (see Exg. §138)).

(vii) Words are conceived as standing for the entities that are their meanings. But nothing in Augustine’s picture or in the Augustinian conception determines whether they stand for meanings independently of their occurrence in a sentence or only in the context of a sentence. Should the picture and the conception that grows out of it be associated only with the former, atomistic variant? It is noteworthy that Augustine, in the quoted passage, emphasizes hearing ‘words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences’. Wittgenstein clearly thought of himself as having succumbed to the charms of the Augustinian conception, and arguably thought that Frege had too, but both were adamant that *words have a meaning only in the context of a sentence*. So, one may accept the basic principle that words stand for meanings, and opt for an atomistic construal of this, as Locke did, or one may opt for a context principle⁹ (TLP 3.3, 3.314; PI §49). Context principles may have very different motivations, e.g. function-theoretic in the case of Frege and picture-theoretic in the case of the *Tractatus*, and the dictum may be variously interpreted (see ‘Contextual dicta and contextual principles’, sects 2–3).

(viii) The combinatorial possibilities in language reflect the combinatorial possibilities in reality of the objects that are the meanings of words. What is possible in language, as it were, mirrors what is possible in reality. On some

⁷ e.g. Locke: ‘Words, in their primary signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them . . . nor can anyone apply them as marks, immediately, to anything else but the ideas that he himself hath’ (*Essay*, Bk. III, ch. ii, sect. 2).

⁸ So Frege, e.g., held that rules for the use of expressions are *answerable to the meanings* (*Bedeutungen*) of the expressions: ‘the rules follow necessarily from the meaning of the signs’ (BLA ii §§91, 158; cf. PLP 234).

⁹ e.g. Frege: ‘Only in a sentence have the words really a meaning’ (FA §60).

conceptions this is what would be true of a logically perfect language;¹⁰ according to others (most notably the *Tractatus*) it is true of language ‘on analysis’.

(b) CORRELATING WORDS WITH MEANINGS

(i) Every meaningful word is correlated with a determinate meaning. There are no indeterminate meanings, inasmuch as there are no indeterminate entities in reality. Whenever one uses a significant word in a sentence to express a thought, one means something quite particular by it.¹¹

(ii) Words are either definable or indefinable.¹² Definable words are explained by means of other words. Their meanings are given by specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for their application.

(iii) Indefinables constitute the points at which language is directly linked with reality.¹³ They are connected with simple entities that are their meanings. These in turn may be conceived as simple ideas in the mind (e.g. Locke and the empiricists) or as simple natures (Descartes) or as simple objects that constitute the substance of the world (the *Tractatus*). Ultimately, all meaningful words derive their significance from the connection between the indefinables of language and reality. It is the indefinables of language that, as it were, inject content into the web of language.

(iv) Indefinable words are directly connected with the given — either in inner or in outer sense.¹⁴

(v) When used in utterances, words are connected with their meanings either (1) by means of causation and association,¹⁵ or (2) by means of mental

¹⁰ Comenius, in *Via Lucis* (1688) (quoted by R. Simone, ‘The early modern period’, in *History of Linguistics*, ed. Giulio Lepschy, vol. iii (Longman, London, 1998), p. 173), held that an ideal philosophical language (‘Panglottia’) must be such that ‘its course is parallel with the course of things, that is, it contains neither more nor fewer names than there are things; and joins words to words with the utmost precision as things are joined to each other, by constantly expressing the nature of the things with which it deals by the very sounds which it uses, and so presenting them to the mind’.

¹¹ As the young Wittgenstein thought: ‘But the sense must be clear, for after all we mean *something* by the sentence, and as much as we *certainly* mean must surely be clear.’ And ‘It seems clear that what we MEAN must always be “sharp”’ (NB 67f.).

¹² e.g. Locke: ‘The Names of simple Ideas are not capable of any definitions; the Names of all complex Ideas are’ (*Essay* Bk. III, ch. iv, sect. 4).

¹³ Names [i.e. logically simple names] ‘link the propositional form with quite definite objects. And if the general description of the world is like a stencil of the world, the names pin it to the world so that the world is wholly covered by it’ (NB 53).

¹⁴ e.g.: ‘The meaning [of indefinables] must be given by direct acquaintance: one can learn the meaning of the word “joy” or “green” only by being joyful or by seeing green’ (M. Schlick, ‘The Future of Philosophy’, repr. in *Gesammelte Aufsätze 1926–1939* (Gerold, Vienna, 1938), p. 129).

¹⁵ e.g. Russell: ‘The relation of a word to its meaning is of the nature of a causal law governing our use of the word and our actions when we hear it’ (AM 198).

acts of meaning (intending) such-and-such an entity by the word¹⁶ (or interpreting the word of another as standing for such-and-such an entity). The causal conception of language is favoured by behaviourists and often also by classical associationist empiricists. The intentionalist conception is favoured by philosophers (including the young Wittgenstein) who have the problems of intentionality uppermost in their considerations.

(c) OSTENSIVE EXPLANATION

The term ‘ostensive definition’ is of twentieth-century coinage. It first occurs in W. E. Johnson’s *Logic* (1921).¹⁷ Equally, ‘hinweisende Definition’ emerged late, being preceded among members of the Vienna Circle by such cousins as ‘demonstration’ (*Aufweisung*) and ‘concrete definition’. Prior to the discussions of ostensive definition by members of the Vienna Circle (e.g. Schlick, Carnap, Waismann and Feigl) and Wittgenstein, one must look for analogues of what we today characterize as ‘ostensive definition’. If we go back to the empiricist debates about language that originated with Locke’s *Essay*, the analogue of ostensive definition is one or another variant of mental ostension whereby a word is associated with a mental sample or pattern.¹⁸ Recognition of the explanatory role of sentences of the form ‘This is A’ preceded their recognition as definitions, i.e. rules for the use of words. Hence the following enumeration of points moves gradually from ostension to ostensive explanation, and only then to ostensive definition. The recognition of ostensive explanation as a *rule*, together with the realization that it does *not* connect language with reality but remains, as it were, within language, that the sample pointed at belongs to the means of representation and not to what is represented, are decisive moves *away* from the Augustinian conception of meaning.

(i) Ostension is the instrument for connecting language with reality; it ‘steps outside language’.¹⁹ Hence there must be ostensive explanations in any language, on pain of total vacuity.²⁰ For it is by their means that content is injected into the web of words.

¹⁶ e.g.: ‘One could say, the intention is the method of projection’ (MS 108 (Vol. IV) 219; see also PR 65). For discussion, see ‘Turning the inquiry round: the recantation of a metaphysician’, sect. 2.

¹⁷ W. E. Johnson, *Logic* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1921), Part I, ch. VI, sect. 7.

¹⁸ e.g. Locke: ‘Such precise, naked appearances in the mind [viz. abstract general ideas], without considering how, whence or with what others they came there, the understanding lays up (with names commonly annexed to them) as standards to rank real existences into sorts, as they agree with these patterns, and to *denominate* them accordingly’ (*Essay*, Bk. II, ch. xi, sect. 9).

¹⁹ e.g. Waismann’s *Thesen*: ‘A definition remains within language. Ostension steps outside language and connects signs with reality’ (WWK 246).

²⁰ e.g. M. Schlick: ‘We conclude that there is no way of understanding any meaning without ultimate reference to ostensive definitions’ (‘Meaning and Verification’, repr. in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, p. 341).

(ii) Ostensive *explanation* involves pointing at something and saying, ‘This is A’, thus connecting the word ‘A’ with the object that is its meaning.

(iii) The thing pointed at may be conceived to be an object *described* by the sentence ‘This is A’,²¹ or it may be conceived to be a *sample* or *pattern*.²²

(iv) Ostensive explanation explains inasmuch as the word ‘A’ can then be applied to anything that *resembles* the object or pattern pointed at.²³

(v) The status of ostensive explanation may be variously conceived. A behaviourist conception will view it as having only a causal and pedagogic role in language acquisition. It is part of the training that establishes a child’s disposition to respond appropriately to stimuli, both verbal and non-verbal. It is an instrument for bringing about understanding of *observation sentences*.²⁴ Alternatively it may be viewed as having a *normative* role in linking words with their meanings in reality (*vide* Locke, n. 18 above).

Idealist conceptions of language take *mental* ostension to link words exclusively with mental representations or ‘ideas’ in the mind. Other conceptions take ostensive explanations to link non-psychological words with entities (objects, properties, relations) in extra-mental reality. In the case of our psychological vocabulary, however, words for unanalysable psychological attributes are commonly conceived to be linked to the attributes that are their meanings by association or intention.²⁵ (Private ostensive definition is a sophisticated variant of this conception; see Volume 3, ‘Private ostensive definition’.)

(vi) Ostensive explanations or definitions must be *final*, the termini of explanations of meaning. Other forms of explanation of meaning ultimately depend on ostensive explanations, since only the latter make contact with reality.

(vii) Consequently, ostensive definitions must be *unambiguous*. Otherwise the web of language which they connect to reality would itself be radically indeterminate. If an ostensive definition were ambiguous, or left open

²¹ e.g. W. V. Quine: ‘What characterizes *direct ostension*, then, is that the term which is being ostensively explained is true of something that contains the ostended point’ (‘Ontological Relativity’, repr. in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1969), p. 39).

²² See Locke, quoted above, n. 18.

²³ e.g. R. Carnap: ‘*ostensive definitions*: here the term is defined by the stipulation that the objects comprehended by the term must have a certain relation (for instance, congruence or likeness) to a certain indicated object’ (*Logical Syntax of Language* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1937), p. 80).

²⁴ Thus Quine: ‘Many expressions, including most of our earliest, are learned *ostensively*; they are learned in the situation that they describe, or in the presence of the things they describe. They are conditioning, in short, to observations’ (*Philosophy of Logic* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1970), p. 6).

²⁵ e.g. Thomas Reid: ‘The simplest operations of our minds must all be expressed by words [that cannot logically be defined]. No man can explain by a logical definition what it is to think, to apprehend, to believe, to will, to desire. Every man who understands the language has some notion of the meaning of those words; and every man, who is capable of reflection, may, by attending to the operations of his own mind, which are signified by them, form a clear and distinct notion of them’ (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002), pp. 19f.).

questions about the application of the definiendum, it would require supplementation. Unless this were itself a further ostensive explanation, something other than ostensive definition would be necessary to secure the foundations of language.

(viii) Ostensive definition must be *complete*, i.e. fully determine the use of the word it links with the world. This will appear all the more plausible if the meanings of words are conceived of as determining their use (a(v) and (vi) above). By connecting the word with the object it means, the use of the word must be fixed.

(ix) Synthetic necessary truths concerning unanalysable properties in reality flow from the natures of the entities that are the meanings of simple names. If, for example, an ostensive definition gives a complete explanation of what each colour-word means, then the necessary truth that nothing can be red and green all over must flow from the objective nature of the colours. Each of these colours must, as it were, get in each other's way, so they cannot simultaneously occupy the same position, just as two people cannot sit on the same chair.²⁶

(d) METAPSYCHOLOGICAL COROLLARIES

(i) Knowing what a word means is knowing what object (entity, thing) is correlated with it as its meaning.²⁷

(ii) Understanding a language is a mental state from which linguistic performance flows.²⁸

(iii) Using a word in an utterance with understanding, as opposed to mere parroting, is meaning something by it. Meaning something by a word is a mental act or activity whereby one projects the word on to the entity meant.²⁹

²⁶ 'That which corresponds in reality to the function "() PT" leaves room only for one entity — in the same sense, in fact, in which we say that there is room for one person only in a chair' (RLF 169; cf. PR 106f.). (The function takes a colour or shade of colour as argument; 'PT' is a spatio-temporal specification.)

²⁷ A striking version of this principle, coupled with d(vi) below, is exhibited by Russell's account of understanding names of 'particulars': 'in order to understand a name for a particular, the only thing necessary is to be acquainted with that particular. When you are acquainted with that particular, you have full, adequate and complete understanding of the name, and no further information is required' (PLAt 179).

²⁸ Thus Noam Chomsky: 'To know a language, I am assuming, is to be in a certain mental state, which persists as a relatively steady component of transitory mental states. What kind of mental state? I assume further that to be in such a mental state is to have a certain mental structure consisting of a system of rules and principles that generate and relate mental representations of various types' (*Rules and Representations* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1980), p. 48).

²⁹ Thus Locke: 'Parrots, and several other Birds, will be taught to make articulate Sounds distinct enough, which yet, by no means, are capable of Language. Besides articulate Sounds therefore, it was farther necessary, that he should be able to use these Sounds, as *Signs of internal Conceptions*; and to make them stand as marks for the *Ideas* within his own Mind' (*Essay*, Bk. III, ch. 1, sect. 3). Evidently *making* words stand for ideas is a matter of intending, 'a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*' Bk. III, ch. ii, sect. 1).

The act of meaning is intrinsically intentional. Meaning or intending is the method of projection (n. 16 above).

(iv) Understanding the words of another is knowing what he means by them. Knowing what he means by them is interpreting his words correctly. All successful communication by means of language involves interpretation.³⁰

(v) Acts of meaning and of interpreting (understanding) are what give life to the otherwise 'dead signs' of language. The intentionality of language is derived from the intrinsic intentionality of these mental acts or activities.

(vi) Knowing what an indefinable means requires acquaintance with the object or entity that is its meaning. One cannot know what colour-words mean without having had the experience of seeing colours, what sensation-words (e.g. 'pain') mean without having had the corresponding sensation, or what emotion terms ('anger', 'joy', 'fear') mean without having felt the emotion. If ostensive definition is the foundation of language, then acquaintance is the foundation of understanding.³¹

This conception generates difficulties with the indefinable (unanalysable) categorial expressions of a language (cf. Locke's struggles with 'substance'). Various options may be essayed, ranging from innateness (actual or virtual) to denial that categorial concepts stand for any object or entity (e.g. identification of categorial expressions with variables, as in the *Tractatus*). Further difficulties are generated by other expressions, e.g. logical 'indefinables' (primitive terms of logic). Russell, ever audacious, demanded 'logical experience' or 'acquaintance with logical objects' (TK 97).

(vii) If an ostensive explanation is conceived to be a description (c(iii)), then grasping what an indefinable word means is a matter of guessing the intended meaning of a constituent word in an assertion.³²

(viii) If knowing what a word means is knowing what object it stands for, and if such knowledge is Russellian knowledge by acquaintance, then there cannot be degrees of understanding. For there are no degrees of (Russellian) acquaintance with simple objects that are 'given'.

(ix) Consequently, knowledge of the meaning of an unanalysable word is achieved, if at all, at a stroke. It consists in acquaintance with the entity that is the meaning of an indefinable, and grasping the connection between the

³⁰ This conception was arguably implicit in the *Tractatus*. It came to dominate Anglophone analytic philosophy of language in the second half of the twentieth century, although for reasons relatively detached from the motivations of the *Tractatus* and of the Augustinian conception of meaning. According to Donald Davidson, 'We interpret a bit of linguistic behaviour when we say what a speaker's words mean on an occasion of use' ('Belief and the basis of meaning', repr. in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984), p. 141).

³¹ e.g. Locke: 'Words being voluntary Signs, they cannot be voluntary Signs imposed by him on Things he knows not. That would be to make them Signs of nothing, sounds without Signification. A Man cannot make his Words the Signs either of Qualities in Things, or of Conceptions in the Mind of another, whereof he has none in his own' (*Essay*, Bk. III, ch. ii, sect. 2).

³² As Wittgenstein put it, if 'this is A' is already a proposition, then 'it can only be understood once the meaning of "A" is known, i.e. I must now leave it to chance whether he takes it as I meant it or not' (PR §6).

word and the entity that is its meaning. This appears to be something that occurs in a moment. It remains opaque how such an instantaneous event (i.e. grasping the meaning) can have effects that unfold thus over time (see PI §139), as one subsequently uses the expression in all the variety of sentences in which it may be used.

(x) In order for us to acquire a language, we must, *in some sense*, already possess one — an idea that has been at the centre of late twentieth-century linguistic theory.³³ Hence too, thought, no matter of what degree of complexity, must appear to be antecedent to and independent of mastery of a public language. Public language will then seem to be necessary not for thinking, but rather for the communication of thoughts.³⁴ Thought-constituents, i.e. the cogitative analogue of words, will have meanings quite independently of words of a public language. Speaking will be conceived to be a matter of translating from the language of thought into a public language. So speaking with thought will seem to consist of two parallel, concurrent processes: thinking and speaking (see Volume 3, ‘Thinking: the soul of language’, sect. 2).

(e) SENTENCE-MEANING

Wittgenstein characterized Augustine’s picture of the essence of language as including the idea that sentences are *combinations* (not lists) of names. In his explicit triadic expansion of Augustine’s picture into the Augustinian conception, and in his two addenda, nothing further is mentioned about sentences. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the thought that just as the essence of words is to name, so too *the essence of sentences is to describe* invites incorporation into the Augustinian conception. Accordingly, it is worth reflecting on some of the ways in which various philosophical conceptions of the nature, role and understanding of sentences grow naturally out of the primitive ideas of words as names of entities that are their meanings, and of sentences as combinations of words.

³³ ‘The speed and precision of vocabulary acquisition leaves no real alternative to the conclusion that the child somehow has the concepts available before experience with language and is basically learning labels for concepts that are already part of his or her conceptual apparatus.’ And ‘the child approaches language with an intuitive understanding of such concepts as physical object, human intention, volition, causation, goal, and so on. These constitute the framework of thought and language, and are common to the languages of the world . . . it is beyond question that acquisition of vocabulary is guided by a rich and invariant conceptual system, which is prior to any experience’ (N. Chomsky, *Language and the Problems of Knowledge* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 27f. and p. 32).

³⁴ e.g. Hobbes: ‘The general use of speech, is to transfer our mental discourse, into verbal; or the train of our thoughts, into a train of words’ (*Leviathan*, Pt. 1, ch. 4). So too Locke: ‘The Comfort and Advantage of Society, not being to be had without Communication of Thoughts, it was necessary, that Man should find out some external sensible Signs, whereby those invisible *Ideas*, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others. . . . Thus we may conceive how *Words*, which were by Nature so well adapted to that purpose, come to be made use of by Men, as *the Signs of their Ideas*’ (*Essay*, Bk. III, ch. ii, sect. 1).

(i) Sentences, being combinations of names, are, as has been argued ever since Plato and Aristotle, composite.³⁵ Accordingly, one-word sentences are elliptical (see Exg. PI §§19f.).

(ii) The meaning of a sentence must be determined by, or be a function of, the meanings of its constituent words. Augustine emphasized that he learnt language by hearing the words ‘uttered in their respective places in various sentences’. It is natural to follow such a thought through and to take the meaning of a sentence as a function of the meanings of its constituents *and their mode of combination* (‘aRb’ obviously does not describe the same circumstance as ‘bRa’).

(iii) If the significant words in a sentence are correlated with entities that are their meanings, it seems natural enough to suppose that the *arrangement* of words in a sentence represents a possible arrangement of the things named.³⁶ Of course, this possibility may not obtain.

(iv) If the arrangement of things that are correlated with the words of a sentence is in fact the arrangement specified by the sentence, then what the sentence says is true. This conception lends itself to variants of the correspondence theory of truth, according to which truth consists in a relation of correspondence between proposition and fact.³⁷ It can, however, be exploited without any such commitment, and it is noteworthy that the *Tractatus* did just that: the fact that *p* is held to make true the proposition that *p*, but truth is *not* conceived to consist in any relationship. Rather, as Wittgenstein put it (ungrammatically) ‘*p* is true’ = ‘*p*’ (NB 9), or, more happily, a proposition is true if things are as we, in using it, say they are (TLP 4.062, modified translation; cf. the rather interesting formulation in NB 113).³⁸ A picture (of which

³⁵ e.g. the Port-Royal *Logic*: ‘Judgements are propositions expressed by sentences . . . sentences themselves are composed of words . . . The product of judging is expressed by a sentence which must contain two terms — the one term is the subject, which expresses the idea of which we affirm or deny another idea; the second term is the predicate, which expresses the idea which is affirmed or denied of the idea expressed by the subject’ (A. Arnauld, *The Art of Thinking*, tr. J. Dickoff and P. James (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1964), Pt. II, chs 1–3). So too Mill: ‘Now the first glance at a proposition shows that it is formed by putting together two names. A proposition . . . is, *discourse*, in which something is affirmed or denied of something. . . . every proposition consists of two names; and every proposition affirms or denies one of these names, of the other’ (*System of Logic*, Bk. I, ch. i, sects 2 and 3). Very differently, and for very different reasons, ‘What constitutes a propositional sign is that in it its elements (the words) stand in a determinate relation to one another. A propositional sign is a fact’ (TLP 3.14).

³⁶ ‘The configuration of objects in a situation corresponds to the configuration of simple signs in the propositional sign’ (TLP 3.21).

³⁷ e.g. Russell: ‘Thus a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact’ (PP 75). So too Moore: ‘To say that this belief is true is to say that there is in the Universe a fact to which it corresponds; and to say that it is false is to say that there is *not* in the Universe any fact to which it corresponds’ (*Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1953), pp. 276f.).

³⁸ The *Tractatus* conception is a precursor of Ramsey’s deflationary account of truth, sometimes called ‘the redundancy theory’ (although not by Ramsey). For discussion, see ‘Truth and the general propositional form’, sect. 5.

a proposition is a special case) is true if what it depicts *is* the case (not if it *corresponds* to what is the case).

(v) Since the same words, correlated with the same entities as their meanings, can occur in sentences of very different syntactical forms, e.g. declarative, interrogative, imperative, it is plausible to think that all such sentences can be bifurcated, on analysis, into the co-ordinated names expressing a sense and another element signifying that things are being asserted to be thus, or that the speaker is asking whether things are thus, or that the speaker wants things to be thus. Hence some kind of distinction between mood-operator (force-indicator) and descriptive component (sentence-radical) is a fairly natural outgrowth of the Augustinian conception.³⁹

(vi) Hence too, the thought that description is part of the essence of a sentence is also a natural one, even though imperatives and sentence-questions do not superficially look as if they describe anything. So a natural addendum to Augustine's idea that the essence of words is to name is the further idea that the essence of sentences is to describe. Declarative sentences describe how things stand and are used to *assert* that they do so stand; imperative sentences describe how things do not stand and are used to *order* or *entreat* that things be made to stand thus; and interrogative sentences describe an arrangement of things and are used to ask *whether* that is how things stand.

(vii) If the meanings of words are conceived to be entities in reality with which words are correlated, and if the combinatorial rules of grammar are reflections of, and determined by, the combinatorial possibilities of those entities, then it is plausible to explain why certain combinations of words are nonsensical by reference to their meanings. So, the reason why it makes no sense to say 'The colour red tastes salty' is because the colour red *cannot* combine with tastes; i.e. the meanings of these words *cannot* be combined (the meaning-bodies will not fit).⁴⁰

³⁹ e.g. Russell: 'In all these [viz. "Beggars are riders", "Beggars would be riders", "Are beggars riders?" and "Beggars shall be riders"], the relation between beggars and riders is the same; but in the first it is asserted, in the second suggested as a consequence of a hypothesis, in the third the object of a doubt, and in the fourth the object of a volition. . . . they all have something very important in common. The word "proposition" is a natural one for expressing what they all have in common: we may say that they express different attitudes towards the same "proposition". . . . we may express the proposition by the phrase "beggars being riders"' (TK 107).

⁴⁰ Taking the proposition 'Two is a prime number', Frege wrote: 'The first constituent, "two", is a proper name of a certain number; it designates an object, a whole that no longer requires completion. The predicative constituent "is a prime number", on the other hand, does require completion and does not designate an object. I also call the first constituent saturated; the second, unsaturated. To this difference in the signs there, of course, corresponds an analogous one in the realm of meanings: to the proper name there corresponds the object; to the predicative part, something I call a concept. . . . An object, e.g. the number 2, cannot logically adhere to another object, e.g. Julius Caesar, without some means of connection. This, in turn, cannot be an object but rather must be unsaturated' (FG I (CP 281 (371f.)).

(viii) The meaning of a sentence being a function of the meaning of its constituent words and their mode of combination, one arrives at an interpretation of another person's utterance by deriving the meaning of the sentence from one's knowledge of the meanings of its constituents and their mode of combination.⁴¹ Understanding another's utterance is therefore a computational process.⁴²

The various ideas sketched above do not constitute, and are not meant to constitute, a single or a complete account of language and linguistic meaning. They are a variety of offshoots that can grow from the ideas that are rooted in Augustine's picture of the essence of language, and the adoption of a significant number of them by a thinker is indicative of the extent to which he is operating within the framework of such presuppositions. That conception could be elaborated in further ways. The propositions mentioned above and illustrated by quotation were selected because they demonstrate the importance of the Augustinian conception, its attractive power, and its ubiquity in the thought of writers throughout the ages who have reflected on linguistic representation.

3. *Moving off in new directions*

It is evident that Wittgenstein thought the Augustinian conception of the nature of language and linguistic meaning to be exceedingly important. As we shall see, it is plausible to view the *Tractatus*, and indeed the works of Frege and Russell, as moving in the gravitational field of this conception. Certainly he thought it sufficiently important to combat root and branch. For these ideas are attacked in the *Investigations*, and the host of auxiliary ideas that constitute the Augustinian family are assailed too, if not there, then in his other writings.

It would be misconceived to suppose that all Wittgenstein was concerned with was to cure us of this syndrome of confusions, i.e. to get us to abandon our misconceptions, without replacing our confusions by something better — that is, by a firmer grasp of the conceptual structures in this domain of reflection. To be sure, he does not offer us a 'theory of language', let alone a 'theory of meaning for a natural language' — ideas he would surely have repudiated. What he does offer us are *grammatical clarifications* of the concepts and reticulations of concepts of name, word, meaning of a word, meaning something by a word,

⁴¹ e.g. Frege: 'The possibility of our understanding sentences we have never heard before rests evidently on this, that we construct the sense of a sentence out of parts that correspond to the words' (PMC 79).

⁴² Chomsky, e.g., argued that various grammatical principles are incorporated in 'the mind/brain' as a 'matter of biological necessity', and that we then 'determine the interpretation of [such-and-such] sentences by a computational process of unconscious inference' (*Language and Problems of Knowledge*, p. 55; see also p. 90).

explanation of word-meaning, ostensive definition, sample, sentence, sentence-meaning, uses of sentences, proposition and so on. These are not *doctrines* or *theses*, any more than propositions such as 'Red is a colour', 'Nothing can be red and green all over', 'White is lighter than black', 'Nothing can be both white and transparent' are doctrines or theses. Wittgenstein's grammatical clarifications will be examined throughout this Commentary. It may, however, be useful to sketch in advance some of the differences between the Augustinian conception (and the associated family of ideas), on the one hand, and Wittgenstein's conception, on the other. For even a rough sketch of these contrasts may add chiaroscuro to the above account. A proper, and properly qualified, picture of Wittgenstein's ideas on these matters will emerge from the subsequent essays and the detailed exegesis of his text.



In place of the conception of word-meaning as determined by a word-world nexus, Wittgenstein now holds that the meaning of an expression is, with certain qualifications, its use in the practice of speaking the language (see 'Meaning and use', sect. 4). We should conceive of words not as names of entities of various logical kinds, but as tools with a variety of quite different uses. A language is a public, rule-governed practice, partly constitutive of the form of life and culture of its speakers. The meaning of a word is what is given by an explanation of meaning, and an explanation of meaning is a rule for the use of the word explained, a standard of correct use. To know what a word means is to be able to use it in accordance with generally accepted explanations of what it means, to be able to explain appropriately what it means and what one means by it in an utterance, and to be able to respond comprehendingly to its use by others. The idea that the essential function of words is to name entities, and hence that the basic question to be addressed regarding any given word is 'What does it name?' or 'What logical type of entity does it stand for?', is misguided. 'All words are names of things' is at best vacuous, at worst wrong. Words have a multitude of uses, fulfil a large variety of roles in speech. The questions that should be addressed by philosophers are, rather: 'What is this word for?', 'What need does it meet?', 'How would one teach its use?', 'What counts as a correct explanation of its use?' — the answers to such questions will show what it is for a word to have a meaning. Similarly, it is misconceived to suppose that the essential function of sentences is to describe. If we think thus, we shall again be prone to ask the wrong kinds of question. We may wonder what arithmetical sentences describe — relations between numbers, or between signs, or between mental constructions. We may ask whether geometrical sentences describe the properties of space or of Ideal figures in a Platonic realm. We may be inclined to think that logical propositions describe relations between propositions or the most general facts in the universe, and that deontic propositions describe what ought to be done. But we should be asking what roles arithmetical, geometrical and logical propositions fulfil, what function they have (see Volume 2, 'Grammar and necessity'), and what the point of deontic propositions is.

This reorientation has dramatic corollaries. There is, in the relevant sense, *no* connection between language and reality. Of course, this does not mean that we do not refer to things ‘in reality’ when we speak. What it means is that the picture of language as deriving its content from the primitive indefinables that are correlated with objects in the world is misconceived. So the conception of ostensive explanation or definition as the instrument that effects such a correlation is itself awry (see ‘Ostensive definition and its ramifications’, sect. 3).

The meaning of a word, even if the word can be said to stand for something, is not the object it stands for. And many kinds of word cannot usefully be said to stand for anything. The meaning of a word, like the price of a good, is not an entity of *any* kind. A word stands to its meaning in a manner akin to the relation between a coin and its *use* (not the relation between the coin and an object purchased). Explanations of meaning are very various (see ‘Explanation’, sect. 3). Neither analytic definition nor ostensive definition enjoy special privileges. Analytic definition is not the ideal towards which all explanations of meaning should strive. Many words — indeed, many words that occupy a special position in philosophical reflection — are family-resemblance terms, and are not explained by analytic definitions (see ‘Family resemblance’). Inability to give an analytic definition does not, in general, betoken lack of understanding. Many expressions are indeed vague, but that does not render them useless or transform propositions in which they occur into senseless concatenations of words.

Ostensive definitions specify only *one* rule among others for the use of a word. Indeed, they presuppose the grammatical category of the word defined. They *can* be misunderstood, for they are not necessarily unequivocal. They do not connect language to its *foundations*, supposedly constituted by the ‘objects’ that are the meanings of simple names. Language has no foundations in the sense associated with the Augustinian conception (and explicit in the *Tractatus*), and the meanings of names are not entities of any kind. The whole picture of the web of language as having content ‘injected’ into it at the point where the indefinables of language make contact with reality was a misconception. For language is, in this respect, a free-floating structure — it is not, *in this sense*, connected with reality. Hence too, the grammar of our language, far from reflecting the logical structure of the world or the objective, language-independent nature of things, is autonomous (see Volume 4, ‘The arbitrariness of grammar and the bounds of sense’, sect. 4). It pays no homage to reality. The practice of speaking a language does not rest on meaning-endowing connections between language and reality, or on primitive indefinables that inject meaning into the web of words. But it might be said to rest on natural human behavioural tendencies and pronenesses, common discriminatory capacities and shared reactive propensities. Speaking is acting, and presupposes the agency of living beings active in the stream of life. ‘What has to be accepted, the

given, is — one might say — *forms of life*' (PPF §345 (p. 226); see Volume 2, 'Agreement in definitions, judgements and forms of life').⁴³

Ostensive explanations are typically *definitions*, and definitions are not *descriptions*. 'This  is black', if it is an ostensive definition, is not a true or false predication. It is a rule for the use of the definiendum. Indeed, there is a patent kinship between this, and a substitution-rule as given in an analytic definition. For instead of the word 'black' in a true/false predication, one may use the sample, ostensive gesture and demonstrative, and say, e.g., 'My shoes are *this*  colour'. Far from ostensive definitions connecting language with reality, the sample which a typical ostensive definition uses belongs to the means of representation, and is not something described by the explanation.⁴⁴ The sample with which an ostensive definition may be linked need not be a 'simple object'. Indeed, the concepts of simplicity and complexity are relative, and have to be specified separately for each category of thing if it is to make any sense to speak of things of that category being either simple or complex. Hence too, the competence of ostensive definition is not restricted to so-called simple names. There is no reason why some words should not be explained in more than one licit way, e.g. by analytic and by ostensive definition.

What appear to be synthetic necessary truths about colour, say — for example, that black is darker than white, or that nothing can be red and green all over simultaneously — are not descriptions of the a priori order of the world (indeed, there is no such thing (see 'Turning the examination around: the recantation of a metaphysician', sect. 5)). Their truth is not attributable to the objective, language-independent nature of things. Rather, such propositions, although they look like descriptions of *de re* necessities, are in fact rules for the use of the constituent words (see 'Ostensive definition and its ramifications', sect. 4).

Precisely because language has no foundations in the requisite sense, and because ostensive definition 'remains within language' (cf. PG 97), the picture of language (ideal or analysed) as a mirror of the logical or metaphysical structure of the world is a mythology of symbolism. The world does not have a logico-metaphysical structure (there is no such thing). The thought that a fully analysed sentence or a sentence couched in an ideal notation matches or is

⁴³ There are, to be sure, hosts of propositions and types of propositions that are taken for granted by members of a linguistic community such as ours. But these are not propositions about 'the Given' as traditionally conceived (e.g. about sense-data, or about indubitable Cartesian thoughts and simple natures). Rather they are propositions such as 'The earth has existed for many years', 'Here is a hand', 'I am N.N.', ' $12 \times 12 = 144$ ' (which Wittgenstein discusses in *On Certainty*) — not foundations of knowledge, but unquestioned and unchallengeable pivots on which our noetic structure turns.

⁴⁴ Of course, what was intended by A as an explanation of word meaning for B may be taken as a description by C, just as 'It is also possible for someone to get an explanation of the words out of what was intended as a piece of information' (PI, b.r.f. §35 (p. 18)).

isomorphic with what it describes is quite mistaken. It is based on a confused idea of word–world connections and deep misconceptions concerning intentionality (see Volume 4, ‘Intentionality’, sect. 5).

Understanding an expression is not a mental state or an activity of interpreting. It is akin to an ability (see ‘Understanding and ability’, sect. 6). To know what a word means is to be able to use it correctly and to be able to answer the question ‘What does it mean?’, not to be acquainted with its meaning. The criteria for whether a person understands an expression are the use he makes of it (i.e. whether he uses it correctly), the explanations he gives of what, in a given context, it means, and the responses he makes to its use by others. Meaning something by a word or sentence is not an act or activity (see Volume 4, ‘The mythology of meaning’). Understanding the utterance of another is not typically interpreting, and where interpretation *is* called for, understanding is presupposed, since to interpret an utterance is to choose between alternative meanings. Understanding, not being an activity, is not a derivational or computational process either. Precisely because understanding is ability-like, there can be degrees of understanding, partial as opposed to complete mastery of the technique of using a word. Understanding something at a stroke is not a high-speed *exercise* of an ability (e.g. to derive or calculate), but the *inception* of the ability to do the various things the doing of which counts as satisfying the criteria of understanding.

A sentence (with marginal exceptions) is the minimal unit for ‘making a move in the language-game’ (see ‘Contextual dicta and contextual principles’). But, contrary to what both Frege and the *Tractatus* had supposed, a sentence need not consist of combinations of words (a name of an argument and a name of a function). For there are one-word sentences. One may say that one-word sentences *in our language* are typically elliptical, since we can often paraphrase them into multi-word sentences. But it is easy to envisage primitive languages in which that is not so.

Sentences have an indeterminate variety of functions. Although describing is one, it is misguided to think that describing is itself logically uniform (compare describing how things are with describing how they might be, how one dreamt of them as being, how they should be, etc.), and equally misconceived to suppose even that all declarative sentences have the role of describing. First-person psychological sentences are often avowals or expressions of experience, thought or will (see Volume 3, ‘Avowals and descriptions’). Arithmetical sentences are not descriptions, but rules, for example, for the transformation of empirical propositions about magnitudes and numbers of things. Geometrical sentences are not descriptions of the properties of space or of the properties of Ideal figures, but rules for describing, for example, spatial relations. And logical sentences are not descriptions of relations between thoughts (as Frege believed) or statements of the most general facts in the universe (as Russell held). They are senseless sentences that say nothing, but are internally related to rules of inference (see Volume 2, ‘Grammar and necessity’, sects 2,3 and 5).

There are indeed systematic internal relations between assertions, questions and orders. The question whether p is answered by the assertion that p (or the assertion that not- p). The order addressed to N.N. to V is the order that is obeyed by N.N.'s V -ing. But these internal relations are readily explicable without recourse to the idea that corresponding declarative, imperative and interrogative sentences have a common descriptive content given by a sentence-radical, and are differentiated (on analysis) by their different 'force-operators'. The imperative 'Shut the door!' addressed to N.N. no more contains a description of N.N. shutting the door than the assertion that N.N. shut the door contains the question 'Did N.N. shut the door?', although, to be sure, one could adopt a convention whereby 'N.N. shut the door' was expressed by 'Did N.N. shut the door? Yes' (see 'Descriptions and the uses of sentences', sect. 3).

Of course, there are combinations of meaningful words that make no sense. But that is not because the meanings of these words do not 'fit' together. For again, the meanings of words are not entities of any kind, and there is no 'meaning-body' behind each significant word. When a sentence is said to be nonsense, it is not its *sense* that it is nonsense (PI §500, see Exg.). Rather, words that *do* have a use in the language (unlike nonsense poetry) are being combined in illicit ways, and nothing has been stipulated regarding their use in such aberrant sentential contexts. To say that the sentence 'It is five o'clock on the sun' makes no sense is simply to say that this form of words has no use in the language. Of course, we could give it a use. But then the constituent words would mean something different from what they now mean (see Volume 4, 'The arbitrariness of grammar and the bounds of sense', sect. 5).

Finally, there is, and could be, no such thing as 'a language of thought' (PG 144f., BB 34f.). Thoughts are not representations, and, unlike the case of genuine representations, it makes no sense for one to raise the question of what is meant by a thought one thinks. Thoughts, unlike representations, have no non-representational properties; they are, so to speak, all message and no medium (see Volume 3, 'Thinking: the soul of language', sects 1 and 3). Thinking is a widely ramified concept. Speaking with thought is not engaging in two activities simultaneously, and speaking thoughtfully is not translating from a language of thought into a public language. The relationship between thinking and the mastery of linguistic techniques is a complex one. But the horizon of possible thoughts is constituted by the limits of the possibility of the expressions of thoughts (*ibid.*, sect. 3).

4. Frege

It is not difficult to show why Frege may be deemed to be operating within the framework of thought guided by the Augustinian conception of language. With marginal qualifications he held the following principles.

(i) Every expression in his concept-script that contributes to the determination of a judgeable content or thought is a name of an entity of one kind or another.⁴⁵

(i') *After appropriate parsing or paraphrase, every expression in a sentence of natural language that contributes to the determination of the judgeable content it signifies or thought it expresses is the name of an entity of one kind or another.*

(ii) The entity which such an expression names is its content or meaning.

(iii) Sentences themselves are names. In his later view, they have truth-values as their meaning.

(iv) Sentences are combinations of names. They are essentially complex, composed of argument- and function-names.

(v) For purposes of logical analysis of inferences, a judgement (expressed by a sentence) has priority over its constituents. What entity a sub-sentential expression names depends, in some cases, on the manner in which the sentence is parsed (the content of judgement, or, later, the thought, analysed). For, in certain cases, one and the same judgement can be decomposed in different ways. So a word has a meaning only in a sentential context (BS §§9f.; PW 16f.; FA p. x, §§60, 62, 106⁴⁶), where it fulfils a role in one or another way of bifurcating a sentence into function-name and argument-expression.

(vi) The combinatorial possibilities of words in sentences are determined by the kinds of entities that are their meanings. Two objects cannot combine together without an unsaturated entity, such as a relation, to bind them together; *therefore* two proper names (singular referring expressions) cannot form a sentence. An object can combine with an unsaturated entity (such as a function), *therefore* a proper name can combine with a concept-word to form a sentence (see n. 40 above).

(vii) Therefore, the rules for the use of words are answerable to the meanings of those words (see n. 8 above).

(viii) Declarative and interrogative sentences split up into, or can be analysed into, a descriptive, truth-value-bearing component (e.g. 'that *p*', which Wittgenstein later calls 'a sentence-radical' (PI p. 11/9n.), and a force-operator (roughly, 'It is the case' and 'Is it the case'). The former specifies the descriptive content of the sentence. So, description is part of the essence of declarative sentences (definitions apart) and sentence-questions. (See 'Thoughts', 62 (CP 355 (62)); 'Negation', 144, 147 (CP 373f. (143–5), 376 (147)).)

⁴⁵ With such exceptions as free variables, the double-stroke of definition and the judgement-stroke, every symbol of concept-script in a well-formed sentence (in *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*) has a meaning, i.e. stands for something. 'Every well-formed name must have a meaning' (BLA i p. xii), and all logically significant expressions (with these exceptions) *are* names, they *stand for, mean or designate* some entity (BLA i §§32f.).

⁴⁶ In the *Foundations* the context principle is highlighted as the way to avoid slipping into psychologism and holding words, in particular number-words, to be names of ideas. Its roots, however, are in the priority of judgements over concepts in decompositional analysis.

These principles are characteristic of the Augustinian conception and its associated family of ideas. What is striking and important is that, unlike Hobbes and Locke, for example, Frege was not led to think thus by an unreflective commitment to the primacy of naming, or by the naturalness of ostensive explanation of meaning (in fact, Frege has no doctrine about ostensive explanation at all). He was a mathematician, with little interest in the so-called foundations of language in experience, and none in language-acquisition and teaching. So what led him to adopt an array of principles that conform so closely with the central commitments of the Augustinian conception and its related family?

Frege's philosophical goal was to demonstrate that arithmetic is reducible to pure logic. For this purpose he invented a new logical calculus, far more powerful than anything hitherto available. The drive-shaft of this formal system was *the generalization of the mathematicians' concept of a function* (BS, Preface; CN 204f.; PW 16f., 26, 184; FC 21, 28; BLA i §2; PMC 59). Frege allowed objects in general as the arguments and values of functions, and represented judgeable contents (in his early system), and truth-values (in his later system) as the values of certain functions for arguments. Accordingly, sentences split up into argument-names and function-names. In simple atomic sentences, such as '*a* is *F*', the argument-expression '*a*' is the name of an object, and the function-name '*ξ* is *F*' is the name of a function or concept. In quantified sentences, such as 'Everything is *F*', the argument-name '*ξ* is *F*' is the name of a concept, and the quantifier is the name of a second-level function that takes concepts as arguments and maps them on to judgeable contents (in the early works) or truth-values (in the later system). In his pre-1890s work, Frege speaks indifferently of sub-sentential expressions as having a content or a meaning. In his mature work, he splits his earlier notion of content into sense (*Sinn*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*).⁴⁷

It is evident that, given Frege's understanding of the concept of a function, the demands imposed by generalizing the notion of a function for the purposes of formalizing the logic of generality drove him to embrace the above principles that converge upon the Augustinian conception of language. For a function, he held, is a pattern of correlation of *entities*. With various qualifications, he conceived of every logically significant expression in a sentence as standing for some entity or other — an object, a concept or a higher-level function. An expression that stands for an entity is held to be a name. So singular referring expressions that stand for objects are 'proper names'; concept-words are held to be names of concepts; and quantifiers are said to

⁴⁷ 'Bedeutung', when used in Frege's works in the early 1890s and later, is sometimes translated 'reference' (whereas when it occurs in the *Foundations of Arithmetic* it is translated as 'meaning'). Translating it as 'reference' has no textual warrant (it is no less strained in German to talk of an object or person, e.g., as the *Bedeutung* of a proper name than it is to speak of an object or person in English as its *meaning*). Moreover, it is questionable whether the idea that every significant expression in a well-formed sentence with a truth-value *refers* to an entity of one kind or another is an improvement over the thesis that every such expression stands for a meaning or content.

be names of higher-level functions. The logical connectives too are names of functions. Negation is construed as a unary function; conjunction, alternation and conditionality as binary functions that map ordered pairs of truth-values on to a truth-value. Not only are the logically significant constituents of a sentence (after proper parsing or paraphrase) all names of one kind of entity or another, but, further, the sentence itself is also held to be a name (of a truth-value).

What motivated his descriptivist drift (i.e. (viii) above)? Again, it is the exigencies of the function-theoretic apparatus he employed, together with his conception of the workings of the grammar of natural language. In conformity with tradition, he thought that the assertoric force of a sentence is (confusingly and defectively) marked in the predicate, in the indicative mood of the verb (PW 184f., 198). But his conceptual notation eschewed subject/predicate parsing in favour of function/argument decomposition. So he felt it necessary to mark the assertoric force in some other way. He did so by embedding it in an assertion-sign prefixed to the sentence-radical that he thought was a constituent of every expression of a judgement or sentence-question. Did he think that sentence-radicals are descriptions? Certainly they are bearers of truth-values. Of course, this does not entail that he thought that they are descriptions, but it creates such a presumption. And if we examine Frege's other discussions (especially 'Thoughts'), that presumption is borne out. For it seems clear that he thought that sentences concerning physical objects are descriptions of the 'physical world' and that sentences concerning psychological phenomena describe the 'mental world'. Arithmetical sentences describe the 'third world' of abstract objects, and logical propositions describe relations between the truth-values of thoughts (see 'Thoughts' (CP 351–72)). Following Kant, he held that geometrical sentences describe the properties of space in synthetic a priori propositions. Various classes of sentences are, therefore, differentiated not by their different roles or functions, but by reference to *what* they describe. Declarative sentences as different in function as first-person avowals of experience, modal propositions (e.g. 'Nothing can be red and green all over'), arithmetical equations, statements of geometrical theorems, and tautologies of logic are uniformly held to describe.

Of course, one must concede that Frege did not think that *every* word or phrase in a sentence of natural language stands for an entity. In his view, some words fulfil a purely syntactical or formal role (e.g. the copula). Others stand for an entity only when taken together with the context of utterance (e.g. indexicals). Some words — for example, empty names — do not stand for anything. Some phrases do not do so either — for example, the subject terms of syllogistic, such as 'All men' in the sentence 'All men are mortal'. But properly parsed or paraphrased — for example, 'For all x ' and 'if x is a man then x is mortal' — every logically significant unit here *does* stand for an entity. The other examples are no more than forms of context-dependency of natural language, or logical imperfections and opacities, that are all remedied in a logically adequate language, such as Frege's concept-script, which excludes empty names and is both context-free and logically transparent.

Equally, one may concede that with his differentiation of sense from meaning, Frege severs meaning, thus construed, from the objects of understanding. Expressions in natural language can have a sense and *no* meaning, and two non-synonymous names can have the same meaning. But it is also clear that the notion of sense merely serves to reinforce other aspects of the referential picture. For the senses of expressions serve to determine *what entity* they stand for. A baroque ontology ensues. The realm of meanings includes not only objects, but also concepts, relations and further functions of various levels. The population of objects is swelled to include such 'entities' as numbers, classes, directions of lines, truth-values, the simultaneous occurrence of events, and even the senses of sentences (which are construed as the meanings of that-clauses in reported speech). In short, both the misuse of the concept of meaning (*Bedeutung*) and the commitment to the idea that the essential function of words or phrases (properly parsed) is to name entities for which they stand remains intact. So too does the descriptivist drift. Although Frege's philosophy is far more sophisticated than the simple, and naive Augustinian conception, there is ample reason for thinking that it is one of Wittgenstein's implicit targets in his criticisms of the various doctrines he associates with this conception of the essence of language. Frege's philosophy of logic, precisely because it is inspired by a generalization of the mathematical conception of a function, is rooted in Augustinian soil.

5. Russell

In the course of the first quarter of the twentieth century, Russell changed his mind, with bewildering rapidity, on a host of matters in the philosophy of language and logic. Nevertheless, he adhered unswervingly to an array of fundamental ideas that can be characterized as aspects of an Augustinian conception of language and meaning. His first major work, *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), exhibited a naive form of the Augustinian conception of language. Subsequently, as he struggled with his theory of denoting complexes, and as the Theory of Descriptions emerged in response to those struggles, he moved away from this naive form towards something more subtle. He came to think that although natural language, in its surface grammar, does not conform to the principles of the Augustinian conception, *on analysis*, it does. Moreover, a logically ideal language, he argued, would perspicuously do so.

(i) In the *Principles*, Russell asserted: 'Every word occurring in a sentence must have *some* meaning' and 'Words all have a meaning, in the simple sense that they are symbols which stand for something other than themselves' (PrM 42, 47). He was later to back off from this naive claim, arguing that many expressions (including ordinary proper names, definite descriptions, names of classes, etc.) are 'incomplete symbols' that do not actually stand for anything at all and, in that sense, do not have a meaning on their own. But when such

expressions are replaced by their analysans, then the constituent words *do* stand for entities that are their meanings.

(ii) In the *Principles*, Russell held that expressions may be definables or indefinables. To understand indefinables, such as ‘red’ or ‘sweet’, we must be acquainted with their meanings. So too, we must be acquainted with *logical* indefinables. The discussion of these, he asserted, ‘is the endeavour to see clearly the entities concerned, in order that the mind may have that sort of acquaintance with them which it has with redness or the taste of a pineapple’ (PrM p. xv). In the *Theory of Knowledge* (1913), he was still insisting that to understand logical terms (in particular, names of forms), we must have ‘logical experience’, that ‘those who understand [such terms as “particular”, “universal”, “relation”, “dual complex”, “predicate”] possess something which seems fitly described as “acquaintance with logical objects”’ (TK 97).

(iii) Russell had no qualms concerning the existence of universals. ‘When we examine common words’, he wrote, ‘we find that broadly speaking, proper names stand for particulars, while other substantives, adjectives, prepositions and verbs stand for universals. . . . no sentence can be made up without at least one word which denotes a universal . . . nearly all words to be found in a dictionary stand for universals’ (PP 53). Only someone in the grip of the Augustinian conception of language could take the existence of universals for granted thus.

(iv) Against this background, it is not surprising to find that Russell explained synthetic necessary truths concerning unanalysable properties in reality by reference to the natures of the entities concerned. Synthetic incompatibility, as he called colour exclusion, for example, ‘consists in the fact that two terms which are thus incompatible cannot co-exist in the same spatio-temporal place’ (PrM 233).⁴⁸

(v) By the time he wrote *The Problems of Philosophy*, he had clarified his Theory of Descriptions, and his distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance was in place. So we find him asserting: ‘We must attach *some* meaning to the words we use, if we are to speak significantly and not utter mere noise; and the meaning we attach to our words must be something with which we are acquainted’ (PP 32). But this does not mean that every expression stands for something with which we are acquainted. Proper names, such as ‘Julius Caesar’, obviously do not. But they are to be replaced by definite descriptions. These, duly analysed, do consist of expressions the meanings of which are entities with which we are acquainted. The guiding principle for analysis of sentences is that ‘Every proposition that we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted’ (PP 32). Prior to Russell’s encounter with Wittgenstein’s radical new ideas, he held that ‘Such words as *or*, *not*, *all*, *some*, plainly involve logical

⁴⁸ A term, as Russell employed the expression at this stage, is not a linguistic expression, but the entity that a linguistic expression stands for.

notions; and since we can use such words intelligently, we must be acquainted with the logical objects involved' (TK 99).

(vi) In the *Theory of Knowledge* (cf. n. 39), he asserted that corresponding assertions, questions and commands all contain a common propositional component. To this extent he was committed to the view that the essential role of sentences is to describe how things are.

(vii) In 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism' he held that propositions are symbols, i.e. 'something that "means" something else' (PLAt 167). A proposition, he asserted, 'is a complex symbol in the sense that it has parts which are also symbols. In a sentence containing several words, the several words are each symbols' (PLAt 166). At this stage, deeply influenced by Wittgenstein's dictations of 1913, Russell claimed that 'The components of the fact that makes a proposition true or false, as the case may be, are the *meanings* of the symbols which we must understand in order to understand the proposition', noting now that the logical connectives are an exception to this principle (PLAt 175).

(viii) Russell cleaved to a Correspondence Theory of Truth. He held that 'a belief is *true* when it *corresponds* to a certain associated complex, and false when it does not' (PP 74).

(ix) He avoided, or evaded, the paradox that he had detected in Frege's attempt to reduce arithmetic to logic by means of the Theory of Types. But he had a persistent tendency to explain logical principles governing the use of words by reference to the nature of the entities correlated with words as their meanings (cf. (iv) above). Establishing that a word is a predicate is finding out that some property is correlated with it. 'Exists' is not a predicate, because what it is correlated with is not a property of objects; 'it is essentially a property of a propositional function' (PLAt 204). That a predicate cannot take itself as argument rests on the fact that no property of objects is also a property of properties.⁴⁹

(x) Although ordinary language is endlessly misleading, *inter alia* because it contains a multitude of incomplete symbols, 'In a logically perfect language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact [with the exception of the logical connectives]. In a logically perfect language, there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the words for simple things that enter in, one word for each simple component.' Indeed, the language of *Principia* is 'intended to be a language of that sort. It is a language which has only syntax and no vocabulary whatsoever. . . . It aims at being

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein criticized Russell for appealing to the meanings of signs when establishing rules for them (TLP 3.331). Even though Russell accepted this criticism and subsequently asserted that the Theory of Types is a theory of symbols, not of things, he nevertheless continued to explain it in the same way as before.

that sort of a language that, if you add a vocabulary, would be a logically perfect language' (PLAt 176).

Russell's position was inherently unstable. To trace it through its various developments would be a lengthy task, which would be out of place here. But the above points suffice to show that his thought was conducted within the force-field of an array of presuppositions that is highly questionable, and that Wittgenstein challenged.

6. *The Tractatus*

The *Tractatus* addressed not so much the very same problems as had been addressed by Frege and Russell, as problems that were raised by their work. Although Wittgenstein briefly discussed their logicist doctrine in order to repudiate it, unlike Frege, he was not moved by the foundations crisis in mathematics. Although he touched on scepticism, it was only in order perfunctorily to repudiate it, for he did not share Russell's preoccupation with epistemology and the attainment of absolute certainty. His primary concerns were the nature of logic and logical truth, the essential nature of representation, and the limits of language. His solutions to these problems were profoundly different from, and indeed at odds with, the doctrines of his two great predecessors. Nevertheless, his point of departure was where they had, so to speak, left the subject. Although he challenged much of their philosophy — rejecting their logicism, disproving their conception of logical propositions, and demolishing their accounts of intentionality — he nevertheless took over from them unthinkingly a variety of presuppositions. These are manifest in the ways in which his thought, like theirs, was conducted in the framework of the Augustinian conception of language and meaning.

According to the *Tractatus*:

(i) *On analysis* of any sentence with a sense into truth-functional combinations of elementary propositions, every constituent of such elementary propositions is a name of an object (TLP 4.22–4.221). The expression 'object' is here used in an extended sense (signifying a simple entity), since properties and relations count as objects too (NB 61; LWL 120), and what we ordinarily think of as objects — e.g. medium-size dry goods — are not objects at all but complexes.

(ii) The object which such a simple name signifies is its meaning (TLP 3.203). Objects are the sempiternal substance of all possible worlds (TLP 2.021).

(iii) Objects stand in (ineffable) internal relations to each other. (As is evident from n. 26 above, in 1929 Wittgenstein explained determinate exclusion by reference to the essential natures of the objects thus related (RLF 169).)

(iv) The meaning of such a simple name is correlated with the name. The correlation of a simple name *in use* with its meaning is psychological — it is effected by acts of meaning (see n. 16 above). In uttering a sentence 'aRb',

the speaker means by the sentence the state of affairs aRb the obtaining of which would make the sentence true (cf. TLP 3.11). In meaning aRb by that sentence, the speaker means by the name 'a' the object a that is its meaning, and by 'R's being thus flanked by the ordered pair of names 'a' and 'b', he means the relation of being R in which a is said to stand to b .

(v) The *explanation* of what a simple name means is effected by an elucidation (TLP 3.263), which is a description in which the explanandum is used in a true assertion, for example, that *this* ☞ is A. Such an elucidation connects a simple name with the object in reality that is its meaning.

(vi) Simple names, thus connected with their meanings, are the foundations of language.

(vii) The combinatorial possibilities of names *reflect* the combinatorial possibilities of the objects of which they are names. For names and their meanings necessarily share the same form.

(viii) Sentences are articulated combinations of names; they are essentially complex (TLP 3.14–3.141). They say that *such-and-such is thus-and-so* (TLP 4.5).

(ix) Names have a meaning only in the context of a sentence (TLP 3.3), not because alternative decomposition of sentences is envisaged (contrary to Frege, Wittgenstein held analysis to be unique), but because a name plays a representative role only in the context of a sentence (TLP 3.21–3.22). Only when it is a constituent of a representing fact does a name represent or go proxy for an object. In a proposition, such as 'aRb', it is *the fact* that 'a' stands to the left of 'R' and 'b' to its right that *says* that aRb (cf. TLP 3.1432).

(x) The unasserted proposition is common to corresponding assertions, sentence-questions and commands (NB 96).

(xi) The unasserted proposition depicts a possible state of affairs. It is a description of a possibility which the world may or may not actualize. The general propositional form is 'Es verhält sich so und so' ('This is how things stand' or 'Thus-and-so is how things stand' (TLP 4.5)) — *the form of a description*.

(xii) To know what a simple name means requires acquaintance with its meaning. To use a sentence with understanding is to use the signs together with the method of projection, which is thinking the sense of the sentence (TLP 3.11), i.e. meaning by the sentence the state of affairs one is using it to depict. Understanding the utterance of another is interpreting the signs he uses as signs for the objects meant. It is acts and activities of meaning and interpreting that give dead signs life.

(xiii) Thinking is a psychological process. It is a kind of language (NB 82). The constituents of thoughts are psychic entities that have the same kind of relation to things as words (CL 68).

These doctrines everywhere display the framework of thought of the Augustinian conception of the essence of language. But the young Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and logic, like Frege's and Russell's, was complex, subtle and anything but primitive — even though one might say of it, as one might say of theirs, that it was rooted 'in a primitive philosophy of language'.

So here too, there are many respects in which it deviates from various ideas rooted in the rude Augustinian conception. Not *all* words are names that stand for objects that are their meanings. It is the cardinal insight of the *Tractatus* to proclaim that the logical connectives are *not* representatives (TLP 4.0312). They do not stand for meanings; they are not functions at all, but operators. Likewise, formal concept-words do not have a meaning, but are in effect variables. Similarly, number-words are not names of entities. Moreover, not *all* sentences are descriptions. But those that are not are either senseless (like the propositions of logic) or nonsensical pseudo-propositions (like sentences of arithmetic, ethics, aesthetics and religion, as well as sentences of metaphysics, including those of the *Tractatus* itself). The exceptions, in effect, prove the rule.

There is no doubt that Wittgenstein himself thought that the *Tractatus* had been written in thrall to the Augustinian conception of language. In grappling with the problems he had inherited from Frege and Russell, he took over from them the unquestioned assumption that the *basic* function of words is to name things, that words which fulfil this function have a meaning, and that the meaning is the object represented (see Exg. §1). This will become clearer in the successive essays of this Commentary.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the philosophies of Frege, Russell and the young Wittgenstein in respect of our current concern is that none of these philosophers thought that the surface grammar of natural languages conforms to the principles of the Augustinian conception of language. But all held this to be a sign of the non-transparency and/or logical deficiency of natural language. A logically perspicuous language or, alternatively, natural language on analysis *will*, in its essentials, conform to this conception. Where (if at all) it does not, very special explanation is called for — and given. In important ways, the Augustinian conception functioned for all three philosophers as a norm of representation.

