

1 *Semantic background*

In this opening chapter I shall explain the main aspects of my interpretation of the semantic doctrines of *TLP*. These were defended at considerable length in *TS*. Readers already familiar with that work may like to move on immediately to Chapter 2.

(A) *Sinn* and sense

In order to interpret *TLP* properly, it is crucial to understand Wittgenstein's use of the terminology of '*Sinn*', '*Bedeutung*' and '*Satz*', and to elucidate the semantic doctrines within which these terms are embedded. My view is that the word '*Sinn*' in *TLP* should be translated as 'truth-condition', instead of the more usual 'sense'. (More accurately, it should be translated as 'directed set of truth and falsity conditions', in the light of the *TLP* doctrine of the essential directedness of *Sinn* – see 3.144.¹) For the *TLP* notion of *Sinn* is not a cognitive one, as is Frege's notion of sense. Rather than being a *mode of thinking* about the world, it is what we *think about*, the existence and non-existence of possible states of affairs.

In order to see that this is so, notice that when the notion of the *Sinn* of a picture is first introduced at 2.221, it is said to be *what* a picture represents, rather than the *way* in which it represents what it does (as we might have expected given Frege's famous metaphor of *Sinn* as the 'mode of presentation' of *Bedeutung*). Then at 3.13 we are told that a proposition – that is to say, a sentence standing in its projective relation to reality (3.12) – does not actually contain its *Sinn*, does not contain *what* is projected. This makes it clear that the *Sinn* of a sentence is something which belongs at the level of reference, rather than of Fregean sense. Indeed, 4.1211 implies that the *Sinn* of the proposition 'Fb' will contain the object b itself. So it is the referents of the component expressions of a sentence which figure in its *Sinn*, and not their senses (supposing that they have senses). We

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get the smoothest reading in all this if we assume that '*Sinn*' means something like 'truth-condition' throughout.

My view concerning the *TLP* use of '*Bedeutung*' is that it should be translated neither as 'reference' nor '(Russellian) meaning', but rather as 'semantic content'; though this will take some explaining. Firstly, notice that Wittgenstein is prepared to speak of the *Bedeutung* of expressions where it is perfectly clear that he does not regard those expressions as referring to anything in reality, such as the sentence '-P' and the sign '+' (5.02), the negation-sign '-' (5.451), and number words such as '1+1' and '2' (6.232). This suggests very strongly that the *Bedeutung* of an expression cannot be its referent, or anything like its referent. Yet on the other hand, at 3.203 we are told that a name *bedeutet* an object, the object being the name's *Bedeutung*. We may be puzzled how this remark is supposed to be understood if '*Bedeutung*' does *not* mean 'referent'.

In fact there is no special difficulty here. First of all, let us introduce the notion of the *semantic content* of an expression, to mean whatever must be known by one who is to understand it; or alternatively, as whatever that expression contributes to what is literally communicated by statements containing it. (I regard these formulations as equivalent.) The crucial point here is that there is nothing in the notion of semantic content as such to require that a semantic content be a possible object of reference – an item in reality. Then if we suppose that '*Bedeutung*' means 'semantic content' throughout *TLP*, it is easy to understand how the negation-sign can have *Bedeutung*, since it certainly makes a contribution to the communicated content of statements which contain it. Yet we can also understand how the *Bedeutung* of a name can be an object, if we suppose that Wittgenstein's doctrine is that in order to understand the contribution made by a proper name to a statement containing it, you are only required to know *which* thing the person in question is talking about (see Section C below).

Notice that on the reading of the *TLP* terminology of '*Sinn*' and '*Bedeutung*' presented here, it turns out that *Sinn* is a kind of *Bedeutung* – thus explaining how 5.02 can speak of sentences as having *Bedeutung*. Indeed, *Sinn* is the distinctive sort of semantic content that sentences have, in that Wittgenstein's view is that in order to understand a statement, it is only necessary to know its *Sinn* (truth-condition). Thus see 4.02–4.022, where it is implied that to understand a proposition is to know its *Sinn*, which is a matter of knowing the situation it represents – of knowing how things stand in the world if it is true (see also 4.024). And see also 4.03, which implies that what a proposition communicates is its *Sinn*. So a *Sinn* is the communicated content (*Bedeutung*) of a sentence.²

Although in *TLP* terminology the *Sinn* of a sentence is its truth-condition, Wittgenstein does in fact find room for a notion similar to that of Fregean sense, expressed in (the normal use of) the terminology of ‘symbol’ (*Symbol*) and ‘proposition’ (*Satz*).³ But sense is not, as in Frege, detachable from the use of signs (see Section E below). Rather, a symbol is a sign together with its sense – together with the mode of thinking which it expresses, or with its mode of projection on to reality; and a proposition is a kind of symbol (at least throughout most of *TLP*).

That this is so is strongly suggested by the fact that a proposition is defined, at 3.12, as a sentence in its projective relation to the world, and that 3.11 implies that a proposition is a sentence used as a projection of a possible situation. These remarks are highly reminiscent of Frege, in a way that must surely have been intended. For the idea of the *projection* of a sentence on to the world seems to be the exact mirror-image of the Fregean metaphor of sense as the *mode of presentation* of *Bedeutung*. Moreover, 3.321 implies that a sign may express different symbols by virtue of signifying in different ways, which again suggests that the notion of a *symbol* is being tied to that of a *way of signifying* (which must be something like a Fregean sense).⁴

While Wittgenstein employs the notion of a symbol in such a way as to suggest that a symbol is a sign together with its mode of projection on to reality (that is, together with its Fregean sense), he also implies that the use of any particular symbol is never essential to what is said (see 3.344, 4.465). Indeed, this is how the idea of there being different symbols with the same *Bedeutung* gets introduced again and again throughout *TLP*, namely under the guise of a distinction between essential and inessential aspects of language. In Wittgenstein’s view, the substitution of one symbol for another makes no essential difference, provided that *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* (semantic content) remain the same.

I think we can understand what is going on here, if we see Wittgenstein as endorsing one aspect of Frege’s theory of sense, but rejecting another. He is accepting that thought about reality cannot be immediate (as Russell would have it),⁵ but is always mediated by modes of presentation; accepting also that the reference (more generally the semantic content) of a sign is determined by the mode of thinking which it expresses. But he is denying Frege’s thesis that mutual knowledge of sense is necessary for communication. In Frege’s view speakers only understand one another in the use of an expression if they both associate it with the very same sense.⁶ This is what Wittgenstein is denying when he denies that differences in symbol are essential. Rather, for the purpose of communication it is

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sufficient that speakers should know that their sentences share the same truth-conditions (*Sinn*), and more generally know that their expressions possess, in their respective idiolects, the same semantic contents (*Bedeutung*).

Wittgenstein's doctrines concerning *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* then contain a theory of communication to rival Frege's. Since he holds that it is sufficient for two sentences to say the same thing (to possess the same *Sinn*) that they be analytically equivalent (5.141),⁷ two speakers may be said to understand one another in the use of a sentence provided that they know that it is, in their respective idiolects, true in the same possible worlds (as a matter of conceptual rather than metaphysical necessity).⁸ And since (as we shall see in Sections C and D below) two atomic sentences possess the same *Sinn* just in case they make analytically equivalent predications of the very same individuals, two speakers may be said to understand one another in the use of such a sentence provided they know that it serves, in their respective idiolects, to say the very same things about the same individuals. But it is not as if we are supposed to be able to think about sets of possible worlds or individual objects directly. It is merely that the modes of thinking (senses, cognitive contents) involved are relegated to the province of psychology, in that mutual possession of them is not required for communication.⁹

(B) Sense and nonsense

In my view Wittgenstein's showing/saying doctrine, together with the doctrine of philosophy as nonsense, flows fairly directly from the theory of communication outlined above. The more usual way of accounting for these doctrines, however, is in terms of the impossibility of using language to represent what is essential to language or the world without presupposing exactly what is being described. This idea is certainly there in *TLP* (see 2.172), but it cannot be the whole story. For what this account fails to explain is why we should not be able to rely upon our inchoate, implicit, grasp of logical form in order to make that very same form articulate and explicit. For Wittgenstein does in any case acknowledge that the logical form of our language can be hidden from our conscious awareness (4.002).

In fact the correct way to explain Wittgenstein's views is as follows. Tautologies, contradictions and the propositions of mathematics are said to be senseless (*sinnlos*), because they fail to mark a division within the set

of possible worlds. A tautology is true in all worlds, whereas a contradiction is true in none. Then since neither has a directed truth-condition (a *Sinn*), neither can succeed in saying or communicating anything. They are nevertheless well formed, consisting of legitimate combinations of signs each of which possesses semantic content. Propositions of philosophy and metaphysics, on the other hand, are said to be nonsensical (*unsinnig*), because they characteristically contain terms (such as ‘necessary’ or ‘impossible’) which can only ever figure in sentences which are necessarily true or necessarily false.¹⁰ These terms then lack semantic content (*Bedeutung*), since they fail to make a contribution to the semantic content (*Sinn*) of sentences in which they occur. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein thinks that tautologies and contradictions (and even, in some obscure way, the nonsensical propositions of philosophy, since these can help us to see the world aright – 6.54) can *show* us something about the essential structure of language and the world.¹¹

In my view these doctrines are unjustified. Wittgenstein has taken a theory of semantic content which provides an adequate account of communication for factual (broadly scientific) discourse, and attempted to extend its scope to cover discourse of all kinds, including that of mathematics and philosophy. What ought rather to be said is that the concepts of semantic content and of understanding are purpose-relative, varying in the conditions of their application according to the context in question. Roughly, to know the semantic content of an utterance of a sentence is to know *enough about the mode of thinking which it expresses for the purposes in hand*. Where the context is a factual one, the condition for understanding will be mutual knowledge of truth-conditions, just as Wittgenstein claims. But where the context is that of an *a priori* investigation of some sort, the condition for understanding will be mutual knowledge of sense (cognitive content). And for other forms of discourse the conditions for understanding will be different again.¹²

An account of the above sort enables us to provide for the significance of statements in philosophy and logic, while recognising the correctness of the *TLP* theory of communication within the crucially central area of fact-stating. Since the account can be combined with a univocal (if purpose relative) definition of semantic content, it is even consistent with Wittgenstein’s project of uncovering the essence of language. It then follows that the doctrine of philosophy as nonsense may simply be excised from *TLP*, without damage to the remainder. It is for this reason that I feel myself justified in laying Wittgenstein’s official attitude towards philosophy to one side in my discussions of his metaphysics.¹³

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(C) Name and object

The correct interpretation of the *TLP* terminology of ‘name’ and ‘object’ will prove crucial, not only for our understanding of the *TLP* semantics of proper names and predicative expressions (see below and Section D), but also for our account of Wittgenstein’s metaphysical views and programme of analysis, to be considered extensively in the present work. I maintain that this terminology should be interpreted narrowly, with *TLP* names being proper names (excluding predicates and relational expressions) and *TLP* objects being individuals, not including properties or relations (universals). There is a great deal of textual evidence in support of this reading, and no insuperable textual evidence against it – though the story is far too complex to be gone into in any detail here.¹⁴

It should be stressed, however, that a large part of the case for the narrow reading is not textual at all, but turns rather on considerations of Charity. For if ‘name’ and ‘object’ are interpreted widely, to cover predicates and universals respectively, then many of the *TLP* doctrines become weak and anodyne as a result.¹⁵ In contrast, if those terms are interpreted narrowly, these same doctrines become powerful and interesting, and the Picture Theory can be understood to embody a new and correct account of the semantics of predicative expressions (see Section D below). So my view is that we should, in charity to Wittgenstein as well as in fidelity to his text, prefer the narrow interpretation.

Perhaps the most powerful textual argument supporting the narrow reading of the name/object terminology is provided by the spatial metaphors which dominate Wittgenstein’s presentation of the Picture Theory. States of affairs are said to be ‘combinations’ or ‘configurations’ of objects (2.01, 2.0271–2.0272); and it is said to be the determinate relation obtaining between the names in a sentence which enables it to signify (2.14), with a sentence being compared to a *tableau vivant* (4.0311; see also 3.1431). These images become entirely inappropriate if objects include relations as well as individuals, and if names include relational expressions as well as proper names.

In order to see that this is so, notice that Wittgenstein would then be saying that in a state of affairs of the form aRb , the individuals a and b and the relation R stand in a determinate relation to one another – inviting the question ‘Which relation do they stand in, then?’ and threatening a vicious regress. And in connection with sentences he would face a dilemma. Either he would be saying that in the sentence ‘ aRb ’ the names ‘ a ’, ‘ R ’ and ‘ b ’ stand in a determinate relation to one another, which precisely conflicts

with what is held to be the main point of the Picture Theory by those who adopt the wide interpretation – namely that what really signifies the relation in ‘aRb’ is not the sign ‘R’ itself, but rather the *relation* obtaining between the signs ‘a’ and ‘b’ when they are written on either side of the sign ‘R’.¹⁶ Or, on the other hand, he would be saying that in ‘aRb’ the signs ‘a’, ‘b’ and the relation which obtains between two signs when they are written on either side of the sign ‘R’ stand in a determinate relation to one another. This, too, would threaten a vicious regress. So at the very least, we can say that if the wide reading of Wittgenstein’s terminology is adopted, then his metaphors turn out to have been chosen most unhappily.

It might be replied that the narrow interpretation is in fact no better equipped to deal with the spatial metaphors of *TLP*. For where an atomic sentence has the subject/predicate form ‘Fb’, how can it be the case that there is a determinate relation between the names, if the only name present is ‘b’? Equally, in a state of affairs such as Fb, where an individual possesses a monadic property, how can there be a combination of objects, if b is the only object involved? I think the correct answer to these questions is that Wittgenstein believed that there would not be any elementary propositions of subject/predicate form, or any states of affairs except relational ones.¹⁷ (This is how I interpret the famous remark at 2.0232, that in a manner of speaking objects are colourless.) The best way of explaining why Wittgenstein should have believed this is that he already had in mind the outline of a programme of analysis which would have such a consequence. This hypothesis will be confirmed in Chapter 14, where I shall defend a model for the elementary propositions of *TLP*, which enables them to meet many of Wittgenstein’s constraints, as well as leaving no room for there to be any elementary propositions of subject/predicate form.

With the terminology of ‘name’ and ‘object’ interpreted narrowly, Wittgenstein’s account of the semantics of names will be as follows. The semantic content of any given proper name is (aside from its logical grammar which it will share with all other names for the same type of thing) exhausted by its bearer (3.203). In order to understand a statement involving a proper name it is sufficient (so far as the contribution of the name goes) that you know which thing the statement concerns – that you know the reference of the name. Mutual knowledge of sense is not (as Frege would have it) required. Nevertheless each name must be associated with a sense (a mode of thinking of the bearer) within the idiolect of each person who understands it; in virtue of which it has the reference which it does (3.3411, together with 3.31 and 3.321).¹⁸

My view is therefore that Wittgenstein agrees with Frege that names

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have (idiolectic) senses which determine their reference, but disagrees with him about the contribution of names to the semantic content (*Sinn*) of sentences in which they occur. Here the *TLP* account is purely referential. This combination of views seems to me to be actually correct, enabling us to retain a notion of sense for use in psychological explanation, while employing a purely referential semantics in our account of linguistic communication.¹⁹

While the above interpretations were in my view sufficiently established in *TS*, there remained two lacunae in the discussion, which will be taken up in the chapters which follow.²⁰ The first was that Wittgenstein combines the above account of the semantics of names with a commitment to analyse names for contingent physical objects into descriptions of the manner in which those objects are constructed out of their parts (3.24). Here he runs together conceptual with metaphysical necessity. For while it is plausible that at least some types of physical object are necessarily made up of their actual parts,²¹ on no account will this be so as a matter of conceptual necessity (the sort of necessity for which it is appropriate to look in an *a priori* analysis). So the question arises why Wittgenstein might have felt himself pressured into accepting such a doctrine. We shall return to the issue in Chapters 7 and 12 below.

The other lacuna in the *TS* discussion concerned Wittgenstein's commitment to the transparency of simple names (the names which constitute the end-point of analysis). For at 4.243 he implies that one cannot understand two such names without knowing whether their reference is the same or different, which seems to conflict with the idea that names (even simple names) have idiolectic senses. My suggestion is that he may here have had in mind the outline of a programme of analysis, within which simple names would be introduced by means of general rules, in such a way that one would be capable of working out *a priori* whether or not two names must have the same reference.²² We shall return to this suggestion in Chapter 14 below.

(D) The Picture Theory

Part, at least, of what is involved in Wittgenstein's Picture Theory is the doctrine that sentences represent isomorphically – for example, that a relation between two individuals will be symbolised by a relation between two proper names (see 3.1432). But we can distinguish between stronger and weaker versions of the doctrine of isomorphism. In its strong version, the idea would be that not only the names but also the significant relations

between them will stand in a relation of reference to the world. In its weaker version, on the other hand, the idea would only be that relational facts will be symbolised by relational sentences, there being no requirement that the significant relation in such a sentence will, like the names involved, have reference. So from the fact that *TLP* certainly endorses a doctrine of isomorphic representation, it does not follow that it is also committed to predicative expressions having reference.

It is clearly the case that Wittgenstein accepted the strong isomorphism thesis in his earliest writings – see *NB* 99, 111. Yet I believe we can trace his increasing worries concerning this version of Picture Theory through his ensuing notebooks, culminating with a rejection of reference for predicative expressions, and a version of Picture Theory which is committed only to the weak version of the isomorphism doctrine. Very roughly, the worry took the form a dilemma, depending upon whether the significant relation in a sentence was supposed to refer to a relation *token* or to a relation *type* (a universal). The dilemma may be developed as follows.

Suppose first, that the significant relation in ‘aRb’ refers to a relation token which obtains between the objects a and b in particular. Then it will be impossible to explain how such a sentence can both have semantic content and be false. For if ‘aRb’ is false, then there *is* no appropriate relation obtaining between the objects a and b to be referred to. Suppose second, that the significant relation in ‘aRb’ refers to the universal Rness. Then since this universal can exist in the absence of a and b, there must be something which in fact relates it to those objects in the particular case in hand, in virtue of which it is true that they are related to one another by that relation. But this is precisely the doctrine of the copula (that the state of affairs aRb contains not only the objects a, b and the relation R, but a copula relating together the other three) which it was one of Wittgenstein’s earliest concerns to reject (see *NB* 120–1). I believe that he came to feel that the only way out of this dilemma was to deny reference to predicative expressions altogether.²³

I interpret the mature version of Wittgenstein’s Picture Theory in *TLP* as embodying just such a non-referential semantics for predicative expressions, as follows. The fact that the elementary propositions which constitute the end-point of analysis consist only of proper names in immediate combination (note that I here presuppose the narrow reading of *TLP* names) would be supposed to reveal to us something of the essence of our ordinary propositions. For just as there would be two distinct aspects to the understanding of an elementary proposition (there would be knowledge of the reference of the names involved, as well as knowledge of the

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rules for comparing a given arrangement of names with the world, so as to test it for truth), so too our ordinary propositions involve two quite different aspects: names referring to items in the world, and predicative expressions which bring with them rules for mapping objects on to truth-values.

I thus see Wittgenstein as being committed to a non-referential semantics for predicative expressions. A one-place predicate, for example, serves not to refer to some item in the world (a property), but rather to express a rule for classifying objects in virtue of the property-tokens which they possess.²⁴ Thus consider the sentence ‘Mary has freckles.’ The role of the predicate here is not, as is that of the name, to refer to some item in the world, but rather to express a rule for determining, of any given object, whether or not it has freckles. This rule will apply to Mary, if it does, in virtue of her possessing a token of the property of being freckled (in virtue of the fact that she enters into a token state of affairs of the type *being freckled*). But this is not to say that the predicate then refers to that property-token; for if it did, then there would be a problem in explaining how such a sentence could be both significant and false, as we saw earlier. Yet all the same, there can be a number of predicates with different senses (which express cognitively distinct rules of classification) which nevertheless have the same *Bedeutung* (semantic content). For in Wittgenstein’s view, all predicates expressing rules which are analytically equivalent to one another may be said to make the same contribution to the *Sinn* (truth-conditions) of sentences in which they occur.²⁵

These views are both substantive and interesting. Indeed, my own assessment is that they are actually correct, with respect to at least most predicative expressions of natural language (some uses of natural kind terms excepted). They may certainly be preferred to a number of referential alternatives – for example, that predicative expressions serve to refer to extensions, or to ‘incomplete’ but extensional entities (Frege’s view); that they refer to transcendent (Platonic) universals; or finally that they refer to universals of an immanent (Aristotelian) sort.²⁶ Then since this interpretation of the Picture Theory is only possible given a narrow reading of the terminology of ‘name’ and ‘object’, we have here yet another argument – from Charity – for adopting that reading.

In contrast, if the wide reading of the name/object terminology is adopted, then the Picture Theory will contain nothing of any deep philosophical significance. For the isomorphism thesis (in either its strong or weak versions) would then constitute the whole content of the theory. Yet this thesis represents, at best, a deep contingent fact about many