1 Introduction

1.1 Delimiting the Topic

This Element deals with Wittgenstein's conception of the contrast between saying something that makes sense and failing to do so or falling into nonsense.[*] When one succeeds in saying something that makes sense – as the phrase will be used in this Element – one correctly takes oneself, and indeed knows, to be doing so. Conversely, when one falls into nonsense, one does not know it. On the contrary, one tries to say something that makes sense and mistakenly takes oneself to be doing so: one undergoes an illusion of sense. In short, this Element is concerned with saying something that makes sense as a *fallible self-conscious capacity.*[1]

Not all nonsense is something that one *falls into*. There are ways of employing the terms "nonsense" and "nonsensical sentence" that do not correspond to the idea of failing to say something that makes sense. Wittgenstein sometimes uses the terms in these other ways. He speaks, for example, of the babbling of a child or a nonsense poem as forms of nonsense (PI §282). Clearly, these linguistic or protolinguistic phenomena do not express failures to say something that makes sense. The infant who is just starting to babble has no conception of what it is to speak meaningfully; hence, they are not trying, but failing, to do so. They are still acquiring the capacity to speak meaningfully, not failing to exercise it successfully. The author of a nonsense poem is also not failing to say something to make sense, even though for very different reasons. They, clearly, have acquired the capacity to speak meaningfully, but are not failing to exercise it successfully, because they are not even trying to do so. Their goal is not to say something that makes sense, even though it depends in complex ways on that capacity. While Wittgenstein occasionally employs the term "nonsense" in these and other similar ways, the notion of nonsense that figures most prominently – and arguably, also most fundamentally – in his writings is nonsense as the expression of a failure to say something that makes sense. This is the notion with which this Element is primarily concerned.

Just as one may or may not succeed in *saying* something that makes sense, one may or may not succeed in *thinking* something that makes sense without saying anything. While Wittgenstein does not deny that we can think without speaking, his primary object of investigation is spoken thought, or thinking *in*

[*] I wish to thank David Stern, Wim Vanrie and two anonymous referees for detailed comments that led to substantial improvements of this text.

[1] A capacity to Φ is "self-conscious," in the sense here relevant, if when one Φ-s, one thereby knows to be Φ-ing – and when one fails to Φ, one thereby fails to know to be failing to Φ, but mistakenly takes oneself to be Φ-ing. Section 1.7 comments on the choice of framing the issue in terms of "capacities," which is not a characteristically Wittgensteinian term.

speaking. This is for him the key for understanding thought in general. For this reason, he is often listed as one of the main representatives of the "linguistic turn" in twentieth-century philosophy. What sort of priority, exactly, Wittgenstein attributes to spoken over unspoken thought, and whether his view on the matter changed over the course of his career, are debatable questions. One may hold, for instance, that early Wittgenstein adopted a comparatively weak version of the linguistic turn, according to which spoken and unspoken thought have essentially the same nature and the former has merely heuristic priority, whereas the later Wittgenstein adopted a stronger version of the linguistic turn, according to which spoken thought constitutes the conceptually fundamental form of thinking. In any case, the main concern of this Element is making sense construed as a *linguistic* achievement.

The rest of this Introduction will give an overview of how the contrast between sense and nonsense is connected to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy on the one hand, and to his conception of logical syntax and grammar on the other. The subsequent sections will contrast two approaches to these regions of Wittgenstein's thought. The Element as a whole focuses on points of continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Discontinuities will be mentioned only when this serves to bring out the underlying continuities.

1.2 Sense, Nonsense, and Philosophy

The contrast between sense and nonsense is at the basis of one of the most distinctive and controversial aspects of Wittgenstein's thought, namely his conception of philosophy. For Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are not well-posed questions that admit of intelligible answers, as happens paradigmatically with questions of natural science. On the contrary, philosophical questions and their purported answers are nonsensical. Philosophy as Wittgenstein seeks to practice it aims to expose their nonsensicality. As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their nonsensicality" (TLP 4.003). The same perspective appears in his major later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (PI §464); "The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense" (PI §119). Philosophical problems, along with their purported positive solutions, only appear to make sense. They generate illusions of sense, and the goal of philosophy is to make us aware of such illusions, in a progress from disguised to overt nonsense. For Wittgenstein, we can say, the object of

philosophy is our capacity to make sense. Philosophy seeks to identify its failures and, in this manner, to confer on us a firmer grasp of the capacity.

The illusions of sense that philosophy seeks to dissolve derive, for Wittgenstein, from a certain sort of misunderstanding – one concerning the use of words figuring in the formulation of philosophical problems. Wittgenstein often refers to it as a "misunderstanding of the logic of our language." The problem is that we are prone to form a wrong conception of the use of linguistic expressions, and in particular, to assimilate the use of some expressions to the use of other expressions that work in fact very differently. In the preface to the *Tractatus*, he writes: "The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language" (TLP, preface; see also TLP 4.003). Later on in the same book, he traces this sort of misunderstanding to the misleading analogies of ordinary language – specifically, to the fact that the same linguistic expression is often used in different ways (for instance, the word "is" is used sometimes as the copula and sometimes as the sign of identity, as in "Socrates is wise" and "Socrates is the teacher of Plato" respectively), and to the fact that linguistic expressions which function differently can often appear to be used in the same way (for instance, the verbs "to go" and "to exist" can appear, qua intransitive verbs, to function similarly in "Cars go" and "Cars exist"; TLP 3.323–3.3324). A version of the same idea is restated in the *Investigations*, even though in this later work Wittgenstein maintains that misleading linguistic analogies are only *one* of the causes of the misunderstanding of the use of linguistic expressions: "Our investigation … sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language" (PI §90). In other passages, he employs the same terminology that he used in the *Tractatus*, speaking of a "misunderstanding of the logic of language" (PI §93) and of the "temptation to misunderstand the logic of our expressions" (PI §345).

If the goal of philosophy is to unmask failures to make sense caused by misunderstandings of the use of linguistic expressions, it is to be expected that philosophy, in order to achieve its goal, will have to clear up those misunderstandings – that is, to clarify how linguistic expressions are used. This is in fact Wittgenstein's view, both early and late. Philosophy as he seeks to practice it is an activity of clarification of the use of linguistic expressions.

1.3 Clarification and Grammar

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein calls the sort of inquiry that seeks to clarify the use of linguistic expressions "grammatical" (PI §90). He uses the term

"grammar" and its cognates to characterize both the inquiry and its object, namely the "grammar" of linguistic expressions (as in, "the grammar of 'to mean' is not like that of the expression 'to imagine,'" PI §38). The grammar of linguistic expressions is also referred to as their "logic" (as in, "we are under a temptation to misunderstand the logic of our expressions," PI §345) and their "use" (as in, "Grammar . . . only describes . . . the use of signs," PI §496).

It is important for the *Investigations* that a grammatical inquiry can take different forms: there is more than one way of clarifying the use of words, whose effectiveness depends on the misunderstanding at issue. This accords with the book's explicit methodological pluralism: "There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (PI §133). Everything in the *Investigations* suggests that there is no closed list of such methods: one has to look and see what works in each particular case. Thus, one way of clarifying the use of linguistic expressions is "analysis," construed as the process of "substituting one form of expression for another" (PI §90); another is "finding and inventing intermediate cases" between different uses of words (PI §122); another is asking "how a proposition can be verified" (PI §353); another is describing "clear and simple language-games" that should throw light on the use of our language by serving as "objects of comparison" (PI §130); another is attending to how the meaning of a word is taught or explained (see, for example, PI §9, even though this is a pervasive procedure of the *Investigations*); another is bringing ourselves to find remarkable the use of some expression that we initially take to be unproblematic, in order to come to see as unproblematic the use of some other expression that we initially find puzzling (PI §524); and yet another method consists in giving what Wittgenstein calls – in equivalent or closely related ways – "grammatical propositions" (PI §§251, 295, 458), "grammatical notes" (PI §232), "grammatical remarks" (PI §574), and "grammatical rules" (PI §497). These are sentences that describe the use of linguistic expressions. Sentences that are explicitly characterized in this way in the *Investigations* include: "Every rod has a length" (PI §252); "An order orders its own execution" (PI §458); "A sentence, and hence in another sense a thought, can be the 'expression' of belief, hope, expectation, etc. But believing is not thinking" (PI §574); "I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say 'I know what you are thinking', and wrong to say 'I know what I am thinking'" (PI, II, xi, p. 222).

Wittgenstein insists that grammar "only describes" the use of signs (PI §496; see also §124). Yet, as the terms "grammar" and "grammatical rule" suggest, this is a sort of description that involves a normative dimension. The description of the use of linguistic expressions that Wittgenstein recommends does not consist in empirical generalizations about how a given population of speakers

uses given expressions. Such generalizations would have to treat *indifferently* the "good" and the "bad" cases, namely the cases where one succeeds in using an expression to make sense, and those in which one mistakenly takes oneself to be doing so. However, it is unclear how such generalizations could help to expose the bad cases as such. In fact, one of Wittgenstein's negative characterizations of a grammatical inquiry is that it is *not* empirical (PI §251, for example, contrasts grammatical propositions with empirical propositions). Wittgensteinian grammar seeks to describe how words are used *to make sense*. We can also say: they seek to describe the *successful exercise* of the capacity to use words to make sense. After all, Wittgenstein holds that we need to get a clear view of the "functioning" of words (PI §5) and of the "workings" of language (PI §109) – not of their *mal*functioning and *mis*workings.[2]

The *Tractatus* does not say that it pursues a "grammatical inquiry" consisting, among other things, in giving "grammatical propositions" or stating "grammatical rules." But the *Tractatus*, too, seeks to clarify how linguistic expressions are used to make sense. Philosophy, it says, is an "activity" whose result is "the clarification of propositions" (TLP 4.112). Just as the *Investigations* holds that "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (PI §109), so the *Tractatus* states that "All philosophy is critique of language" (TLP 4.0031). The *Tractatus*, like the *Investigations*, seeks to remove misunderstandings about the functioning of language and dissolve in this way the ensuing philosophical problems. For instance, and proceeding roughly from the beginning to the end of the book, the *Tractatus* seeks to show that "senseful propositions" (*Sinnvolle Sätze*), stating truly or falsely how things stand, function differently from names, picking out something we want to talk about;[3] that the so-called truth-predicate ("is true") and analogous expressions ("is a fact," "obtains," "is the case") function differently from genuine predicates ascribing a property to some kind of entity (such as "is wise"); that truth-functional connectives ("if," "and," etc.) function differently from genuine predicates; that numerals function differently from names; that propositional attitude reports (such as "S judges/says p") function differently from relational propositions (such as "A loves B"); that senseful propositions function differently – and in each case in a different way – from identity statements, the so-called propositions of logic (such as the law of noncontradiction), mathematical equations, probability statements, the fundamental laws of physics, the so-called propositions of ethics, and the so-called propositions with which

[2] This does not deny that, for Wittgenstein, the ultimate goal of describing the functioning of language is to identify cases in which it malfunctions.

[3] A Tractarian *Satz* is a linguistic entity. A less common but perhaps clearer translation is "sentence" rather than "proposition."

a work of philosophy such as the *Tractatus* seeks to clarify the functioning of language. In each case, the *Tractatus* opposes a false assimilation of uses of language.[4]

1.4 Grammatical Remarks and Tractarian Elucidations

While the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are alike in pursuing the clarification of the use of language, they differ in various ways about how to pursue this clarificatory work. One major difference concerns their respective views about the status of clarificatory language.

There is a question about how to conceive the functioning of the sentences that serve to clarify the functioning of language. One of the fundamental misunderstandings of the logic of our language that Wittgenstein addresses arises precisely with regard to this use of language. In particular, Wittgenstein thinks that it is a common mistake to construe this use of language on the model of contingent, empirical statements, belonging to what Wittgenstein sometimes calls "natural science." The traditional characterization of philosophy as the study of "necessary and apriori truths" is an expression of this sort of misunderstanding in so far as it takes the notion of truth that applies to empirical claims and then seeks to capture what is specific to philosophy by adding some external qualification. The well-known pronouncement that philosophy is not a "theory" (TLP 4.112, PI §109), which tends to alienate many of Wittgenstein's readers or would-be readers, must be understood and assessed in the context of these preoccupations about, we might say, the logic of philosophical language: not only the language that occurs in the formulation of alleged philosophical problems and their purported direct solutions, but also the language that is used to show that those alleged problems rest on misunderstandings of the use of linguistic expressions.

For the *Tractatus*, the sentences that seek to clarify the use of language achieve their purpose only in so far as they are eventually recognized as nonsensical. The *Tractatus* says that "a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations" (TLP 4.112) and presents itself as such a work. In the penultimate numbered remark of the book, Wittgenstein writes: "My sentences elucidate in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)" (TLP 6.54). So, the ultimate goal of philosophy is to help us become aware of illusions of sense; it

[4] For a discussion of the Tractarian recognition of various uses of language besides the fact-stating or "picturing" use (which is laid out by the so-called "picture theory of the proposition"), see Kremer (2002) and Diamond (2011, 2019).

does so by clarifying the use of linguistic expressions; and it does *this* – namely, clarifying the use of linguistic expressions – by giving us sentences that fulfil their function only in so far as they are initially taken to make sense (and arguably, to make sense in the specific way in which Tractarian *sinnvolle Sätze* make sense), but are eventually seen to express mere illusions of sense. More briefly: in order to help us overcome failures to make sense, philosophy should first lead us into *more* failures to make sense and then make us recognize those failures as such.

There is a question about whether this procedure is inherently paradoxical, but in any case, there is no commitment to it in the *Investigations*. This later book contains nothing analogous to TLP 6.54. It does not state that its method for clarifying the functioning of language is the employment of sentences that must be eventually recognized as nonsensical. In particular, there is no suggestion that "grammatical remarks" are supposed to function in this way. One way of understanding this difference is that the *Tractatus*' method of elucidations and the *Investigations*' method of grammatical remarks are mutually compatible and could in principle be used in tandem. On this reading, the *Investigations* could in principle admit the *Tractarian* elucidatory method in its pantheon of clarificatory tools, and the *Tractatus* (in so far as it holds that a work of philosophy consists "essentially," but not exclusively, of elucidations) could in principle admit the use of grammatical remarks as a subsidiary clarificatory device. Another way of understanding the matter is that the two methods are mutually incompatible, because they express alternative views about the *same* sort of undertaking. On this other reading, there is no room in the *Tractatus* for grammatical remarks, and no room in the *Investigations* for a Tractarian elucidation. What the *Investigations* regards as a grammatical remark would have to be conceived for the *Tractatus* as an elucidation, and what the *Tractatus* regards as an elucidation would have to be conceived for the *Investigations* as a grammatical remark.[5]

Whether or not Tractarian elucidations and grammatical remarks are mutually compatible, they are supposed to function very differently. A Tractarian elucidation is construed as an *essentially transitional* use of language: it achieves its purpose only if it is first taken to make sense and then recognized as nonsensical. The *Investigations* provides different positive characterizations of what goes on in a grammatical remark. A first feature of grammatical remarks is that they purport to "remind" us of something we already know: "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (PI

[5] The relation between Tractarian elucidations and grammatical remarks is a debated topic. See, for instance, McGinn (2006) and Moyal-Sharrock (2007).

§127). Also, "The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known" (PI §109; see also PI §89). A second feature of grammatical remarks is that they do not purport to put forth anything controversial: "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everybody would agree to them" (PI §128). A third feature of grammatical remarks is that they get their purpose – that is, their *whole* purpose – from the philosophical problems they serve to dissolve: "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems" (PI §109).

Arguably, this is only an entry of a much longer list of differences between Wittgenstein's early and later conception of clarification. However, the background of these differences is a general agreement about the ultimate goal of philosophy – namely, dissolving philosophical problems by clarifying the functioning of language – and the necessity to resist the assimilation of clarificatory uses of language to the statement of contingent, empirical facts.

1.5 Grammar and Syntax

While the *Tractatus* does not purport to give grammatical remarks, it does mention "logical grammar" as a synonym of "logical syntax" (TLP 3.325). It also speaks of the "logicosyntactical employment" of linguistic expressions (TLP 3.327) and of "rules of logical syntax" (TLP 3.334, 3.344). A precursor of this terminology appears in the 1914 *Notes Dictated to Moore*, where Wittgenstein equates "rules of logic" with "syntactical rules for the manipulation of symbols" (NB 117). After his return to full-time philosophy in 1929, he continued for a few years to speak of "syntactical rules" (see, for example, RLF 162, PR §78, BT 206/264) and of the "syntax" of linguistic expressions (BT 429/636). He also began to speak of "propositions of syntax" (PR §§132, 177, BT 212/270). In this period, Wittgenstein appears to use "syntax" and "grammar" interchangeably. For instance, in a lecture delivered in 1933, he reportedly said, "Just as 'sense' is vague, so must be 'grammar,' 'grammatical rule,' 'syntax'" (MWL 282). The grammar talk however becomes increasingly more frequent, and in the *Blue and Brown Books* (BB), dictated between 1933 and 1935, there is no trace left of the syntax talk. The same applies to the *Investigations*.

There are certainly important differences between the "logical syntax" of the *Tractatus* and the "grammar" of the *Investigations*. However, at a sufficiently high level of abstraction, they are equivalent: like grammar, logical syntax describes how linguistic expressions are used *to make sense* – and thus the

functioning of language, as opposed to its malfunctioning. In a different registry of the terminology, just as the grammar of an expression is its meaningful use (as opposed to its nonsensical, and thus defective, application), so is its logical syntax.

The connection between Tractarian logical syntax and sense is particularly explicit in a passage written in 1929, when Wittgenstein's views were still in many respects very close to the *Tractatus*. The paragraph begins with a paraphrase of the sections of the *Tractatus* that introduce the topic leading to the discussion of logical syntax (TLP 3.31–3.315), and then continues: "By syntax . . . I mean the rules which tell us in which connections only a word gives sense, thus excluding nonsensical structures" (RLF 162). The connection is almost as explicit in a letter that Wittgenstein wrote before the first bilingual publication of the *Tractatus* in 1922. The letter was addressed to one of his English translators, and the relevant passage discusses the translation of TLP 3.325, which was eventually rendered as: "In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use [*sinnvolle Gebrauch*]." In his comments, Wittgenstein equates, first, "how [the] sign is *used* significantly in propositions" with "how the sign is used in accordance with the laws of logical syntax," and secondly, "significant use" with "syntactically correct use" (LO 59). Most plausibly, this means that the *syntactically correct* use of a sign is intended to contrast with a *nonsensical* combination of signs.[6]

The *Tractatus* introduces the terminology of "logical syntax" in a context that deals explicitly with the use of language that pertains to senseful propositions (*sinnvolle Sätze*), which state truly or falsely contingent states of affairs. Arguably, this is for the *Tractatus* the central use of language, in the sense that all other uses occupy a derivative position. It is thus reasonable to maintain that logical syntax, in the strict Tractarian understanding of the term, deals with the use of signs to "make sense" in a restricted understanding of the phrase – namely, to express a Tractarian "sense" (*Sinn*), which amounts to stating a contingent state of affairs. However, as the *Tractatus* acknowledges a variety of other uses of language (Section 1.3), it would not go against the spirit of the book to speak of logical syntax in an extended sense of the expression, so that the "logicosyntactical employment" of signs is in general *any* intelligible use of signs, as opposed to a way of mobilizing signs that results in nonsense. The contrast between "syntactically correct" and "syntactically incorrect" uses of signs, so understood, is a contrast between all the cases in which language is at work, fulfilling an intelligible function, and those in which

[6] For a different reading of the passage, see Johnston (2007), who takes the "syntactically correct use" to contrast with a semantically contentful use.

it fails to do so – running idle, or going on holiday, as Wittgenstein would later put it (PI §38). On this capacious construal of the terminology, one can say that the *Tractatus* addresses problems that rest on a misunderstanding of the logical syntax of our language, and that Tractarian elucidations seek to clarify the logical syntax of language.

1.6 Grammar, Form, and Content

Whenever words are not synonymous, they have in an obvious sense a different use. For instance, "Socrates" and "Plato," as names of different philosophers, have a different use. We saw above (Section 1.3) that Wittgenstein tends to speak equivalently of the "use" and the "grammar" of linguistic expressions. This equivalence, joined with the obvious sense of "use" just mentioned, entails that "Socrates" and "Plato" have a different grammar.

However, this is *not* the sort of difference that Wittgenstein is typically concerned with when he investigates the "grammar" of an expression. Take for instance the claim, in the *Investigations*, that "the grammar of 'to mean' is not like that of the expression 'to imagine'" (PI §38). Or take this other remark: "One might say 'Thinking is an incorporeal process' . . . if one were using this to distinguish the grammar of the word 'think' from that of, say, the word 'eat'" (PI §339). If the point here were simply that "to mean" and "to imagine," or "to think" and "to eat," have different meanings, it is hard to see how it would be worth making. Moreover, it is hard to see how pointing out mere differences in meaning could help to remove the sort of misunderstanding that Wittgenstein is interested in, namely misunderstandings leading to illusions of sense. It can indeed remove misunderstandings to point out, for example, that "Moscow" is the name of a city in Russia but also a city in Idaho. If I tell a friend that I am moving to Moscow, they might form the false belief that I am moving to Russia while I am in fact moving to Idaho, and they might ask questions that they would not ask if they had correctly understood what I wanted to say. However, this is simply a case of miscommunication (taking a certain form of words to mean X when in fact they mean Y), whereas Wittgenstein is interested in cases that give rise to an illusion of sense (taking a certain form of words to mean something when in fact they mean nothing at all).

We may distinguish, within the overall "use" or "grammar" of a word, its *content* and its *grammatical* (or *logical*) *form*. Wittgenstein is generally interested in the latter, and when he argues that two expressions have a different grammar, he generally aims to establish that they do not merely differ in content, but also in grammatical form. The distinction is here to be understood along the following lines. Two expressions may have different contents but the