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TWO CONCEPTIONS OF WITTGENSTEIN'S CONTEXTUALISM

Abstract

How should we understand Wittgenstein's proposals that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953, §43) and that a name only has a meaning in a language-game (ibid. §49)? Are they incompatible with occasion-invariant semantics? In this paper I present two leading interpretations of Wittgenstein's contextualism: James Conant's meaning-eliminativism (ME) and Charles Travis's meaning-underdetermination (MU). I argue that, even though these two interpretations are very similar, the latter gives a more nuanced account of Wittgenstein's contextualism which does not involve a commitment to the claim that words have no meaning outside immediate contexts of use.

Keywords

Wittgenstein, contextualism, Conant, Travis, use, nonsense

1. Introduction

For many years now there have been ongoing debates among scholars concerning how Wittgenstein's proposal that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953: §43) ought to be understood. Some have taken the proposal to signal the emergence of the "use theory" of meaning, whereas others have taken it to be a manifesto for a brand new therapeutic method that aims to do away with theoretical approaches to meaning and language altogether. In

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what follows, I shall remain neutral about such matters. Instead, what I shall be concerned with here is a certain approach in philosophy of language that has been motivated to a great extent by Wittgenstein's use conception of meaning, and which has given rise to much discussion in recent decades; *viz.* contextualism. Of course, the numerous extant versions of contextualism vary, and in certain cases it is arguable to what extent the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy persists. However, as will become evident, advocates of the more radical varieties of contextualism that I discuss here *do* associate themselves with Wittgenstein, and adapt and employ his arguments in current debate.

My brief in this paper is to distinguish two closely connected contextualist readings of Wittgenstein, to examine some of their corollaries, and to argue for one of them as a more compelling reading of Wittgenstein's contextualism. Both of these readings oppose another strand of interpretation, which takes Wittgenstein's view to be that a particular context (or occasion of use) combines, or fails to combine, with a bit of language that already expresses a determinate thought or sense (truth-conditional content).¹ Against this idea, the views I am interested in here argue that prior to its use in a context, the linguistic expression itself is not something truth-conditionally complete. Where they differ is in how they are inclined to evaluate the contribution that a linguistic expression itself makes on an occasion of use.

According to the first view, Wittgenstein took there to be no such thing as understanding the meaning of an expression in isolation from particular occasions in which that expression is used, and so more broadly, no semantics for languages that can be isolated from our use of those languages. Language-not-used boils down to a bunch of noises, doodles, and psychological associations. Hence, an immediate context of speaking does not merely contribute to determining what is said by a sentence, but rather it fully determines its semantics. Occasion-invariant meaning, on this interpretation, does nothing, since there is no such thing. On this view, then, the concepts of linguistic meaning and understanding are one-, rather than multi-dimensional, and essentially relate to the use of language on particular occasions.

An important problem with this view, which I spell out in more detail below, is that it calls into question the capacity of native speakers to recognise (or understand) a string of signs as a sentence of their language, irrespective of any known purpose or occasion of speaking. The second view, on the other hand, retains the key insights Wittgenstein arrived at on these matters *without* falling prey to this problem. I will therefore aim to show that the latter view offers a more compelling interpretation of Wittgenstein's contextualism, and what is more, that

¹ On this interpretation, as Conant formulates it, nonsense arises because "the situation somehow does not 'fit' the *Satz* – or, alternatively: the *Satz* somehow does not fit into this context of use" (Conant 1998: 223).

there is good textual evidence for regarding this as the more accurate interpretation of the later Wittgenstein's work.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the next section I introduce the first interpretation of Wittgenstein's contextualism (ME) in the context of the discussion concerning Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense. I specify which assumptions this interpretation finds dubious with regard to Wittgenstein's employment of nonsense, as well as how such dubious claims can be avoided. In section 3, I explain the main thesis of this interpretation to the effect that the idea of meaning which is not use is to be eliminated. In section 4, I introduce another interpretation of Wittgenstein's contextualism (MU), which tries to avoid a commitment to this thesis, and I specify how, on this interpretation, the commitment can be avoided. In section 5, I suggest that one need not accept the thesis insofar as one properly understands Wittgenstein's concept of language games as objects of comparison. In section 6, I point out some textual evidence that supports the view that Wittgenstein does allow for linguistic understanding that is not exhausted by understanding what is said by using expressions on particular occasions. I conclude that the second variant of contextualism (MU) gives a more nuanced interpretation of Wittgenstein's contextualism, which involves no rejection of linguistic competence, including the knowledge of standing meanings.

2. Against the “incompatible context” interpretation of nonsense

One dominant interpretation of Wittgenstein's contextualism, which I here call *meaning eliminativism*² (henceforth, ME), is given in James Conant's paper “Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use” (1998). Even though Conant's primary focus is on illuminating Wittgenstein's use of *nonsense* as a term of criticism, he also provides a particular interpretation of the role of the context principle in

² It is important to note that there is a sense of ME on which Wittgenstein is a meaning eliminativist, namely, the sense Francois Recanati (2004) gives to this term. Recanati explains that what a meaning eliminativist eliminates is the notion of “meaning” as something which occasion-insensitively determines the conditions of correctness for the concept's application or the truth-conditions of a sentence. Meaning eliminativist in this sense subscribes to the idea that words have “contextualized senses” carrying some semantic potential. Still, even this does not imply that, semantically speaking, anything goes: as Recanati emphasises, “[context] does not do everything, even on the most extreme form of Contextualism” (Recanati 2004: 152). Apart from Conant, a proponent of this radical variant ME is Anna Bergqvist (2009) who argues that “there just is no such thing as the invariant core meaning of a term, taken in isolation from its application in particular contexts of use” (Bergqvist 2009: 344).

Wittgenstein's later conception of meaning and use, and thus of Wittgenstein's later contextualism. Conant's target in this paper is an interpretation of nonsense according to which some utterance of a sentence (or *Satz*) is nonsense because of a clash or incompatibility between the *Satz* and the context of use. Call this the *incompatible context interpretation of nonsense* (henceforth IC).

Conant points out that the IC rests upon a claim about what constitutes a *Satz*, where the *Satz* is understood as that which fits or fails to fit the context of use, and where a failure to fit the context of use amounts to nonsense. That is, the IC assumes that the *Satz* that gets to be used, appropriately or inappropriately in a certain context, already is a proposition or an expression of a determinate thought, thus something with determinate truth-conditions. On the IC, a *Satz* is something more than, as Conant puts it, "a mere form of words" (Conant 1998: 223). Accordingly, the incompatibility in question, or nonsense, arises because there is a clash between a proposition with a determinate semantic content and the context in which it is spoken.

The point could also be put in terms of understanding what is *said* and understanding what is *asserted* (or understanding of any context-embedded speech act more generally). According to the IC, it is possible to understand the content of what is said, but still fail to understand what is asserted by a (meaningful) proposition in a particular context. Hence, when Wittgenstein judges an utterance to be nonsense, what he thus targets are the "acts of assertion rather than propositions" (Conant 1998: 224). It is possible that a proposition is meaningful (and in virtue of that truth-evaluable), even if the act of asserting it in a particular context is strictly speaking unintelligible.³ Conant puts the point as follows:

Questions can be raised about why what is said is being said and what the point is of its being said on a particular occasion of use. But the very possibility of asking such questions presupposes that it is already reasonably clear what thought is expressed, and thus what it would be for truth to have been spoken on this occasion of speaking. (Conant 1998: 241)

Furthermore, it is stressed that the IC attributes to Wittgenstein "an implicit reliance on a Gricean distinction between sentence-meaning and speaker's-meaning" (Conant 1998: 227), where the former is a property of sentence-types (regardless of their use by the speakers in context), and the latter denotes what the speaker intends to say or imply by her utterance, where this includes the point and purpose of her speaking. A commitment to such a distinction presupposes that it is possible to specify the conditions under which an utterance is

³ The IC interpretation attributes to Wittgenstein a distinction between a claim's being meaningless and its being unintelligible, where "meaningfulness has to do with sentences, and intelligibility has to do with context-embedded speech-acts" (Conant 1998: 228).

true simply based on knowing what the sentence means (even if we fail to see the point of speaking on a particular occasion). Thus, if we know what a sentence means (and we know that by virtue of knowing what individual parts mean and how they combine), then we *ipso facto* know what thought is expressed by it.

Conant objects to the IC by appealing to Frege's context principle; i.e. that "the meaning of a word must be asked for in the context of a proposition, not in isolation" (Frege 1884 [1997]: 90). More specifically, he argues that Wittgenstein's adherence to the context principle is incompatible with the IC's commitment to the idea of context-independent word- or sentence-meaning. According to Conant, in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein defends a generalised version of Frege's context principle (henceforth CP), which applies not just to individual words and their role in the context of a proposition, but also to sentences and their role in the context of "circumstances of significant use" or language-games. *Context* here primarily means "the context of a language game" (see Wittgenstein 1953: §49).

To show that Wittgenstein's commitment to the CP renders the IC implausible, Conant exploits Frege's claim concerning three methodological principles in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. He emphasises Frege's warning to the effect that the breach of the CP implies the breach of the principle that one should never confuse the psychological and the logical,⁴ and he takes the interdependence of Frege's principles as a main support for his claim that anyone who asks for the meaning of a sentence outside the context of significant use will "unwittingly end up seeking its meaning in the realm of the psychological" (Conant 1998: 239). As a result, those who claim that an expression has a meaning in isolation from the context in which it is used (i.e., a language game), commit Wittgenstein to a sort of psychologism or mentalism. Namely, because it wants to allow for the distinction between meaningfulness and intelligibility, the IC attributes to Wittgenstein the view that context-independent meanings are some sort of psychological entities or processes; and this Wittgenstein clearly rejects. Therefore, the IC must be wrong.

3. Eliminating meanings

On Conant's understanding of the CP, a breach of it would imply psychologism with regards meaning, which is a view Wittgenstein clearly criticises in his later work. In order to avoid such an outcome one should abandon the separation between evaluating sentences in terms of their context-independent meaning and

⁴ As Frege writes: "If [the CP] is not observed then one is almost forced to take as the meaning of words mental images or acts of an individual mind, and thereby to offend against the first as well" (Frege 1884 [1997]: 90).

evaluating speech acts in terms of their intelligibility in a particular context, and one should be austere about the implications of the CP for how we should interpret Wittgenstein's use of nonsense. As Conant explains:

What we are tempted to call 'the meaning of the sentence' is not a property the sentence already has in abstraction from any possibility of use and which it then carries with it – like an atmosphere accompanying it – into each specific occasion of use... it is a mistake to think that the words themselves possess a meaning apart from their capacity to have a meaning when called upon in various contexts of use. (Conant 1998: 241)

To be austere about ramifications of accepting the CP primarily means to recognise that English sentences such as *I know I have hands* or *I am here* say nothing determinate, and *hence* have no semantics outside the context of significant use.⁵ They are, as far as their meaning goes, on a par with gibberish and arbitrary noises such as *piggly wiggle tiggly*.⁶ Thus, if the threat of psychologistic construal of meaning is to be removed and the CP properly appreciated – that is, in a way that expressions are understood as not saying anything determinate outside the relevant context of use – then we need to eliminate the idea of a context-independent meaning altogether. Clearly, on the ME variant of contextualism, the relevant notion of saying something by using a sentence, or “what is said” by it in a context, is intimately associated with its meaning, so that if we fail to “say” something by using the sentence on an occasion, then the sentence thus spoken “means” nothing or simply lacks any meaning. The austere consequence of accepting the CP is that context-independent meanings are eliminated. So, when Wittgenstein calls Moore's utterance *I know this is a hand* nonsense, what he thus says is that the sounds Moore made on that particular occasion have as much semantics as any other arbitrary noise would have on that occasion.

One important aspect of Conant's argument against the IC requires special attention. I mention it here briefly, but I return to it below. Conant's criticism relies

⁵ It is crucial that on Conant's ME contextualism a failure of a sentence/speaker's use of sentence to say something is *ipso facto* a failure of meaning *tout court* (both what the sentence means and what the speaker means by saying it). So, Conant says, for instance, that “[t]he problem with a Moore-type utterance of ‘I am here’ is that the meaning of words ‘is not determined by the situation’: that is to say, it is not clear, when these words are called upon in this context, what is being said – if anything” (Conant 1998: 241).

⁶ The expression is from Diamond (2000: 155). Although, Conant does not explicitly argue this particular point in the paper under discussion, he defends it elsewhere. He writes for instance that “[mere] nonsense is simply unintelligible – it expresses no thought... it is mere gibberish” (Conant 2001: 14). Nonsense is “strictly speaking, not a grammatical or logical unit of a language, but a mere mark on paper (or noise) or sequence of marks (or noises)” (*ibid.*, 20).

on a certain notion of what understanding or knowing language involves. Both Conant and his opponents associate Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense with a certain failure of understanding. Whilst the proponents on the IC find a reason for calling something nonsense in a clash between what a sentence means and the occasion of using it, Conant rejects the "clash view" arguing that there is nothing semantically rich on the sentence side to cause such a clash in the first place. Where Conant's opponents allow for the possibility that the sentence can be understood in isolation (although being wrong about what this understanding could achieve), Conant rejects the possibility of understanding a language without understanding its use on particular occasions. Thus, by means of rejecting the possibility of occasion-insensitive meaning, Conant's ME contextualism also excludes, or is at least set against, the possibility that language can be understood in isolation or abstraction from its use. "Being used in a particular context" represents a necessary condition of linguistic understanding. This corollary of Conant's reading is, so I shall argue, at odds with Wittgenstein's view of linguistic understanding, which allows for different understandings of what it means to understand language.⁷

4. Meaning-underdetermination

In contrast to Conant's strong ME, Charles Travis (1989, 2006) offers a slightly different interpretation of Wittgenstein's proposal that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language", which does not accept the thesis that the context-independent notion of meaning is incompatible with Wittgenstein's context principle and his conception of meaning. I shall refer to Travis's variant of contextualism as the *meaning-underdetermination* (MU) interpretation. On this interpretation, "meaning, while it does not decide when words would be true, does not do nothing either" (Travis 2008: 101). So, what does meaning do? Travis's preferred formulation of this question is: what do (and what do not) meaning and naming accomplish?⁸

Like Conant, Travis sees Wittgenstein's proposal as aimed against a certain view of what meaning alone can accomplish, namely, the view according to which "if we know what words mean, we can always identify the proposition they expressed on an occasion" (Travis 2008: 96). We have seen that on Conant's ME contextualism, expressions only have a meaning in the context of circumstances of

⁷ See Section 6 below.

⁸ For Travis, the word's naming what it does is the word's meaning what it does are "roughly the same thing" (Travis, 1989: 105). Namely, "there is no in principle cleft between a word's naming what it does and its meaning what it does" (ibid.). Following Travis in this section I use "meaning" and "naming" interchangeably.

the significant use; there is no point talking about what words mean in isolation because there is no such thing as the "meaning" of words when we do not use them. Now, it is important to highlight that to *some* extent Travis's contextualism does agree with Conant's austere conclusion about meanings. He, for instance, acknowledges that Wittgenstein's version of the CP, formulated in terms of language-games, indeed casts doubts upon the idea that words can be said to mean or name something determinate without taking into account their role in particular language-games.⁹ So, wherein do Conant's and Travis's variants of Wittgenstein's contextualism differ?

Travis articulates the relevant point of difference in terms of what he calls different aspects of the verb *to name* something (cf. Travis 2006: 21). I think that the point he drives at with the idea of aspects, and thus the contrast between Conant's and Travis's interpretations of Wittgenstein's contextualism can also be specified in terms of the status of simple language-games as "objects of comparison". I first spell out Travis's idea of aspects and then, in the next section, explain in more detail what I take to be important to note about the status of language-games.

We have just seen that Travis agrees with Conant inasmuch as, in one of naming's aspects, a word does not "name" (or "mean") anything outside the context of a language-game: "what a word names in a language-game is entirely fixed by how that game is to be played – by the rules, where there are rules which fix this" (Travis 2006: 20). However, although, with respect to this particular aspect of naming, Conant's austere conclusion¹⁰ accurately captures Wittgenstein's idea in §49, in another sense of what naming achieves it might be seen as making a dubious claim about natural language semantics. Here is how Travis formulates the relevant contrast between the two aspects of the verb *name*, where in its second aspect words can be said to name (or mean) something simply by virtue of being part of a lexicon of some natural language such as French:

[If] I am setting up my little language, and I announce that, in it, 'chaussure' is to name shoes, shoes do not yet even have a name. But suppose (as I do) that, in French, 'chaussure' means shoe. To say that is to say, at least, that it is for making a certain kind of contribution to what is said in speaking French: if you do use it, on an occasion, in speaking French properly, you will, ipso facto, speak of shoes, or something's being one, or etc. You will, that is, use it to make the sort of contribution a word would make in naming shoes. (Travis 2006: 21)

⁹ Travis says that a word "does not name anything where it does not occur in a whole to whose condition of correctness it might appropriately contribute" (Travis 2006: 21).

¹⁰ I refer here to Conant's claim that words (*qua* names) are comparable to arbitrary noises when considered outside the circumstances of significant use.

Therefore, on Travis's MU contextualism, the point Wittgenstein makes about naming (meaning) by invoking Frege's CP, is more subtle than Conant's interpretation allows for. Whereas Conant is absolutely right that, according to one sense of naming or meaning, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that names name, or words mean, anything in isolation from particular language-games, as Travis correctly points out "there is another aspect of the verb 'name' in which 'chaussures' does name shoes in French. It names shoes on any use of it as it is to be used in speaking French" (Travis 2006: 22). On this second aspect of naming, knowing what, say, English or French words mean is one important factor in determining what they can be used to say, or better, what they cannot be used to say. So, I cannot mean my words to say something they will not say in the language I speak:

If I speak English, and am good enough at talk, then I recognize that if, at the meeting, I say, 'Sid will be late', what I will say is that Sid will be late. Recognizing that, I cannot intend, in so speaking, to say that I had croissants for breakfast, or that your car is in a tow-away zone. I cannot mean my words to say that, since I know that they will not. (Travis 2006: 124)

In this way, knowing what words mean in language such as English, or being a competent speaker of some language, places certain constraints on which thought or sense can and will be expressed on some use of them on an occasion. So, *pace* Conant, I cannot simply "confer" or "give" a meaning to a word, or mean my words to mean something they will not do so in English. Still, even though it is necessary, knowing the (standing) meaning of an English expression is not sufficient to fully determine its use on an occasion, thus also when what is said would be true: "[words'] fixed, language-contributed semantics must, in general, be supplemented if they are to be properly assessable as to truth" (Travis 2008: 70).

Note that accepting that words might be said to "name" something across different speakings need not be in conflict with Wittgenstein's observation that "[f]or a large class of cases... in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953: §43). It is not in conflict because the notion of the "use of a word in a language" can itself be understood in different ways. Namely, we can think of "use" as the use of words on particular occasions, or we can take "use" to be the way a word is used throughout history by the speakers of that language on various occasions.¹¹ In

¹¹ Travis points out the multi-dimensional character of "use" too: "[For] the 'use' of a word may refer not only to its proper use, but to its actual history in its language – its life, so to speak, among the speakers of that language: what it has been used and taken to communicate on various occasions by various people" (Travis 1989: 110).

this way, “meaning” would still correspond to “use”, even if “use” would not denote particular circumstances or contexts of use but rather the historical aspect of word’s use in a community of speakers.

The point of Wittgenstein’s shift of focus to particular occasions of use, on MU contextualism, is to highlight a positive contribution those occasions make to understanding of what can be meaningfully said or done with words, rather than to eliminate the semantics words may have in isolation as the words that belong to some natural language. By rejecting any role for the occasion-insensitive (standing) meaning of words in determining what can be said by using them on an occasion, ME contextualism thus also rejects the notion that the meaning of English words places certain constraints on our understanding of what is said. This raises various concerns, especially about the method in which one “confers” everything semantically relevant on words simply by “[sketching]...a background, a surrounding, for a remark” (Conant 1998: 243). Intuitively speaking, this is simply *not* what we do with (English, French, German, etc.) words every time we use them, even if we need to deploy an additional sensitivity to surroundings to make our words say something determinate.

Travis’s thought that there are at least two different aspects of naming or meaning, one of which allows that “words always bear whatever semantics they do bear” (Travis 1989: 119) irrespectively of an occasion of speaking, can be further clarified by considering the methodological status of simple language-games as objects of comparison. This will help bring out where, I think, ME contextualism moves too far away from clarifying actual phenomena.

5. The status of language-games

Without going into a lengthy discussion concerning Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games and innumerable ways this notion has been discussed in the literature, let me briefly clarify some relevant points that my argument rests upon. To my mind, the notion of language-game I develop here, at least the notion relevant for Wittgenstein’s formulation of the CP in §49, also underpins Travis’s reading. As many scholars have pointed out, Wittgenstein uses the term *language-game* sometimes to talk about our actual linguistic practices such as describing, giving orders, reporting, praying, etc. (see Wittgenstein 1953, §23), and other times to talk about invented, constructed models of language use such as the “builders” game (§2) or the “shopkeeper” game (§1).¹² The latter are known as “simple

¹² Note that “§2” and “1§” are references to sections 1 and 2 of *Philosophical Investigations*. This applies to all subsequent uses of §.

language-games”. The key thing about a simple language game is its methodological status as an “object of comparison”

Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language – as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are rather set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities. (Wittgenstein 1953: §130)

That simple language-games are only to be compared with “the facts of our language”, rather than to be taken as prescriptions regarding how language ought to be used, assertions about how language is used, or speculations about the “essence” of language use, is crucial for Wittgenstein’s non-dogmatic philosophical treatment of our language use. The truly important thing is to present a simple language game, i.e. the artificial model of language use, “as what it is, as an object of comparison... not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond” (*ibid.*, §131).¹³

Now, how is this observation about the status of simple-language games as objects of comparison important for my argument against ME contextualism and how does it support Travis’s idea of different “aspects” a word may have? The way Conant formulates his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s CP is quite relevant here: he uses the notion “contexts of circumstances of significant use” synonymously with Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games.¹⁴ Conant seems to have in mind the notion of a simple language game such as the one Wittgenstein himself refers to in §49 where he formulates his “generalised” CP. These are, as we noted above, methodological tools Wittgenstein uses to clarify something about our actual uses of language that might not be *prima facie* available to us. With the help of rules, a language game can make perspicuous standards of correctness that may be relevant on some occasion that we find to be similar to it. In this way, particular simple language games with rules are modelling or representing particular (types of) occasions or particular contexts of use, i.e., different ways we may actually employ language, and, by doing that, language games help specify and clarify standards of correctness that are relevant for a particular occasion where an expression is used, in contrast to some others. Nonetheless, simple language games understood as objects of comparison are still only artificial constructed models of language use whose connection with our actual language use *need not* be only by way of similarities. They throw light on the facts of our language also by way of *dissimilarities*.

¹³ Besides Travis, the interpreters who stress the importance of the methodological role of simple language-games as objects of comparison are Hilmy (1987) and Kuusela (2006).

¹⁴ See Conant (1998: 233, 239).

One obvious dissimilarity with “the facts of our language” is that in constructed language games, unlike in natural languages, what a word used in a language game means or names is something *stipulated*. So, we could stipulate that for purposes of one such language game *slab* excludes or does not “name” (mean) broken slabs – here the word *slab* will not be used correctly if it was used to signify such objects. In another game, however, some other stipulation may be in place. The meaning of English *slab*, in contrast, is not stipulated or regulated by strict rules in that way: English *slab* sometimes signifies broken slabs, other times it does not. It simply means or names slabs, or something being one, without specifying when something will count as being one and when not. The point I think Travis is getting at with the idea of different “aspects” regarding what meaning does is that in the case of natural languages that we use to communicate with each other which particular “things” expressions correctly name or describe is not specified for every occasion of use, whereas artificial language games that model those (types of) occasions do normally specify (by means of their rules) the correctness-conditions for expressions employed therein.

Second, Wittgenstein's simple language-games and possible occasions of use differ inasmuch as each simple language-game amounts to a *complete* language with its own lexicon and grammar (see Wittgenstein 1953: §2, §18), whilst English or German, with their lexicons and grammars, are used on a variety of different occasions to say a variety of different things. That there is a contrast between the functioning of an expression in a language game and a like-sounding expression in a natural language is prominent, for example, in Wittgenstein's discussion concerning the treatment of *Slab!* as either a word or a sentence in the language game §2. There is a strong tendency to see the call *Slab!* as a shortened form of *Bring me a slab!*. However, whereas the grammar of a language game specified in §2 does not allow from the latter combination of words, the grammar of English does allow for this combination as well as other possibilities such as *Bring him a slab*, *Bring two slabs*, or *Hand me a slab* (see Wittgenstein 1953: §20). Similarly, English word *slab* has not the same meaning as *Slab!* in the language-game §2, since the latter there functions as a call.

Given that, in the case of simple language games, both the meaning of a word (i.e. what it names) and the criteria for its correct application are something stipulated, and each such game counts as a complete language, it does indeed make sense to say that words that are used in a particular language game do not have any meaning in isolation, or do not name anything outside the context of that game. However, it would be a mistake to draw the same conclusion for meaning in natural languages. It is uncontroversial that the word *chair* most likely does not mean or name anything outside the context of English language, yet it is another thing to claim that *chair* means or names nothing in isolation from its use on a particular speaking. To understand what the latter claim aims at we need to

understand “meaning” or “naming” as that which determines the correct use of an expression on a particular occasion. That, however, does not, and should not amount to a rejection or elimination of occasion-insensitive (standing) meaning of natural language expressions. Insofar as it is plausible to differentiate between, as Travis puts it, “the semantics of words on a speaking” and “the semantics of words in a language”¹⁵, it will also be possible that an expression fails in terms of a speaking-specific semantics while its language-fixed semantics, for all that, remains intact. By asserting that words do not bear any semantics whatsoever – i.e., are comparable to arbitrary noises – in isolation from the contexts of significant use, Conant’s ME contextualism overlooks an important contrast between, on the one hand, simple language games as constructed, ahistorical¹⁶ models of language use, and on the other, natural languages, as well as the role of simple language-games as objects of comparison with the latter.

6. Nonsense and linguistic understanding

We have seen in Section 2 that Conant’s critique of the IC primarily focuses on the question what it means to evaluate some utterance as nonsense. The IC separates the issue of the meaningfulness of expressions from the issue of the intelligibility of speech acts whereupon meaningful sentences, with determinate truth-conditions, are used. One can understand what a sentence says (one can understand its truth-conditions) yet still fail to understand what the speaker meant to use it for on a particular speaking. Nonsense as a term of criticism applies to the latter.

Conant, as we saw, objects (and he does so rightly): there is no such thing as understanding what a sentence says or what thought it expresses outside an occasion of speaking. However, on his ME version of contextualism, this entails that there is no such thing as understanding what the sentence means in isolation from particular contexts in which it is used. Put differently, it is an illusion to think one can understand a language, and, in particular, “the semantics of words in language”, in isolation from their use on particular occasions. Nonsense arises when one imagines that one’s words mean something determinate irrespective of the circumstances of their use, or that they mean the same thing across all occasions of use. Part of such an illusion is to think “one knows what one’s words mean even though no meaning has yet been conferred on them” (Conant 1998: 246). Hence, ME contextualism associates the source of nonsense with “a

¹⁵ Cf. Travis (1989: 120)

¹⁶ “[L]anguage games are specified, or specifiable ahistorically, in terms of their rules” (Travis 1989: 119).

hallucination of meaning" (*ibid.*, 247) or imagining one can understand language in isolation. Does Wittgenstein, however, share this "one-dimensional" view of linguistic understanding?

Consider the following set of remarks:

Do I understand the proposition 'There is...' when I have no possibility of finding where it exists? And here there are two points of view: as an English sentence for example I understand it, so far, that is, as I can explain it (and note how far my explanation goes). But what can I do with it? Well, not what I can do with a constructive proof. And in so far as what I can do with the proposition is the criterion of understanding it, thus far it is not clear in advance whether and to what extent I understand it. (Wittgenstein 1974: 299)

The sentence 'I know that that's a tree' if it were said outside its language-game, might also be a quotation (from an English grammar book perhaps). (Wittgenstein 1969: §393)

I read a sentence from the middle of a story: 'After he had said this, he left her as he did the day before.' Do I understand the sentence? – It's not altogether easy to give an answer. It is an English sentence, and to that extent I understand it. I should know how the sentence might be used, I could invent a context for it. And yet I do not understand it in the sense in which I should understand it if I had read the story. (Wittgenstein 1974: 43)

These and similar passages suggest that Wittgenstein's conception of language and understanding (the uses of) language allows for at least two different "aspects" of what understanding a sentence of language amounts to:

- a. We may be said to understand a construction to the effect that it is an English (German, etc.) sentence.
- b. Even if we succeed in understanding something as an English sentence, we can still fail to understand a thought it expresses (its sense or truth-conditions) on an occasion of use, and so find ourselves unable "to do something with it".

Thus, there is indeed a sense in which one can be said to "understand a sentence" in isolation, namely, to recognise it as a grammatically well-formed construction that belongs to some language; Wittgenstein is not in the business of denying this aspect of understanding a language, although he is clearly interested in another aspect of our understanding language which has to do with its uses on particular occasions. He aims to highlight that understanding sentences in isolation is not sufficient for doing something determinate, or reacting to what is said

meaningfully (e.g. to know what must be the case for what is said to be true). But, *pace* Conant, that does not imply that Wittgenstein denies the context-independent aspect of linguistic understanding. To the extent that he admits that one can “understand a sentence” without understanding its use, Wittgenstein does not share Conant’s “one-dimensional” view of linguistic understanding.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I defended an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s contextualism that does not involve a rejection of occasion-independent semantics of words. I argued that the rejection of the view on which we have something truth-conditionally complete in isolation from particular contexts does not imply an elimination of the meaning expressions of a language carry from one occasion to another. I showed that, *pace* Conant’s ME contextualism, Wittgenstein’s context principle is compatible with occasion-invariant semantics insofar as we bear in mind that verbs *to name, to mean, to understand, to be used* have more than one aspect or sense. Furthermore, Wittgenstein’s employment of language games as objects of comparison should be understood as a methodological device used to clarify particular aspects of our actual language use, rather than involving a claim about natural language semantics. There are, as I tried to show, significant contrasts between simple language games and natural languages, in that the former are ahistorical, stipulated models of language use, and the latter are integrated with people’s actual practices. Instead of understanding Wittgenstein as someone who denies that the speakers have an understanding or knowledge of language which transcends any particular occasion of use, we should see his observations as aiming to bring to view different aspects of the words “meaning”, “use”, “understanding”, “naming”, etc., that have been neglected by a received (truth-conditional) orientation of our systematic inquiries into meaning.

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