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## THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE AND THE IDEA OF EXPLAINING MEANING AS FROM THE OUTSIDE

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### The problem

Frege, in his “Introduction” to the *The Foundations of Arithmetic (FA)* (1959), claimed that violating the context principle (CP) leads almost inevitably to a recognition of subjective ideas as the meanings of words – that is, to psychologism in logic. In the present article, my aim will be to show that accepting CP almost inevitably leads to a rejection of the project of giving a completely general explanation of linguistic meaning. What I have in mind is that it is difficult to reconcile CP with any version of the project of giving

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such an explanation of meaning in a manner that does not appeal to semantic terms: i.e., any version of the project of constructing a full-blooded theory of meaning. The full-bloodedness requirement, as formulated by Dummett (1987, 1993a), can be fulfilled in many ways. At the same time, it should be noted that although Dummett (1993c) was a critic of psychologism, psychologicistic explanations of meaning are not actually ruled out by this requirement. So my goal will be to show that accepting CP obliges one to question the range and variety of positions available as regards how one should explain the meaning of linguistic expressions. One of these positions is psychologism, conceived as a standpoint which explains the meaning of linguistic expressions in terms of subjective associations.

I begin with a short characterization of CP. However, my discussion will not focus on historical questions or on presenting alternative interpretations of CP. Instead, I shall outline the reading of CP which I myself embrace, and make just a few remarks in connection with certain questions that have been raised by other commentators. Then I shall briefly characterize the difference between the idea of explaining the meanings of linguistic expressions from outside of any language (the idea of a full-blooded theory of meaning), and that of doing so from inside of a language (the idea of a modest theory of meaning). Then I move on to the main point of my article, arguing that it is difficult to render the consequences of CP compatible with the idea of an explanation of meaning external to all linguistic content. I end with some short remarks on psychologism and the possible sources of the full-bloodedness requirement.

## The context principle

### a. Presentation of the principle

The context principle was formulated by Frege in *FA*.<sup>1</sup> It appears in the “Introduction” and, among others, in paragraphs 60 and 106:

[...] never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition (1959, p. X).

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<sup>1</sup> As is well-known it was also accepted by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (cf. 1922, 3.3).

Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning. It may be that mental pictures float before us all the while, but these need not correspond to the logical elements in the judgment. It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on its parts also their content (1959, §60).

[...] we must never try to define [explain] the meaning of a word in isolation, but only as it is used in the context of a proposition [...] (1959, §106).

As Frege did not, in *FA*, distinguish *Sinn* from *Bedeutung*, one might wonder whether CP should be taken as applying to both of them, or only to *Sinn*, or only to *Bedeutung*. Below, I shall treat it as applying to sense (*Sinn*), and shall not seek to resolve the question of whether it also applies to reference (*Bedeutung*). According to CP, words do not have any meaning outside of the context of meaningful sentences. (I shall hereon use the terms ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ interchangeably in this article.) Their meaning is determined in the context of a sentence. Furthermore, there is a suggestion in the part of Section 60 quoted above that the meanings of words in a given sentence are logical parts of the judgment corresponding to that sentence. So, in order to determine the meaning of a word in a sentence, one must determine its logical role in the sentence. (I shall be using the term ‘logical role’ in its wider sense here, according to which the logical role of an expression includes both its syntactic and its semantic features).<sup>2</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>2</sup> How do I understand the logical role of an expression? Roughly speaking, the logical role of a given expression is fixed, first, by that how its syntactic category determines and is determined by the syntactic category of more complex expressions of which the given expression is part, and, second, by that how its semantic value determines and is determined by more complex expressions, and not only by such expressions of which it is part. This interdependence of the semantic value of a given expression and other expressions shows that an adequate conception of the logical role of the given expression requires giving a description of inferential relations, which hold between various sentences – both the sentences in which the given expression occurs and certain other sentences. Let us begin with syntactic questions. The logical role of the word “John” in the expression “John is brave”, which is determined by the fact that under the assumption that syntactic categories of the two expressions among the following three, “John”, “is brave”, “John is brave” are given the syntactic category of the third expression, is fixed. If one assumes, for example, that “John is brave” is a sentence, “is brave” is a predicate, then “John” must be a name. Now, let us turn to semantic questions. The logical role of the name “John” in the sentence “John is brave” is determined either by the fact that the

according to Frege, it is only in virtue of the fact that the whole sentence is meaningful that a sense can be ascribed to its parts. As Frege was to put it much later on: “So I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form a thought or judgment; I come by the parts of a thought by analyzing the thought” (1979, p. 253).

## b. Some substantive and interpretative problems pertaining to CP

The first problem with the principle thus formulated is this: it seems to be too strong, and for that reason not credible. Why? Because we often do use

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semantic value of this name determines the semantic value of this sentence (this case is, of course, more common) or by the fact that the semantic value of this sentence – when it is fixed – determines the semantic value of this name (in such cases more information is needed to decide whether the name “John” functions like a proper name or like a description of the type “a person whose name is “John” and who is brave”). When one describes the logical role of a given expression, one cannot, of course, confine to showing how the given expression functions in only one more complex expression. As I have already mentioned, that is the reason why the logical role is determined by inferential relations which hold between various sentences. So, the logical role of the name “John” is determined, among other things, by the fact that the sentences “There is someone who ate a big breakfast”, “A big breakfast was eaten by John”, can be inferred from the sentence “John ate a big breakfast”. An analogous relation holds in the case of expressions belonging to other syntactic categories, for example, “is red”, “and”. For example, the fact that one can infer the following sentences “This car is coloured”, “There is a property such that this car has this property” (“There is an  $F$  such that this car is an  $F$ ”) from the sentence “This car is red”, determines in some – of course, not very specific – way the logical role of the predicate “is red”. Whereas the logical role of the word “and” is determined in natural languages in a significant way by introductory and eliminatory rules that allow one to infer the sentence “John is clever” from the sentence “John is brave and clever” and the sentence “John’s car is red and cheap” from the sentences “John’s car is red” and “John’s car is cheap”. (What is the nature of the relation between rules of use of logical constants and their meanings is by some philosophers perceived as a controversial question. However, I will not discuss this issue here [cf. Wittgenstein, 1976; Prior, 1961; Diamond, 2002]). However, it is worth adding that in natural languages, the order of clauses with a conjunction is in some cases essential for the sense of the whole sentence, and for that reason the principle that “ $p$  and  $q$ ” entails “ $q$  and  $p$ ” is not valid without exception in natural languages (“John went out of the house and ate breakfast” does not entail “John ate breakfast and went out of the house”). The above remarks are not, of course, a full explanation of the concept of the logical role, but I think they are sufficient to understand what I mean by the term “the logical role of an expression”.

single words or incomplete sentences in a conversation, and these expressions are undoubtedly meaningful. This problem has been discussed by, among others, Glock and Bronzo (Glock, 2004; Bronzo, 2011). It can be resolved, roughly speaking, in the following way: uses of words outside of the context of a sentence are derivative: the meaning of a word used outside of the context of a sentence is derived from the meaning of a word used within the context of certain meaningful sentence (cf. Bronzo, 2011). How, exactly, one should understand this derivative character is a question I shall not address here.

It is worth pointing out that there are languages in which it is possible to construct sentences consisting of only one word (for example, my first language is such a language) but that does not imply that certain single words are identical to certain sentences. One of the visual indicators of the fact that a certain expression is a full sentence is that a full stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark occurs at the end of a string of words (one word is, of course, also a string of words) of which this expression consists (i.e. a full sentence is not identical with any string of words – a full stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark must be added to an appropriate string of words in order to obtain a full sentence). It is worth adding that such a full sentence can, of course, consist of other, simpler sentences, and those simpler sentences (i.e., the clauses the full sentence is made of) are the strings of words that will become full sentences when completed with appropriate punctuation marks. Full sentences are used to assert that something is the case, ask whether something is the case, order that something be the case, and so on; whereas words are used to construct sentences. This view is often criticized. One points out that in many cases, uses of single words – and not such words that form one-word sentences – are speech acts, such as assertions, questions, commands (Stainton, 2000). Examples used to support this thesis are such strings of words that, from a grammatical standpoint, are not correctly-constructed sentences. However, one cannot say that uttering these strings of words is merely an uttering of words and nothing more because at the end of these strings occur full stops, question marks, or exclamation marks. This fact indicates that they serve to express assertions, questions, or commands. On the other hand, it is justified to say that one utters nothing but words when, for example, a pupil repeats certain words after the teacher or rewrites them from the board. This shows that there is even a syntactic difference between expressions that are used to express

assertions, questions, or commands, and words. The existence of this difference does not, of course, prove that strings of words used to express assertions or questions are sentences. What one can undoubtedly acknowledge is that such expressions are used in a similar way to sentences, but their surface form is different from the surface form of sentences. It also seems that users of natural languages understand such expressions because they understand sentences that consist of words occurring in these expressions. To sum up, sentences and expressions that serve the same purpose as sentences are used to perform illocutionary acts, such as assertions, questions, commands, etc. These illocutionary acts have fulfillment conditions, whereas words qua words are used to construct sentences or such expressions which function as sentences; other cases of word use, such as a mere utterance or the writing of a word or words do not have fulfillment conditions.

The second problem concerns the possibility of reconciling CP with the principle of compositionality of sense. If these two principles are accepted, the following question then arises: does this not lead to a vicious circle in explaining the sense of linguistic expressions (cf. Bar-Elli, 1997)? If, according to the principle of compositionality, the sense of a whole sentence depends on the senses of its parts and the way they are combined, and if, according to CP, the senses of parts of a sentence are determined by the sense of the whole sentence, then to explain the sense of a whole sentence one must already know it, as an explanation of the sense of the whole sentence requires an appeal to the senses of its parts, but according to CP their senses are determined by the sense of the whole sentence. One can try to solve this problem in different ways. Firstly, one can abandon one of these principles. Secondly, one can reinterpret the principles in such a way as to avoid the vicious circle. However, neither of these strategies seems credible.

There are many different interpretations of CP. However, I shall just touch on two points pertaining to some popular interpretations of the principle. First, I shall briefly discuss Dummett's remark concerning Quine's formulation of CP, and then I shall present the distinction made by Glock between weak and strict versions of CP (Glock, 2004). Quine, in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1961), claimed that, according to Frege, the unit of sense is a sentence, not a word, but in Dummett's opinion, Quine's formulation of CP is either a truism or an absurdity (Dummett, 1973, p. 3). If Quine's statement is understood as meaning that one can only say something by means of a sentence, then it is the former. However, if Quine's statement implies

that single words, like single letters or isolated syllables, do not have any meaning, then it is absurd. As Diamond rightly points out, Quine's statement can and should be understood in a different way (Diamond, 1991). CP says that words which occur in sentences have sense in virtue of the fact that in each case the entire sentence has sense. That is why the concept of identity of sense between expressions can be applied only to expressions occurring in sentences. The question of identity of sense between expressions taken as occurring outside of the context of a sentence is meaningless. Such a reading of Frege's CP is undoubtedly supported by the following quotations:

It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on its parts also their content (1959, §60).

So I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form a thought or judgment; I come by the parts of a thought by analyzing the thought (1979, p. 253).

Glock, in *All kinds of nonsense*, distinguishes two versions of CP. The first, strict version, says: "A word (name) has meaning only in the context of a proposition" (2004, p. 225), while according to the second, weak version, words have meaning because they *can* be used in sentences:

The kernel of truth in contextualism is that the meaning of a word is determined by *how* it can be used within sentences. But it does not follow that the word has meaning only in the context of a sentence. On the contrary, it is the *individual word* which has such a use (2004).

However, it is obvious for Glock that Frege (in *FA*) accepted the strict version of CP. According to Glock there is no doubt that the strict version of CP is wrong. The most fundamental reasons for rejecting it are to be found in the existence of counterexamples (occurrences of words in dictionaries, lists of words, etc.) and the impossibility of reconciling CP with the principle of compositionality of sense.

On the basis of the above remarks, one can draw the following conclusion: if one accepts CP (interpreted in the Fregean way), then it is not possible to *explain* the sense of a sentence in terms of senses of the words forming it already given prior to the sense of the sentence itself, and neither is it possible to claim that *recognition* of the sense of a sentence is based on prior recognition of the senses of the words forming it. This conclusion

directs our attention once again to the question of whether it is possible to reconcile CP with the principle of compositionality, while the conclusion imposes quite substantial constraints on possible solutions to that problem. I will start with an attempt to answer the question of whether Dummett's sketch of a solution to this problem fulfills this condition: namely, that one should not treat meanings of words as prior to meanings of sentences. The following quotation presents Dummett's view:

(...) in the order of *explanation* the sense of a sentence is primary, but in the order of *recognition* the sense of a word is primary (1973, p. 4).

One can say that Dummett solves the problem of how to reconcile the two principles through a reinterpretation of CP. According to his solution, the principle of compositionality is primary in the order of recognition, whereas CP is primary in the order of explanation. But how should we understand the issue of priority here as it relates to the order of recognition? Dummett explicates this point in the following terms:

We thus derive our knowledge of the sense of any given sentence from our *previous* [my underlining] knowledge of the senses of the words that compose it, together with our observation of the way in which they are combined in that sentence (1973, p. 4).

The conception presented above of what is involved in understanding the sense of a sentence assumes that knowledge of the senses of words forming a sentence is prior to knowledge of the sense of the whole sentence. This, in turn, means that one must grasp the meanings of words independently of the meanings of sentences. So does this imply that one must grasp the meanings of words, so to say, in isolation? Dummett himself seems to repudiate such a conception, in that he claims that "our understanding of those words consists in our grasp of the way in which they may figure in sentences in general" (1973, p. 5). No matter whether Dummett's conception is coherent or not (i.e., whether or not a prior grasp of the sense of the words requires that they be grasped, so to say, in isolation), this is by no means compatible with the condition to the effect that our understanding of the words forming a sentence is not prior to our understanding of that sentence itself. It is worth noting that the version of CP endorsed by Glock is also not compatible with this condition.



It therefore seems that the only possible option for someone who accepts CP (in its proper sense) is to acknowledge that knowing the sense of a whole sentence is indeed prior to knowing the sense of its parts. Even so, there are many objections to this kind of solution. I will not discuss them systematically here, but just point out the most important ones. First of all, if the meaning of sentences were to be prior to the meaning of words in the sort of way that would entail that we would be able to understand sentences without recognizing the words that make them up, then the existence of logical connections between sentences would be a complete mystery. Secondly, the conception of the priority of the sense of sentences to the sense of words would seem to be compatible with the possibility of treating sentences as completely devoid of semantic structure: if the sense of a sentence were prior to the sense of the words, one would never need to grasp the sentence's structure in order to be able to grasp the sense of the sentence itself. This, then, obscures the difference between sentences and simple names. Thirdly, acknowledging the priority of sentences to words in such terms makes it impossible to explain the fact that we are able to understand indefinitely many new sentences. That argument has, of course, been put forward on many occasions in the context of discussions on the relationship between CP and the principle of compositionality (Dummett, 1973, p. 4).

I myself think that these two principles are compatible. In essence, I agree with Bronzo's proposal for how one ought to construe the relationship between the principles (2011). I will not present his considerations in any detail here, though. Rather, I will just confine myself to pointing out that in his opinion one should reject the conviction that either the sense of a sentence must be prior to the senses of its parts, or the senses of words forming a sentence must be prior to the sense of that very sentence. The recognition that these two principles are in fact complementary is what offers a genuine solution to the problem. So grasping the sense of a sentence requires grasping the sense of its parts, and grasping the sense of parts of a sentence requires grasping the sense of that whole sentence. But doesn't such a solution result in a circular explanation of meaning? And is it not therefore entirely lacking in credibility? I shall not seek to answer these questions at this particular juncture, but instead will return to them in subsequent parts of this article.

### c. CP and moderate holism

How should one set about explicating the meaning of a complete sentence? Can one do so independently of any explanation of the meaning of other sentences – in isolation, so to speak? It seems that if one attempted to explain the meaning of a given sentence without making any appeal whatsoever to the sense of any others, one would inevitably fall prey to psychologism, because such explanations of the meaning of a sentence would not then be able to take into account its logical relations with others, and for that reason would probably involve an appeal to subjective associations. As such, it seems that this would also make it impossible to see the logical connections between sentences, and so would violate the principle of compositionality of sense. Thus, any such extremely narrow interpretation of CP is completely implausible. Moreover, the following understanding of CP seems quite natural: the meaning of a word should be explained not in the context of one sentence, but in the context of many sentences. If one were to give, for every context in which a word occurs, a separate explanation of the meaning of this word, it would imply that in fact there were no words (one could say that there would be no semantic difference between such words and mere clusters of letters or syllables). So according to CP, in order to explain the meaning of a word, one must know the meaning of a whole body of sentences in which this word occurs (Davidson, 1984) – sentences that are logically interconnected. For example, the explanation of the meaning of the English word “cat” requires knowledge of the meaning of sentences like “this is a cat”, “this is not a cat”, “there is a cat here”, “there is no cat here”, “the cat stands”, “the cat lies”, “the cat runs”, “cats are animals”, “cats are born”, “cats eat”, “cats die”.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the question of how many sentences of this kind one has to understand in order to know the meaning of the word “cat” is not only controversial but in some sense unanswerable. However, there can be no doubt that knowing the meaning of the word requires that one understands at least some sentences of this sort.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be added that knowledge of the meaning of a given word does not require knowledge of the content of statements made when such occasion-specific sentences as “this is a cat” are used. No matter how one conceives of the meaning of this type of sentence, or of the content of the statement being made when such a sentence is employed, the former must undoubtedly be distinguished from the latter. (Among other things, content depends on context in a way that linguistic meaning definitely does not).

Even so, such a conception of knowing the meaning of a word can be questioned. First, it seems to lead to an unacceptable holism: that is, to a view according to which knowledge of the meaning of a word requires full mastery of an entire language. Why? To explain this, let us suppose that knowing the meaning of the word “cat” requires that we understand the above-mentioned sentences. Of course, understanding these sentences itself requires us to understand their parts: namely, amongst others, the words “it”, “not”, “is”, “here”, “no”, “to run”, “animal”, and so on. In turn, understanding these words requires understanding other sentences in which they occur. These other sentences will be composed of yet other words, the understanding of which requires understanding some other set of sentences, and so on. So, understanding the word “cat” would then require mastery of a whole language. However, it is worth noting that this statement is only really absurd if taken to mean that knowledge of the meaning of the word “cat” requires a full understanding of the entire English language. As Dummett rightly points out, the Wittgensteinian dictum that “to understand a sentence is to understand a language” (Wittgenstein, 1974, §199) can be interpreted in another much more reasonable way: understanding a word requires mastery of just some part of a natural language that can itself be recognized as making up a complete, though certainly also a very primitive, language (cf. Dummett, 1993d, p. 222).

The second reason why it may seem that the conception of understanding a word that requires us to understand a certain set of sentences may be criticized is that it does not furnish a criterion that would allow us to decide in every case whether a given sentence belongs to this set or not. This could be an objection, but only if the concept of knowing the meaning of a linguistic expression (i.e., possessing the requisite linguistic understanding) is a sharp one. What this impossibility shows, then, is that concepts such as *knowledge of meaning*, *understanding*, etc., are not like that. Some people undoubtedly do know the meaning of a certain word because they are able to deploy a sufficiently large number of sentences in which that word occurs (of course, that ability consists not only in a disposition to use these sentences in appropriate (non-linguistic) circumstances, but also in the ability to recognize the logical connections between them), and other people undoubtedly do not understand the word in question, because they cannot make use of any sentence in which it occurs. However, it happens that there are people who can only use a very limited number of sentences

in which the word occurs. Moreover, even this competence is highly limited, as such people cannot use these sentences in many circumstances in which a competent language-user would be able to use them, and cannot see many fundamental logical connections between them. The obvious instance of such a person is a young child who distinguishes cats (such as are typical for Europe) from dogs, but who, if asked, “Is it a cat?” when presented with a Siamese or a Persian cat, does not answer, or says, “I don’t know”. Such a young child might well accept not only sentences like “cats mew”, “cats drink milk”, but also ones like “my plush cat drinks milk”, or “my plush cat was born once”. Moreover, it is quite plausible that such a young child will not understand, and therefore will not accept, the following inference: because all cats are animals and, in fact, no plush cats are animals, no plush cats are cats. No matter how one may seek to account for the details of the above example, it shows clearly that the concepts of meaning and linguistic understanding are vague and gradable.

The answers just presented to these two objections – namely, the objection that embracing CP must lead to a radical and unacceptable version of holism, and that it is categorically false to suppose that the concepts of meaning and understanding are vague and gradable – allow one to hold that a moderately holistic approach to meaning is not after all beyond the bounds of plausibility.<sup>4</sup>

### The difference between explaining meaning from the outside and from the inside with respect to conceptual/linguistic content

We find the most radical kind of skepticism towards the idea of explaining meaning from the outside in respect of linguistic content exhibited in the following remark by Wittgenstein:

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<sup>4</sup> One can raise the following objection against my discussion on CP: it does not contain a detailed explanation of the difference between words and sentences. My response to this criticism is that such an explanation is not necessary if one’s aim is only to present CP, not to justify it; and my aim is the presentation of CP, not its justification. In order to understand CP it is enough to be able to distinguish words from sentences, and one can do this without being able to present an explanation of the difference, i.e., without having explicit propositional knowledge concerning this difference.

The limit of language manifests itself in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence without simply repeating the sentence (1998, p. 13).

Wittgenstein pointed out that if one wanted to explain what is asserted by means of a certain sentence, one would have to use the same sentence again. Of course, Wittgenstein's remark is not entirely convincing when taken literally, because in many cases where one wants to capture the fact corresponding to a sentence one can actually just employ a paraphrase of that sentence. So, Wittgenstein's remark would be adequate, were it to be supplemented with this qualification. However, Wittgenstein's formulation has a certain didactic value anyway, in that it serves to emphasize the trivial character of explanations of meaning.

What does it mean to say that such an approach to the explanation of linguistic meaning is trivial? Primarily, it means that on this approach, it is not possible to explain meaning in non-semantic terms: i.e., that any attempt to do so is doomed to failure. At the same time, though, the triviality just adverted to need not necessarily entail that it is impossible to reveal important relations between the notion of meaning and other semantic and non-semantic notions. The most important contemporary philosophers who endorse such an approach are John McDowell and Barry Stroud (McDowell, 1998a, 1998b, 2007; Stroud, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). I will call their approach "modest". According to this way of looking at things, it is not possible to explain meaning without appealing in some way or other to the notion of linguistic or conceptual content. (Both adherents and critics of this approach regard the concept of conceptual content as a semantic notion in the broad sense of this term.) Thus:

What adherents of modesty deny, then, is the feasibility of this sort of account of the practice of speaking a language: an account given from outside the thoughts expressible in the language, and indeed from outside the very idea of expressing thoughts, but nevertheless such as to display what makes the behavioural repertoire it deals with a case of speaking a language.

(McDowell, 1998 b, pp. 111–112).

Similarly, statements about what expressions mean [...] are not equivalent or reducible to non-semantic or non-intentional descriptions of what goes on when certain sounds or marks are made.

(Stroud, 2000b, p. 187)

By way of contrast, I shall call the alternative approach to explanations of the meaning of linguistic expressions “full-blooded”. According to this view, both linguistic and conceptual content should be explained in terms of some more basic concepts. The terms “modest” and “full-blooded” were used in this context for the first time by Dummett, who originally described his own approach as full-blooded, and both Davidson’s and McDowell’s as modest (Dummett, 1993b). (He later changed his mind as regards Davidson’s project (cf. Dummett, 1993b, Appendix)). It should be noted that on such a construal of what this alternative amounts to, not only Dummett’s conception, but also, for example, that of Fodor (cf. 1992, p. 32; 2008, p. 203), counts as full-blooded. It should be added that Dummett’s conception is not as reductive in spirit as Fodor’s, in that it emphasizes the rational character of language use and does not aim to formulate *predictions* about what speech acts will occur (Dummett, 1987).

At the same time, I would like readers to be alerted to the fact that I shall not pay much attention to the question of whether I attach precisely the same significance to the terms “modest” and “full-blooded” as McDowell and Dummett. This is because I shall be using these terms only as convenient labels for the approaches I myself am concerned to characterize in this part of my article.

Acceptance of the modest approach to meaning implies that adequate explanations of the meaning of any expression will involve such terms as “expresses thought”, “states that”, “expresses truth”, “is true” or even “means that”. Of course, some modest explanations exhibit a manifestly circular character and, for that reason, are completely uninformative. Moreover, it seems that such explanations as are not explicitly circular are ultimately based on ones that are so. For example, the meaning of the sentence “John is an eccentric person” can be explained in the following way: this sentence means that John is a person who is different from other people and whose behaviour is considered by other people to be strange and unusual. However, such an explanation – if one’s aim is to give the meaning of every expression belonging to a given language (in this case English) – requires further

explanations. It is obvious that we will come, sooner or later, to an explanation of the form: the sentence “*x* is *F*” means that *x* is *F*. An explanation of this form is, of course, manifestly circular because it can be understood only by someone who can use the sentence “*x* is *F*”: i.e., someone who knows the sense of this sentence and understands the concept of meaning. So how could one avoid this circularity? Basically, one might do so in one or other of two ways: either by rejecting modesty and accepting full-bloodedness, or by formulating explanations in other semantic terms. As regards the latter, acceptance of a truth-conditional conception of meaning (cf. Davidson, 1984) can be treated as an attempt to avoid this kind of circularity without abandoning modesty. The meaning of a sentence of the form “*x* is *F*” is then explained by means of a bi-conditional formulated in a metalanguage: e.g., “the sentence ‘*x* is *F*’ is true only if *x* is *F*”. This, of course, cannot be the whole story where this particular conception of meaning is concerned. But can this conception avoid the objection of circularity? That, of course, will depend on exactly how one understands the term “circularity”. If one recognizes as circular any explanation which has to appeal, in some sense, to notions of linguistic or conceptual content, then this conception also ought to be considered circular. Why? Because even if one were to acknowledge, as Davidson did, that the concept of truth is primitive and undefinable (1996), one would not be in a position to deny that it presupposes the concept of meaning. (If one were to opt to use the notion of truth-in-a-language as defined by Tarski to construct a theory of meaning, then its connection with the concept of meaning would be obvious. Tarski’s definition assumes, firstly, the concept of an interpretation of a language and, secondly, if a metalanguage does not contain the object-language, the concept of translation.) The use of the concept of truth in explanations of the concept of meaning requires that it be comprehensible itself. So, if the sense of the predicate “is true” is not given by a definition, then it must be given in some other way. And indeed, it is given to us by the way we use this predicate. How do we use it? Firstly, we recognize that it can be applied only to meaningful sentences which express statements. Secondly, we ascribe it to some such sentences, among others, in virtue of their senses. These remarks show that the conception which explains the meaning of sentences in terms of their truth-conditions is, in some sense, circular. However, explanations which are circular need not necessarily be completely idle and uninformative. Such explanations can be called “non-manifestly circular”. They can show essential connections

within a given set of concepts. If a circle of concepts is not too small, explanations can be revealing, though not, of course, in the sense of all concepts belonging to the set being fully explainable in terms of concepts belonging to its proper subset (cf. Strawson, 1992, pp. 19–20).

The above considerations show that one of the main reasons for accepting the full-blooded approach to meaning is the aim of avoiding circularity of any kind when explaining it. What, though, motivates the modest approach? The most basic consideration here is, I think, the conviction that all full-blooded conceptions of meaning misrepresent the phenomenon of linguistic meaning. According to McDowell and Stroud, one of the absurd consequences of full-blooded conceptions is that if they were to be correct, then the meanings of the expressions we use would always be completely indeterminate (McDowell, 1998b; Stroud, 2000b). Why so? The point is that full-blooded conceptions assume that the meaning of any expression is constituted by certain features of the expression that are describable in non-semantic terms (e.g. the use of the expression described non-semantically, the association of the expression with a certain class of images in one's mind, a causal connection between the expression and a certain class of things, etc.). However, Kripke's (1982) considerations show that the fact that a given – non-ambiguous – expression has any property which can be described in non-semantic terms is compatible with ascribing to this expression one of infinitely many different – mutually incompatible – meanings. So, if Kripke is right, full-blooded conceptions of meaning seem to support the thesis of complete meaning indeterminacy. This thesis, however, as Stroud rightly points out, leads to the paradoxical conclusion that the sense of this very thesis is itself also indeterminate (2000b). Meanwhile, McDowell notes that Kripke's considerations also entail a quite implausible conception, according to which understanding a language is always a hypothetical matter, in that one can never be sure what someone else's words mean (1998b).

Because my aim here has not been to actually resolve the dispute between them, my presentation of these two alternative approaches to meaning (the modest approach and the full-blooded one) has confined itself to just giving a rough outline sketch of the arguments for both sides.



## CP and modesty

The main aim of my article is to show that acceptance of CP almost inevitably leads to rejection of the project of constructing a full-blooded theory of meaning, and thereby also to the recognition that meaning can only be fully explained, if at all, in a modest way, i.e., in terms of semantic notions. So how might one justify such a conviction?

I would like to begin my line of argument by reminding readers that CP excludes the possibility of understanding a word without having knowledge of the meaning of a fairly extensive set of sentences containing that word. Hence, if one's mode of explaining the meaning of linguistic expressions is to respect CP, one's explanations cannot have the following form: first, the meanings of words and the possible modes of their combination are given without, of course, any explicit or implicit appeal to meanings of sentences; then, on the basis of that first step, one is able to give the meanings of sentences composed of these words combined in the previously specified ways. (It should be emphasized that this statement does not rule out explanations of linguistic meaning of the following kind: the Polish word "kot" denotes the class of cats, the Polish expression "X je" means that X eats, etc. Why? Because if the meanings of the English words are known, and are so on the basis of knowledge of the meanings of a quite extensive set of English sentences, then explanations of that kind do not presuppose the possibility of explaining the meanings of all words in all languages without appealing to knowledge of the meanings of a relatively extensive set of sentences belonging to a given language.)

Now I turn to my second point. I shall seek to show that the mode of explanation excluded by CP can look attractive from the standpoint of the full-blooded approach. Now according to the full-blooded approach, the meaning of linguistic expressions should be explained in non-semantic terms. It seems that even if one agrees that it is possible to explain meaning in such a way, there are serious doubts as to whether it is possible to explain the meanings of words and the meanings of some sentences containing these words at the same time. Yet one would have to fulfill this condition in order to respect CP. What are the reasons for doubting the possibility of such explanations? I think that confronting highly complicated theories of this type (i.e., full-blooded and holistic) with actual linguistic practice would give no determinate indications as to how such theories might be

improved. (The supposition that one can just formulate a completely adequate theory all at once, so to speak, is of course not at all credible.) What I mean by this is that the incompatibility of such theories with linguistic practice can be explained in too many alternative ways that are by no means completely implausible. For example, the fact that such a theory ascribes an understanding of the word “cat” to someone who evidently does not know the meaning of this word can be explained in terms of the thought that the theory mistakenly identifies the meanings of such words as “animal” or “alive” with certain properties (properties of human organisms or certain complicated relational properties), or that the theory mistakenly describes the character of logical relations – and so on. Of course, the above remarks do not prove that a full-blooded theory cannot be holistic; however, they show that accepting even a moderate version of holism calls into question the possibility of constructing a full-blooded theory of meaning. Moreover, it seems that the requirement of full-bloodedness is much more in agreement with semantic atomism. If one wanted to present a full-blooded theory against the background of the assumption that semantic atomism was correct, one would only need to explain the meanings of a basic lexicon in non-semantic terms. That is to say, it would be enough to separately explain the meanings of those words which cannot be defined in terms of the meanings of other words. When a theory that is both full-blooded and atomistic is brought face to face with actual linguistic practice, this does not seem to lead to such difficulties, as in the case of a theory that is full-blooded but holistic. In the case of an atomistic and full-blooded theory, it is easier to pinpoint elements of the theory that run counter to linguistic practice. To sum up the second point of my argument, then, I have tried to show that it is hard to reconcile even a moderately holistic approach to meaning with the requirement of full-bloodedness, and that fulfilling this requirement seems much more plausible against the background of the assumption that semantic atomism is right.

The third point of my argumentation concerns the following question: what character can explanations of meaning that respect CP have? I have already pointed out that they must be at least moderately holistic. Now I will try to show that provided that one accepts a certain (in my view) quite natural generalization of CP, such explanations must also be modest. In order to make my argument more perspicuous, it is worth reminding ourselves what conception of the explanation of the meaning of linguistic expressions (conceived as *logical* units) is implied by CP. I take CP to imply that

the explanation of the meaning of any expression consists in determining what logical (semantic and syntactic) role it plays as a component of other meaningful expressions. It should also be added that Frege, in the “Introduction” to *FA*, points out that respecting CP protects one from the danger of psychologism, i.e., from, amongst others things, invoking irrelevant factors in explanations of the meanings of linguistic expressions. The juxtaposition of these two remarks may lead to a posing of the following question: should the principle that states that one expression must be explained in the context of other expressions of which it is a part be restricted to just parts of the sentences, or should it also apply to whole sentences themselves? The adherent of the full-blooded approach who also wants to respect CP would claim that the meanings of sentences should be explained in a different way, that is, without any appeal to meanings of other expressions. According to adherents of the full-blooded conception, meanings of sentences should be explained in non-semantic terms (e.g., in sociofunctionalist terms, or with reference to causal relations holding between, so to speak, syntactically-defined states of human brains and the world, etc.). It seems, however, that even if such an approach is in agreement with the letter of CP, it is not compatible with its spirit. The principle was formulated in order to show that the meaning of expressions is determined only by their logical (semantic and syntactic) roles, and not by such irrelevant factors as, for example, subjective associations prompted by the occurrence of expressions. So strictly speaking, all explanations of the meanings of sentences appealing to something other than the logical role of those expressions will be incompatible with the spirit of CP. Full-blooded explanations of the meanings of sentences have that character just by virtue of aiming to explain the semantic function of sentences in non-semantic terms. It also seems that the burden of proof then lies with the adherent of a holistic and full-blooded theory of meaning to show that the meanings of sentences should still then be explained in a completely different way than the meanings of words – i.e. not in terms of their logical role. To sum up, the natural extension of the Fregean principle is the requirement to explain the meaning of any given linguistic expression just through determining its logical role in a language. This generalized version of the context principle – which one could call “Wittgenstein’s Principle” – only allows for modest explanations of the meaning of linguistic expressions.

## Concluding remarks on psychologism and full-bloodedness

Having argued that accepting CP leads almost inevitably to an adoption of the modest approach to meaning and a rejection of the full-blooded approach, I would like to briefly make two further remarks. The first concerns the relationship between psychologism and the full-blooded approach to meaning, while the second concerns the roots of the idea that we should seek to give a full-blooded explanation of meaning.

Psychologism as regards linguistic meaning can be defined in many ways. Yet no matter how, exactly, one determines the content of this standpoint, it is, broadly speaking, a view according to which the meaning of any expression can be explained in terms of mental objects, acts, states or processes (cf. Dummett, 1973, pp. 637–642; Mohanty, 1997). What is it that is questionable about such a view? Above all, it is the fact that, according to this position, features of expressions which do not play any logical (semantic and syntactic) role in language use are nevertheless treated as relevant, and even essential, for determining the meaning of these expressions. For example, psychologistic explanations of meaning may include images associated with expressions, as if these were something vital to understanding. So the most objectionable aspect of psychologism is its attempt to explain meaning in non-semantic terms. Therefore, it is the full-bloodedness of psychologism that is its most questionable aspect. However, explanations of meaning which appeal to terms referring to mental states *need not* raise any objections. For instance, explaining the meaning of the sentence “Cats mew” by stating that “‘Cats mew’ expresses the thought that cats mew” need not be regarded as confusing what is subjective with what is objective. Of course, adherents of standardly construed psychologistic explanations of meaning do not confine themselves to such innocent uses of mental terms<sup>5</sup> in their conceptions of meaning, and that is the reason why these conceptions can be described as full-blooded.

I think that there are two possible main sources for the idea that we should seek to give a full-blooded explanation of linguistic meaning. The first

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<sup>5</sup> I would say that an explanation having the form “the sentence ‘p’ expresses the thought that p” can be called “innocent” because the expression “expresses the thought that” can be treated as unexplainable in non-semantic mental terms.

is the aspiration to avoid circularity in explanations, while the second is an acceptance of reductionism with respect to linguistic meaning.

According to those who embrace the full-bloodedness requirement, every attempt to explain linguistic meaning in semantic terms (no matter how the latter are understood) is ultimately flawed, due to the fact of being caught up in a vicious circle. Concepts such as *possession of truth-conditions by a sentence* or *expression of thought by a sentence* cannot be understood independently of the concept of meaning, and that is the reason why the meanings of linguistic expressions should be explained in other terms. Thus, it could seem from a logical point of view as though the modest approach to meaning is fundamentally mistaken. My answer to that objection – though somewhat sketchy, I admit – can also be deployed as an answer to the previously mentioned similar objection to Bronzo’s proposal for reconciling CP with the principle of compositionality. As I have already claimed, not all kinds of circularity in explanations need be taken to constitute a flaw. Circular explanations can show that there is an essential connection between members of a certain class of concepts. Of course, the circle should be appropriately wide, lest the explanations in question prove completely uninformative (Strawson, 1992). Moreover, it is worth adding that the very attempt to step outside the circle can generate explanations of the concepts and phenomena under consideration that are completely mistaken – or, at least, that can be described as revisionary.

As I said above, the second source of acceptance of full-bloodedness may be the conviction that some version or other of reductionism with regard to linguistic meaning must be right. However, it should be emphasized that Dummett did not himself seek to justify the requirement in that way. Adherents of reductionism assume that irreducible semantic facts would be in some sense queer,<sup>6</sup> and for that reason should be reduced to facts of some more basic kind or other.

The above remarks on the possible sources of the full-bloodedness requirement lend support to a certain very general and conditional conclusion: *if CP as interpreted here is right, and the line of argument proposed*

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<sup>6</sup> The argument from queerness was explicitly formulated for the first time by Mackie (1992, pp. 38–42), in the context of considerations pertaining to moral facts. One can find an anticipation of that type of argument in *Philosophical Investigations*, in the context of the so-called rule-following considerations (1974, § 195). However, Wittgenstein does not endorse that argument.

regarding the connection between CP and the full-bloodedness requirement is correct, then the conviction that the semantic aspect of language can be fully explained in certain more basic terms is questionable. Of course, as Stroud rightly points out, such a conclusion is, from a metaphysical point of view, deeply unsatisfactory (Stroud, 2000b, p. 192). However, it should be emphasized that the recognition that it is doubtful whether the requirement of giving an entirely general explanation of meaning could ever be fulfilled is not only a recognition of a certain negative thesis, but also something that permits one to better understand the character of the metaphysical project that aims to explain meaning from, so to say, outside of linguistic content. Of course, adherents of the requirement may well opt to reject the above conclusion, pointing out that “one philosopher’s *modus ponens* is another philosopher’s *modus tollens*” (Putnam, 1992, p. 295).

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### Abstract

The aim of my article is to show that accepting the context principle (CP) almost inevitably leads to a rejection of the project of giving a completely general explanation of linguistic meaning. I will argue that it is difficult to reconcile CP with any version of the project of giving such an explanation of meaning that does not appeal to semantic terms. I will begin with a short characterization of CP. I will outline the reading of CP which I myself embrace. Then I will briefly characterize the difference between the idea of explaining the meanings of linguistic expressions from outside of any language, and that of doing so from inside of a language. Then I will move on to the main point of my article, arguing that it is difficult to render the consequences of CP compatible with the idea of an explanation of meaning external to all linguistic content.