WITTGENSTEIN’S LATER THEORY OF MEANING
IMAGINATION AND CALCULATION

“Schneider’s penetrating and original reading transformed my understanding of the later Wittgenstein.”
Robert B. Brandom, University of Pittsburgh

“Schneider’s originality shows itself in his forceful way of pointing out that certain insights articulated by Wittgenstein can be used to clarify those aspects of the Frege-Dummett project of constructing a systematic theory of meaning that may continue to inspire imaginative new work in the philosophy of language.”
Joachim Schulte, University of Zurich

Wittgenstein’s Later Theory of Meaning presents a comprehensive analysis and exploration of the significance of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language for a theory of meaning. Proposing that there is a network of systematically connected insights to be found in Wittgenstein’s later writings that is of epistemological relevance, renowned philosopher and Wittgenstein scholar Hans Julius Schneider attempts to free Wittgenstein from his reputation as an unsystematic thinker with nothing to offer but “therapy” for individual cases of philosophical confusion.

Schneider argues his points by first summarizing Gottlob Frege’s philosophy of language, then engaging in close readings of a variety of Wittgenstein’s texts to explore what he really has to say about “kinds of words” and “parts of speech.” Subsequent chapters explore and answer questions centered on the concepts of “imagination” and “projection”; discuss Wittgenstein’s struggle with his older models of linguistic complexity; and spell out the consequences for the project of a “theory of meaning.” Innovative and original, Wittgenstein’s Later Theory of Meaning represents an important and invaluable contribution to Wittgenstein scholarship that offers rich new insights into one of the 20th century’s most influential philosophers.

Hans Julius Schneider is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Potsdam. His publications include Phantasie und Kalkül (1992) and Religion (2008). He also served as a co-editor of the journal Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie for a number of years and has made several contributions to this publication as well as numerous other philosophical essay collections.
Wittgenstein’s Later Theory of Meaning
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Imagination and Calculation

Hans Julius Schneider

Translated from the German by Timothy Doyle and Daniel Smyth

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I would like to thank a number of people for their help in making this publication possible: James Conant was the first to suggest that it would be desirable to supply a complete translation of my original, much larger book _Phantasie und Kalkül_ (Suhrkamp, 1992). But it turned out to be extremely difficult to find a publisher who would be willing to read 560 German pages, let alone to eventually finance their translation.

Later, Robert Brandom proposed to publish in English the systematic core of the book, that is, the chapter on Wittgenstein and the paragraphs surrounding it, using the opportunity to situate the argument in the current philosophical debate. This idea seemed much easier to realize, so a translation had to be furnished. Here I have to thank two people, my student Timothy Doyle who, although he was still working on his dissertation at the time, did (if I may say so) the rough carpentry work, and Daniel Smyth, who is responsible for the (to my mind) perfect final outcome.

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Foreword

By Charles Taylor

This book gets to grips with a central problem in Post-Fregean philosophy; it in fact offers a treatment of linguistic structure in the framework set up by the later Wittgenstein. And since the post-Fregean is one of the dominant strands in Anglophone analytic philosophy today, the issue has great importance for analytic philosophies of language.

Gottlob Frege, the great 19th-century German philosopher of mathematics, was channeled into the Anglophone world partly by Bertrand Russell around the beginning of the last century. Russell had emancipated himself from his early period under the sway of the English Hegelians, and had reverted to an epistemological view based on the great 17th-century empiricists, the so-called “way of ideas,” soon to be re-baptized “sense data.”

Another route through which Frege’s work entered the English-speaking world was via the Vienna positivists, who gathered in the early century around Ernst Mach. These, too, combined Frege with a basically Humean epistemology. Originally, this movement had little to do with the English-speaking world, but the rise of Nazi-ism forced some of its best minds to emigrate, mostly to the United States.
Their temper was rationalist, tough-minded, suspicious of “metaphysics.” Their idea of properly valid discourse was the discourse of science, augmented by truths about observable objects of common experience. So the work of Frege enters the English-speaking world partly as a resource for a streamlined, rationalist, highly systematized view of language. His contribution to this was considerable: not only did he clarify the basic structure of the proposition as concept and object, but he also greatly enlarged the scope of logical connection through his invention of the logic of quantification.

One of the sites of this streamlined logical systematization was in the theories of linguistic competence, such as in the work of Michael Dummett and Donald Davidson. One of the widely noticed phenomena of our language competence from Humboldt to Chomsky was our ability to put finite resources to “infinite ends.” With a large, but not unlimited stock of words, we are able to create and/or understand an indefinite number of new sentences. Davidson proposes that we understand this competence as the mastery of a theory in which we can derive the truth conditions of declarative sentences from a combination of axioms attributing meaning to referring expressions and predicate terms.

Another terrain of systematization was the tracing of deductive relations between propositions with different ontological commitments. The resources of Fregean logic, including truth-functionality and quantification, make it possible to organize a host of possible sayables as derivations from more basic assertions. In this way, the products of our depictive power can be organized, one might say “regimented,” in relation to more basic depictions. This defined what Robert Brandom refers to as the classical program of semantic analysis. He sees this concern as lying at the heart of analytical philosophy: “I think of analytic philosophy as having at its center a concern with semantic relations between what I will call ‘vocabularies’. Its characteristic form of question is whether, and in what way, one can make sense of the meanings expressed by one kind of locution in terms of the meanings expressed by another kind of locution.”

This opened a large field for the anti-metaphysical drive of 20th-century positivists and others who felt themselves to be the
heirs of classical empiricism. Brandom described what he calls “the classical project of philosophical analysis as having the task of exhibiting what is expressed semantically by one vocabulary (one sort of meaning) as the logical elaboration of what is expressed by another.”

Now traditionally, these projects were driven by metaphysical (sometimes expressed as anti-metaphysical) suspicion. Certain supposed realities were illusory or fraudulent, those postulated by religions for instance; or goods or values, like those of ethics or aesthetics, that claimed an ontological grounding (as against those which were seen as subjectively projected). But sometimes the suspect entities were condemned as merely superfluous posits, without warrant in reality, such as the self (Hume), or natural necessity (again Hume), or “society” and other such terms for collectivities (methodological individualists).

Brandom describes the two most widespread such projects of reduction, empiricism and naturalism:

What is distinctive of empiricism and naturalism, considered abstractly, is that they each see some one vocabulary (or vocabulary-kind) as uniquely privileged with respect to all other vocabularies. Empiricism takes its favored vocabulary (whether it be phenomenal, secondary-quality, or observational) to be epistemologically privileged relative to all the rest. In what I think of as its most sophisticated forms, the privilege is understood more fundamentally to be semantic, and only derivatively and consequentially epistemological. Naturalism takes its favored vocabulary (whether it be that of fundamental physics, the special sciences, or just descriptive) to be ontologically privileged relative to all the rest. In both cases, what motivates and gives weight and significance to the question of whether, to what extent, and how a given target vocabulary can be logically or algorithmically elaborated from the favored base vocabulary is the philosophical argument for epistemologically, semantically, or ontologically privileging the base vocabulary. These are arguments to the effect that everything that can be known, or thought, every fact, must in principle be expressible in the base vocabulary in question. It is in this sense (epistemological, semantic, or ontological)
a *universal* vocabulary. What it *cannot* express is fatally defective: unknowable, unintelligible, or unreal. One clear thing to mean by “metaphysics” is the making of claims of this sort about the universal expressive power of some vocabulary.\(^3\)

The stigmatized entities could be shown to deserve exclusion, either by being shown to be unintelligible in relation to the base vocabulary (the objects mentioned in meaningless “metaphysical” statements), or else by our showing that everything useful which could be said in statements mentioning them could be said perfectly adequately in the terms of the base vocabulary (all statements about society translated into statements about individuals, all statements mentioning material objects translated into statements about sense data, and so on). These putative objects could thus be eliminated without loss.

But sometimes the object of relating base to target was the positive one of saving some suspect entities which might otherwise be relegated to outer darkness. Thus Hume’s suspicion of natural necessity, something beyond the mere correlation he wanted to reduce it to, could be answered by showing that we can make perfect sense of it. This is a “saving” derivation that Kant claimed to accomplish; and Brandom does something analogous.\(^4\)

The goal of this kind of regimentation was a language of minimal commitment, which would be able to capture all valid knowledge, including especially that gained by empirical science. In this way, 20th-century post-Fregean philosophy shows its debt to the pre-Fregean early modern theories of language, developed by Hobbes, Locke, and others. These had as their first concern a language which could be an adequate and clear medium for expounding valid scientific knowledge and avoiding illusion and imposture. The first requirement of such a language was clear definitions, and the second, equally important, was that one stick to these definitions once introduced. We can see here the important effects which stemmed from the contingent fact that Frege entered the Anglophone world alongside a reversion in this world to a pre-Kantian epistemology.

But Frege’s work wasn’t totally abandoned in the hands of philosophers with these epistemological concerns. It was wrenched into a
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Quite new orbit by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Admittedly, his early work, the *Tractatus*, shared much of the outlook of Bertrand Russell’s Frege-reception. And it became an inspiration for the Vienna Circle. But Wittgenstein later turned against this, and leveled the most decisive criticisms against any attempt to see language through the prism of the forms of tight logical systematization described above, either in a deductive theory of the language capacity, or in a regimentation of modes of depiction.

For the later Wittgenstein, a given utterance could only be understood in the context of the language game in which it figured; and our language included an indefinite number of such games, themselves only comprehensible within our overall form of life. The goal of reducing them all to a single model, or mode of depicting the world, was a chimera.

As a general thesis, this seems to me unanswerable. There are utterances in contexts so far removed from the standard concern of depicting an independent reality with maximum accuracy and freedom from illusion, that it approaches the absurd to try to understand them on the same model. The well-known example is that of someone saying through clenched teeth “I’m in pain,” an utterance which could be accompanied, but also replaced by, a groan.

But does that mean that any attempt to understand language as a system is mistaken? That we can only grasp the multiple language games, with their indigenous rules? Hans J. Schneider, while greatly admiring Wittgenstein, demurs. What we need is a view of language which avoids the total logical systematization of a deductive theory of meaning, or of Brandom’s regimentations, on one hand, but also sees the multiple links between different uses of language on the other.

We might think of some examples: we say: (1) “George has a car,” but also (2) “George has an idea.” The first implies that there is an object (the car), which can become the property of some human being, and which in fact belongs to George. If we construe the second sentence on this logic, it begins to sound queer. But let’s stretch a point: George got this idea from Pete, from whom he also bought the car. But then how about (3) “George has a headache”? 

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This is the kind of issue often posed by Wittgenstein. If one thinks that all information-bearing propositions must have the same logical form, then it begins to look as though (2) and (3) have "surface" forms which fail to match their real logical form, and one engages in the game widely followed among post-Fregean philosophers: find the real logical form of X.\(^5\)

But if we follow Hans J. Schneider, we might see the steps from (1) to (2) to (3) as more akin to metaphorical or analogical extensions. Schneider speaks of a "syntactical metaphor." Our language is full of such leaps, where faced with a situation for which we do not yet have an adequate expression, we borrow from a more familiar context, thus giving an old expression a new twist. This also happens on the level of syntax. But this doesn’t mean that our language has no systematicity; on the contrary, we are always drawing on long-acquired resources to say something new. It just means that this systematicity can’t be explained in terms of tight logico-deductive relations.

Now to speak of metaphor is to awaken the beast in the classical Hobbes-Locke theory. As Hobbes put it:

To conclude, the light of human minds is perspicuous words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; reason is the pace; increase of science the way; and the benefit of mankind the end. And on the contrary, metaphors and senseless and ambiguous words, are like ignes fatui; and reasoning upon them is wandering among innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention and sedition, or contempt.\(^6\)

And of course, in a sense Hobbes was right: if your goal is a deductive logical system, metaphors utterly queer the pitch; they are to such a system what sand is to the internal combustion engine. And so if the aim of a Brandomian regimentation is to give us an adequate language of science, then we have indeed to stay away from all figures and tropes. But that doesn’t mean that human language, as it operates in nature, as it were, doesn’t rely essentially on such leaps. It is, in fact, as Schneider argues in this highly insightful book, an artful combination of systematicity (Kalkül) and imagination (Phantasie).
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Notes

2 Brandom (2008), p. 31
4 Brandom (2008), Chapter 4.
Analytic Philosophy may not be the most “up to date” branch of the field but it has certainly produced a number of insights and procedures nobody would seriously want to miss out on. Concerning many philosophical questions (e.g., what are numbers, what are mental states, virtues, gods) it is still good advice to look at the words and phrases we use in trying to state the respective problem in an intelligible way as a prerequisite for answering it. Although hardly anyone would claim that philosophers are concerned with “mere words,” in most cases they cannot do their work without also having an eye on language; indeed, in many cases it is not at all clear what it would mean to look at “the things themselves.”

Yet the philosophical treatment of language has slowed down in the last decades. One symptom of this is that Michael Dummett (1975, 1976, 1981), who had offered many most valuable suggestions for the shape of a theory of meaning, did not complete his project, and it seems that ideas developed in the later philosophy of Ludwig
Wittgenstein played no small role in this retardation. In the same context, philosophers like Richard Rorty (1980) and John McDowell (1998, 1998a, 2007) have explicitly pleaded (against Dummett) for a “modest” theory of meaning, that is, one that would exclude the issues most relevant to philosophy, especially those pertaining to epistemology. Such a “modest” approach (in contradistinction to a “full-blooded” one) would simply use the logical tools provided by Gottlob Frege (1972) and his followers without asking (as Frege himself unceasingly did) the relevant philosophical questions such as why we are calling certain structures “logical” and why we think they shed light on what we do in using a natural language or in thinking. This negligence corresponds to the fact that in the newly flourishing philosophy of mind semantic concepts like “representation” and “reference” are mostly taken for granted instead of being explained, so that here too we have a kind of “modesty” that shies away from what used to be the “real” philosophical questions. Judged by older ideals, this approach to the mind constitutes a vicious circle, not unlike John Locke’s (1975) talk of “ideas” in his explanation of language, which so many of his contemporaries had difficulties in understanding. Locke explained language with recourse to “ideas,” and when his contemporaries pressed him to explain what he meant by ideas his answer was: the meanings of words.

This book investigates the significance of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language for a theory of meaning. Did he indeed give compelling reasons that force us to give up on the development of a “full-blooded,” epistemologically interesting theory of meaning? Is the “quietism” attributed to him, the idea that philosophy in all respects leaves everything as it is, a systematic result of his understanding of the functioning of language? Or is it a personal preference? Is it even a mistake to attribute such a view to him, a false generalization of statements that were meant to have a much more limited scope? The answer worked out in these pages takes sides against the first alternative: There is nothing in Wittgenstein that would compel us to resign ourselves to a “modest” theory of meaning. Our claim is, on the contrary, that there is a systematic network of insights to be found in his later philosophy that is of
epistemological relevance and that no philosophical treatment of language should neglect, although this body of insights does not (and indeed cannot, as we will see) take the form of an axiomatic-deductive theory, as Dummett had once envisaged. We shall see in detail why this is the case and why it nevertheless provides no reason for us to content ourselves with a “modest” theory. So the proposed answer to the question: “Can there be a full-blooded theory of meaning?” will take the form “Yes, but…” The advice is: Let us not throw out the baby with the bathwater, let us not give up on the project of a systematic theory of meaning, even if we have to accept that it will not take the form of an axiomatic system and will be “systematic” in a sense different from what we know from such systems. So the quietism attributed to Wittgenstein has to be qualified to do justice to his thoughts.

The central claims in what follows are, first, that we have to acknowledge that in Wittgenstein we find a diachronic perspective. What appears to be unsystematic in his approach loses much of this appearance as soon as we see that the network he unfolds is the result of ever more complex activities proceeding in time. To put it in Nietzschean terms: What Wittgenstein unfolds is a genealogy, or, more precisely, a number of such genealogies discussed (and partly invented) to make visible kinds of systematic relationships we find in natural language.3

The second point is that, in these unfolding linguistic activities, processes of projection play a central role. Such processes are only possible in time since they presuppose that certain means of expression are already in place which (in a second, additional step) are then used in an “unorthodox” way, as, most prominently, in the case of metaphor. If such an as yet unprecedented use results in successful communication, this success rests on the capacity for imagination – on the part of the speaker as well as the hearer. The most obvious case is that of a new use of a word, where the hearer has to guess what the speaker means by an utterance that (judged from the rules applied until that moment) would have to be classified as a “misuse” of language. We will see that such projective steps also play a role in the realm of syntax, which has led Eric Stenius (1960, p. 212ff.) to
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speak of “syntactical metaphors.” Their presence is a central feature of natural language; their existence is the main circumstance that blocks the possibility of an axiomatic-deductive theory of meaning.

It may be grasped from these introductory gestures that the resulting picture can indeed appear to be “unsystematic” if the calculating side of language (which is not at all denied here) is taken to be its only philosophically relevant aspect. This calculating side is certainly highly important and Dummett is surely correct when he claims that without Frege we would not have the slightest idea of how to handle this side of language, that is, the fact that we somehow “infer” the meaning of a new sentence from the meanings of its constituents and the way in which they are composed. We do not learn the sentences of our language one by one. But the contribution of Wittgenstein’s later works will here be seen not as contradicting this calculating aspect, but as adding something to it, and as an important qualification as to what “inferring” can mean here. We are not only calculating in our linguistic activities (it is, for example, not enough to get the verb forms right) but constantly using our powers of imagination in attempting to grasp the sense of an utterance (not just its point in the particular given situation, which is undisputed, but its sense). That this is the case is a systematic insight into what we do when we use language; it pervades the whole of language, it is not just a poetic quirk, irrelevant for more “serious” uses. Therefore, to acknowledge and correctly assess the imaginative side of our language competence is a central feature in the picture we should have of ourselves as agents.

The argument of this book will proceed as follows: Chapter 1 will summarize Frege’s philosophy of language, read from a perspective that stresses some of his late insights in order to bring his ideas as close as possible to those of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. It will also formulate expectations that someone impressed by Frege might bring to Wittgenstein. Chapters 2 through 5 will engage in a close reading of Wittgenstein’s texts. The goal is to find out whether we can discover there any compelling reasons for excluding the possibility of a systematic theory of meaning, as Dummett has claimed to. This involves finding an answer to the question of why Wittgenstein so repeatedly showed contempt for “grammar” in the