

Frege’s *On Concept and Object* and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* not only eschew naïve conceptions that there could be unified semantic ‘things’ which swim across and through the different media of thought and linguistic expression, but each, in his own way, undermines any confidence ordinary language users might have about the semantic power or significance of ordinary sentences.

“By a kind of necessity of language,” Frege writes, “my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought [p.179].” It is not surprising why this might be so given the nature of Frege’s endeavour at the cusp of the inexpressible, engaging with logical simples which do not lend themselves to further definition, and which have a mercurial quality which allows them to show up as parts of linguistic predicates (‘is Venus’) or as linguistic subjects (‘the concept horse’) depending upon the particular sentence of which they are part. The sentences, correlatively, are elusive and shifting and not tethered in any uniform way to these simples. “There is nothing for it but to lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the words as is intended [p.169]” notes Frege, before disclosing his hopes for “a reader who would be ready to meet me half-way—who does not begrudge a pinch of salt [p.179].”

These scruples, importantly, are not limited to the rarified domain of the inexpressible, either, for Frege goes on to assert that thought is indeterminate—a significant hurdle, since, to the extent that a sentence is a determinate thing, it is difficult to see how it can be said to express something indeterminate in any meaningful way. Frege for his part opts for a kind of asymmetry, *viz.*, that a thought can be expressed in a number of ways, such that a number of apparently different sentences can express the same thought [p.175]. This asymmetry seems to be grounded upon his understanding of there being a formal correspondence between the parts of a properly formed sentence and the parts of a thought [pp.179-180], but, if indeterminacy is in substance about the meaning of the thing—of what a particular thought holds to be the case about a particular something—then the expression relation still fails, despite what can be said about it logically or formally.

It is perhaps here that Frege would rely on our pinch of salt, which seems nothing other than his reliance upon our finely calibrated sense of discerning his intention, bringing to bear upon it our charitable sense of how things could hold together in the way he suggests. Meaning, then, is to be cashed out within a field of extra-linguistic norms, but the reader is left to discern whether, in the case of Frege’s assertion about thought, for example, here is where one should depart from taking his expression literally [p.179], and, if so, in what manner and to what extent. We start moving in the direction of wondering how could we ever know whether any given sentence reflects what Frege thought? It would appear that a sentence does not express a thought at all, that the relation between a sentence and a thought may be nothing but their each being part of a parallel, though loosely correlated, sequence of events whose meanings are fixed contingently by the fine psychological and social calibrations of competent language users. Thought and its “expression” in a sentence is merely a reference to a shared social activity of giving shape to (or even of creating or inventing) something called a ‘thought’.

Wittgenstein, in a similar vein, states that “[l]anguage disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe [4.002].” Despite this obscuration, Wittgenstein shows how a determinate form underlies that outermost garment, however opaquely the one may be related to the other. Our confidence that a sentence expresses a thought is anchored by the traditional idea of correspondence, at first instance between the elements of the logical picture and the elementary objects which correspond to it. This correspondence relation subsists as the constituents of reality, broadly conceived, scale up until we obtain a thought (the logical picture) about a fact (the sum of atomic facts) that can be expressed by a proposition of the form: ‘such and such is the case’. A sentence expresses thought by being the outer garment of such propositions.

We have the form of a guarantee that, at some essential level, a thought and a sentence are identical by virtue of being grounded upon the same atomic facts. The difficulty with this view is that these relations are not apparent even when “we probe beyond merely surface appearances [2/35]”, and so the comfort purchased by the *Tractatus* comes dear: a vision of reality which bears no recognizable relation to anything we, as agents in the world, would

appreciate as a thought, or to any understanding of how the subterranean happenings as outlined bear any relation to what we would recognize as a sentence. Our sentences, which purport to express our thoughts, are, in a sense, trading in illusions. To extend Wittgenstein’s clothing metaphor, our talk, in substance, is little different than the chatter of the glitterati of high fashion. We are made denizens of an artificial reality, but are at the same time asked to accept that through the accumulation of our ordinary words, employed by Wittgenstein in a particular order and form, we can nevertheless obtain purchase upon the True and the Real. We have only Wittgenstein’s dicta on the matter, as wrapped up in a wager in the form of a paradox: ordinary language which only obscures the essential and the necessary is the tool by which we will see the essential and the necessary. It is telling that Wittgenstein’s opening to the preface of the *Tractatus* warns that “[t]his book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it.” This scruple is appropriate. Wittgenstein’s model presumes an obscuration of true forms to such an extent that, if true, it significantly undermines, if not annihilates, the function of ordinary sentences.

If, as with Frege, we have reasons to doubt whether a thought can even be expressed by a sentence, or, as with Wittgenstein, that the how of such expression remains veiled in mystery, then a crucial element for the soundness of our understanding about language is in doubt, and we could never be sure, in any particular case, whether a sentence uttered by A truly expresses A’s thought, assuming A can even have a thought in any meaningful sense: there would only be my thinking about what A is thinking he is thinking, and the referent of any indirect sentence of the form ‘A believes that *x*’ would threaten to become, at best, nothing more than reportage of the contents of my mind, of which any hearer B could reasonably have doubts about whether what I have said is expressive of what I think. If the functionality of sentences so breaks down, then we do not really receive or interact with the thoughts of others at all, which raises further questions about how we receive or acquire new thoughts in the first place [2/33]. Perhaps this latter question is premised on a philosophical illusion, and that, to the extent we believe our thoughts are acquired or develop or change through what we receive from others, the only thing that is happening is that we, according to our own particular

impetus and predilections, are cycling from one position to another along the points of a circle already inscribed for us. In such a world, the sentences of others are stepping stones for our advancement along our own singular circumference, or, to change metaphors, as artefacts that we exploit to outline or give shape to what we already hold to be the case, but if that is the case then we would appear to be courting a kind of solipsism (3/64-65) and Platonism (3/70) or even to be prefiguring Plato’s view of knowledge as recollection (1/19).

If any of this is unpalatable, we would need to go back to the drawing board, which explains why, in Wittgenstein’s case, perhaps, that is just what he did. Either that, or we embrace (but this time out in the open) a more robust and coherent form of Platonism, if such a thing is possible.