

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT SENTENCES?

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion of Frege's maxim that it is only in the context of a sentence that a word has meaning. Quine reads the maxim as saying that the sentence is the fundamental unit of significance. Dummett rejects this as a truism. But it is not a truism since it stands in opposition to a conception of meaning held by John Locke and others. The maxim denies that a word has a sense independently of any sentence in which it occurs. Dummett says this denial is inconsistent with the fact that people understand sentences they have never heard before. The maxim is defended against this attack.

1. Introduction

The claim that "it is only in the context of a sentence that words have any meaning" is central to much of the enquiry Frege set forth in *Die Grundlagen Der Arithmetik*, and expresses the basis for his "fundamental principle" that we are "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a sentence".¹

This maxim certainly asserts no *less* than that words have meanings only in relation to sentences, and thus ascribes to sentences a certain primacy over words, but then equally a primacy over phrases, and thus over all expressions other than sentences. But what is so special about a sentence?

2. Michael Dummett: sentences are the only expressions suitable for saying something

On the view of Michael Dummett, what is special about a sentence is that

... we cannot say anything by means of a sequence of words that stops short of being a sentence — cannot make an assertion, express

a wish, ask a question, give a command, etc., in short do what Wittgenstein called 'make a move in the language-game'...²

He also says that "a continuous tradition, from Aristotle to Locke and beyond"

...had blurred, or at least failed to account for, the crucial distinction between those combinations of words which constitute a sentence and those which form mere phrases which could be part of a sentence.³

On the other hand,

In insisting on the crucial nature of the distinction between sentences and well-formed combinations of words that fall short of being sentences, and in giving a theory of meaning which offered an account of this distinction, Frege thus took a great stride forward, and contributed something that has become part of the foundation for any philosophical account of meaning.⁴

The distinction to which Dummett is drawing our attention is the one between those words or combinations of words suitable for *saying* something ("it is only by means of a sentence...that we can *say* anything"), and those not thus suitable. His suggestion is that what is special about sentences is that *they* are the expressions of our language suitable for saying something under standard conditions.

Dummett surely thinks that the distinction between expressions suitable for saying something and expressions not suitable for saying something is *important*. But how so?

One might say: The importance comes out when we recognize that expressions not suitable for saying something serve to form expressions which are suitable for saying something, for this establishes the primacy of sentences over non-sentences. But it doesn't. For the converse holds as well: just as for every non-sentence there are unlimitedly many sentences which it serves to form, so also for every sentence, there are unlimitedly many non-sentences which *it* serves to form. The *combinatorial* facts do not provide a basis for ascribing to sentences some kind of primacy in relation to non-sentences.

At this point it is tempting to make such observations as that with a declarative sentence we can *assert* something, and that this cannot be done with any non-sentence. But it is equally true that with singular terms we can *denote* things, and this cannot be done with any non-singular term. The fact is that the expressions formulable in virtually any language are not all everywhere interchangeable, and they thus divide into different basic types with quite

different "powers". For any such type of expressions whatsoever, there will be something we can do with expressions of that type which cannot be done with expressions not of that type. And we will not in general want to say that expressions of such and such a basic type are *the* units of significance or meaning.

For example, singular terms seem to form a basic type of expression, and what they are suitable for (making reference to an object) is something for which no other types of terms are suitable. But for all that we do not want to say that the distinction between singular terms and all other types of terms is *the* crucial one for the theory of meaning, much less say that the singular term is *the* unit of significance or meaning.

So we again ask: What is so special about sentences?

3. Michael Dummett: that sentences are the units of significance is a trivial truth

Let's grant as unproblematic the distinction between expressions suitable for saying something and expressions not thus suitable. Now, what makes this distinction a *crucial* one? More specifically, why, having acknowledged this distinction, should we go on to say that expressions suitable for saying something are *the* units of meaning or *the* units of significance?

Dummett suggests that the claim 'The sentence is the unit of significance (meaning)' is "truistic", and gives as his reason for saying this that "in a logical rather than a typographical sense" an expression suitable for saying something "is precisely what a sentence is".⁵ If so, we can take the claim 'The sentence is the unit of significance (meaning)' as equivalent to the claim

The type of expression suitable for saying something is the unit of significance (meaning).

But what is "truistic" about *this* claim? To feel the force of this question, just reflect on how natural it is to say that the *word* is the basic unit of meaning, and that the meanings of expressions compounded from words (and this includes the meanings of most sentences) are *composed* of the meanings of those words.

The fact is that the above displayed statement is far from being an *obvious* truth, and certainly is no truism.

Dummett also asserts that the claim that

...we cannot say anything by means of a sequence of words that stops short of being...an expression with which we can make a move in the language-game⁶

is truistic. Since 'expression with which we can make a move in the language-game' and 'sequence of words suitable for saying something' come to the same in the current context, the just displayed statement comes to this:

We cannot say anything by means of a sequence of words that stops short of being a sequence of words suitable for saying something.

And this *is* a truism. But the claim 'sequences of words suitable for saying something are the units of significance or meaning' is *not* the claim 'we cannot say anything except in the use of an expression suitable for saying something'. So the triviality of the latter claim does not testify to any triviality in the former claim.

4. Michael Dummett: the sense of a non-sentence consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the sense of any sentence in which it occurs

Dummett says not only that sentences are special in being the only expressions suitable for saying something, but that they also are special in that

...the sense of a word or of any expression not a sentence can be understood only as consisting in the contribution which it makes to determining the sense of any sentence in which it may occur.⁷

But why suppose that this is how things are? Why suppose that the sense of a word consists in "the contribution it makes to determining the sense of any sentence in which it may occur"? Why this view of the sense of a word rather than some other view?

As if in response to such a question Dummett says that

Since it is only by means of a sentence...that we can *say* anything — the possession of a sense by a word or complex expression short of a sentence cannot consist in anything else [than the contribution which it makes to determining the sense of any sentence in which it may occur]⁸

Dummett says "since". But how does the fact that certain expressions alone are suitable for saying something show that the senses of expressions not thus suitable consist in the contributions those expressions make to determining the senses of expressions thus suitable? Is it supposed to be just *obvious* that the sense of any expression not itself suitable for saying something consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the senses of expressions which are thus suitable?

Dummett *takes it* that the fact that sentences alone are expressions suitable for saying something shows that the sense of a non-sentence consists in just those of its features which contribute to fixing the senses of the *sentences* in which it occurs. On the other hand, Dummett also takes it to be a fact that the sense of *any* expression — sentence or non-sentence — is fixed by the senses of its component expressions (together with their mode of combination). So why not say that the sense of any expression consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the senses of the *expressions* in which it occurs — be they sentences or non-sentences?

How does the fact that *only* sentences are suitable for saying something show that it is the fixing of *their* senses which is determinative of the senses of all other expressions?

That is, why suppose that the sense of any expression not suitable for saying something consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the senses of expressions suitable for saying something? For though this is the *basic* point, it is not an *obvious* point.

Suppose someone were to write as follows:

Since it is only by means of a singular term that we can *refer to* anything, the possession of a sense by a word or complex expression short of a singular term cannot consist in anything else than the contribution which it makes to determining the sense of any singular term in which it may occur.

Dummett certainly would reject this. But what is the error? And what *shows* that something has gone wrong here?

What, for example, would be the error in the claim that the sense of any expression not suitable for referring to some object consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the senses of expressions suitable for referring to some object?

We began by asking what is special about sentences. Dummett's answer was that sentences are special because they alone are expressions suitable for saying something.

But for every basic type of expression there is something for the doing of which it alone is suitable. So what makes sentences special is not that there is

something for the doing of which they alone are suitable, but that the thing for the doing of which they alone are suitable is *saying* something.

But how does *that* make them special? Dummett replies that it makes them special because the sense of any expression not suitable for saying something consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the senses of expressions suitable for saying something.

But to this we can reply as follows. Let us agree that words and combinations of words which fall short of being sentences do somehow contribute to fixing the senses of the sentences in which they occur. We can then resolve to apply the word 'sense' to nonsentences to designate whatever it is about them which so serves. It will then be true enough that the sense of a non-sentence consists in the contribution it makes to determining the senses of the sentences in which it occurs. But equally then, non-singular terms will somehow contribute to fixing the senses of the singular terms in which they occur. And we might resolve to apply the word 'sense' to non-singular terms to designate just *those* features. And that would make it equally true that the sense of an expression other than a singular term consists in the contribution it makes to fixing the senses of the singular terms in which it occurs. But why limit our application of the word 'sense' in either of these two ways? Why not count as constitutive of the sense of an expression its contribution to fixing the senses of *all* the expressions in which it occurs? Why select out this or that type of expression as somehow primary?

For the underlying point here is that *every* expression makes a "meaning difference" to virtually every expression in which it occurs. Thus, the sense of *any* expression is partly determinative of the sense of virtually any expression in which it occurs. (The qualification "virtually" is required by the fact that expressions can occur in expressions words as mere spelling units or by being quoted.) And so it would seem best to say that *every* feature of a word or combination of words which makes a difference to the senses of the expressions into which it enters is constitutive of the sense of that word or combination of words.

5. The Lockean conception of language and meaning

In opposition to the view that sentences are *the* units of significance is what we shall call the Lockean conception of language and meaning since it derives from Book III of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.⁹

This conception is grounded in two recognitions: First, the recognition that there are many meaningful words and sequences of words belonging to many

different grammatical categories e.g., sentences and noun phrases; second, that words and sequences of words from various categories combine in many ways, e.g., one noun phrase can contain another noun phrase, ('man who spoke to a woman who likes children'), or a sentence ('man who voted for Bush because Bush promised not to raise taxes'), or be contained in a sentence ('Bill is a man who voted for Bush'). From the perspective fixed by these two insights nothing selects out the expressions of any one particular type as *the* expressions relative to which expressions of all other types have such significance as may accrue to them.

On this kind of view it will be natural to see every expression composed of expressions with meaning as itself having for *its* meaning a complex composed of the meanings of its constituent expressions, and to think of any expression with a complex meaning as either composed of expressions whose meanings are parts of that complex meaning or as being definitionally equivalent to some expression thus composed. In this connection Locke says that, while simple ideas cannot be defined,

The case is quite otherwise in *complex ideas*; which, consisting of several simple ones, it is in the power of the words, standing for the several ideas that make that composition, to imprint complex ideas in the mind which were never there before, and so make their names be understood. In such collections of ideas, passing under one name, definition, or the teaching the signification of one word by several others, has place, and may make us understand the names of things which never came within the reach of our senses and frame ideas suitable to those in other men's minds, when they use those names: provided that none of the terms of the definition stand for any such simple ideas, which he to whom the explication is made has never yet had in his thought. Thus the word *statue* may be explained to a blind man by other words, when *picture* cannot; his senses having given him the idea of figure, but not of colours, which therefore words cannot excite in him.¹⁰

With this will go a certain conception of how we can arrive at *clarity*: namely, by analyzing complex meanings into their constituent simpler meanings (an operation the results of which are classically expressed in definition). The ideal limit of this process will be the analysis of complex meanings into meanings which are in no way composite, and are thus unanalyzable. On such a conception of language and meaning, sentences are in no way distinguished as a special type of expression, much less as a type of expression central to there being any

expressions with meanings at all. Rather, one will be inclined to see as central to language not its sentences but its words; for these will appear to be the basic units of meaning such that all complex expressions gain their meanings from the meaning of the words from which they are formed. It is clear that roughly this picture has, to one degree or another, affected much of what philosophers have had to say about meaning.

Dummett asserts that

Frege was unwaveringly insistent that the sense of...any complex expression is made up out of the senses of its constituent words.¹¹

and plainly is inclined to agree. But if senses are thus composed, then some senses will be simpler than other senses. For example, the sense of 'the mother of someone' will be simpler than the sense of 'the father of the mother of someone'. In general, if one word or phrase occurs in another word or phrase, then its sense will be the simpler one. Consider, then, a language from which words have been so eliminated that no remaining word has the same sense as that possessed by any combination of words. (In effect, we remove those terms which make for analytic equivalences.) Then the senses of these remaining words will be the simplest senses expressed in the language and all other senses expressed in the language will be composed of these simplest senses. Given this, the task will be to account for two things: First, the senses of the words expressing the simplest senses expressible in the language; second, the various modes of composition by which more complex senses are produced from these simpler senses. And from the point of view here under consideration an account of the senses of words cannot take the form of explaining those senses in terms of the senses of combinations of words, since those are *compounded from* the senses of their constituent words. If anything, the direction of explanation would be just the reverse.

It is clear that Dummett would regard an account which incorporates this picture of meaning as fundamentally inadequate since it cannot account for the "crucial distinction between those combinations of words which constitute a sentence and those which form mere phrases which could be part of a sentence".¹² But it is not obvious that it cannot account for this distinction. It would be possible to hold that the distinction is not a distinction of sense but of syntax. It could be said that, e.g., the phrase '*red house*' is true on the same condition that the sentence '*Some house is red*' is true. What is brought before the mind in understanding '*red house*' and '*Some house is red*' is one and the same sense, and that what differentiates the sentence from the phrase is that it has a form

which serves to indicate *assent*, a certain act of mind in relation to the sense grasped. On this account the words 'some' and 'is' would not be expressions with sense, but would instead be a linguistic device for signalling assent to the truth of a description.

Dummett would here complain of

...a constant tendency to assimilate the truth of a sentence to the possession by a complex general description of an application¹³

But is this tendency an *error*? And does the fact that certain forms of words alone are suitable for saying something *show* that this tendency is an error?

6. What makes a notation a language

The claim that the unit of significance is the sentence is not a terminological truism. It is made in opposition to this Lockean conception of language and meaning. But the claim that the unit of significance is the sentence has not been justified.

What needs to be added to yield as natural the claim that expressions suitable for saying something are *the* units of significance is something which *selects out* those sequences of words suitable for asserting, asking, etc., as somehow special. The needed additional thought is roughly this, that what makes a notation a *language* is that it provides signs suitable for doing such things as asserting and asking, i.e., signs suitable for *saying* something. That is, what is needed is the recognition that language is a *means* to an *end* — the end of communication — and that *communication* is a matter of *saying* something.

We speak in terms of understanding words, understanding phrases, etc. We also speak in terms of someone understanding what is said. The two go hand in hand for the basic case of a person in a community within which just one language is spoken. Such a person would not be regarded as having understood some range of words and phrases if he or she were regarded as not understanding anything said with those words and phrases. And conversely: such a person would not be regarded as having understood some certain things said if he or she were regarded as not understanding any of the words or phrases used in saying those things.

But now consider a community of speakers who cease saying anything, but continue to utter the various words and phrases of the language they had been speaking. For example, a person in this group one day utters the phrase 'a brown

table', and someone else says 'tattered sheets' and someone else says 'the', and then the first person says 'Robert', etc. Are they still speaking a language?

It is of course possible to use words one by one or in combinations falling short of grammatical sentences and still be saying something — many words are, after all, suitable for saying something in certain contexts. For example, a word like 'rain' serves for exclamatory assertion in certain contexts and under certain conditions (the group is hiking and Bill looks to the west and exclaims 'Rain!'). But it does not so serve when used, e.g., in the sentence 'Most rain water is potable'.

So, let the speakers in our imagined community not only forego all sentences properly so called, let them as well forego the use of all other words or combinations of words in all those contexts in which uttering them would constitute saying something.

It would be entirely natural to say that a community whose sound and sign makings satisfied the above condition were no longer speaking a *language*. And that pretty much comes to this: We would no longer *call* what they do 'speaking a language'.

A notable fact is this: that in a group under the imagined conditions the use of words and combinations of words would no longer serve for the coordination of their actions one with another.

A notation lacking signs suitable for saying something would be, at best, a notation *for* a language, but would not itself *be* a language. To make a *language* of a notation is to bring it about that its signs include ones in the use of which something gets *said* (a prediction is made, a promise is extended, a question is asked, etc.).

Once we think about things in this way it will be entirely natural to say that *the* units of significance in a language are those of its expressions which are suitable for saying something — for they alone are the expressions in relation to which our whole system of sign and sound making is an instrument for communication, i.e., a language. And so, of course, the expressions suitable for saying something are the units of significance in a language, and as regards the expressions which are not thus suitable, *their* utility lies entirely in the role they play in producing expressions of the other type.

7. An analogy

Someone might come to regard a certain range of things manufactured in a factory as its products e.g., gears and springs, as well as a variety of more or less complex mechanisms. At any particular time the output of the factory

includes gears, springs, mechanisms built up from springs, gears, other mechanisms, etc. No inventory of the factory output at any given time would select out as special those of the mechanisms it produces which are clocks. But if an observer were to look beyond the inventory he would see that the things produced in the factory are used in just two ways. Some are never incorporated into more complex mechanisms but instead are used to tell time, and all the rest are used to form further mechanisms suitable for telling time. Once this is seen it will be natural to say that *the* unit of production in this factory is the clock, not the gears, springs, gear trains, etc.

The claim that the clock is the unit of production is founded on the recognition that although it manufactures many things, it has just one *product*: mechanisms suitable for telling time.

The claim that the sentence is the unit of significance too is founded on an something important, the insight that of the various expressions produced by the "factory" of language *only* some are suitable for doing that in virtue of which the whole apparatus of words and phrases is *language* — namely, the saying of things. The remaining devices of language, including words not themselves suitable for saying something, serve only as means to the "manufacture" of those expressions suitable for saying something.

8. Frege's maxim

The slogan that sentences are the units of significance thus is founded not merely on the insight that certain sequences of words are to be singled out as the one's suitable for saying something, but also on the intimately connected recognition that saying something is what language is *for*.

But the primacy of sentences over words, expressed by Frege's maxim

It is only in the context of a sentence that words have any meaning,

consists in more than the sentence being the unit of significance. What more is expressed ?

It is very natural to read Frege's maxim as asserting that in their occurrences outside of sentences words simply lack meaning. And a natural way of understanding that would lead one to say that if this is so then if a person P pronounces 'desk' by itself and not in the course of carrying out any further utterance then the sound P produces in pronouncing that word lacks meaning, but that if P assertively utters the sentence 'Frege owned a desk with a walnut top'

the very similar sound P then produces in pronouncing the word 'desk' has meaning.

All this would be compatible with saying that the *word* 'desk' has meaning and that when P pronounced that word all by itself P pronounced a word with meaning. For by the *word* 'desk' we do not mean this or that sound produced in pronouncing that word, and it could be claimed that the *word* has a meaning if there are sentences including it such that something is said in our use of them.

On this view, that a word has meaning consists entirely in the circumstance that it occurs in expressions suitable for saying something. To say that 'desk' has meaning is, then, to say that 'desk' occurs in expressions suitable for saying something.

And to say that someone grasps the meaning of that word is to say that they understand the expressions in which that word occurs and which are suitable for saying something. And in this way a word gains its meaning from the sentences in which it occurs.

Here is an analogy. Imagine that a child is given the task of drawing a picture of a face using just dots and curved lines. Now after the picture has been drawn, certain questions are answerable. For example, to the question, "What does this dot stand for?", the child might answer, "The left eye!" But if one were to simply put a dot on the board and ask the same question, a correct answer would be "It does not stand for anything". Within the picture the dots and curved lines have signification; they have no signification in isolation from the picture.

Barbara Hall Partee, Alice ter Meulen and Robert E. Wall express the principle of semantic compositionality as follows:

The meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of its parts and of the syntactic rules by which they are combined.¹⁴

This principle is implicit in the Lockean conception of language and meaning outlined earlier. And, while it is somewhat underspecified, it is clear enough for us to say that the principle is incompatible with Frege's maxim. For compositionality seems to require that words have meaning independently of any sentence in which they occur. T.M.V. Janssen make this point. Referring to Frege's maxim as "the principle of contextuality" Janssen writes:

Contextuality seems to be in conflict with compositionality for the following reason. The principle of compositionality requires words in isolation have a meaning, since otherwise there is nothing from which a compound expression can be built. A principle of contextuality would deny that words in isolation have a meaning.¹⁵

Dummett, in addition, thinks that Frege's maxim (on the reading we have given it) is inconsistent with our capacity to understand new sentences. He writes:

Surely a word has a sense independently of any sentence in which it occurs: it is because this is so that we are able to understand the thought expressed by some sentence we have never heard before.¹⁶

What he means is that we can *without further language learning* understand sentences so long as they are composed of familiar words put together in familiar ways. (For, of course, we can understand even sentences composed of unfamiliar words in unfamiliar ways given appropriate further language learning.) So the claim he wants to bring before us in justifying his view that a word has its meaning in itself this:

If we understand all the words occurring in some sentence and are familiar with how those words are combined in that sentence, then we can, without any further language learning, understand that sentence.

Dummett also says that we have this capacity to understand sentences composed of familiar words in familiar ways *because* words have their senses independently of any sentences in which they occur i.e., *because* they have their meanings in themselves and not as considered as occurring in a particular place in a particular sentence. So, Dummett seems to hold as well to the following:

If we do not understand the words occurring in some sentence, then we cannot, apart from appropriate further language learning, understand that sentence.

These formulations suggest the following argument: Suppose P were to read a sentence new to P's eyes and ears and grasp the senses of none of its words. P then could not grasp the sense of the sentence except through further language learning. So, it is only by grasping the senses of its words that P will be able to grasp the sense of a sentence composed of those words. But in that case those words must already *have* a sense. So, P can grasp the sense of a sentence without further language learning only if its words *already* have a sense.

A closely related line of argument runs as follows: Suppose that a word gains the sense it has in its occurrence in a sentence from the sense of that sentence. Then to grasp the sense a word has in its occurrence in a sentence we would have to *first* grasp the sense of the sentence itself. But then *every* next

sentence would be like a sentence all of whose words we fail to understand, so that *every* next sentence would be one whose sense we could grasp only through some further language learning. So since we in fact grasp the sense of lots of sentences without any further language learning, it cannot be that a word gains the sense it has in its occurrence in a sentence from the sense of that sentence.

This, it seems, is what Dummett has in mind.

But these arguments fall short of establishing that a word has its sense in itself and not as considered as occurring in a particular place in a particular sentence.

The second argument yields only the following conclusion: It is not the case that for every sentence S and word W occurring in S, W gains the sense it has in its occurrence in S from the sense of S. This leaves open the possibility that for each word W there is *some* sentence S such that W gains the sense it has in its occurrences in S from the sense of S. And, of course, it equally leaves open the possibility that there are any number of such sentences. We might call such sentences "sense-endowing sentences" and then regard a word as gaining its sense from its occurrences in its sense-endowing sentences. It might then be held that if a sentence is "sense-endowing" for none of its constituent words, then its sense can be grasped without further language learning by anyone who has already grasped the senses of its constituent words by grasping the senses of their sense-endowing sentences.

As regards the first argument, its conclusion requires only that a word possess its sense independently of its occurrences in sentences we can understand without further language learning. It does not require any across the board independence. So its conclusion is consistent with there being *some* sentences whose senses can be grasped independently of grasping the senses of the words occurring in them, and *some* sentences which possess a sense even though the words composing them do not possess senses one by one.

What Dummett seems to be thinking is that we somehow construct the sense of newly encountered sentences from the antecedently grasped meanings of their constituent words. The picture is this: a person P has already grasped the meanings of many words. When P hears or reads for the first time a sentence composed of these words P constructs its sense by composing together the already grasped meanings of its constituent words. (It is standard to think of the syntactic structure of the sentence as a kind of instruction as to how to so combine the already grasped meanings of its words into a sense of the type appropriate to sentences with that syntactic structure.)

But it is none too clear that this picture is in any fundamental way at odds with Frege's maxim.

It may be that to understand a word one must already understand at least some sentences in which it occurs. So, for example, suppose the newly encountered sentence is 'Dogs run'. Then (on the picture at hand) a person P derives his or her understanding of this new sentence from its syntactic structure together with the understanding of the words 'dog' and 'run' afforded by those sentences in which they occur and which P has *already* understood. So that were P to have as yet understood *no* sentences in which those words occur, then they would not as yet be words P understands at all, so that the sentence 'Dogs run' would *not* be one P would understand without further ado.

That is, it may be that our capacity to understand sentences we have not heard before but which are composed of familiar words is not grounded in those words having meanings in themselves or independently of any sentence which we grasp as such, but rather is grounded in our understanding other *sentences* in which those words occur.

9. Final remarks

For W.V.O. Quine the central insight contained in the maxim that it is only in the context of a sentence that words have any meaning is that the unit of significance is not the word but the sentence.¹⁷ Dummett rejects this reading of Frege's maxim, saying that it is a truism to say that the sentence is the unit of significance.¹⁸

But the claim that the unit of significance is the sentence and not the word is made *on opposition to* the Lockean conception of language and meaning outlined in section 5. This conception is *brought into question* as soon as we recognize (i) that among the various expressions we construct only some are suitable for saying something, (ii) that it is only in virtue of providing signs suitable for saying something that any system of sounds or signs is a language, and (iii) that expressions not themselves suitable for saying something serve for the formation of expressions of that type.

Frege's maxim also seems to go against the compositional conception of language and meaning. For the most straightforward interpretation of what the maxim says about words is that they have no meaning in their occurrences outside of sentences. But compositionality seems to require that words *do* have meaning in their occurrences outside of sentences.

Opposed to Frege's maxim is the contention that the senses of words and sentences are so related that we grasp the sense of a word prior to grasping the sense of *any* sentence in which it occurs.

And an argument along the following lines might be given for this claim: If, when we read or hear a sentence, we have not already grasped the sense of some word occurring in it, then we will fail to grasp the sense of that sentence. So it is quite impossible to grasp the sense of a sentence if it contains a word whose sense we have not yet grasped.

This sort of argument, whatever its merits may be, is not one supported by the fact that there are new sentences which we will be able to understand without further language learning. That we can come to grasp the senses of many words and that for many sentences composed of those words we can grasp their senses via our antecedent grasp of the senses of their component words simply does not entail that *every* sentence into which those words enter and whose sense we have grasped via our grasp of the sense of those words.

Notes

1. Frege (1953, xxii).
2. Dummett (1973, p. 3).
3. Dummett (1973, pp. 3-4).
4. Dummett (1973, p. 4).
5. Dummett (1973, p. 3).
6. Dummett (1973, p. 3).
7. Dummett (1973, p. 4).
8. Dummett (1973, p. 4).
9. Locke (1959, pp. 1-164).
10. Locke (1959, p. 39).
11. Dummett (1973, p. 4).
12. Dummett (1973, p. 4).
13. Dummett (1973, p. 4).
14. Partee, ter Meulen, and Wall (1990, p. 318).
15. Janssen (1986, p. 6).
16. Dummett (1973, p. 192).
17. Quine (1953, p. 42).
18. Dummett (1973, p. 3).

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