

# What Are Concepts?

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“‘Meaning’ has *fallen to pieces*.”

Hilary Putnam<sup>1</sup>

Picking up the pieces where they were left in the “Age of Meaning”<sup>2</sup>, I would like to sketch a general philosophical theory of linguistic meaning that is (i) *realistic* with respect to the way we talk about meaning in everyday life, (ii) *complex enough* to account for compositionality and avoid the pitfalls of the simplistic “one-size-fits-all” approaches dominating most philosophy of language, (iii) *comprehensive* in the sense that all kinds of linguistic meaning are covered, not only traditional categorematic favorites like the reference of singular terms and the meaning of monadic predicates, (iv) *integrative* by connecting ‘surviving’ elements of traditional philosophical theories of meaning going back to Aristotle’s *categories*, Kant’s *Transcendental Analytic* of concepts, Cassirer’s *Logic of Symbolic Forms*, C. I. Lewis’ *Mind And World-Order*, and the work of more recent philosophers like Wittgenstein and Sellars, with the findings of modern logic and linguistics, and (v) *not exclusively or primarily based on assertive sentences and not, ultimately, founded on the notion of truth*. In this first of a series of papers, *concepts* are introduced as the basic components of such a theory of linguistic meaning.

A word on quotation marks: words *without quotation marks* (e.g., bicycle) are *used* in the usual sense and stand for things (in the broadest sense of “things”). Words and phrases *with double quotation marks* (“bicycle”, “these three bicycles here”) are used to *mention* the words and phrases within the quotation marks and stand for words and phrases. And words and phrases *with single quotation marks* (‘bicycle’, ‘these three bicycles’) stand for *concepts* which are the meanings of words and phrases. So “bicycle” is the word for bicycles, and the concept ‘bicycle’ is the meaning of “bicycle”.

## I. What Concepts Are Not

Concepts have always been central to philosophy. All branches of philosophy could roughly be described as *the study of the most general concepts used<sup>3</sup> in human thought and language*. There is even a school of thought that reduces philosophy to nothing but conceptual analysis. Concepts and the processes of conceptualization are studied not only by philosophers, but, amongst others, by linguists, psychologists, and cognitive

<sup>1</sup> Hilary Putnam (1981), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Soames (2003).

<sup>3</sup> This use of “use” is misleading, at least according to the theory of concepts proposed here, since concepts are not used, they *are the use*.

scientists. And the interest in concepts is not confined to disciplines that study them as their subject matter, it can be seen in almost every human endeavor: *scientific concepts* are used to formulate hypotheses and theories, *technological concepts* are used to apply these theories, *moral* and *political concepts* are employed to debate societal concerns, *legal concepts* to stipulate the results of these debates, write laws and govern our affairs; there is a never-ending wealth of *economic concepts*, lately rivaled by *ecological concepts*; we have very old as well as brand-new *mythical* and *religious concepts*, *aesthetic concepts*, and so on. And these are only *the salient concepts*, the ones we talk about as concepts: embedded in our language(s) are – literally – hundreds of thousands of simple, lexicalized concepts (and, though smaller in number, grammatical concepts) we hardly ever talk about. You *name* it – we have a *concept* for it, and for very good reasons, as we shall see.

*That there are* concepts seems obvious, but *what they are* and where they come from is far from clear ... despite (or because of) the concept's centrality to philosophy. But we have already stated in our description of philosophy that they are "used in human thought and language," so looking there might give us an idea of their provenance. One of the obvious questions would then be: do concepts originate in human thought and / or language? Which means the same as: are concepts mental and / or linguistic entities?

The question what concepts are – or, to put it in more traditional philosophical terms: what *the ontological status of concepts* is – is one of the perennial "Great Questions"<sup>4</sup> of Western philosophy. It was with us almost from the beginning: once the philosophers in ancient Greece turned away from the world and its first principles, and Socrates started asking *how we know* about the world and ourselves (he had already lost interest in the first principles), an answer to the question what concepts<sup>5</sup> are had to be found, since knowledge was obviously based on them. One of the first attempts to answer it coherently was the doctrine of forms or ideas. Here, Plato, besieged by a *zeitgeist* under the spell of the sophists, tried to solve several problems with one bold move, especially the question *how objective knowledge is possible*: taking geometrical knowledge as his yardstick and not trusting the senses to deliver the goods, he based the objectivity of knowledge on abstract *objects*, entities completely independent of the human mind. But this heavenly realm of eternal, uncaused, unchangeable, purely intellectual, in short *Platonic* entities, the "really real" or "hyper-real," was hardly conceived when it already came under fire: Aristotle, who put more trust in the senses, started to chisel away from the mind-independent transcendence of Plato's abstract objects. Wishing to preserve the objectivity of knowledge, Aristotle developed a moderate form of immanent realism, *hylomorphism*, thereby beginning the long journey towards empiricism as we know it. The Aristotelian scholastics mostly left it at that, though at times, especially with respect to the "problem of universals", the question resurfaced. Descartes, like Plato inspired by the certainty of mathematical deductive reasoning, and the rationalist philosophers in his wake tried to resurrect Platonic forms as *innate ideas*. But by now a new way of doing things called *science*, based on systematic empirical experiments, had developed: Plato's abstract objects and Descartes' innate ideas were finally – or so it seemed – overcome by the British empiricists, who conceived of ideas as *mental* entities, located firmly in a person's mind after having been deposited there by the senses. Francis

<sup>4</sup> Hilary Putnam: *Language And Philosophy*. In Putnam (1975), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> In the following overview, the word "concept" is used in the narrower sense of 'universal' resp. 'meaning of a general term.'

Bacon, Hobbes and Locke took the lead and turned Plato's objective forms into subjective ideas, the most basic kind of which their successors, Berkeley and Hume, even renamed as "sensations": these ephemeral, caused, constantly changing sensual entities now formed the foundation of all higher-order concepts and, ultimately, knowledge. This tradition, in its purest form Berkelian idealism, seemed to be in perfect lockstep with the science (and the concept of 'science') of its time. Spurred on by Hume's skeptical analysis of causal relations, Kant aimed to overcome this form of sensualist empiricism in his *Critique of Pure Reason* with his own blend of empiricism and rationalism but failed to convince many of his immediate successors. And so German Idealism went on its *Sonderweg* towards the *Absolute*, and empiricism reigned supreme all the way into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often changing hue due to broader developments. It appeared under a more fundamental epistemological guise as "Phenomenology", absorbing some of the German Idealist spirit, and was given a radically scientific thrust by the Logical Positivists of the Vienna Circle and Logical Atomists following Russell. It took until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for a 'new' idea to emerge, an idea which had its roots in a growing unease (probably inspired or at least triggered by Kant's *Critique*) with the subjective *psychologism* espoused by the Neo-Kantian School in Germany. This unease led Frege to reinstate something very akin to Platonic forms: he again conceived of concepts as abstract objects that constituted the meaning (in Frege's terminology the "Sinn"<sup>6</sup>) of predicates.<sup>7</sup> But this was only an interlude, although one with far-reaching consequences, at the time mostly geared to the needs of fellow mathematicians and logicians. Then, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), the later Wittgenstein attacked the subjective empiricist concept of a 'concept' as a mental entity, arguing – in his own way of "arguing" – that this conception could not explain what it was supposed to explain, i.e., how words can have meanings. Correcting the Platonism of Frege's *third realm* of abstract objects and rejecting the underlying idea of concepts as *definitions* in favor of "family resemblances"<sup>8</sup>, Wittgenstein replaced the subjective empiricist conception with an objective one, at least as far as its criterion of identity was concerned.

Of course, Wittgenstein – always eager *not* to use the traditional philosophical terminology, and often vague – would not say outright what concepts were or what their ontological status was, but he clearly stated what they are not: *mental pictures, mental ideas, mental rules, or mental anythings*. The gist of his attack, translated into traditional terminology, was that *whatever concepts may be, they cannot be subjective mental entities, or they lose all their explanatory power*.

## II. What Concepts Are

Unfortunately, it remained vague *what concepts are*. Wittgenstein was more interested in what it is to *have a concept of something* than in spelling out what these concepts consist of. In line with the *Linguistic Turn* he had helped to instigate with the *Tractatus* and relying on his own method of piecemeal conceptual analysis, the criterion of identity this new concept of a 'concept' was moored onto had to be *language*, or more

<sup>6</sup> Cp. Gottlob Frege: On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. In Beaney (1997), pp. 151 - 171.

<sup>7</sup> Cp. Gottlob Frege: Function and Concept. In Beaney (1997), pp. 130 - 148.

<sup>8</sup> Cp. Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009), §§ 67, 77, 164, 179.

specific: linguistic behavior. *To have a concept*, in short, was to have the ability to properly use a word or words connected with the concept.<sup>9</sup>

With the help of an example, Wittgenstein's ideas could be summarized as following: if we want to know whether a person has a proper grasp of the concept 'bicycle', we can ask her to show us a few bicycles. If she understands, the person will point to a few bicycles close by or, if there are none, point them out on pictures. If we are still in doubt whether she really understands what bicycles are, we could investigate her understanding by showing her (pictures of) unicycles, mopeds, motorcycles, racing bikes, shopping carts, tandems, e-scooters, mountain bikes, tricycles, in-line-skates, trailers, trolleys, and so on, and ask her which of them are bicycles. Or we could probe further by asking what the main parts of bicycles are, what their function is, how and to what purpose people ride bicycles, and so on. Satisfying answers to all these questions will lead us to agree that she has a proper grasp of the concept, that she understands what a bicycle is.

But now that we *know* she understands, we obviously *know* what it means to have the concept of a bicycle. Therefore, we must *know what a concept is* ... even if we can't spell it out in abstract terms, especially not in the terminology philosophers employ. We *know* it the way we *need to know* it to judge whether a person has the concept or not. And what is even more important: her linguistic (and related paralinguistic) behavior gives us a clear and observable, i.e. objective criterion to tell whether a person has grasp of a certain concept or not.

When Wittgenstein developed these ideas in his painstaking departure from the Russellian Logical Atomism of his earlier ideas, behaviorism was rampant. A contemporary naïve behaviorist of the 1920s or 30s would have jumped to the reductionistic conclusion that a concept was nothing but linguistic and maybe paralinguistic behavior. Wittgenstein indeed grappled with this idea, only to reject it.<sup>10</sup> As vague as he was in other respects, here at least he made it clear that linguistic and maybe paralinguistic behavior was only to function as the *criterion* we use to ascribe an ability: the ability to properly use the word "bicycle".

This *ability* could be described – though again not by Wittgenstein who would have loathed the term – as a *dispositional property* of a person: the property to behave in certain ways under certain circumstances, for example to point at bicycles when asked to explain what bicycles are. And a seasoned, sophisticated behaviorist of the Rylean mold would now be tempted to jump the gun again and say that a concept was nothing but the ability that produced the linguistic and maybe paralinguistic behavior in question, where the word "ability" is understood as a person's dispositional property. Here is where we can see Wittgenstein depart from behaviorism, naïve or sophisticated.

Because the ability *is* not the concept, the ability is *having* the concept. Identifying the ability to produce certain behavior with the concept is a last remnant of empiricist subjectivism that needs to be removed to fully understand *the social nature of concepts*. Just like *having the ability* to ride a bicycle is not *the bicycle*

<sup>9</sup> Cp. Hilary Putnam: Language and philosophy. In Putnam (1975), p. 8. Sellars, according to Brandom ((2015), p. 43), expressed the same thought: "Sellars takes it that "grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word"."

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009), §§ 307 – 309.

*ride*, having the concept of a bicycle cannot be equated with *the concept of a bicycle*. Having a concept of something and *the concept itself* are fundamentally different – although intricately connected<sup>11</sup> – things, as we will see below, and Wittgenstein manages to avoid confusing them when he writes, in what has become the most famous paragraph of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.<sup>12</sup>

The meaning of a word is its *use* in the language: not a person’s ability to use it, nor an idealized speaker’s ability to use it, not even *all* the native speakers’ abilities or an idealized language community’s ability to use it, but simply *the use*. (Though there is, as we will see below, nothing simple about explaining what *the use* actually is.) Wittgenstein eliminates the last vestiges of subjectivity in the concept of a ‘concept’, for a person’s ability to use a word properly – *having the concept*, in other words – is still a dispositional property *of a person*, i.e., in traditional philosophical parlour a *subjective* property (whether it can be reduced to behavior or not), albeit with an objective criterion of identity. The new, *social concept* of a ‘concept’ is now completely objective, just like Plato’s forms and Frege’s “Begriffe” were supposed to be, but free of their Platonic aftertaste: it consists in the observable *use* made of a word or words in the language.

### III. Concepts As Meanings

But, one might object, Wittgenstein does not mention *concepts*, at least not in the quoted paragraph, he only talks about the *meaning* of words. That clearly is the focus of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the *meaning* of words. Unfortunately, despite or, in some cases, because of the endeavors of philosophers like Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein himself, Carnap, Quine, Davidson, Dummett, Kripke, and Putnam, it is still not very clear what we mean when we talk about *meaning*. What is often called “the theory of meaning” is a notoriously thorny field of inquiry that has been ploughed again and again, each time yielding a fresh crop of – admittedly more sophisticated – disagreements and, finally, disappointment. In his famous essay “Two dogmas of empiricism” (1951), Quine started a thorough attack on the philosophical concept of ‘meaning’ (in the intensional sense of the word)<sup>13</sup>, and in *Word and Object* (1960) he was willing to abandon it completely, claiming it was too vague a notion to serve any philosophical, let alone logical purpose.<sup>14</sup> “Why is the theory of meaning so hard?” sighed Hilary Putnam a decade later<sup>15</sup>, and despite his own Herculean efforts not much has changed

<sup>11</sup> Roughly speaking, *my concept* of a ‘bicycle’ (i.e., me *having the concept* of a ‘bicycle’ which may have its idiosyncrasies), is part of *the concept* of ‘bicycle’ (where these idiosyncrasies are cancelled out by the normative force of a social institution), since I am part of the linguistic community which has shaped and constantly reshapes that concept as a social institution.

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009), § 43.

<sup>13</sup> Cp. Willard Van Orman Quine: Two dogmas of empiricism. In Quine (1980), pp. 20 – 46.

<sup>14</sup> Cp. Willard Van Orman Quine (1960), chapter VI, esp. § 43.

<sup>15</sup> Hilary Putnam: Is semantics possible? In Putnam (1975), p. 139.

since then. So we must ask: can we really equate the – still very vague – *concept* related to a word with its *meaning*, and can this equation further our understanding?

Let us begin with the historical question whether Wittgenstein himself identifies the concept a word relates to with its meaning. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he goes to great lengths to avoid even the appearance of using technical philosophical terminology and often ends up with several words or phrases instead of one central term. The “use” of the English translation of § 43 above, for example, is a translation of the German “Gebrauch”, but in the same paragraph he also uses “Benützung”. In other passages, one can find the words “Verwendung” and “Anwendung” with approximately the same meaning. But with respect to the equation of *concept* and *meaning*, the following does not seem to leave much room for doubt:

We do not analyse a phenomenon (for example, thinking) but a concept (for example, that of thinking), and hence the application [Anwendung; S. H.] of a word.<sup>16</sup>

The *concept* of ‘thinking’ is the *use* (“application”) of the word “to think” which in turn, as we saw above in § 43, is the *meaning* of the word. The next paragraph contains a similar remark, linking concepts and language learning:

You learned the *concept* ‘pain’ in learning language.<sup>17</sup>

This implies that when we learn how to use a word, “pain” for example, what we learn is the concept the word relates to. Another, even clearer indication of Wittgenstein’s equation of meanings and concepts can be found later:

Then has “understanding” two different meanings here? – I would rather say that these kinds of use of “understanding” make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Here, the *meaning* of “to understand” is explicitly equated with a person’s (having a) *concept* of ‘understanding’. (It’s worth noting, I think, that Wittgenstein can be very precise, if he wants to: here, he clearly distinguishes *having a concept* (“my *concept*”) from *the concept itself*).

Having settled the question concerning the *Investigations*, let’s turn to the wider query: should we follow the path outlined above, a path that leaves behind first Plato’s otherworldly, supposedly<sup>19</sup> objective concepts,

<sup>16</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009), § 383.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. § 384

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. § 532.

<sup>19</sup> *Supposedly*, because for knowledge to be objective, something must be a possible object for the person who knows, i.e., it has to be accessible, and Plato’s account of access to his forms presupposes the rather cumbersome process of

then their replacement, the empiricists' concepts that are forever locked in the subject's mind? Should we settle for concepts as *the use* of words, for which we certainly have an objective criterion in people's behavior? To answer this question, we must first try to answer another: what, exactly, *is* the use of a word?

#### IV. Concepts As Use

Here is where Wittgenstein is at his vaguest. Conceiving of *concepts as the use of words* clearly links the meaning of words to human behavior and practices: *we use words to do things*. Not only are *speech acts* a part of human behavior, but they are also often embedded in the whole web of long-established human practices. But except for a few, very simple examples of *language games*, as well as words and sentences that get analyzed, Wittgenstein does not clarify what the concept of 'use' is supposed to cover. And it gets worse: in the *Philosophical Investigations*, this vague use of "use" is linked to even foggier expressions like "Lebensformen" ("forms of life").<sup>20</sup> And even a seemingly clear passage like § 43 is not without its pitfalls. That Wittgenstein explicitly talks about the meaning of a word as its "use *in the language*" [italics by me; S. H.] seems to be either superfluous or misleading: words are always words in a language. Words have hardly any use outside of a language. The emphasis on, so to speak, "*inner-linguistic*" use is not very helpful at best and could even be construed by postmodernists like Derrida as supporting utterly nonsensical claims, e. g. the proposed *endless cross-referentiality of the signifiers*.

Then what, exactly, is the *use* of a word? Let's stay with "bicycle": what is its *use* and therefore, as we assume, the *concept* related to this word, understood as something that is *essentially social*? Words like "bicycle" usually occur as a part of bigger units, *phrases*, which form *constituents of sentences* that are used in *utterances*, and this is where we will start. Take, for example, the sentence:

These three bicycles here belong to my brother.

uttered with a default prosodic structure<sup>21</sup> at a place *p* and a time *t* by a person *P*, accompanied by the appropriate paralinguistic behavior.<sup>22</sup> Let's first look at what could, justifiably, be described as the "use *in the language*".<sup>23</sup> The indexical definite description "These three bicycles here" is obviously used to *refer*: the first reference, "these three bicycles", is to a *plurality* (with the help of the numeral and the -s-suffix) of certain *objects* (because the sortal noun is the head of a noun phrase) that are *counted* (with the numeral) and *classified* (by the sortal), and the second purely indexical reference "here", added on as an attribute, is to the place of the utterance *p*. The whole definite description is used in the grammatical function of a subject of the

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*metempsychosis*.

<sup>20</sup> Cp. Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009), § 19, 23, 241, PPF 1.

<sup>21</sup> No doubt linguists specializing in prosodic structure will wince in pain. But we all have to bring sacrifices ...

<sup>22</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will ignore all the possibilities of "non-sincere" or quotational utterances of the sentence.

<sup>23</sup> Again, for the sake of brevity and since they are intertwined, I will not strictly separate the logical and grammatical structures of the sentence uttered.

verb “to belong” – with the absence of the -s-suffix as a redundant reminder that the subject refers to multiple objects – that is then complemented by a prepositional object, “to my brother”, which contains a second indexical definite description, the noun phrase “my brother”.<sup>24</sup> (Obviously, this is *not all the meaning* that could be conveyed by this sentence uttered under these circumstances: prosodic features like a strong vocal emphasis on “these”, “belong”, “my” or “brother” could, under the appropriate circumstances, significantly change the meaning in comparison to the default emphasis we have stipulated. And even the utterance with the same prosodic features can, under *very* different circumstances, have a *very* different meaning, as we shall see below.)

Now let’s take a closer look at the meaning of the classifying sortal “bicycle”. How would an attempt to describe it look like? Fortunately, we don’t have to invent the wheel again. To get a rough idea, all we need to do is look at a dictionary:

**bicycle** ♦(*noun*) a road vehicle with two wheels that you ride by pushing the PEDALS with your feet <sup>25</sup>

This explanation obviously relies on the reader’s previous knowledge of the use of the indefinite article “a”, the noun “road”, the noun “vehicle”, the preposition “with,” (part-of-a-whole), the numeral “two”, the noun “wheels”, the relative pronoun “that”, the personal pronoun “you” (in the impersonal sense), the verb “ride”, the preposition “by”, the gerund “pushing”, the definite article “the”, the noun “pedals”, the preposition “with<sub>2</sub>” (instrument), the possessive article “your” (again, in the impersonal sense), and the noun “feet”. At first glance, it is unclear how this ties in with the idea of *concepts-as-use*. But this dictionary entry, like most dictionaries, serves a predominantly *practical*, not a *theoretical* purpose: though not without its problems <sup>26</sup>, it does no doubt suffice to convey to a reader sufficiently fluent in English but unaware of the meaning of “bicycle” what a bicycle is, based on the features mentioned, or better: based on a *stereotype* of bicycle that – according to Putnam <sup>27</sup> – lies at the bottom of the use of this word. So, what we need to do is to show how this entry for *practical* purposes can be translated into *theoretical* terms.

To describe *the concept* of a ‘bicycle’, understood as the use of the word “bicycle”, within the framework of a general theory of meaning, i.e., *in theoretical, not practical terms*, I would like to propose a *classification* of concepts that draws on the philosophical tradition of classifying predicates into *categories* <sup>28</sup>, complemented

<sup>24</sup> The logical and the grammatical analysis diverge in the treatment of this complement.

<sup>25</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> What about off-road mountain bikes? What about bicycles for children with support wheels? Or two-wheeled vehicles where the “pedals” are “handles” since they are pushed with the hands? And why is the word “PEDALS” written in capital letters?

<sup>27</sup> Cp. Hilary Putnam: The meaning of ‘meaning’. In Putnam (1975), pp. 247 – 252.

<sup>28</sup> Cp. Aristotle’s categories in *The Categories*. More recent attempts to classify and justify categories are Kant’s “Table of Categories” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Peirce’s “On a New List of Categories”, Hartmann’s theory of general and special categories in his *Ontology* (esp. vol. 3 and 4), Whitehead’s “Categorical Scheme” in chapter II of *Process and Reality*, and Wilfrid Sellars essay “Towards A Theory of the Categories”.



by terminology developed in modern sentential and first-order predicate logic and in linguistics, esp. in morpho-syntax. (To show how the semantic features mentioned in the dictionary entry are translated into this theory, I will add corresponding parts of the former in []-brackets.) The classification introduced here is a first, very rough approximation. Due to the complexity of the task, it will be in questionable order, incomplete, and may even be inconsistent, but I hope not incomprehensible. Its background is basically Aristotelian and Kantian, as developed further in the work of Wittgenstein, C. I. Lewis, Sellars, and others (entry points for a Sellarsian semantic inferentialism will be indicated).

Using *categories based on the material aspects of concepts*<sup>29</sup>, we can describe the concept of a ‘bicycle’ as (i) a *substance concept*: the entity thus conceived has properties and can enter into relations with other entities conceived by substance concepts [*noun*]; (ii) a *general concept* under which an indefinite number of objects can be subsumed [*a road vehicle...*]; (iii) an *artefact concept* that implies (and in our example explicitly refers to) the existence of personal concepts [*a road vehicle...that you ride by pushing the PEDALS with your feet*]; (iv) a *non-personal concept* [*a road vehicle...*]; (v) a *non-deictic concept*<sup>30</sup> [*a road vehicle...*]; (vi) a *spatial concept* [*a road vehicle...that you ride by pushing...*]; (vii) a *temporal concept* [*...that you ride by pushing...*]; (viii) a *physical (as opposed to a mental) concept* [*a road vehicle with two wheels...the PEDALS...*] which implies that it can be counted and measured; (ix) a *concrete (as opposed to an abstract) concept* [*a road vehicle with two wheels that you ride by pushing the PEDALS with your feet*]; (x) a *reality (as opposed to an appearance) concept* [*a road vehicle...*]; (xi) a *descriptive (as opposed to a prescriptive) concept* [*a road vehicle...*]; (xii) a *highly systematic concept* [*a road vehicle with two wheels that you ride by pushing the PEDALS with your feet*] that maps a cluster of paradigmatically related concepts; (xiii) a *holistic concept* that implies (and in our case explicitly refers to) the existence of part concepts [*a road vehicle with two wheels that you ride by pushing the PEDALS...*]; (xiv) a *discrete concept* [*a road vehicle...*]; and (xv) a *non-fictional concept* [*a road vehicle...*].

Now let’s apply this theoretical description of the concept of a ‘bicycle’ to the above utterance of:

These three bicycles here belong to my brother.

The general non-deictic physical substance concept ‘bicycle’ is combined with the deictic concept ‘this’ (itself combined with an indefinite number concept conceiving a plurality of objects) and an attention-focusing gesture, the number concept ‘three’ and the deictic concept ‘here’ to form a complex concept ostensibly referring to three objects in the vicinity of the speaker that are supposed to fit the more specific criteria listed in the description “a road vehicle...” (or any equivalent description). This complex concept functions as the topic since the corresponding phrase is the subject of the sentence. The objects it refers to are said to be in the relation of ‘belonging to’ another entity, conceived by a second general non-deictic personal substance

<sup>29</sup> A description according to *categories based on the formal aspects of concepts* is omitted here.

<sup>30</sup> Putnam argues convincingly, I think, that concepts that rely on stereotypes all contain an indexical / deictic component, cp. Hilary Putnam: The meaning of ‘meaning’. In Putnam (1975), pp. 229 – 235. Since this inflates the meaning of “deictic”, I use it in the narrower traditional sense.

concept ‘brother’ which is combined with the deictic concept ‘my’, thus referring to *a or the*<sup>31</sup> male sibling of the speaker. The dyadic relational concept ‘*x* belong(s) to *y*’ is a general non-physical state-of-affairs artefact concept that has the following constraints on its ordered pair of arguments: the first argument must – at least since the abolishment of slavery – be a non-personal concept, either concrete or abstract, whereas the second one is required to be a personal concept, at least in the derived sense of conceiving something (a company, corporation, foundation etc.) that in the end, in some form or another, belongs to a person or persons.

So far, we have analyzed how the word “bicycle” is used “in the language”, but it should be clear from the above that, although we can distinguish between a strictly “*linguistic*” use (consisting, e.g., of all the grammatical sentences or utterances containing “bicycle”) and *the world* these sentences / utterances deal with, this distinction will always be arbitrary. Even a relatively simple word like “bicycle”, used in our exemplary utterance, through the concept ‘bicycle’ (as described by “a road vehicle ...”) is already tied into a vast web of human practices that can be summarized under the headings *building, traffic (including the laws governing traffic, and therefore the institutions upholding the laws), technology, production, industry, and leisure*. And the web gets wider and wider, since the concept of ‘*x* belong(s) to *y*’ connects ‘bicycle’ to *ownership (and the laws governing ownership, and therefore ...)* and thereby to issues like the *transfer of ownership, buying and selling, i.e. commerce*, and so on (see below). The required personal concept for the owner then introduces the whole range of *human relationships*, here especially *kinship relations*. It may have been “preposterous”<sup>32</sup> by Wittgenstein to always jump to “*Lebensformen*” (“forms of life”) when referring to this web of human practices, but the complexity behind even relatively simple examples is, for lack of a better word, humbling.

The web of human practices forms the backdrop of what is going on when we grab a particular piece of the world by grasping it with a complex concept like “these three bicycles here”. That *the world* clearly belongs to this utterance and its meaning in more than one sense can also be seen in a different way. Take the same sentence:

These three bicycles here belong to my brother.

with the same paralinguistic features, and slightly *change the world* by assuming that the bicycles in question at the time of the utterance, *t*, belong not to the speaker’s brother but to the speaker, *P*, himself who, by uttering this sentence, bequeaths them hereby to his brother. This Austinian speech act, at the very fringes of what anybody would still call an *assertive sentence*, clearly has a different “force”<sup>33</sup> as the assertion we have so far analyzed: if it is really possible that there is no discernible *inner-linguistic* difference between the sentence uttered as an assertion and as a bequest, this would show that *the world* must be an integral

<sup>31</sup> Depending on the hearer’s knowledge of the speaker’s familial circumstances, he could have one or several male siblings.

<sup>32</sup> Putnam really talks about “Wittgensteinians, whose fondness for the expression ‘form of life’ appears to be directly proportional to its degree of preposterousness in a given context ...”. Hilary Putnam: *Is semantics possible?* In Putnam (1975), p. 149.

<sup>33</sup> In Frege’s terms, cp. Michael Dummett: *Origins Of Analytical Philosophy*, p. 13.

ingredient of whatever we mean with the word “meaning”.

## V. Towards A Theory Of Meaning

Let’s revisit the five criteria that ought to be met by a general theory of meaning listed in the introduction: such a theory should be (i) *realistic*, (ii) *complex enough*, (iii) *comprehensive*, (iv) *integrative*, and (v) *not exclusively or primarily based on assertive sentences (and, ultimately, the notion of truth)*.

(i) Although *realism* (in the broad sense of ‘giving a description of something that is close to the way things are’) is not a necessary feature of theories, a theory of meaning *not* guided by special interests like the introduction of a formal language or computability should be realistic if it can. And since the proposed *concept-as-use* approach allows us to talk about meaning as we do indeed talk about meaning, it seems to meet this criterion. How *do* we talk about meaning? Obviously not in the stilted, theoretical way used above. In everyday life, e.g. to answer the question “What does “bicycle” mean?” we use sentences like:

“Bicycle” means *Fahrrad* in German.

which is short for:

Use the word “bicycle” in English like you use the word “Fahrrad” in German.

This goes back to a point that Sellars first made: meaning statements seem to be a form of identity statements, they equate the meaning(s) of two words as the same concept or, in Sellars’ words, they say that the word “bicycle” “plays the same role in a certain linguistic economy”<sup>34</sup> that “Fahrrad” has in the German linguistic economy. This is sometimes explicit, like in:

“Bicycle” means *the same* in English as “Fahrrad” in German.

Most explanations of the meaning of words take one of these forms: we hardly ever (have to) explain how sentences containing the word “bicycle” are verified. This not only holds for inter-linguistic meaning statements. Take another intra-linguistic example:

“Bicycle” means *a vehicle with two wheels and PEDALS*.

This is how we (and most dictionaries) explain the meaning of words, relying on the hearer’s previous knowledge of word meanings, because we usually can assume that we share the same concepts.

<sup>34</sup> Cp. Wilfrid Sellars: *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. In Sellars (1991), § 31. Sellars then rejects this analysis, claiming that meaning statements are not relational, even if they appear to be. This claim needs further inquiry.

(ii) The example used here is probably sufficient to show the *complexity* of the proposed theory of meaning: beginning with lexicalized as well as grammatical concepts as basic building blocks, we need to cover the *compositionality*, i.e., the *structures* of complex lexical units, phrases and sentences, their logical as well as their grammatical structure (in the widest sense of “grammatical”, including phonetic, prosodic and morpho-syntactic structures), and – this will always remain a distant goal – the circumstances under which the sentences were actually uttered. Fortunately, a lot of logical and linguistic groundwork has been done, although it seems to me that even with respect to traditional categorematic favorites, e.g., the reference of proper nouns, there still is a strong reductionistic tendency to oversimplify what their meaning is. The fact that more than one and a half centuries after Mill’s *System of Logic* there still is no agreement whether proper names have (*intensional*) meaning might just show that *meaning* does not fit into the Procrustean bed of *intensions vs. extensions*, esp. when there are reasonable doubts that extensions are part of the meaning of words at all.<sup>35</sup>

(iii) The example should also have shown that using *concepts* as the principal components of such a theory allows us to treat other forms of meaning, often neglected by philosophers (but well researched by linguists), especially the meaning of syncategorematic words and the grammatical meaning of non-lexicalized constituents like word order, tenses etc., the same way we deal with lexicalized concepts. (There will even be concepts for ‘discontinuous constituents’ and ‘omission’ to deal with the grammatical structure of sentences.) This striving for *comprehensiveness*, and the overarching *concept-as-use*-approach should not, however, disguise the fact that there are fundamentally different kinds of meaning.

(iv) The same holds for the fourth criterion, the *integrative* nature of a general theory of meaning, and for good reasons, since the transition from (already existing) philosophical to (already existing) linguistic theories of meaning is so seamless that – for large parts – they seem to cover the same ground. The *concepts-as-use*-approach allows us to hook up philosophical and linguistic strands of investigation. Traditional philosophical theories of meaning, despite the claim to start from utterances, have often failed to cover the complexities of compositionality, esp. with respect to aspects of spoken language. And linguistic theories of meaning are often still mired in obsolete representationalism. But the need for integration does not stop here. There is another area of philosophy that needs to be taken on board: *epistemology*. This will have to be just a promissory note here, but drawing on a tradition that goes back at least to Aristotle’s *De Anima* and the *Categories* and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, concepts can be seen as our way to *grasp the world* as far as it can be the subject of human experience.<sup>36</sup> Kant’s idea of *conceptualization* was a giant step forward from the largely passive sense impressions and more abstract ideas of the British empiricists. The mind, according to Kant, *forms* the given sensual material by bringing it under concepts; it does not “receive” the concepts the way the empiricists assumed that the simplest ideas were received by way of the senses.<sup>37</sup> Kant never explained where the mind

<sup>35</sup> Cp. Hilary Putnam: The meaning of ‘meaning’. In Putnam (1975), pp. 216 – 219.

<sup>36</sup> This is much more obvious in German, where “Begriff” (‘concept’) comes from “begreifen” (‘to conceive of sth’) with the root “greif-“ which literally means ‘to grab’. A concept therefore is (the result of) an *expressive action* of the mind, not (the result of) a *passive impression* the mind gets to work on at best.

<sup>37</sup> This hylomorphic analysis clearly links Kant and Aristotle.

takes its concepts, especially the *pure concepts of understanding* called *categories*, from, but I guess the reader can see by now where we, with a little help from Wittgenstein and Sellars, might go with Aristotle's and Kant's ideas.

(v) Finally, using concepts as the basic components of a theory of meaning allows us to avoid what may be called *the truth trap*. There are several paths, beginning at different points in the philosophical landscape, that all lead to this trap, but the fatal step common to each is the assumption that *truth* is logically prior to *meaning*, an assumption that seems not only counter-intuitive – one must understand the meaning of a sentence / utterance to have a clue as to its *veracity* – but also comes with a lot of baggage collected by the proponents of the *verification principle* and their heirs, all the way to Davidson. Avoiding the truth trap and the ensuing quest for *extensions* means that we don't have to answer rather strange questions, e.g., what the extensions of the words “why”, “if”, “not”, “unlike”, “would” or of word components like “-ed” are. Of course, as shown in our example, a *concept-as-use* based theory of meaning will also have to start from sentences / utterances, since we simply don't have a use for words outside of their use in sentences / utterances. So truth does play a role in a theory of meaning. But to describe the meaning of words, conceived as concepts, within the framework of a general theory of meaning, i.e., *as theoretical entities*, we don't have to assume that there is a notion of truth logically prior to the notion of meaning, or that for every word, we have to know the truth conditions of (*all?*) the sentences / utterances it could ever be used in, or that for every object in the universe of discourse we have to know whether it is a member of the class that constitutes the extension of the concept. *Truth* certainly is one of the most fundamental concepts of philosophy, and it may even be a primitive one,<sup>38</sup> but not for the reasons given by philosophers who want to erect a theory of meaning on a Tarskian foundation. Words, when used, may only ever occur as parts of sentences / utterances; their meaning, as Frege stated in his *Context principle*<sup>39</sup>, may only be what they contribute to the meaning of sentences / utterances. But when it comes to constructing a theory of meaning, these are genealogical issues: a theory of meaning that is not designed to explain this genealogy can ignore them. To use an analogy: we hardly ever encounter or use pure chemical elements in everyday life (unless we are chemists, or goldsmiths).<sup>40</sup> Does that mean that the theory of chemical elements upon which modern chemistry is based is not helpful in explaining what happens to us in everyday life?

## Addendum

So, what about Putnam's question quoted above: “Why is the theory of meaning so hard?” Why is it “as much in the dark as it ever was”<sup>41</sup>? I think one of the main reasons for this malaise lies in the fact that the words “to mean” and “meaning” already exist in ordinary language, albeit with some extraordinary characteristics. They are used quite often, but at the same time clearly distinct from most other “ordinary” words in that they allow

<sup>38</sup> Or we may have to treat it as a primitive notion in a theory of meaning to avoid circularity.

<sup>39</sup> Cp. Gottlob Frege's *Context Principle*. In Frege (1953), § 62.

<sup>40</sup> Here is where the analogy, like all good analogies, breaks down: we do use concepts all the time in everyday life.

<sup>41</sup> Hilary Putnam: The meaning of ‘meaning’. In Putnam (1975), p. 215.

a *meta-use* of words (their *mentioning*) and quite sophisticated identity statements. In some respects, they are like the words “true” and “sentence”, only less obvious: whereas careless use of these two words soon leads to the most egregious paradoxes (which almost everybody can recognize almost immediately), “to mean” and “meaning” at first glance still look like “to push” and “pushing” or “to shop” and “shopping”. A sentence like:

What is the meaning of “bicycle”?

uttered under the appropriate circumstances, *is* a completely innocent question. But past and present philosophical answers to this kind of question show that “to mean” and “meaning” can be just as treacherous as “true” and “sentence.” Not only are meaning-statements easily mistaken for statements about relations between *words and things* or *properties of things*<sup>42</sup>, “to mean” and “meaning” are also *proto-theoretical* words embedded in ordinary language, words that introduce levels of object- and meta-language within ordinary language, and then throw spanners into the works of a theory of meaning.

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<sup>42</sup> Cp. Wilfrid Sellars: Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind in: Sellars 1991: § 31.

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