Now the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them... Judgment is therefore the mediate cognition of an object...

(Kant 1781/1997: 205)

10

Sentence Primacy

10.1 THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE

What the context principle says can, in a way, be put succinctly: sentences are prior to words. Arguably the most famous formulation of this in Western philosophy¹ appears in Foundations of Arithmetic, where Frege promised to keep to the following fundamental constraint: “never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a sentence” (1884: x).² The principle, sometimes phrased in terms of sentences having meaning only in isolation, was also endorsed early on by Wittgenstein (1922: 51), and sanctioned more recently by Quine (1951: 42), among many others.

I will be urging that there are at least five different ways of reading the claim that sentences are primary. That’s because ‘primary’ can mean, and has meant, at least five different things. The game plan will then be to explain each reading of ‘primary’, to introduce arguments for sentence primacy that are not specific to any reading, to introduce others that are specific to one reading or another, and then to evaluate sentence primacy both in general, and specifically in light of

¹ I say “Western philosophy” because the Fregean principle, and on several different ways of understanding it, seems to have been foreshadowed in classical Indian philosophy; see Matilal and Sen (1988). Taking sentences to be prior to the words that make them up is, of course, an instance of holism. Some other examples include social holism, which says that a community is prior to any person in it; ecological holism, which says that the larger environment is somehow prior to any organism in it; and so on. As with all such doctrines, one gets a “holistic primacy thesis” by specifying what the “whole” is, what its “parts” are, and in what sense the former is “prior” to the latter. The parts in the holism that concern us here are words. The wholes are sentences. Now, holism in general often sounds attractive, even deep and insightful, at first glance; but it seldom turns out to provide workable concrete accounts of observed phenomena. Though I won’t argue the point here, my conviction is that the same holds for this holism about sentences over words.

² For the most part, I will not here enter into the heated exegetical controversies over Frege’s relationship to the principle. Some believe that he would have applied it to both sense and reference; others disagree. Some believe that Frege rejected the principle in his later work, others that he retained it throughout. For a thorough discussion, see Dummett (1981: 369 ff.; 1991b).
Implications

the genuineness of non-sentential speech. Before turning to that, however, it is crucial to remind ourselves of another terminological minefield.

Recall from Chapter 2 that there are at least three ways of understanding ‘sentence’. These are:

(a) Sentence_syntactic: an expression with a certain structure/form
(b) Sentence_semantic: an expression with a certain content/meaning
(c) Sentence_pragmatic: an expression with a certain use

Given this three-fold division, there are three ways of reading sentence primacy. It’s important to flag this because no one, so far as I know, is in the business of defending the primacy of sentences_pragmatic. This is not because it’s false, but rather, because granting the primacy of sentences_pragmatic would at best consign very few items to the “non-primary” class: e.g., (maybe) bound morphemes, or contrastive features below the morpheme level, but certainly not words, phrases, etc. So, when someone asserts that sentences are primary, they must—if they wish to be saying anything controversial—mean that sentences_syntactic or sentences_semantic are primary. Note too that it would be a fallacy of equivocation to infer without further ado from “Sentences_pragmatic have primacy” that sentences in either of the other two senses are in any sense “prior” to words. (Moreover, how could sentences_pragmatic be prior to words, since words are among the sentences_pragmatic?) In short, if the doctrine of sentence primacy is to be of any significant interest, we must understand ‘sentence’ as involving senses (a) and/or (b), not sense (c).

Let us set aside whether ‘sentence’ is meant in sense (b) or sense (c). Even so, there are, by my count, at least five readings of the context principle: methodological, metasemantic, pragmatic, semantic, and psycho-interpretational. Taken as a methodological precept, the principle essentially tells the lexical semanticist only to contemplate the effect that a word can have on sentences in which it may embed. For instance, to find out the meaning of the word ‘one’ (an example of great interest to Frege), the lexical semanticist should reflect upon things like: what whole sentences containing ‘one’ have in common (e.g. ‘One apple fell’ and ‘One dog died’); how sentences that contain words slightly different from ‘one’ differ systematically in meaning from maximally similar sentences containing ‘one’ (e.g. ‘One dog died’ versus ‘No dog died’); and so on. What the lexical semanticist should never do is try to figure out the meaning of ‘one’ just by thinking about it, that phrase, in isolation (where ‘in isolation’ means: not embedded in any larger syntactic structure).

That is the first reading. Here is the second. As philosophical readers will know, a metasemantic view is a view about where meaning comes from. It poses an “in virtue of what” question, about meaning facts. Here’s an example. Suppose we ask,
In virtue of what is the sound/tofu/meaningful? In virtue of what does it mean a pale curd of varying consistency made from soybean milk rather than sea lion or watch?

Notice that we are not asking, in (116), what the sound/tofu/means. We are asking, rather, why it means what it does. Nor is this the causal—historical question about the steps whereby/tofu/came to mean this. It is, instead, the issue of what more primitive present facts make for this less primitive present fact: how do the “higher” facts get fixed by the “lower” ones? (Compare asking what makes it the case that things have the monetary value they do, or what makes it the case that certain things are illegal, or rude, or immoral. These too are “in virtue of what” questions.)

Some philosophers seem to have taken away from Frege’s discussion of “not asking for the meaning of a word in isolation” a claim about what makes words meaningful and what makes them have the particular meaning that they do. The claim I have in mind is that, fundamentally speaking, only sentences have meaning. This isn’t to say that subsentences are gibberish. Rather, it is to say that the entities that have meaning in the first instance are sentences: the only things that have meaning non-derivatively are sentences, so it must be in virtue of their role within sentences that sub-sentential expressions have meaning at all. (I stress: whereas above the issue was epistemological, i.e. where to look for evidence, here the claim is avowedly metaphysical, i.e. about what supervenes on what. That is, it is assumed that some expressions get their meaning from how they alter the meanings of larger wholes. Supposedly, this is how words/phrases get their meaning. They therefore have meaning only derivatively, not fundamentally. Now, it cannot be the case that all expressions get their meaning in this way, or there would be an infinite regress. The primacy claim says: the things that have meaning non-derivatively are sentences.)

The third reading of ‘Sentences are prior to words’ is pragmatic. It says that sentences are prior in terms of usage. Specifically, it asserts that only sentences can be used to perform speech acts. In particular, to add an extra wrinkle, it is only with a sentence that speakers can do something correct/incorrect. (Read this way, the context principle is, of course, essentially the denial of my P1.)

The fourth reading is semantic. The radical variant of ‘Sentences are primary’, understood semantically, is that subsentences do not have meaning at all. It must of course be granted that words alter the meanings of wholes somehow, else we cannot explain why ‘Karen is sleeping’ and ‘Karen is crying’ mean different things, nor why ‘sleeping’ and ‘crying’ have the same systematic impact in many different sentences. Allowing for this, however, it may still be denied that words alter sentence meanings in a way that merits assigning them their own “meanings”. To see how this might go, note that one could, if one wished, treat phonemes or letters of the alphabet as affecting whole meanings, via an extremely
complex function. The meaning of ‘j’ combines with the meaning of <m, ‘u’, ‘m’, ‘p’> to give the propositional content JUMP, and it combines with the meaning of <n, ‘o’, ‘i’, ‘n’> to give the propositional content JOIN. The point is, even if one treated ‘j’ as having this functionally characterized impact, one would be hard pressed to call this the meaning of the letter ‘j’. Similarly for ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘c’ and all the rest. In a similar vein, one might say that, appearances notwithstanding, words genuinely do not after all have meanings outside sentences—any more than letters do. A more moderate idea is that words are meaningful in some pre-theoretical sense, but that they lack meaning-relata (more on this in Section 10.3). We have grown accustomed to thinking that the, ‘if’ and particles like ‘up’, ‘out’, etc., are syncategorematic. For instance, ‘up’ alters the meaning of ‘throw up’, ‘use up’, ‘tear up’, ‘up to bat’, ‘on the up and up’, ‘up close’, etc., but one would be hard-pressed to assign it some thing that it means. The proposal here would be that, upon closer inspection, all words turn out to be like ‘up’.

The last reading of sentence primacy, or anyway the last that I will discuss, is psychological/interpretational. It says that we cannot grasp the meanings of sub-sentences. Dummett (1994: 97) discusses the view that “it is possible to grasp the sense of a word only as it occurs in some particular sentence”. In a way, this reading of the context principle is the most straightforward of all: the idea is that the only things we are psychologically able to interpret are whole sentences. Put in terms of generative capacity, and hence in terms of semantic knowledge, the claim would amount to this: the only thing that our semantic competence generates is meanings for whole sentences; it does not generate meanings for words/phrases (though it presumably uses word/phrase meanings “internally”, as it were, in generating meanings for whole sentences). Thus, we can understand words only when they are spoken within whole sentences. Again, here is Dummett:

But what is it to come to grasp in advance this sense attributable to a specific expression capable of occurring in a wide variety of sentences? Is it to learn the sense of that expression taken on its own? That would violate the context principle (considered as applying to sense). It is meaningless to speak of grasping the sense of an expression as standing on its own, independently of any sentence in which it occurs. (Dummett 1991b: 202)

This psycho-interpretational reading itself admits of further sub-readings. Dummett, for instance, contrasts two varieties of “grasping a sense”, one dispositional, the other occurrent. He grants that one may dispositionally grasp the sense of a subsentence outside the context of any sentence. But he apparently denies—or anyway, has Frege deny—that one can, in the occurrent sense, grasp the sense of a word/phrase without grasping the sense of a sentence within which that word/phrase occurs (see Dummett 1994: 109). This would mean that, in some manner, one could “know the meaning” of a word in isolation—e.g., one could know its potential contribution to a variety of sentences—but that whenever one put that knowledge to work, in actual understanding, it would have to be in grasping a sentential content.
Sentence Primacy

Having contrasted the five readings of ‘Sentences are prior to words’, I turn now to arguments in favor. I’ll do this in two steps. I begin with general arguments for the context principle. I then present arguments that are specific to one or more readings of it.

One motivation for sentence primacy, understood broadly, is that it seems to be connected with other holistic primacy theses, each of which can seem independently motivated. For instance, Kant (1781/1997) famously insisted that judgment is prior to perception of individuals: seeing that María is a female, a person, tall, etc., is prior to seeing María. That is, whereas classical empiricists started with representations of individual objects (and sometimes of universals), viz. “impressions”, building up from these to complex mental representations that could be true/false, Kant turns this on its head: the whole representation (i.e. what is judged) is prior to the object-denoting parts that make it up. Why this turn-to-judgment? To make percepts epistemically relevant: a percept must be an experience which evidentially supports a judgment, and one way to do that is to make percepts conceptualized (see Sellars 1956). Related to this is the recognition that it is judgments, rather than sensations, that stand in inferential relations: it is judgments that can serve as premises. So, if percepts are to play an epistemic role, that role must derive from their relation to inferences. (One thinks here of Brandom 1994.)

Another example. The early Wittgenstein held that facts are prior to the things that make them up: “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1922: 31). Echoes of this show up in the logical atomism of Russell as well. One motivation for this doctrine are sophisticated worries about “the unity of the fact”. There is a familiar puzzle about how an object can combine with a property to form a fact, if properties just are another kind of object: what gives rise to the fact, as opposed to a mere collection of objects? It would seem that, to combine any two objects A and B, one would need a third object, call it “the combiner”. But if “the combiner” is itself just another object, then the three objects A, B and “the combiner” need something to combine all of them. And so on. (For a historical introduction, see Gibson 2004.) The way out, made famous by Frege, is to take properties to be “unsaturated”, so that they are not objects, and so do not need a third item to combine them with objects. So far so good. But what does ‘unsaturated’ mean? This is where the primacy of sentences may seem to come into play. Drawing on some insightful remarks from Dummett (1973), one can understand the unsaturated nature of properties as follows. Put in the material mode, a property is the result of removing an object from a fact. (What does this mean? An example in the formal mode may clarify the point. Take the sentence ‘Dummett is a philosopher’. Subtract the name from this sentence, and what remains is ‘___ is a philosopher’. This expression can clearly combine with a name to give a sentence; so the referent of this open expression, whatever it is, is equally clearly such that it can combine with an object to yield a fact, without any “combiner” being required. Goes the idea: that is a property.) The point of all this is that one
Implications

can glean an argument for the primacy of facts from such considerations: facts must be prior, the argument runs, for we derive properties from them by subtraction. Indeed, if we don’t think of properties as derivative from facts, then we are back with the problem of how they can be unsaturated, so as to combine with objects.

Consider now arguments specific to the various readings of the context principle. Frege believed that, in failing to obey his methodological constraint, “one is almost forced to take as the meanings of words mental pictures or acts of the individual mind” (Frege 1884: x). Thus, in the case of number—words, the failure to respect the principle could easily lead one to suppose that ‘one’ stands for a mental item, and hence that mathematics is somehow about mental entities—which in Frege’s view is an extremely serious error (see Frege 1884: 116). Obeying the principle, in contrast, one comes to the right view: the meaning of a number—word isn’t some idea that we associate with it, but is instead the thing that the word contributes to the meaning of larger mathematical expressions. Frege writes:

That we can form no idea of its content is therefore no reason for denying all meaning to a word, or for excluding it from our vocabulary. We are indeed only imposed on by the opposite view because we will, when asking for the meaning of a word, consider it in isolation, which leads us to accept an idea as the meaning. Accordingly, any word for which we can find no corresponding mental picture appears to have no content. But we ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in a proposition [Satz] have the words really a meaning. (Frege 1884: 71)

(This can seem like an argument from hope: “If you adopt my methodology, you will end up endorsing my ontological views; therefore, you should adopt my methodology.” But a deeper insight lies behind this methodological plea. It has always seemed puzzling how humans can have access to numbers. But, runs the argument, if we endorse the context principle, understood methodologically/epistemically, the puzzle begins to dissolve: we access numbers by understanding the contribution of number—words to truth-conditions in various sentential contexts.)

A first argument for the context principle on its metasemantic reading can be extracted from some insightful remarks of Dummett (1973). The argument goes like this. The only things that can be used in isolation, i.e. used without being embedded in a larger structure, are sentences. This, of course, is sentence primacy in the pragmatic sense. The point is captured by the epigram that began the book:

A sentence is, as we have said, the smallest unit of language with which a linguistic act can be accomplished, with which a ‘move can be made in the language-game’: so you cannot do anything with a word—cannot effect any conventional (linguistic) act by uttering it—save by uttering some sentence containing that word… (Dummett 1973: 194)
But, as a famous Wittgensteinian slogan says, meaning comes from use (see Wittgenstein 1953 and elsewhere). Thus, the things that have meaning fundamentally have it because of their use: an expression has the "fundamental" meaning that it does because of the kinds of actions speakers can perform with it. But, says Dummett, those just are the sentences. So words must get their meaning because they appear in meaningful sentences. Dummett puts the general lesson as follows:

Indeed, it is certainly part of the content of the dictum [i.e., the context principle] that sentences play a special role in language: that, since it is by means of them alone that anything can be *said*, that is, any linguistic act (of assertion, question, command, etc.) can be performed, the sense of any expression less than a complete sentence must consist only in the contribution it makes to determining the content of a sentence in which it may occur. (Dummett 1973: 495)

If the argument works, the meaning of a subsentence (i.e. a word or phrase) must be determined solely by what it contributes to the meaning of sentences.

Essentially the same argument is distilled nicely in the following passages from Brandom’s *Articulating Reasons*:

In the *Grundlagen*, Frege follows this Kantian line in insisting that “only in the context of a proposition [*Satz*] does a name have any meaning”. Frege takes this position because it is only to the utterance of sentences that pragmatic force attaches. . . . Since semantics must in this way answer to pragmatics, the category of sentences has a certain kind of explanatory priority over subsentential categories of expression, such as singular terms and predicates. For sentences are the kind of expression whose free-standing utterance (that is, whose utterance unembedded in the utterance of some larger expression containing it) has the pragmatic significance of performing a speech act.

Sentences are assigned semantic contents as part of an explanation of what one is doing in asserting them, what one claims, what belief one avows thereby. But the utterance of an essentially subsentential expression, such as a singular term, is not the performance of this sort of speech act. It does not by itself make a move in the language game, does not alter the score of commitments and attitudes that it is appropriate for an audience to attribute to the speaker. Accordingly, such expressions cannot have semantic contents in the same sense in which sentences can. They cannot serve as premises and conclusions of *inferences*. They can be taken to be semantically contentful only in a derivative sense, insofar as their occurrence as components in sentences contributes to the contents (in the basic, practice-relevant inferential sense) of those sentences. (Brandom 2000: 125–6)

The premise, then, is that the things that are used in isolation get their meanings non-derivatively, from their use. The invited conclusion is that these then endow meanings upon their parts (which parts cannot be used in isolation) in terms of how those parts contribute to the meanings of things that have meaning in isolation. Thus, the metasemantic reading of the context principle.

Another advantage of endorsing this view is that, by strictly obeying the context principle on its metasemantic reading, we will automatically meet a key constraint
Implications

of semantic theories: compositionality. Roughly speaking, compositionality says that the meaning of a whole expression is exhausted by (a) what its parts mean, and (b) how those parts are put together. Compositionality is accepted as a constraint for two related reasons. First, in so far as these are the sole determinants of whole meanings, people can understand complex expressions that they've never encountered before: they understand them by calculating the whole meaning from precisely these two elements, both of which are known. Second, were whole meanings not compositional, it would be an utter mystery how we finite beings could know the meaning of the infinite number of sentences that, given time, we are capable of understanding. Notice, however, that compositionality is one side of a coin whose other side is the context principle. Compositionality says that whole meaning is entirely a function of part-meanings plus structure:

(117) Whole meaning = < part-meaning₁, part-meaning₂, ..., part-meaningᵢ, ..., part-meaningₙ > + structure

The context principle employs this same equation to solve for a part-meaning, i.e. taking part-meaning to be entirely determined by the whole meaning, the meaning of the other parts, and structure:

(118) Part-meaningᵢ = Whole meaning − (< part-meaning₁, part-meaning₂, ..., part-meaningᵢ, ..., part-meaningₙ > + structure)

So, if we assign part-meanings in line with (118), we can’t help but get the desired result vis-à-vis (117). (Note. Obviously the manner of combination of part-meanings and structure isn’t literally addition. Nevertheless, I use the symbols ‘+’ and ‘−’ to simplify presentation.) Automatically satisfying the compositionality constraint in this way is thus another advantage of endorsing the context principle, in its metasemantic reading.

Let me head off a possible objection to the context principle read in this metasemantic way, which I will not here endorse. One might worry that having word meaning derive from sentence meaning requires that one must first grasp the meaning of each of the infinite number of sentences in the language, only then solving for word-meanings. Yet doing so is not humanly possible. Faced with this, proponents of the metasemantic version of the context principle can say several things. First, they may insist on a sharp difference between (1) a psychological story about how humans grasp word and sentence-meanings and (2) a philosophical story about the metaphysical underpinnings of word and sentence-meaning. They may then eschew any claims about the first of these, stressing that they only mean to address the second (see Dummett 1973: 4 for this approach). Second, the proponent of the context principle, read metasemantically, could propose that there is some finite cluster of basic sentences whose meaning one grasps; one then presumably solves for the meaning of words, and for the contribution of syntax, using just those sentences. Performing this finite task then gives the person the capacity to understand new
sentences, a potential infinity in fact, on the basis of the familiar words, and how those words are structured. Thus Dummett:

To grasp the sense of a given expression requires us to be able to grasp the thoughts expressed by certain sentences containing it: if it did not, we should be able to grasp that sense in isolation, contrary to the context principle. Not, however, of all sentences containing it, but only of certain ones: those of a particular simple form, characteristic for the expression in question. The contribution of the expression to the thoughts expressed by other, more complex, sentences is then grasped, and can be explained, by reference to the sense of those simpler characteristic sentences. (Dummett 1991b: 202–3)

(See also Dummett 1991a: chapter 10, and Brandom 2000: chapter 4 for development of this two-stage idea. A very helpful discussion appears in Kenyon 1999.)

Considerations about meaning coming from use, and only sentences being used, can be drawn upon again to support the context principle on its semantic reading. It is, so it’s said, possible to hold sentence meanings constant while systematically assigning quite different satisfaction conditions to the words of the language. Now, if only sentences have meaning in isolation, and if it is possible to hold sentence meanings constant while systematically assigning quite different contents to the words of the language, then words cannot have determinate contents. (I use ‘contents’ here as a cover term because, as Quine (1969) himself insists, this argument can be run not only at the level of intension, but also at the level of extension.) Let me illustrate the point. To slightly modify an example of Quine’s, even assuming that ‘Ech utpal gavagai’ has determinate truth-conditions, such that it is true if and only if there is a rabbit nearby, these truth-conditions could be generated by assigning quite different entities to the word ‘gavagai’. (I pause to stress: ‘gavagai’ here is a lexical item, a subsentence, rather than a “one word sentence”. Quine allows that ‘Gavagai’ also exists, as a one-word sentence. But my concern here is ‘gavagai’, not ‘Gavagai’.) By appropriately modifying the contributions of ‘ech’ and ‘utpal’, and/or by altering one’s compositional semantic rules, the sentence ‘Ech utpal gavagai’ could be assigned a constant truth-condition, while ‘gavagai’ was assigned as content any of the following:

(119) Divergent translations for the word ‘gavagai’
(a) temporal rabbit stage
(b) undetached rabbit parts
(c) portion of rabbit-stuff
(d) rabbithood

So, even given determinate sentence-meanings, one cannot arrive at determinate contents for sub-sentential parts: sentence-meanings underdetermine sub-sentence contents. But if sentences are the only things that have meaning in isolation—so that, as explained above, they are the only source of meaning—then the fact that sentence-meaning underdetermines sub-sentence contents makes it natural to conclude that there simply is no such thing as “the unique
thing which a given word contributes, as its content’. That is, reflections on ‘gavagai’, conjoined with the Brandom/Dummett style metasemantic argument, yields that there just are no contents for words in isolation—even if sentence-meanings are determinate. Thus, the metasemantic thesis, taken together with further Quinean reflections, supports the semantic reading of the context principle.

Finally, the psychological claim is, of course, related to the semantic one. First, if words don’t have a meaning at all, except when they show up in sentences, one clearly cannot grasp the word’s meaning outside of a sentence. There just is nothing to grasp. Second, and less radically, even if the meaning of a word exists, as per the moderate proposal, if it is horrendously complex, as syncategorematic meanings are, then we still won’t be able to grasp that meaning outside a context.

One last point, before I evaluate these arguments in the light of my P1. My discussion so far may leave the impression that the various readings of the context principle are related to each other in name only. Their only connection, it may seem, is that they all endorse the slogan “Sentences are prior to words” in some sense. This overstates things. In fact, the various readings are connected in a variety of ways. To illustrate, consider the flow of argument from pragmatic primacy (only sentences can be used) to metasemantic primacy (sentences are the only fundamental source of meaning) to semantic primacy (words don’t have determinate meanings) to psycho-interpretational primacy (we can’t grasp word meanings). That said, if one has to choose between the risk of running these together and missing their interconnections, the latter is the better option when it comes to understanding and evaluating claims of sentence primacy.

I begin my evaluation of the arguments, and of the doctrines, with Kant and Wittgenstein again. Whatever one’s reaction to the Kantian move of making percepts epistemic by invoking judgment, this doctrine isn’t directly about the primacy of natural language sentences. It is so far merely about judgment. And what the priority of judgment at best demands is the priority of thoughts, and propositions—something I haven’t been arguing against. Similarly for the Frege/Wittgenstein point about being unsaturated. What these sophisticated metaphysical considerations really motivate is fact primacy—or proposition primacy, or maybe the primacy of truth. Barring nominalism (and maybe even granting nominalism), however, a detour through sentences that stand for facts and contain proper names is otiose. So, again, sentence primacy is not directly supported by such considerations.

That said, adopting these other primacy theses can seem, each in its own way, to lead indirectly to sentence primacy. One can reflect on what is judged, and conclude that the judged-entities are sentential representations. Or, again, one can reflect on what linguistic item corresponds to a fact, and conclude that the linguistic correlate of a fact is a sentence. This might serve as a bridge premise from judgment/fact primacy to sentence primacy. But, on second thought, this doesn’t work either. First, it’s just not the case that we judge sentences of natural language:
that was part of the burden of Chapter 9. Second, it’s not true that natural language sentences in general express facts. Many don’t: interrogatives and imperatives, of course, but also context sensitive ones, vague ones, etc. Maybe almost none do, the exceptions being sentences like ‘4 is larger than 2’. Thus, natural language declarative sentences are not the correlates of judgments or facts. Moreover, the priority of a worldly thing—judgment or fact—needn’t translate into the priority of its linguistic correspondent, even if it has one. To take an obvious example, even if society is prior to the persons in it, that doesn’t at all entail that ‘society’ is (methodologically, metasemantically, pragmatically, semantically, or psychointerpretationally) prior to ‘person’. This should be even more obvious when the item is merely metaphysically, rather than practically, central. Maybe ‘sex’ will be widely used, because sex is so practically important to us. But the metaphysical centrality of something provides no reason at all to expect its centrality to ordinary language. (For instance, if substance is metaphysically prior to accident, that surely has no implications whatever about the place of ‘substance’ in natural language.) There is also no reason why the grammatical class that corresponds to something metaphysically central should be linguistically central, i.e. no reason why the class of declaratives should be primary—even if their worldly correlates, if such there be, are primary. (Much more on this below.)

Consider now the specific variants on the context principle. Start with the methodological reading. It is a bit strong to demand that one never consider the word in isolation if words/phrases can be used unembedded to perform speech acts. More appropriate, and still in the broadly Fregean spirit, would be: never only consider the word in isolation, but instead also consider its behavior when embedded in whole sentences. Non-sentential speech does not, I believe, conflict with this latter, more inclusive, methodological precept. And the methodological point of the context principle—to cure one of the habit of taking mental images and such as meanings—is met even on this weaker reading. Hence subsentence use actually poses little trouble for the principle, on this first reading.

What of the metasemantic doctrine? A key premise in the argument for the doctrine was that only sentences can be used to perform speech acts; words and phrases cannot be. (That was why they were denied meaning, fundamentally speaking.) But this key premise looks false, if words/phrases really can be used in isolation; and without this premise, some other argument must be given for the conclusion that only sentences have meaning fundamentally. Thus, subsentence use, if genuine, does not falsify the principle read in this metasemantic way—but it does leave one in need of an empirically adequate argument for meaning needing to come from sentences alone.

It might seem that a better argument for the claim that word-meanings must still derive from sentences is ready-to-hand: surely this doctrine is required to preserve compositionality. As I stressed earlier on, you don’t get (117) above unless you also accept (118); and (118) requires that word-meanings, i.e. the meaning of the parts, not exceed what they contribute to full sentences. In fact, however,
Implications

Compositionality does not, on its own, support the metasemantic doctrine. The latter says two things: first, that sentences are a metaphysical source of word meaning, and, second, that they are the only such source. Neither of these, however, can be inferred from compositionality per se. All (117) gets us is a constraint: whatever story we tell about where a word’s meaning comes from, it must be consistent with sentence meanings being exhausted by what their parts mean. It does not, however, support any claim about “sources”. Moreover, if words are used in isolation, then, though sentence use might be one source, it wouldn’t be the only one.

To see why compositionality does not, taken alone, support the metasemantic doctrine, consider an analogy. Take the proposal that facts about what art works are beautiful derive from facts about what works are attractive to (most) art experts. That is, it is in virtue of the judgment of (most) experts that works are beautiful (or not). Suppose one tried to defend this meta-aesthetic view by saying: “It can’t be that most genuine experts are wrong about what’s beautiful. They wouldn’t be experts otherwise.” This wouldn’t begin to succeed as an argument in meta-aesthetics, because one could only infer that it’s a constraint on where beauty comes from that most experts are right about what’s beautiful. This fact wouldn’t, on its own, support the idea that beauty comes from expert judgment. Nor would it support the even stronger idea that beauty comes solely from expert judgment. In the same way, compositionality may well impose a constraint on metasemantic theories: one might well contend that any successful metasemantics must have whole meanings exhaustively determined by part meanings and linguistic structure. But one can’t proceed from such a constraint immediately to conclusions about where meaning-facts emerge from; still less can one move from such a constraint to a conclusion about the sole thing that they emerge from. In sum, given sub-sentential speech, we are still in need of a reason for embracing the metasemantic reading of the context principle.

We have seen that subsentence use is consistent with the methodological reading of the context principle, suitably weakened. It is also consistent with the metasemantic reading, though it leaves this latter doctrine in need of an empirically adequate supporting argument. The remaining two readings, in contrast, will be seen to be out-and-out in conflict with the genuineness of sub-sentential speech.

The pragmatic reading is obviously in trouble. It says that only sentences, in the syntactic and semantic sense, can be used. (And, I added, only uses of them result in things that can be correct/incorrect.) Chapters 3–8 showed that this is not the case. What of the semantic reading? There are three points to make here. First, given that words can be understood in isolation, this provides plenty of reason for thinking that they do have meanings in isolation: if we recognize the meaning in isolation of something, it surely exists. Second, it isn’t even obvious that a language needs to have sentences_{syntactic}, or even sentences_{semantic}, to serve the needs of communication: maybe all humanly possibly languages have such expressions, but if so that seems to be a nomological necessity arising from our human brains,
not a conceptual necessity (see Carstairs-McCarthy 1999, 2005 for extended discussion). If that’s right, there could be communication-worthy languages that had only words and phrases. It thus seems possible that there could be a language with meaningful items that entirely lacked sentences—which would seem to mean that words and phrases can be meaningful in isolation. (A language couldn’t lack sentences, of course. But that is not what is at issue.) Third, given that sentences are not in fact pragmatically prior, there remain no positive reasons to believe that only sentences really have meanings. The previously mentioned metaphysical considerations do not really carry much probative weight: we may want facts/propositions to be prior, in order to account for how objects and properties can combine; but even granting this, the priority of facts and propositions is neither here nor there, when it comes to which items of natural language genuinely have meaning. And besides, even if these metaphysical concerns are serious, one shouldn’t allow philosophical convictions to directly dictate what one believes about natural languages: a philosophically perspicuous language may need to make metaphysical sense, but maybe Urdu and English just don’t. Finally, on a related note, that sentences, in the syntactic and semantic sense, are the only well formed formulae in certain logical languages is simply irrelevant, since the topic is natural language, and natural languages are very different from, say, the predicate calculus.

Consider finally the psycho-interpretational doctrine. This says that, as a matter of our psychology, we cannot understand a word, when uttered, unless it is embedded in a sentence. This reading of the context principle seems simply false, given the existence of sub-sentential speech. There is no hope for making it consistent with genuine subsentence use: apparently, hearers understand sub-sentential expressions in isolation; hence their semantic competence must generate a meaning for such expressions in isolation. Put in terms of earlier examples, we just do grasp the meaning of ‘both hands’ and ‘on the stoop’, in a way that we don’t grasp ‘the meaning’ of ‘b’ or ‘up’.

I began my discussion of the context principle by quoting Frege. By way of concluding it, I would like to summarize briefly what I take to be the implications of the foregoing for his larger philosophy. I will limit myself to some remarks about what Frege needs, regardless of what he may have said. To begin with, it is very clear that, given his purposes, the issue at best is the primacy of sentences. Frege need make no claims whatever about the priority of inflectional phrases and the like, nor even about natural language expressions with subjects, verbs, and objects. More than that, it seems to me that all Frege need insist upon is the primacy of propositions/truth. So far as I can tell, he does not need to fetishize any kind of expression at all. Next, it is clear enough that Frege relies only on the methodological reading of ‘prior’. It is this, I have said, which allows him to steer his readers away from focusing on images and ideas when thinking about numbers: he gets them, instead, to consider carefully the contribution of number-words to numerical propositions. If Frege does not need to
Implications

endorse the other readings, this is just as well, because if I am right it is those other readings that are unmotivated at best, and outright false at worst. This is emphatically not to say that all of Frege’s followers can escape so lightly. In particular, those who are shy of language-independent Gedanke, Platonism, etc., including those who would fuse Fregean insights with themes from the later Wittgenstein, may well need to make natural language sentences primary in ways that Frege himself does not.

10.2 BRANDON AND SENTENCE PRIMACY

I have hinted (and more) several times that Robert Brandom is a proponent of sentence primacy. In some sense, this is clearly the case: following Kant, he takes judgments to be prior; and his inferentialism about content is underwritten by the idea that the things that allegedly have content in the first instance (i.e. sentences) are the very things that stand in inferential relations. Though I have tried to avoid exegesis where I can in this book, I want to consider briefly whether Brandom’s endorsement of sentence primacy sits ill with the existence of genuine sub-sentential assertions.

Consider a reading of Brandom according to which he is merely doing rational reconstruction.³ He is constructing a myth, in roughly the same way that Sellars (1956) did, with an eye to illuminating philosophical problems about meaning, norms, etc. Specifically, goes the idea, Brandom wants to indicate how a sophisticated assertoric practice could emerge, thereby also addressing the pressing problem of how normed practices are even possible. To do so, he begins with a simple language, very like the predicate calculus. He shows that it is philosophically unproblematic. Next, he shows how additions—each “innocent”, as it were—can be added to its immediately prior mythical language. The end point, in proper Hegelian fashion, is a language in which this very process of linguistic enrichment can be described, thereby allowing explicit reflection upon the norms and contents of language. Taking this to be Brandom’s project, the fact that we full-fledged language users can and do employ words and phrases to make assertions would hardly seem relevant: first, because the overall point is rational reconstruction, not empirical description of what we actually do; second, because it is reconstruction by means of simplified mythical languages. So, although the predicate calculus type languages that Brandom often focuses on do not permit assertions to be made with singular terms or predicates, this is consistent with, say, English permitting this.

The point is very well taken. And I’m too shy about Brandom exegesis to insist that it cannot be correct. Still, it does seem to me that this is not the

³ I am greatly endebted to Henry Jackman and Doug Patterson for discussion of this reading of Brandom.
whole story. First, it’s unclear how rational reconstruction could carry all of the
philosophical weight of Brandom’s larger projects. He does, after all, want to
make some claims about our fully mature natural languages: as noted, he holds
that inferentialist semantics is true of natural languages. (If it were not, it’s hard
to see how his other philosophical stances would be supported—for example
understanding truth as merely derivative, specifically upon what is preserved by
the good moves of our language games.) But rational reconstruction by means
of a series of mythical languages gives us no reason to expect that our actual
languages, in their full complexity, should retain features that were present in the
imagined languages precisely because those languages were simpler. To the contrary,
the reasonable expectation would be that such features would disappear as com-
plexity was added. (Here is a simple example of what I mean. Brandom suggests
in various places that singular terms can be defined in terms of substitution-
while-preserving-grammaticality. This works for the predicate calculus *qua simple
language*—because singular terms therein are not marked for gender, case, num-
ber, etc. It patently does not work for natural language, however. (See Fodor and
Lepore 2001 for discussion.) Moreover, turning to another aspect of his larger
philosophy, I myself do not see how to square a rational reconstruction project
with Brandom’s continual insistence, *qua* pragmatist, that we begin with our cul-
tural practices, and work from there.

My second reason for doubting that rational reconstruction can really be the
whole point is that Brandom seems repeatedly to explain empirical observations
and offer empirical arguments. Indeed, think back to his argument for the con-
text principle on its metasemantic reading. The key premise was that “the utter-
ance of an essentially subsentential expression, such as a singular term, is not the
performance of [a] speech act. It does not by itself make a move in the language
game, does not alter the score of commitments and attitudes that it is appropriate
for an audience to attribute to the speaker” (Brandom 2000: 126). Surely this is
an empirical claim.

In sum, at first glance there is a way to read Brandom such that he makes no
claim about how natural language actually works. So read, he need not object to
my P1 on page 00. Ultimately, however, it remains clear, at least to me, how to
make this work.

10.3 MORE ON MEANINGFULNESS IN ISOLATION:
QUANTIFIER PHRASES

In Section 10.1 we encountered the idea of items that lack meaning in isolation.
According to the semantic reading of the context principle, this is the fate of all
sub-sentential expressions. In this section I will address in more detail what it
might be to lack meaning in isolation. That will throw further light on the discus-
sion above. In addition, I will consider, as a sort of detailed case study, whether
quantifier phrases have or lack meaning in isolation. To anticipate, I will argue that quantifier phrases, e.g. ‘some woman’ and ‘eight cats’, do belong in the class of expressions that have meaning in isolation. The central argument for this claim will come as no surprise: quantifier phrases can be used and understood outside the context of any sentence. (For example, a man may approach an apple cart and utter nothing more than ‘Six large apples’, thereby requesting six large apples.)

Semanticists and philosophers of language have traditionally divided expressions into two classes: those that do, and those that do not, have meaning ‘in isolation’. There are at least three variants on the idea of lacking such meaning. First (setting aside quotational contexts of course), there are formal features that do not alter the content of items at all. Here one would place the color or font of a written item, as well as strings which are simply gibberish (e.g. ‘uitlok’). Second, there are items that alter the meaning of wholes, but clearly do not merit the label ‘meaningful’. Into this category fall phonemes and letters. (Think of the different impact of concatenating ‘og’ with ‘d’ versus ‘l’.) Third, there are expressions that have an impact upon the meaning of larger wholes, and merit in some sense the label ‘meaningful’, yet seem peculiar in some way. This is marked by saying that they are not meaningful in isolation.

One can, as I did above, give examples of this third sort of “not meaningful in isolation” item: the class includes words like ‘up’, ‘and’, etc. But if the notion is introduced only via examples, it becomes rather hard to treat empirically the question of what else belongs in the class. In even worse shape, qua empirical, is the question whether the paradigm examples really belong in the class. What I would like to attempt in this section, therefore, is to spell out this notion. In particular, I want to do so without taking an especially concrete stand on the thorny question of what meanings are: ideas, mental sentences, worldly objects, guises thereof, etc. My strategy will be to draw upon an idea that has appeared repeatedly above, viz. the structured proposition. This notion will allow me to make clear sense of an expression that “has meaning, but not in isolation”. Though I use this neo-Russellian notion to make my point, I hope it will be clear how anyone who takes sentence-contents to have parts can adapt my points to their favored theory of what meanings are.

The key contrast needed to make sense of “meaningful, but not in isolation” is between expressions that contribute constituents as their meaning, and items that seem pre-theoretically to be meaningful, but which contribute to the meaning of larger wholes in some other way. Paradigm examples of the former are singular

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Footnotes:

1 Though the variant on structured propositions that I employ has a distinctly neo-Russellian flavor, my aim is emphatically not an attempted explication of, and subsequent attack upon, any theses proposed by Bertrand Russell. It is true that, in trying to get a firmer grip on what “meaning in isolation” amounts to, I will appeal to some of Russell’s (1905, 1911, 1919) ideas. But, in the end, nothing I say hangs on whether, for example, the notion of “having meaning in isolation” that I arrive at really derives from Russell. (The historical issue is discussed by Botterell 2005; see also the commentary on Botterell in Barber 2005.)
terms, which contribute objects as constituents, and predicates, which contribute properties. The question is, what other kind of contribution can there be? The answer is not far to seek. One can allow for expressions that alter the meanings of larger wholes by means of a sentence-level rule. To take a very simple case, one might take the meaning of ‘It is not the case that’ to be given by something like:

‘It is not the case that $F$’ is true if and only if $F$ is not true.

(This contrasts with taking ‘It is not the case that’ to stand for a function from one truth-value to the other. Treating it that way, it would contribute a constituent.)

Given this contrast, the question can now be posed clearly: do quantifier phrases contribute constituents? In Russell’s own case, this question had a reasonably straightforward answer. Quantifier phrases are neither names nor predicates for him; and he maintained that only names and predicates contributed constituents. (This for epistemological reasons.) Hence, Russell insists that quantifier phrases are not meaningful in isolation. Much of the tradition has followed suit. The resulting approach, which I’ll label ‘the contextual definition’ approach to quantifier phrases, is to specify their semantic contribution by giving a general rule, which determines what sentences containing them mean. For example, to give the meaning of ‘Every cat’, one could provide a rule like

(120) ‘Every cat’ combines with an expression of the form ‘is $G$’ to yield a sentence; that sentence is true if and only if, for every $x$, if $x$ is a cat, then $x$ is $G$.

Abstracting away from the restrictive predicate ‘cat’, one could give a meaning-contribution rule for ‘Every $F$’. That rule might be

(121) An expression of the form ‘Every $F$’ combines with a predicate of the form ‘is $G$’ to yield a sentence; that sentence is true if and only if, for every $x$, if $x$ is $F$, then $x$ is $G$.

Generalizing still further, the approach as a whole may be captured by the following, where $Q$ is any quantifier word, and the ellipses are completed by the rule appropriate to the particular quantifier word:

(122) The not-meaningful in isolation approach: An expression of the form ‘$Q\ F$’ combines with a predicate of the form ‘is $G$’ to yield a sentence; that sentence is true if and only if . . .

Adopting the above as the semantic axiom for quantifier phrases amounts to saying that quantifier phrases do not have meaning in isolation. For, what (122) provides for each quantifier phrase is a method of calculating the meaning of whole sentences containing quantifier phrases, i.e. a contextual definition — rather than having them contribute a constituent.

Part of what motivates this first approach is a metaphysical worry. If one assimilates quantifier phrases to the category of names, thereby pairing them with individuals, logical puzzles and bizarre ontological commitments thereby arise. ‘A golden mountain’ turns out to stand for an object, and is meaningful only if that object exists; but then ‘A golden mountain does not exist’ must be false.
And so on. Clearly, treating quantifier phrases as standing for objects won’t do.
It’s equally unpalatable to have quantifier phrases contributing (’ordinary’, i.e.
first-order) properties. A natural conclusion therefore is that they don’t contrib-
ute constituents at all. Another option, however, is to introduce a third kind
of constituent, beyond individuals and first-order properties. Specifically—and
this brings us to the alternative, ‘not just meaningful, but meaningful in isolation’
account—quantifier phrases, whether within a sentence or unembedded, correspond to
generalized quantifiers. (see Lewis 1970, Montague 1974, and
Barwise and Cooper 1981 for early work). Since I am laying things out within
a neo-Russellian framework, a generalized quantifier, for present purposes, will be
a function from properties to propositions. (Two things deserve to be stressed
about my usage. First, a generalized quantifier, as I use the term, is not a kind
of expression: though quantifier phrases are linguistic items, generalized quantifi-
ers are not—they’re functions. Second, I’m treating generalized quantifiers in the
neo-Russellian spirit: not as functions from sets to truth-values, but as functions
from properties to propositions.)

The generalized quantifier corresponding to ‘some nitwits’, for example, is that
function \( f \) from properties to propositions such that, for any property \( P \),
\( f(P) \) is the proposition that SOME NITWITS ARE \( P \). This proposition is true, of
course, if and only if the intersection of nitwits with the set \( \{ x : x \text{ is } P \} \) is non-
empty. And the generalized quantifier corresponding to ‘every toadstool’ is that
function \( g \) from properties to propositions such that, for any property \( P \),
\( g(P) \) is the proposition that EVERY TOADSTOOL IS \( P \). This proposition is true if
and only if the set of toadstools is contained in \( \{ x : x \text{ is } P \} \). Applied to a com-
plete sentential example, (123) is true if and only if the intersection of the nitwits
with the smokers is non-empty—i.e. if and only if something is both a nitwit
and a smoker; and (124) is true iff the set of toadstools is contained in the set of
broken things.

(123) Some nitwits smoke
(124) Every toadstool is broken

Having the notion of a generalized quantifier at hand, I can now lay out an
alternative to (122):

(125) The meaningful in isolation approach: “\( Q \ F \)” denotes the function \( f \) from the
property \( G \) to propositions such that \( f(G) \) is the proposition that … which is true if and
only if …

Notice that, because quantifier phrases do not, on this approach, denote
individuals, the aforementioned logical puzzles and weird ontology are avoided;
nevertheless, it’s worth stressing, because quantifier phrases are assigned meaning-
relata by (125); they are meaningful in isolation. That is, returning to my earlier
terminology, they contribute constituents. Hence, on this approach, quantifier
phrases are meaningful in isolation. This is in stark contrast with (122).
I have tried to spell out what “meaningful, but not in isolation” might be. I then presented competing views on the semantics of quantifier phrases. One side denies that they have meaning in isolation; the other insists that they do. The next question is, who is right? This is not the question of which camp assigns the right truth-conditions for the sentences of, say, English: the generalized quantifier view was developed with an eye to ensuring that it assigned exactly the same truth-conditions as the classical “contextual definition” approach. It’s not even the question of which provides a better model for regimenting the valid inferences of natural language: I’m willing to presume that the two are equally good at that. Rather, it is the empirical question about what the rules actually are, for the languages we humans speak.

My view will be obvious. As a perfectly general approach to quantifier phrases in natural language, (122) does not work. The reason is, (122) is operative only when there is a predicate “is G” for the quantifier phrase “Q F” to combine with. Lacking such a predicate, the rule simply does not apply. But, as a matter of empirical fact, quantifier phrases can be used and understood in the absence of any such “second predicate”.

Some examples appeared earlier in the book. Here are some others. Suppose I’m at a linguistics meeting, talking with Andy. There are some empty seats around a table. I point at one and say, ‘An editor of Natural Language Semantics’; I then indicate another empty seat and say, ‘Anyone from Pragmatics and Cognition’. Another detail. The seats I pointed to are actually reserved for Emmon Bach and M. A. K. Halliday; and, as a matter of fact, they are not involved with these journals. I want to stress two things about this imagined situation. First, since, in the imagined situation, the seat I indicated first is not reserved for an editor of Natural Language Semantics, and since the second seat is not set aside for someone from Pragmatics and Cognition, I spoke falsely in uttering (126) and (127) below. I made false statements.

(126) An editor of Natural Language Semantics
(127) Anyone from Pragmatics and Cognition

Second, what I uttered, in the described situation, were two quantifier phrases. Neither time did I utter a sentence. (I take the arguments in Chapters 3–8 to have established this.)

One might reasonably reply that, while unembedded quantifier phrases must be treated as linguistically meaningful stimuli—no less than names, predicates, and full sentences—it doesn’t follow that they need to be assigned meanings in isolation. There is, as I said, an intermediate option between being utterly meaningless, and being meaningful in the sense of contributing a constituent. Thus, this reply might go, in saying an unembedded quantifier phrase (‘Three philosophers’, for example) the speaker does produce a truly contentful linguistic stimulus. But there’s no need to have an account of the meaning-relatum of said unembedded quantifier phrase, because it has none. This line of response raises
Implications

an obvious question: how can such phrases be understood in isolation, if they have no meaning in isolation? Here’s a possible answer: the hearer, making use of the context, comes up with some predicate. He then combines this predicate with the heard quantifier phrase, to form a sentence. Only then does he use (122) to interpret the resulting sentence. This would allow quantifier phrases to be used and understood in isolation, but without impugning the contextual definition approach.

In reply, first, I have argued in various places above that when a subsentence is used to assert hearers very often do not, and even cannot, find a predicate of natural language. Second, because quantifier phrases are given only a contextual definition, this proposal faces a special problem. It remains a mystery how the right predicate is found: the hearer, in his search for the right predicate, cannot rely on the meaning of the unembedded quantifier phrase since, by hypothesis, it doesn’t have meaning in isolation. Its content-contribution cannot come into play until after the missing predicate has been found. But, if the quantifier phrase offers no semantic clue about where in the context to search, there are going to be far too many “salient predicates” to choose from. Arriving at an interpretation of the speaker would end up being a fabulous stroke of luck. It’s just not credible that interpretation works like this. Pretty clearly, the quantifier phrase’s content must play a central part in the search for the “right predicate”—in which case, the bare phrase cannot be assigned its meaning merely in terms of (122).

10.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Time to sum up. I have laid out five different ways of reading the context principle: methodological, metasemantic, pragmatic, semantic, and psychological. I also noted several rationales for embracing the principle. I ended with an objection to the principle, on several of its readings, from non-sentence use. The suggested result, in the face of this objection, was two parts consistency and two parts inconsistency: (a) the first reading of the principle would be largely untouched; (b) the second would be left unsupported; but (c) the other readings would be outright falsified.

Those were the results of my discussion of the context principle proper. Appealing to the idea of structured propositions, I then tried to clarify further what it might be for an expression to be “meaningful, but not in isolation”. The core idea was that such expressions did not contribute constituents, yet did affect whole meanings in ways that warranted application of the label ‘meaningful’. Having this notion on the table, I raised the question of whether quantifier phrases should be so classified. I argued that they should not. The contextual definition approach—which is schematized in (122), and which denies that quantifier phrases have meaning in isolation—at best says nothing whatever about the unembedded use of (126), (127), and related cases; at worst, it says that
a meaningful utterance of (126) or (127) on its own is impossible. The reason, as I said, is that (122) applies only where there is a "second predicate" available to combine with the quantifier phrase. In contrast, the generalized quantifier approach—which is schematized in (125) and which asserts that quantifier phrases are meaningful in isolation—applies with equal naturalness both to quantifier phrases within sentences and to unembedded quantifier phrases. The latter is thus superior to (122).

Before leaving the topic, I would like to consider what could lead brilliant and deep philosophers to endorse sentence primacy, especially when understood as being about semantics, pragmatics, and psychology. As always, my aim is not exegesis. Worse than that, in this case what I’m up to is more like diagnosis, rather than broadstrokes interpretation—though I hope it is mostly sympathetic diagnosis. Some philosophers may have been misled by unhelpful models for natural language. It’s certainly possible that some were thinking of “languages” as prescriptive grammarians do. We are taught in grade school that “sentence fragments” are ill formed; editors at publishing houses generally frown on them, etc. Indeed, the term ‘non-sentence’ is often used to mean ungrammatical! But we clearly cannot infer the primacy of sentences, in actual speech and in actual languages, from the peculiar dictates of language mavens.

A far more influential source of the acceptance of sentence primacy, I suspect, is a perspective on natural languages that sees them as not importantly different from artificial logical languages. The pioneering work on syntax and semantics was done on artificial languages of the sort employed in formal logic and mathematics. Formation rules were laid down, which stated what the elementary parts were and how these could be combined. Rules of interpretation specified what the parts meant, and how combining various parts would impact the meaning of the whole. One thinks here of Frege, Carnap, Tarski, and so on. Later theorists, in both linguistics and philosophy, applied these powerful tools to natural languages: Zelig Harris, Chomsky, Montague, Davidson, and the like. Now, as it happens, the only well formed formulae in these simple artificial languages were "sentences" (in some sense of that term). Presumably that’s because the whole point of such formal systems is to formalize proofs, and proofs operate over things that are truth evaluable. Of particular consequence, given present purposes, in the predicate calculus, a distinction that I’ve been at pains to maintain throughout the book—between sentences _syntactic, sentences _semantic, and sentences _pragmatic—is of no interest, since the three senses of 'sentence' are co-extensive. In the predicate calculus (PC), only sentences are well formed formulae. Only they are of type $<t>$. And only they can appear as premises/conclusions, etc. Since sentences in PC genuinely are the very heart of the language, failure to notice how different natural languages are can lead theorists to expect the same in English, Swahili, Urdu, etc. Natural languages are fundamentally and massively different from such logical languages, however, in both their structure and their use (pace, for example, Brandom).
Implications

Notice too how this connects up with my earlier remarks about the metaphysical structure of the world and the idiosyncrasies of natural language. Logical languages precisely are designed to capture our sophisticated logico-metaphysical views. So, we can move relatively quickly from metaphysics to features of those languages. If we then assume that natural languages are just like these artificial creations but for inessential details, then we seem to have found the requisite inference ticket from metaphysics to the details of natural language syntax and semantics. But, I insist, it is an empirical question how much Swahili is like the predicate calculus. More than that, given their very different origins and very different purposes, it would be surprising indeed if they turned out to differ only in very superficial ways.

My second diagnosis of how sentence primacy could have been endorsed so widely is this. If one notices sub-sentential speech, and realizes that it may threaten sentence primacy, this thought is quickly forestalled with the dismissal “Well, that’s just ellipsis.” Without, of course, considering what sense of ‘ellipsis’ would actually be required to rescue sentence primacy, nor whether ellipsis in that sense really is, as a matter of empirical fact, taking place in natural language interchanges. Having spent long enough discussing that gambit, I won’t take the time to say again here what is wrong with it.

I have just discussed the centrality of natural language sentences within the language system. I have also discussed their centrality for cognition/thinking, and for conveying thoughts. I now turn, in the final chapter, to the centrality of natural language sentences in speech.
Queries in Chapter 10

Q1. Kindly, provide the details