

LANGUAGE AS EXISTENT

HARRY A. NIELSEN

No one voices skepticism about the existence of meaningful statements. Since Frege, however, along with the emergence of modern logic as a tool of analysis, the philosophy of language has drifted, I believe, toward a particular view of *how* they exist. This question takes on some importance in connection with Frege's "On Sense and Reference,"¹ Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,² and other difficult analyses of statement-meaning, because an answer to it would clarify the purpose of such analyses, the gap they are meant to fill. That is, a statement exists, according to these philosophers, in such a way as to pose problems concerning its relations to reality, and the *prima facie* purpose of the analyses is, it seems, to x-ray those relations. Yet the role of the analyses is not made fully clear just by saying that on the one hand we have language and on the other what it is about. If we are to avoid the old ptolemaic danger of a preconception which, without our noticing, sends us in pursuit of the wrong kind of complexity, we must also satisfy ourselves that the view of the *relata* which occasions analyses is itself an inevitable view. In suggesting that this remains in our time an unresolved danger to the philosophy of language, I have borrowed and adapted some ideas from Wittgenstein's later work.³

I

Since Frege, philosophers of language have given their blessing to certain uses of the words 'language' and 'statement' as in these examples:

- (a) '... the language or totality of designations . . .'⁴
- (b) '*Die Gesamtheit der Sätze ist die Sprache.*'⁵
- (c) '... our whole body of affirmations . . .'⁶
- (d) 'The system of statements as a whole . . .'⁷
- (e) '... a given language *L* . . .'⁸
- (f) '... given the syntax of a language . . .'⁹

Back of these and similar expressions, it seems to me, lies a particular way of thinking of how our language, or at any rate our statements, may be supposed to exist. To put it into words: *a human language exists as an*

aggregate of objects (words, gestures, etc.) having sign-value for some parish of humans, who use them according to rules which exclude some combinations. Under certain circumstances this way of putting it might sit well enough with anyone, for example if one were asked to prepare a definition of 'language'.¹⁰ Still, despite the great cautions taken by the authors of (a)-(f), it involves some risks in the context of meaning-analysis.

To begin, expressions such as 'totality', 'whole body' and 'system' in (a)-(d) suggest that the statements of our language enjoy a kind of existence on their own, corporate or scattered, not unlike an outfit of tools, a body of troops, or a system of telephone wiring. I do not mean that the authors of (a)-(d) would wish to second this impression. On the contrary, it is plain that our statements, our affirmations, do not co-exist like all the tools in a factory or all the soldiers in an army. But the disclaimer does not entirely stifle this impression. That is, so long as the mode of existence of statements has not been made clear, the use of expressions like 'totality' and 'whole body' may tempt us to carry the analogy between statements and physical co-existents beyond its margin of safety, even to the extent of making us suppose there *must* be meaning-rules as general as the laws which hold for physical co-existents, e.g., moving bodies.

Expressions (e) and (f) speak of a language, or a quite general aspect of language, as 'given'. Here we are to understand that a language not only can be learned—a point no one would question—but exists in a way that allows us to take its particulars in survey. The statements of our language are thought to be somehow co-present to the mind, if not in their full particularity then at least in their essentials *qua* statements. Now a general analysis of statement-meaning, or an analysis over a broad region, e.g., language of science or modal propositions, does demand that the field of statements under analysis be taken in survey. But how are they to be? Again, if we were talking about physical co-existents, this would be easy to answer. We see how an inventory-sheet 'gives' the toolroom clerk his stock of tools, and how an officer with a war map can remark, 'Given this disposition of the Afrika Korps. . .'. However, when it comes to statements—which the authors of (a)-(f) do not imagine exist as a mappable or countable array of beings in space—we are obliged to think of givenness in a rather different way.

In what sense, then, are the statements of our language *given*? Their co-presence to the mind is sometimes understood in terms of rules for correctly forming them, or in terms of a certain function such as describing or predicting which they are all presumed to serve, or in terms of definitions, exemplar-statements, or other devices which venture to catch the essence of statements. Thus, when we turn away from the analogy with physical co-existents, expressions (e) and (f) remind us of the way the word 'given' is used in theorems of geometry: 'given any right triangle', 'a given circle', 'within a given square', etc. In geometry construction-rules, exemplars and definitions capture the essentials of, say, right triangles, and put us in position to talk about all right triangles in one breath. Here the fact that in modern analyses of statement-meaning philosophers of language

make constant use of such devices might suggest that they think statements are given, brought under survey, in the way that right triangles are, i.e., through a construction-rule or formula that preserves what they have essentially in common.

On the other hand, this analogy threatens to break down as quickly as the one between statements and physical co-existents. The statements of our language do not exist very much like shapes passively displaying their properties on a hypothetical surface. The form of a statement, as we consider it in logic, preserves that which enables it to figure in inference, but not necessarily what makes it meaningful. That is, people *use* statements, including those of geometry and natural science, to help and hurt themselves and others in myriad ways—training, insulting, bearing false witness, changing the subject, encouraging, deceiving, aiming artillery, and so on. A clear decision seems needed, then, as to whether the formal make-up of statements, i.e., the formula for what they have in common, or the formula out of which statements can be created by substitution, suffices to ‘give’ them to us *for purposes of meaning-analysis*. For so long as the mode of existence of statements has not yet been made clear, expressions such as (e) and (f) can suggest that statements have an existence rather like that of geometric figures, and can lead us further to suppose there *must* be meaning-rules as general as the theorems which hold for all triangles, not to say as general as the laws of thought.

It wants deciding, then, whether what people do or can do with statements is not essential to their being *statements*. If statements existed in the way hammers do, this question would decide itself; it is not essential to something’s being a hammer, for example, that people can use it for a pry or a mobile. Similarly, no one counts it essential to right triangles that they have uses, e.g., in designing a house. But statements do not exist like those either.

This raises an important question about general analyses of statement-meaning. These, in their investigations of the relations between statements and what they are about, do not take account of the human practices in which statements figure when they are being used. We have to ask whether such analyses do not leave out some matters essential to statement-meaning. Notice that this question is not met by replying that meaning-analysis is concerned with the *descriptive*, or *predictive*, or *information-giving* use of statements, or by adding that that use of them at any rate can be ‘given’ in the ways mentioned before. Reference to description, prediction, etc., instead of characterizing people’s uses of statements, assimilates a great plurality of uses, nowhere completely listed, which are diversified by the human practices whose givenness for purposes of meaning-analysis is now in question. We are asking, in other words, in what sense statements may be said to exist, and to present themselves collectively for analysis, apart from people’s uses of them.

The mode of existence of statements is, I believe, strikingly like that of manual work. To bring out the likeness, and also to show its possible bearing upon theories of meaning, the following schema speaks of manual

work in the same way that modern philosophy of language seems to speak of statements: as (somehow) existing independently of, and related to, human doings, and as (somehow) gathered under survey for purposes of analysis. This schema will embody, as far as the likeness holds up, considerations parallel to those found in many theories of meaning concerning the essence and general function of language, self-reference, simples, negative facts, tautology, contradiction, false propositions, logical constants, and the *a priori*.

Analysis of Manual Work

A. Therbligs¹¹

- AA. Therbligs = *df.* elements of manual work.
- AB. There are sixteen kinds of therblig.¹²
- AC. All the manual work in the world is all the therbligs.
- AD. No element beyond those needed to complete a product is a therblig for that product.
- AE. A therblig is neither a product nor part of a product; it perishes in its accomplishment.
- AF. A therblig cannot be moved about. If it could be moved it would have to be moved, and another therblig would be required to move it, etc., so that no work would ever be done. If it could move itself it would survive its accomplishment.

B. The Relation of Therbligs to the World

- BA. Therbligs exist. Man is capable of using them to bring off any manual task.
- BB. Every therblig accomplishes something.
- BC. A therblig cannot fail, though a worker can.
- BD. Man uses therbligs according to rules of two kinds. The specifications for a product embody the first kind of rule, governing dimensions, quantity, material, etc. The other kind is *a priori* and need not be specified. E.g., a product must have been assembled if it is to be disassembled, but not *vice versa*; one cannot first assemble and then select a part; etc.
- BE. Therbligs must be either simple or composed of simples, because they are combinable to bring off tasks of any specifications.
- BF. Just as each product approximates the ideal called for by the specifications, each set of therbligs approximates an ideal set.
- BG. The relation of therbligs to the world is this: they determine how parts of any product go with the whole.

C. How Therbligs Function

- CA. The general function of therbligs is: connecting this part to that part.
- CB. Although 'delay' therbligs appear to have no connecting function, their importance in calculating production schedules shows their

- function. Even 'disassemble' therbligs, which suggest the very opposite of connecting part to part, make possible a correct connection, as for example when an engine is taken down to replace worn parts.
- CC. The cutting away of material, as in threading pipe, in a certain sense can hardly be said to connect parts. Yet it determines the positive slant and interval of the threads.
 - CD. Operations such as trundling parts to the assembly-bench connect therbligs rather than parts.
 - CE. 'Rest for overcoming fatigue', which seems at first not to share the general function of therbligs, prepares the way for any other therblig to follow. 'Unavoidable delay', while it is going on, does just the opposite; it prevents any other therblig from being used.
 - CF. A therblig, which cannot itself be moved, must move the part.
 - CG. A third entity, neither therblig nor part, must be posited to engage the two. This third will be the extremities of a worker, or extensions thereto.
 - CH. This third engages with the part on the side of the worker's skin-surfaces, and with the therblig on the side of his muscular contraction.

II

Grounds for rejecting our therblig-theory go deeper than its accidental faults, which a defter hand at theories might remedy. A particular way of speaking about therbligs generated the seeming need for analysis, a way of speaking which represented them as existing independently of, and related to, the uses they serve and the people who do manual work. It also represented therbligs as (somehow) given or gathered in survey for purposes of analysis. That way of speaking, it would be fair to say, carries within itself the challenge to discover the general function of therbligs in the world, as if to say 'Therbligs exist, they are the commonest thing in the world, and now we ought to be able to explain how it happens that this duality—the world of therbligs and the world—meshes so well'.

The view of how therbligs exist which would occasion such a theory is hardly an inevitable view. It is, to say the least, an unclarified view. Therbligs exist and are related to the world only in so far as people do manual work. Particular jobs of work, e.g., drilling a hole, plucking a fowl, soldering two wires together, pose no problem about their function or relation to the world. Nor can we boast that the theory unifies the concept of manual work by finding a thread that runs through all kinds of therblig. No one in the first place imagines that a formal unity must underlie therbligs so visibly diverse as 'assemble', 'rest for overcoming fatigue' and 'plan', though it is true that all of these occur in manual work. No one assumes that the huge gallery of techniques, knacks, applications and purposes which go into manual work must have rules which extend over the whole domain.

If the likeness between the ways in which therbligs and statements exist goes as far as I have suggested, some of these strictures against the therblig-theory would seem to carry over to meaning-analysis. However, there is at least one respect in which the likeness breaks down. That is, the nimbus of mystery which surrounded manual work had to be invented. With language it is different. Manual work, one could protest, is not about anything; it does not carry meaning from soul to soul; it does not stand in for reality. It is in this dimension of meaning that the philosopher of language finds depth and the need for analysis. Further, the challenge to enunciate meaning-rules binding for all statements, or for important blocs of statements such as those of science, finds apparent justification in the fact that our statements, unlike our therbligs, look and sound quite alike.¹³

These protests do, I believe, show cracks in the analogy between statements and therbligs. No doubt there are many more cracks. My only reply would be that these differences do not themselves clarify the matter of *how* statements exist, or *how* their mode of existence enables us to bring them under perspicuous survey for purposes of meaning-analysis. Our analogy merely leaves open this question: is it not essential to statements, as it is to therbligs, to serve human purposes and to figure in human doings? And if this belongs to their essence, are we nevertheless to seek an understanding of statement-meaning apart from those purposes and doings?

NOTES

1. Cf. Gottlob Frege. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings*. Translated by P. Geach and M. Black. Oxford: Blackwell's, 1952.
2. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922.
3. Mainly *Philosophical Investigations*. London and New York: Macmillan, 1953.
4. Frege, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
5. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.001.
6. W. V. Quine, *Methods of Logic* (revised ed.) New York: Henry Holt, 1959, p. xii.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xv.
8. R. Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity*. U. of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 234.
9. B. Russell, Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, p. 8.
10. It is interesting to compare the following definitions of 'language', the first from an encyclopedic dictionary, the second prepared for purposes of philosophical analysis:

"The whole body of uttered signs employed and understood by a given community as expression of its thoughts; the aggregate of

words, and of methods of their combination into sentences, used in a community for communication and record and for carrying on the processes of thought. . .”

The Century Dictionary, New York, 1914.

“By ‘language’, in its most general sense, I wish to denote any aggregate of objects which are themselves meaningful or else are such that certain combinations of them are meaningful.”

B. Mates, “Synonymity”. In L. Linsky, *Semantics and The Philosophy of Language*. Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1952, p. 111.

11. The word ‘therblig’ is borrowed from industrial time-and-motion research.
12. The sixteen kinds are: Terminal Therbligs (grasp, position, preposition, assemble, disassemble, release load); Gross Movement Therbligs (transport empty, transport loaded); Hesitant Movement Therbligs (search, select); Delay Therbligs (hold, unavoidable delay, avoidable delay, rest for overcoming fatigue); Therbligs Accompanied by Thinking (plan, inspect). Cf. M. E. Mundel, *Motion and Time Study*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950, pp. 228-231.
13. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xi.

University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana