

The Context Principle

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Abstract

The context principle holds that only sentences have meaning in isolation. Three readings of this principle are introduced and explained: a methodological reading, a metasemantic reading, and an interpretation/psychological reading. Reasons for endorsing the principle are introduced, as is an objection from the use in isolation of sub-sentences.

It is a near truism of philosophy of language that *a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence*, sometimes formulated as the claim that *only sentences have meaning in isolation*. This is the Context Principle, first stressed in Western philosophy by Frege (1884), endorsed early on by Wittgenstein (1922: 51), and sanctioned more recently by Quine (1951: 42) among many others. (I say ‘in Western philosophy’ because the Fregean Principle, and several different ways of understanding it, seem to have been foreshadowed in classical Indian philosophy. See Matilal and Sen (1988).)

In what follows, I provide some background to the Principle, I canvass three ways of reading it (a methodological reading, a metasemantic reading, and an

interpretational/psychological reading), and I offer some reasons for endorsing the Principle, and some reasons for being skeptical.

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. And different authors take Frege to endorse different readings of the Principle: nearly everyone would agree that he accepts the methodological reading, but it's less clear which of the others he endorsed. Such scholarly issues will not be my concern here. For a thorough discussion, see Dummett (1981: 369ff) and Dummett (1993a).

A. Sentence Primacy: Three Interpretations of the Context Principle

The Context Principle gives primacy to sentences. Specifically, sentences are taken to be semantically prior to the words which make them up. The Principle is, in this regard, a member of a family of theses which has some whole being somehow "prior" to its parts. 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. Most importantly for present purposes, one can mean different things by 'prior'. Of particular interest here, one can take sentences to be methodologically prior, metasemantically prior, or interpretationally prior to the words that compose them.

Let me begin with the methodological reading of the Principle. In his *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Frege (1884: x) famously 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”. Taken as a methodological precept, this 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).

The second reading of the Context Principle I want to consider is the metasemantic reading. A metasemantic view is a view about where meaning comes from. It poses an “in virtue of what” question. Here’s an example. Suppose we ask,

1. In virtue of what is the sound /**to:fu**/ 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 (1), what the sound /**to:fu**/ means. We're asking, rather, why it means what it does. Nor is this the causal-historical question about the steps whereby /**to:fu**/ 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 emerge from “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 meaning they do. The claim 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. Unlike the first reading of the Principle, this doctrine is not about where one should look to find out about meaning; it is, rather, a doctrine about where meaning comes from, i.e., the basic source of meaning. What the Principle says is: the only things that have meaning nonderivatively are sentences, so it must be in virtue of their role within sentences that subsentential expressions have meaning at all.

Here's the same idea put another way: Suppose that some expressions get their meaning from how they alter the meanings of larger wholes. Suppose, indeed, that 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 claim says: the things that have meaning nonderivatively are sentences.

One argument for this metasemantic claim goes like this. The only things that can be used in isolation, i.e., used without being embedded in a larger structure, are sentences. As Michael Dummett (1973: 194) puts it:

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...

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 non-derivative meaning that it does because of the kinds of actions speakers can perform with it. But, as suggested just above, those just are the sentences. So words must get their meaning because they appear in meaningful sentences. Dummett, expanding on this Wittgensteinian theme, 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 (1973: 495. See also Dummett 1993a.)

Does this mean that one must first grasp the meaning of each of the infinite number of sentences in the language, only then solving for word-meanings? No, not least because doing so is not humanly possible. To avoid this problem, 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 simple sentences whose meaning one grasps from use; one then presumably solves for the meaning of the 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 in the (unfamiliar) sentences and how those words are structured. Either move would save the proponent of the metasemantic thesis from endorsing the absurd view that one first understands all sentences, and only then understands any words.

So far we've looked at two readings of the Context Principle. The first was merely methodological, a claim about how to find out what particular words mean: to find word-meanings, look at what they contribute to sentences. The second reading was metasemantic, a claim about why words have the meanings they do: words only have meaning because of how they impact upon sentence meanings. The third reading of the Principle is interpretational/psychological. It is an empirical claim about the psychology underlying comprehension. Dummett (1993b: 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 Principle is the most straightforward of the three: the idea is that the only things we are psychologically able to understand are whole sentences. Put in terms of generative capacity, the claim would amount to this: the only thing that our semantic competence generates are meanings for whole sentences; it does not output 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. Even this most straightforward of the three readings admits of further sub-readings, however. 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 1993b: 109). This would mean that one could “know the meaning” of a word in isolation, but that whenever one put that knowledge to work, in actual understanding, it would have to be in grasping a sentential content. This last is what the Context Principle would come to, on this weaker sub-reading of the interpretational/psychological principle.

B. Motivating the Context Principle

Having explained three senses in which one could take whole sentences to be prior to the words that make them up, I turn to reasons for endorsing sentence primacy. Some of these reasons support just one reading of ‘priority’. Some support more than one. Given the limited space, I will mention only three such reasons, and will leave for the reader the question of which reason supports which reading of ‘Sentences are prior’.

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 word isn't some idea that we associate with it, but is instead the thing which the word contributes to the meaning of larger 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 (1884: 71).

So, one advantage of endorsing the Principle is that it keeps us from making such a mistake.

Another related motivation is this: "Starting from the top" -- focusing on whole sentence meanings, and only then considering what the parts must mean, in order for the observed whole-meaning to be generated -- opens up the possibility of novel and surprising accounts of what the parts mean. Indeed, it becomes possible to conceive of syntactic parts that, though they have some sort of impact on meaning, do not themselves have a meaning in isolation. Such parts receive only what is called "a contextual definition". This is best explained by appeal to an example. If we start by looking at the phrasal parts of 'The king of France is bald', asking what they mean, it can seem

inevitable that the phrase ‘The king of France’ must stand for an object. What else could its meaning be, in isolation? This, of course, raises all manner of ontological issues: What is this bizarre object, since there is, in reality, no king of France? How can such an unreal entity be bald, or not, so as to render this sentence true or false? And so on. Crucially, however, if we pursue the methodology suggested here, and start with the whole sentence, we may notice, with Russell (1905), that the sentence as a whole means: *There is exactly one king of France, and every king of France is bald.* We may further notice that this whole-meaning can be generated without assigning any reference at all to the phrase ‘The king of France’. This isn’t to say that this phrase makes no difference to what the whole means – patently it does make a difference. But, in place of a meaning-entity for ‘The king of France’, all we need is a rule, a contextual definition, which says:

2. A sentence of the form “The *F* is *G*” is true iff exactly one thing is *F* and everything which is *F* is *G*.

Taking this contextual definition to be the meaning determining rule, we simply avoid the issue of what phrase ‘The king of France’ stands for -- since it itself, upon analysis, does not contribute a constituent to the whole-meaning. Another methodological advantage of the Context Principle, then, is that it’s rather easier to arrive at this kind of contextual definition than if we begin with what the parts mean, in isolation.

A second kind of advantage is that, by strictly obeying the Context Principle, we will automatically meet a key constraint 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, insofar as these are the sole

determinants of whole meanings, we can explain why people 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 familiar.

Second, were whole meanings not compositional, it would be an utter mystery how we finite beings could in principle know the meaning of the infinite number of sentences that, though we never have heard them, we would, but for our finite lifetime and memory, be capable of understanding. That is, compositionality accounts for an observed ability in practice, and a (different though related) ability in principle. 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:

$$3. \text{ Whole meaning} = \langle \text{part-meaning}_1, \text{part-meaning}_2, \dots, \text{part-meaning}_i, \dots \text{part-meaning}_n \rangle + \text{structure}$$

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 meanings of the other parts, and structure:

$$4. \text{ Part-meaning}_i = \text{Whole meaning} - (\langle \text{part-meaning}_1, \text{part-meaning}_2, \dots \text{part-meaning}_n \rangle + \text{structure})$$

So, if we assign part meanings in line with (4), i.e., the Context Principle, we can't help but get the desired result vis-à-vis (3), i.e., compositionality. (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.

A third kind of motivation for endorsing the Principle is that it seems to be connected with several other holistic primacy theses, each of which is independently motivated. (Unfortunately, space doesn't permit me to explain what the independent motivation is for these other theses. See Brandom 1994, chapter 2, sections II and III for discussion. He also provides a nice overview of the relations among these various primacy claims.) Kant (1787) 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. Put otherwise, whereas classical empiricists started with representations of individual objects and of universals, and built up 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. The early Wittgenstein also insisted that facts are prior to the objects and properties that make them up: "The world is the totality of facts, not of things" (1922: 31). In a related move, Dummett (1973) has urged, following the later Wittgenstein, that the practice of assertion – and other full-fledged "moves in the language game" – is prior to the act of referring. As Wittgenstein put it:

For naming and describing do not stand on the same level: naming is a preparation for description. Naming is so far not a move in the language-game – any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess. We may say: *nothing* has so far been done, when a thing has been named. It has not even *got* a name except in the language-game. This was what Frege meant too, when he said that a word had meaning only as part of a sentence" (1953: 24).

Adopting these primacy theses can, each in their own way, lead one to expect sentences to be primary as well. Goes the idea, what is judged are sentential representations; the linguistic item which corresponds to a fact is a sentence; the linguistic item that we assert with is the sentences.

C. A Possible Objection to the Context Principle

Having noted three kinds of reasons for embracing the Context Principle, let me end with an objection that may come immediately to mind. First, it seems that adults speak in sub-sentences all the time. I see a woman wearing a lovely garment and say to my wife, ‘Nice dress’. I receive a letter in the mail, hold it up, and say to my companion, ‘From Spain’. Such talk is absolutely ubiquitous. (For empirical support, see the papers in Elugardo & Stainton 2004, and the many references cited there. An overview may be found in Stainton 2004.) Second, children learning a language seem to start with sub-sentences – which makes it equally hard to see how grasping a sentential meaning could be a prerequisite for grasping a sub-sentential one. Before I end, I want to consider the problem that such sub-sentential speech might pose for the Principle.

Start with the methodological reading. It’s 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. Nonsentential 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 sub-sentence use actually poses no problems for the Principle, on this first reading.

What of the metasemantic doctrine? Notice that 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 is why they were denied meaning, fundamentally speaking. But this key premise looks false, if words 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 sub-sentence use, if genuine, does not *falsify* the Principle read in this way – but it does leave one in need of an empirically adequate argument for meaning having to come from sentences alone.

It might seem that a better argument for the claim that meaning must still come from sentences, is ready-to-hand: surely this doctrine is required *to preserve compositionality*. As I stressed above, you don't get (3) above unless you also accept (4); and (4) requires that word meanings, i.e., the meaning of the parts, not exceed what they contribute to full sentences. In fact, however, 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 (4) 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. This does not support any claim about "sources". Moreover, if words are used in isolation, then, though sentence use might be one source, it surely 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's 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: "Look, it can't be that most genuine experts are wrong about what's beautiful. They wouldn't be experts otherwise". This wouldn't really succeed as an argument for the meta-aesthetic view because, even granting this, 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 get 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.

Before moving on, let me make a brief detour into a related issue. One reason it matters whether the metasemantic doctrine is upheld is this: If sentence-meaning is the only source of word-meaning, then it's arguable that the latter is indeterminate. That is, there might be no fact of the matter about what individual words "really mean". The argument goes like this. We can hold constant the meaning of every sentence in the

language, while varying the contribution that we assign to the words within those sentences. To give a highly simplified example, one way to assign the right meaning to the Spanish sentence ‘María no fuma’ [“María doesn’t smoke”] is to assign the person MARIA to ‘María’, SMOKES to ‘fuma’, and DOESN’T to ‘no’. But another way, which still gives the right meaning for the whole sentence, is to assign the person MARIA to ‘María no’, and DOESN’T SMOKE to ‘fuma’. Now, with respect to this highly simplified example, we can find reasons for picking the first over the second option: ‘fuma’, ‘no’ and ‘María’ show up in lots of sentences, and their contribution in those other sentences is, surely, SMOKES, DOESN’T and MARIA respectively. So, that’s what they contribute here too. But suppose we revised our view of the meaning of the other parts in *all* sentences containing ‘fuma’, ‘María’ and ‘no’. Surprisingly, it has been suggested that this sort of rearrangement is something we could systematically do. The result would be that the complete set of sentences containing a given word leaves us with various options about what the word means. And, assuming that the meaning of all sentences in which a word occurs is the sole thing that metaphysically determines its meaning, there can be no single thing which is “the meaning of ‘fuma’”. This is the thesis of indeterminacy. (See Quine 1960 and Putnam 1981 for worked out examples.) I introduce the indeterminacy thesis because it highlights the sense in which the metasemantic version of the Context Principle says more than “the meanings one assigns to words must fit with the meanings one assigns to sentences containing those words”. Beyond this, it also says that the word meanings are *exhausted* by sentence meanings – in a way that can lead to indeterminacy. In contrast, if word meanings depend also upon how words are used on their own, then even if the complete set of sentence meanings

doesn't fix the meaning of individual words, we cannot yet conclude that word meaning is indeterminate. For word meaning might be more completely fixed by how words in isolation are used. (For more on this connection between the Context Principle and indeterminacy, see Stainton 2000.)

We have seen that sub-sentence use is consistent with the methodological reading of the Context Principle. It is also consistent with the metasemantic reading, though it leaves this latter doctrine in need of an empirically adequate supporting argument. Consider finally the interpretational/psychological doctrine. It 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 subsentential speech. There is no hope for making it consistent with genuine sub-sentence use: apparently, hearers understand subsentential expressions in isolation; hence their semantic competence must generate a meaning for such expressions in isolation. The best hope for the Principle read in this strongest way is thus to deny that the phenomenon of sub-sentential speech is genuine: adults do not actually speak in sub-sentences, they merely appear to do so. What is really going on is that adults speak "elliptically" in some sense – they produce sentences, but those sentences somehow "sound abbreviated". (See Stanley 2000 for this sort of idea.) As for children, who appear to grasp word meanings long before they grasp the meanings of any sentences, a proponent of the interpretational reading of the Context Principle must make some fairly implausible suggestions. She either may insist that children actually do *understand* sentence meanings even though they do not speak in sentences, or she may claim that what children mean by their words (e.g., *doggie*) is not what the adult word means: the child's expression, she might insist, is

actually a one-word sentence meaning “There is a dog”, and hence not synonymous with our word. (That is, on this second disjunct, the idea would be that children actually do not employ/understand *our* words outside sentences, but rather they employ homophonous sentences – until, that is, they are also competent with *our* sentences.)

Does this inconsistency with the interpretational reading mean that the other primacy doctrines – of judgment, facts and assertion – are also required to make these implausible empirical claims? After all, it was suggested that those doctrines supported sentence primacy. I think the answer is negative. That’s because I do not think that these other primacy doctrines really do entail anything about only sentences being used and only sentence-meanings being graspable occurrently. At best what they lend credence to is the primacy of a certain sort of content, namely the proposition. For, strictly speaking, it is propositions that are judged, propositions which correspond to facts, and propositions which are exchanged in assertion. And sub-sentential speech doesn’t call the centrality of propositions into question: when I say ‘Nice dress’ or ‘From Spain’, *I* still convey something propositional, viz. a proposition about the salient dress to the effect that it is nice, and a proposition about the letter to the effect that it is from Spain, respectively. I merely do so using linguistic expressions that aren’t propositional. So, sub-sentential speech leaves proposition primacy intact. To move immediately and without further argument to any conclusion about the syntactic structures which (purportedly) express propositions, however, is to commit some kind of global use/mention error, running together features of a content (i.e., a proposition) with features of its supposed linguistic “vehicle” (i.e., a sentence). In short, even if you take judgments, facts or assertions to be

primary, you needn't endorse the Context Principle vis-à-vis interpretation – since the latter is about the centrality of a certain class of syntactic items.

Time to sum up. I have laid out three different ways of reading the Context Principle: methodological, metasemantic and interpretational/psychological. I also noted three rationales for embracing the Principle: to avoid the errors of psychologism, to enforce compositionality, and because of links to other independently motivated “primacy doctrines”. I ended with an objection to the Principle, from non-sentence use. The suggested result, in the face of this objection, was two parts consistency and one part inconsistency: (a) the first reading of the Principle would be untouched, (b) the second would be left unsupported, but (c) the third reading would be outright falsified, so that the proponent of this reading of the Principle must make some (implausible) empirical claims to the effect that people don't actually speak sub-sententially.¹

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Biography

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