Chomskyan Linguistics and Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Language:

Contrast, Conflict, and Hopes for Reconciliation

Peter Wagner
Philosophy 97
Spring '92
"The spirit informing this book is obviously skeptical and critical. In pursuing the clarification of concepts, we also demonstrate a readiness to demolish large parts of what pass for significant modern intellectual achievements. But our ultimate purpose is not to persuade linguists or philosophers that their theories are false, thereby encouraging them to redouble their efforts and to construct ever more sophisticated and subtle theories. It is rather to suggest that their endeavors are futile because pointless and misconceived. It will, no doubt, appear to them that we are trying to suppress the light, to deflect them from the true path of a science. In fact we are suggesting that what appears to be sunrise is merely a false dawn, that the path they are following with such enthusiasm leads to the wastelands of the intellect where there is only 'dry sterile thunder without rain'." —G.P. Baker & P.M.S. Hacker, *Language, Sense and Nonsense*, pg. 13

"...In fact, I will argue that Chomsky's great philosophical contribution to meaning theory has been to elaborate a framework of assumptions that would allow syntactic devices to substitute for obscure semantic apparatus that the later Wittgenstein justly criticized. This syntactic shift provides the means for rendering the later Wittgenstein his due without succumbing to the anti-theoretical nihilism that his writings often engender."—Norbert Hornstein, *Reflections on Chomsky*, pg. 23
Introduction

In this paper I consider two radically opposing views of language and human linguistic competence. One is Chomsky’s generative program in theoretical linguistics; the other is the approach to language presented by Wittgenstein in his Philosophical Investigations. My purpose in this is to critically evaluate generative theory as it seems to be in conflict with Wittgenstein’s work in the Investigations. As shall become clear, there are many obstacles to making such an evaluation.

In my experience, the conflicts between Chomsky’s and Wittgenstein’s approaches to language are such that they have traditionally inspired two reactions. I want to explain these reactions as they background and make intelligible my concerns in this paper. One reaction, which I stereotype as that of (Witgensteinian) philosophers, is to conclude that theoretical linguistics is a misconceived discipline which fails to recognize certain realities human understanding, and which consequently should be abandoned. The other reaction, which I stereotype as that of linguists, is to conclude that Wittgenstein’s remarks, insofar they engender much ‘anti-theoretical-nihilism’, are really of no consequence to an empirical investigation of language. In my opinion, each of these reactions is undesirable; each fails to appreciate important insights which are to be found in Wittgenstein’s and Chomsky’s work. Contrary to these, I think that both Chomsky’s and Wittgenstein’s approaches need to be embraced, coordinated with each other, and, where necessary, revised if we are to have anything like a comprehensive understanding of human linguistic competence.

The structure of this paper is as follows: The first two sections are essentially background explication of Chomsky and Wittgenstein. The first section presents a brief sketch of some important assumptions which stand behind Chomsky’s generative linguistics program. Originally I intended for this section to be more comprehensive, including some background on the nature of generative theory: this is not happening for various reasons. By and large, in this paper I do not assume a substantial understanding of generative theory itself. In section three, however, I do assume a certain familiarity with Chomsky’s ideas that grammar is innate and that linguistic forms are represented in the mind(—So be warned). The second section explicates some aspects of the
approach to language which Wittgenstein advances in the Philosophical Investigations. Specifically, it focuses on how Wittgenstein criticizes the notion of an essence or mental representation as a ground for human linguistic competence, and how he instead advances the idea of language as a kind of practice. The third section—the only one which is actually essential for the purpose outlined above—has two principle objectives. The first is to criticize two previous attempts at evaluating linguistic theory in relation to its conflicts with Wittgenstein. I take these attempts to be deeply flawed, and I take them to be indicative of the most attempts generally. The other is to advance my own evaluation of linguistics (again, in relation to Wittgenstein), with the hope of circumventing the disturbing failure which I believe most other attempts to make. Following this is a conclusion.
The goal of this section is to present a (very) brief review of certain background assumptions which are implicit to Chomsky’s work on generative linguistics. The most important aspects to consider here are 1) the continuity which Chomsky claims between his program and the traditional practices of philosophy and science, and 2) the nature of the scientific/psychological questions which he takes to be compelling. For the most part, my discussion is simply derivative of remarks made by Chomsky in his book *Language and Problems of Knowledge* (LPK).

Chomsky begins LPK by suggesting that questions about the nature of human language are significant in two different, but related contexts. Questions about language, especially about our knowledge of language, have an important place both in the context of “traditional philosophy and psychology” as well as in the context of contemporary science. He explains this situation further: Questions about natural language have always been especially significant in the traditions of philosophy and psychology. This is because, he says, these are disciplines which historically have been concerned with understanding the “essential nature” of human beings. As a species-wide and species-specific property, natural language plainly identifies itself as an important aspect of our human nature which calls out for deeper understanding. Because of this, philosophers and psychologists have often looked to human speech abilities as an essential indicator of the kind of things we are and the sort of things we do.

Contemporary science, on the other hand, has become involved with questions about natural language by a different route. Unlike philosophy and psychology, the physical sciences have historically had little to say about essential nature of human beings. They have only recently come to approach this topic\(^1\). This is because for various reasons, the boundaries which have

\(^1\) Consider, in contrast, that for Descartes, questions about the essential nature of human beings were, in fact, questions about the nature of minds, substances which were not open to explanation in terms of physical laws.
traditionally segregated inquires about human nature into separate disciplines from inquires into physical science have become questionable. Contemporary science more and more tries to incorporate the address of human issues into the general program by which it seeks to investigate nature universally. Specifically, because of recent advancements in biology and computer science, it has become plausible for scientists to believe that many traditional questions about human nature, including questions about human language, may be approached scientifically, perhaps even in terms of biological explanations. Importantly, it is in this spirit of science that Chomsky comes to take up questions about the nature of language and the human mind. Ultimately, it is his ambition to give scientific explanations to the mysteries of natural language, mysteries which have for centuries succeeded at keeping an essential knowledge of our human nature hidden from us.

Delving into the mysteries of human language, Chomsky initially raises certain interesting questions about the nature of our knowledge of language. Specifically, he questions how such knowledge comes to be learned by and represented in the mind/brain of a speaker. In his own words, he describes the dilemma thus:

"A person who speaks a language has developed a certain system of knowledge, represented somehow in the mind and, ultimately, in the brain in some physical configuration. In pursuing [this topic], then, we will face a series of questions, among them:
(1) What is the system of knowledge? What is in the mind/brain of a speaker of English or Spanish or Japanese?
(2) How does this system of knowledge arise in the mind/brain?
(3) How is the knowledge put to use in speech (or in secondary systems such as writing)?
(4) What are the physical systems which serve as the material basis for this system of knowledge and for the use of this system of knowledge?" (LPK p. 3)

In posing these questions, Chomsky articulates what he considers to be the "essential framework" for further inquiry into the relationship between language and mind. In this sense these questions suggest what sort of issues a linguistic science can be expected to deal with. Briefly, I'd like to flesh out these expectations, elaborating on what each means and how it is actually addressed by generative theory.

Question one suggests that at its core, generative linguistics is concerned with formulating hypotheses about what a speaker's "knowledge of language" essentially consists in. This
basically amounts to speculation on how linguistic knowledge is represented in the mind/brain. In this context, talking about the “representation” of a speaker’s linguistic knowledge is roughly parallel to talking about its symbolization in some abstract medium, in this case the mind. A scientist investigating a person’s linguistic knowledge approaches the subject by viewing the person’s knowledge as he would a set of symbols whose identity and properties of combination he must deduce. In this case the linguistic forms which are evidence of a person’s knowledge of language are considered to be translatable into grammatical forms which symbolically encode grammatical similarities which exist covertly beneath the surface of normal utterances. The essence of a person’s linguistic knowledge has been explained when the scientist has discovered what the symbols are and the rules for their combination are as well.

Question two indicates linguistics is also concerned with formulating hypotheses about how knowledge of language comes to be present in the mind/brain. Essentially, this challenge amounts to developing a causal story for how language is learned. The story which linguistics chooses to tell here is basically a cognitive or functional approach to explaining language acquisition. Chomsky’s generative theory equates a person’s acquisition of linguistic competence with their development of a specific and complex set of “cognitive states” in the mind/brain. The development of these states is a very mechanical process; unlike many other prominent approaches to learning, Chomsky’s relies only slightly upon environmental influences in determining the character of a person’s knowledge. Linguistic knowledge is, as he says, innate.

Chomsky’s third question is, in one sense, not very distinct from his first question. It is indeed strange to imagine that a scientist who knows what knowledge of language essentially consists in does not also know how that knowledge is evident in a person’s speech. However, Chomsky’s purpose in asking this question is actually more subtle than this. By treating question three like it asks something distinct from question one, Chomsky is suggesting that a person’s capacity know a language is something which is essentially distinct from his ability to speak it. He feels this distinction is too often neglected by many philosopher—and particularly Anthony Kenny. Kenny denies that a coherent distinction can be drawn between a person’s knowing language and his ability to speak it. Whereas Chomsky believes that what is known by a speaker is a
psychological or physical entity which exists independently in the mind/brain, Kenny believes that what is known does not exist separately from its use in a linguistic practice. This debate between Chomsky and Kenny is an important one, and it’s terms are critical to both our understanding of the generative program and the criticisms of it which we will subsequently consider.

Chomsky’s fourth question brings up the task of determining which parts of the brain are actually the physical manifestation of our linguistic knowledge. This question stands as the final challenge for inquiries into language and mind. It requires that linguistic theories ultimately be determinable in terms of physical evidence. If nothing else, this is a bold claim, and it is perhaps most significant in that it allies the generative research more closely to endeavors in the physical sciences than to those traditionally adopted in psychology. However, it is also important to notice that although Chomsky, in principle, accepts this challenge for generative research, he is very careful not to bind his program too heavily to any immediate need for physical evidence. In fact, he rather plainly retreats from any immediate expectations here. He claims that finding physical evidence is not properly the concern of generative researchers. Rather, this topic is something which will ultimately be a concern for biology, and perhaps also for computer science. Someday these disciplines will be employed to search for the physical and cognitive architectures which linguists have hypothesized. However, still too little is known about the first three questions to give any reasonable foundation for biologists, et. al. to speculate on this issue.

Hopefully these questions, as they are concerned with the essence, origin, and material basis for linguistic knowledge, provide some insight into the issues and claims of Chomsky’s generative program. Along with his earlier remarks on the contexts in which the study of natural language is most important, these questions—the “essential framework” for linguistic inquiry—reveal the stringently scientific and individualistic character of Chomsky’s investigation of human language. It is important to keep this in mind when comparing his program that of Wittgenstein.
The purpose of this section is to explore some aspects of the Wittgensteinian approach to the topics of language and mind. Wittgenstein's treatment of these topics is especially pertinent to a criticism of Chomsky's work because it sharply contrasts in the assumptions and conclusions which it brings to and from these topics. As discussed previously, Chomsky sees human language and mental abilities as categories of natural phenomena which are in need of scientific explanations. Wittgenstein, in contrast, sees them as aspects of our being which reveal the normative and transparent character of our knowledge, as well as the importance of our immersion in social forms of life. In clear opposition to Chomsky, Wittgenstein believes that it is a source of great confusion to try to understand our linguistic and mental faculties in terms of the same concepts and methods we use in developing a scientific understanding of nature. Attempts to do this have the inevitable consequence of producing nonsense. The foundations for this charge will be examined more thoroughly below.

One of Wittgenstein's chief projects in Philosophical Investigations (PI) is to show that philosophy, as traditionally practiced, is deeply confused and misguided. Principally, its confusion stems from the fact that it tries to extend the grammar of our language in ways which it simply does not go. The chief result of these attempts is to produce nonsense. The problems, questions, and claims to deep knowledge with which philosophy has traditionally busied itself are all misbegotten; they all fail to recognize the sensible, meaningful forms of expression. Consequently, more or less all philosophic and philosophically grounded endeavors must be abandoned—theoretical linguistics included.

Support for this criticism of philosophy comes from the novel and insightful new conception of language which Wittgenstein advances in his remarks in the Investigations. Compared to previous conceptions of language, Wittgenstein's remarks are perhaps most striking because they challenge and cast doubt upon the idea that there is some essence to our language
which determines how it is meant and understood\(^1\). His remarks are also striking because they call for the related dismissal of the idea that our faculty for language (and for knowledge generally) is at base something which is representational. In what follows, I will try to explicate each of these situations a little further. My hope is to sketch a general overview of how these and other aspects of Wittgenstein's remarks combine to form a coherent picture capable of usurping traditional conceptions language and mind.

Wittgenstein rejects the idea that there is an essence (logical, metaphysical, or otherwise) to linguistic forms which determines how we mean and understand them. This idea leads to deep confusions when we try to determine what such essences are or how they become realized in language. Instead, he demonstrates that understanding and meaning are actually determined by how language is used by members of a speech community. He argues that meaning and understanding should be recognized as things which reside in, or arise from, the agreement which surrounds a 'social practice'. Speaking in code, a social practice can be defined as the performative aspect of a person's intelligent behavior for which there exist publicly agreed upon criteria for the ascription of a correct performance. However, this definition is pretty opaque. I'll try to rectify this in the course of the following considerations.

To understand what is at issue here, and to see what it means to say that language is a social practice, it is important to understand (the metaphysical nature of) the conceptions of language and meaning to which Wittgenstein's later work responds. The Investigations\(^2\) is most obviously a response to his earlier work in the Tractatus, and its notion of logical atomism. It is also clearly a response to work by Russell, and to the characterization of language-learning found in Augustine. Less narrowly, the Investigations may be seen as a response to any conception of language or meaning which claims that the meaningful nature of linguistic utterances is derived

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\(^1\) The notion of essence being subscribed to here is something which imposes a certain amount of material or logical necessity on a linguistic practice, and which is manifest in either a rational or material form. Examples are things like platonic forms, Cartesian ideas, or the brain-state of a speaker who understands the English word "California".

\(^2\) When I speak of the Investigations, I should make the qualification that I am thinking principally of the early part of the book. My concern is mostly with Wittgenstein's remarks on the nature of language and the confusions of philosophy. I do not address the issues of following a rule, or private language. I should also mention that my familiarity with the Investigations after section 315 is lacking.
from their correspondence to (or “picturing” of) certain aspects of reality3 (be it a physical, logical, platonic, or whatever kind of reality).

To appreciate the difficulties which arise in construing the meaning of an utterance as something like a semantic essence or primitive, we should consider how Wittgenstein begins the Investigations. He begins with a criticism of the idea that learning and using language is, at its base, a matter of learning to attach the right names to the right objects. He takes from Augustine the example of a child who has learned to speak language by attending to the words and movements of his elders:

"When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. ...Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires." (PI 1)

In this passage, Augustine puts forth a rather common-sense conception of language-learning. It asserts that having knowledge of language essentially consists in knowing the proper connections between objects and words; that our capacity to make these connections follows from our ability to perceive them as they are drawn in the intentions of others; and that the expression of our desires (and intentions) is facilitated by our comprehension of these connections (this implies that we have such desires, etc. prior to our comprehension of language). In all of these respects, this notion of a connection between a word and an object makes an important presupposition: it presumes that there is some substratum of reality which exists independently of and in anticipation of its representation in the forms of language. (Another way of putting this is to say that the word and object are treated as if they are formally distinct.) It is important to realize this presumption because it is challenged and eventually discredited by Wittgenstein in the Investigations.

Before going on to consider Wittgenstein’s criticism of Augustine, it is important to first have a clear understanding of the ideas which underpin Augustine’s picture (It is necessary to know the significance of what is said, before we can see the significance of how it is refuted).

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3 It is not important that an utterance pictures reality in the sense that it be true of reality, just in the sense that it has the possibility of being true.
In a preliminary analysis of Augustine’s remark, Wittgenstein writes:

“These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words of a language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture of language, we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.” (PI §1, italics added)

With this remark, Wittgenstein exposes two significant assumptions of Augustine’s approach to language. These assumptions, as Wittgenstein formulates them, are that words are names, and that words stand for meanings. Augustine’s tacit commitment to these assumptions is important and revealing: they show his connection to very traditional approaches to language and meaning—especially those which are found in contemporary semantics. Taken out of context from the Investigations, the significance of the assumptions is somewhat unobvious. To compensate for this, I will explain their significance more thoroughly.

Firstly, Wittgenstein calls attention to how Augustine’s picture is founded on the idea that words are names. Through his child’s testimony, Augustine advances the idea that every meaningful word may and should be construed as a name of some thing (e.g. as the name of a concrete or abstract object, as the name of an activity, or as a name of a property of or relationship between such objects or activities). This idea is significant because Augustine treats it as if it were deeply revealing about the child’s capacity to use language and comprehend the world. It amounts, though perhaps only tacitly, to a philosophical claim about the representational nature of language and, more importantly, about how linguistic forms come to stand for and be about things in the world. The claim is as follows: To say that every word is a name obviously asserts that language pictures and represents the world through its capacity to correlate names names objects in the world. More subtly, however, this assertion (i.e. that words are names) makes a further presupposition about the character of the world itself. It presupposes that the world, in the possibility of its being pictured and represented by language, is itself a thing (or composition of things) whose possibility for revelation lies in that of its being named.

If we accept Augustine’s intuition that words are names, we are thus led to the conclusion that the world, insofar as it is an object of linguistic knowledge, must be understood as medium
filled with things whose essential nature is to bear a name. Significantly, conceiving of the world in this way is tantamount to its consisting of semantically 'simple' or 'fundamental' essences. At base, it is this metaphysical picture of the world—one construes the world as a composition of such fundamental essences—which is tacit to Augustine's conviction that words are names. Given that Augustine is rather silent on this point, it is important to explicitly recognize it.

Secondly, Wittgenstein suggests that behind this fundamental notion of a word being a name lies the further notion that every word stands for (or is correlated with) a meaning. Interestingly, he suggests that the meaning of a word actually is the 'object' for which that word stands. Intuitively, this suggestion may seem uncontroversial. However, it is in an apparent contrast to Augustine's picture (in which the "objects" are be actual physical entities), and hence its assertion merits some explanation.

By explicitly realizing a connection between a word and a meaning, Wittgenstein reveals another assumption which lies unarticulated beneath Augustine's words. This assumption is that a child's utterances do not stand in relation to the world without some form of mediation: 'some thing' must be posited which mediates the gap between the empty formalism of linguistic symbols and the vastly rich and overwhelming nature of the world which such formalism describes. To this point, we should realize that a mediation occurs in terms of a speaker's intentions; and likewise, that the thing which mediates is a 'meaning'.

Wittgenstein's introduction of meanings into Augustine's picture of word-object correspondences is thus both legitimate and illuminating. It shows how language may sensibly be said to represent the world only when this representation is assumed to occur in terms of a speaker's intentions and meanings. Importantly, once we notice that meanings as part of Augustine's picture, we naturally face the question what such meanings are—a point on which Augustine himself is obscure. The child, he says, 'grasps' the connection between its elders
actions and the object they name. Presumably, part of what is grasped is a meaning; however, this attribution of grasping reveals little about what meaning consists in, or how it is that it be stood for by a word.

In connection with contemporary work in semantics, this idea that a word stands for a meaning can be explained in the following way. The meaning of a word is understood in terms of some commonality which runs through all the real world objects for which the word stands. For example, the meaning of the word 'chair' is defined, at least in part, by a some property which is found to be common amongst all of things which we call chairs; i.e. all these things share common semantic properties which allow them to be included in the set of things called 'chairs'. Furthermore, we assume that in learning to use the word chair, a person internalizes some sort of generalization for applying the word; he learns what we might call a 'truth-rule' for using the word as a predicate. And, it is by reference to this rule that he is able to determine the extension of the word (as a predicate) in the world. In the case of Augustine's child, it is really this sort of rule which is "grasped" by the child; a connection is drawn between the word and the rule.

Given the above considerations, it should be clear that Augustine's picture of language learning is misleading in its apparent simplicity. As argued above, the claim that a child learns language by seeing words used to name objects depends on a number of unobvious philosophical assumptions. To recapitulate, it assumes that words are, fundamentally, names; and in this sense it glorifies this function of words above others, and these functions are themselves consequently seen as more superficial in nature. It also assumes that the world, insofar as it may be described in its logical and linguistic character, is a medium of name-bearing entities, whose nature is really that of simple conceptual essences. These essences, arising as objects of knowledge, are things grasped by the mind; their correspondence to "objective reality" occurs secondarily, through a determination of their extension. Thus, Augustine's picture further assumes that the world is split into a dual character—split between the real outer stuff and our (empirical) idealizations of it. Lastly, his picture assumes that the nature of a word's meaning is successfully revealed by claiming that it inheres to an abstract object (essence!) posited in his child's understanding. In our

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5 I am thinking of 'truth-rules' as they are defined by Jerry Fodor in his book Language of Thought. In general, my discussion here of what it means to know the meaning of a word is entirely derivative of the discussion in this book.
more modern phrasing, we say that the meaning inheres to a semantic primitive (again, an essence!) and is realized in terms of the satisfaction of its truth-conditions.

With respect to the underpinning of Augustine’s picture, it is these assumptions which must be recognized when we consider the nature and importance of Wittgenstein’s criticisms. By themselves, they are neither particularly attractive nor repellent in their appearance. However, they are a variety of philosophical baggage, something which we must carry if we take Augustine’s child to be making a coherent and significant statement about the nature of language. As will be argued below, there are good reasons for feeling that Augustine’s picture is simply too heavy to be worth its philosophical weight.

Now let’s turn to Wittgenstein’s critical response to the Augustinian approach to language. As mentioned before, the spirit of Wittgenstein’s approach to language in the *Investigations* is radically different from that of Augustine’s, and perhaps from any in the history of western thought. In a very marked contrast to previous ways of thinking, Wittgenstein argues that it is the use of a word, and not some property of representational content, which most reveals the real nature of our linguistic practices. Furthermore, it is through an investigation of how words are used that the wrong-mindedness of thinking of words as names is most plainly revealed.

On of Wittgenstein’s earliest projects in the *Investigations* is to show how Augustine’s picture errs by construing one paradigm of our grammar (i.e. that of naming) as a foundation for the rest of our linguistic knowledge. Although naming is clearly an important way in which we use words, it is certainly not the only way, nor even an especially fundamental way. In trying to turn us away from this misconception, Wittgenstein urges that we look freshly on the diversity of applications which are to be found in our everyday uses of language.

In contradiction to Augustine’s advocation of naming as the fundamental function of words, Wittgenstein urges us to realize that naming is itself only one among many activities which we perform with language. In principle, it is no different from any other linguistic activity which

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*It should be noted that the term ‘grammar’ as it is used in the *Investigations* is not comparable to that which is used in generative linguistics.*
we perform. And consequently, it is no more important either. [To elucidate this] Although we typically think of the expressions like ‘James T. Kirk’ as names, this tendency, which is itself an illusion, does not reveal anything universal in our speech. Consider how other expressions, e.g. ‘Slab-there!’ or ‘Miss Scarlet with the knife’, appear to us. These expressions typically would be identified as a command and a hypothesis respectively; they would not be thought of as names. These different attributions we make (i.e. that an expression is a name, a command, or a hypothesis) do not correspond to something deep or hidden in a word. Rather, they merely describe the different activities we use the word for. No description or activity is any more fundamental than another. Because a word is a name only in virtue of the activity we perform with its utterance, it is backwards to think of naming as a universal property of words or of language generally.

If it is still difficult to see the correctness of regarding naming as one among many activities, we should consider Wittgenstein’s remarks: "...naming is like attaching a label to a thing. One can say that this is preparatory for the use of the word. But what is it preparatory for?" (PI§26); and relatedly: "We name things and then can talk about them: can refer to them in talk."—As if what we did next given by the mere act of naming. As if there were only one thing called talking about a thing." (PI§27). Both of these remarks show the great shallowness which comes from thinking of language as a only as an essentially naming activity. If we think this, we have blinded ourselves to the extreme variety of things we do and diversity of things we may signify in using our words. (Naming does not show how a word signifies something; consider also the toolbox in PI§14.)

Relatedly, it is very important to realize that the use of a word determines whether we describe it as name, a command, or whatever. This shows how a word’s significance—i.e. how we mean it—is really a function of its use. It also shows how meaning is not something which may not be generalized to every application of a word. In light of this, it is plainly confused to think that the meaning of a word is something which is stood for by the word—e.g something which is revealed in the correspondence between word (as a predicate) and the objects picked out by the extension of its truth-conditions. This idea depends on the fallen assumption that naming is
a essential property of language, an assumption which appears to have no justification.

Once we see naming as one kind of linguistic activity, we gain real ground on freeing ourselves from the misconception of Augustine’s picture. If we ask “How could one activity (i.e. naming) be more fundamental than another?” we realize a sever strangeness to this question. It attests the confusion into which the picture has sunk. Confusion arises because of a mistake Augustine makes in trying to elucidate the child’s ability to learn and speak language. He tries to explain these abilities in terms of the child’s knowledge that language is a certain way—specifically, in terms of its knowledge that language is a set of names. However, this move does not explain or elucidate the child’s abilities at all. On the contrary, it simply hides them in recesses of an opaque mental faculty for understanding (“grasping”) and using words as names. To really explain the child’s abilities, we must treat them as abilities. Abilities, characteristically, reflect knowledge how to do something. Accordingly we must investigate the child’s ability to learn and speak language in terms of its knowledge of how-to do something and not in terms of its knowledge that something. In connection to this, we see Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the idea that speaking language is an activity stresses just this point. When we regard language as an activity, we are naturally drawn to see our knowledge of language as knowledge of how-to do something. Conversely, when we try to ignore the fact that speaking a language is an activity, as Augustine does, we become confused and slip in to seeing language as some “thing” which we mistakenly reify with explanations involving propositional knowledge-that. Clearly, then, Wittgenstein’s approach is good therapy for this confusion.

We can see how Augustine’s picture has have two obvious flaws. It inappropriately tries to explain knowledge of language as knowledge that so-and-so and our ability to know a language as an ability to know-that so-and-so. As above, this explanation unacceptable. It amounts to nothing but empty evasion of the crucial issue—i.e., what an ability really is. Furthermore, Augustine’s picture faces the problem of justifying its construal of naming as the fundamental linguistic activity. Once we notice the multitude of other activities which language is used for, this idea seems implausible and absurd. It is simply a mistake to think that naming is an essential

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7 For clear explanation of the differences between knowing-how and knowing-that, and of the mistakes which arise by placing too much importance on the latter form of knowledge, see chapter 2 of Ryle’s *Concept of Mind*. 
function of words, or that anything but confusion is made by explaining language this way. I will take these faults as compelling, and as reasons to leave further criticism of Augustine's picture (and related approaches to semantics) aside.

Presently, I want to briefly focus on how Wittgenstein shows language to be a form of practice. As indicated in the beginning of this section, seeing language as a (social) practice constitutes the positive side of Wittgenstein's approach to language.

Wittgenstein introduces many devices which demonstrate the need for regarding language as a form of practice. The most significant of these is, perhaps, the analogy he draws between speaking a language and playing a game. He shows that the concept of a game is very similar to that of a language in many illuminating respects. I want to emphasize related ones.

First, speaking a language, like playing a game, is a kind of practical ability: it is something which we do. It is essential to keep this in mind if want to think clearly about what language and meaning are and what it is to be able to use language. Among other things, recognizing that language is a kind of practical ability emphasizes that speaking a language, like playing chess, essentially depends on some form of training. It also shows how language, like any practical ability, is something which arises in a social context.

Second, consider how there is no single concept for what a game is. Many different things count as games, but there is no one thing, nor even a revealing set of things, which is common to all of them. Comparably, there is no single concept for what constitutes a language (a language-game⁹); we play many different kinds of language-games. These concepts, of games and of languages, seem to defy an explicit comprehensive definition. They are examples of what Wittgenstein refers to as 'family resemblance' concepts⁹. Being family resemblance concepts is an

⁹Wittgenstein introduces the concept of a language-game to describe different paradigms for the use of a word. Counting is one language-game, ordering another, and measuring still another. See P1§23 on the diversity of language-games.
⁹ For an through explanation of 'family resemblances', see P1§66-67.
important property of both games and language. Considering them as such brings out an essential connection between them and their basic nature as practices. For games and language alike, understanding either as a family resemblance concept requires that we acknowledge our relation to it as of one of knowing-how and not knowing-that. This is because in knowing-that, our understanding is be expressed as a finite set of propositions. Given the nature of family-resemblances—specifically that there is no common property which holds between an unlimited number of ‘similar’ things—knowing-that is clearly an inadequate model for our understanding. We simply cannot know enough ‘thats’ to employ our concepts as broadly we understand them; we can always find an application of our concept which falls outside the most extensive or subtly articulated list of ‘thats’. Consequently, in understanding the concept of a game or a language, our knowledge must be that of a knowing-how. And, seeing these concepts in this way furthers our understanding of games and language as practices; it brings the character of our knowledge out of our heads and puts it into our active relationships with others and the world.

Third, both language and games require a form of tacit understanding. Even if they are taught by explicit rules, this explanation itself depends on a background of tacit understanding which allows the explicit rules to be interpreted. The idea of tacit understanding is closely correlated to that of knowledge-how. Knowing how to do something consists essentially in the

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\(^{10}\) It is very important to notice what it is to say that language is a ‘family resemblance’ concept. The significance of Wittgenstein’s claiming this is realized in PI§65, where an opposing voice objects:

“You take the easy way out! You talk of all sorts of language-games, but nowhere have said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is. ...[Y]ou let yourself off the part of the investigation which once gave you yourself the most headache, the part about the general form of propositions and language.’

[Accepting this accusation, Wittgenstein responds]... And this is true.—Instead of producing something which is common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but they are all related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them language.”(PI§65)

By claiming that ‘language’ is a family resemblance concept, Wittgenstein denies that there is any systematic identity to that which we call ‘language’. This is obviously a severe departure from his previous thoughts (i.e., those in the Tractatus). Furthermore, it is in connection with this conception of language that Wittgenstein advances his idea of language as a social practice and he rejects the notions of logical essence (semantic primitive) and linguistic representation.

\(^{11}\) Charles Taylor speaks about tacit understanding—Do I get this phrase from him or is it widely used by others as well?
exercise of an ability. It cannot, on pain of confusion, be reduced to anything less than the
performance which demonstrates this ability (i.e. a knowledge-that which hides in the head).
Likewise, a person’s tacit understanding is inseparable from their exercise/performance of an
ability. It consists in nothing but their training in various practices and their ability to perform these
practices correctly. In this sense, the significance of what someone understands is not different
from that of things they do; the reality of their understanding goes to nothing deeper than that their
of actions. In connection with this, Wittgenstein insists that “explanations must come to an end
somewhere” and that at some point person’s justification in actions amounts to nothing but than the
statement “This is simply what I do” (PI§217). The tacit understanding required to speak a
language or play a game thus implies the essential nature or our relationship to these things as a
form of practice. As things which are tacitly understood, the reality of games of a language is
nothing more than that of their practice.

To make a brief rephrasal: language and games are alike in virtue of both being forms of
practical ability, both being family resemblance terms (and therefore demanding a knowledge-how,
as opposed to a knowledge-that), and both requiring a form of tacit understanding on the part of
the person who uses/plays them. In various ways these, things all show how the nature of
language is that of practice—i.e. some form of behavior held commonly amongst human beings.
Equally, they also show that it cannot be that of an essence (which in this sense is the same as
denying that it is a ‘thing’ in itself).

I hope I have made some headway at explaining what it is for Wittgenstein to say that
speaking a language is a practice, and that language (esp. with regard to understanding and
meaning) cannot be reduced to some essence. There are many things which have been left out, but
I think this is nevertheless a substantive enough beginning to see the most important contrasts
between Wittgenstein’s and Chomsky’s approaches to language.
Section 3:
Language, Meaning, and the Reality of Inner Processes

It is my hope that the preceding sections have made clear certain contrasts between a Chomskyan and a Wittgensteinian approach to language. My interest in this section is to throw light on these contrasts, ultimately evaluating the goals of theoretical linguistics as they appear in conflict with Wittgenstein’s program in the Investigations. Guiding me through this section is the conviction both of these approaches have valid and important insights to offer, if only we can see how to reconcile them to each other. To begin this, I will make a brief recapitulation of each position.

Chomsky tries to approach language as an empirical phenomenon, i.e. as something which may be explained in terms of a “language acquisition device” which he posits in the mind/brain of a speaker. For our purposes, the two most important ideas to his approach are 1) that linguistic knowledge is, in some sense, innately determined by a speaker’s biological endowment, and 2) that linguistic knowledge may be accurately modeled and given substantive explanation in terms of grammatical representations in the mind/brain.

Wittgenstein, in contrast, approaches language with an eye towards our ability for meaning and understanding linguistic forms. Importantly, he demonstrates that linguistic meaning cannot be analyzed in terms of word-object correspondences; words can not stand for “semantic primitives.” Relatively, he criticizes the idea that understanding a language entails the occurrence of mental representation. In both cases, our traditional commitments misrepresent the nature of linguistic communication by construing meaning and understanding as a form of “inner process.” Among other things, his remarks in the Investigations are aimed at overturning this traditional approach to linguistic competence and replacing it with a less philosophically confused conception of language and meaning.

A clear and important point of opposition between the Wittgensteinian and Chomskyan approach to language thus lies in the question of the reality of ‘inner linguistic processes’—i.e. mental states, grammatical representations, etc. Chomsky posits such processes in the name of
scientific progress; Wittgenstein tries to cut them from their foundation in confused metaphysics. Caught in between these perspectives, we are left facing the questions of whose approach is right and of how language really is.

In reality, these are rather difficult questions to answer, especially if we wish to do justice to the insights posed by each approach. If we seek a fair evaluation of Chomsky’s program in relation to Wittgenstein’s remarks in the *Investigations*, we will find this hard to come by. Or so it appears, if we consider typical attempts made by linguists and philosophers. All too often, it seems that in evaluating and criticizing each other’s claims, each group carelessly misunderstands the other, and that each, stuck in its own perspective, leads us only to biased, and hence unsatisfying, conclusions about the nature of language and the reality of “inner linguistic processes”.

For the remainder of this section, I want to do three things in response to this situation. The first is to expound some differences between the disciplines of linguistics and philosophy which, if kept in the back of the mind, will aid us in making a fairer evaluation of Chomsky’s program. The second is to make an extensive criticism of two previous attempts at evaluating Chomsky’s program. As I will argue, both exemplify the type of conclusions we should avoid coming to. The third is to advance a less biased, though more limited, evaluation of Chomsky’s position in relation to its contrasts with Wittgenstein. Finally, in conclusion, I will remark on the evaluation I have made.

Linguistics and philosophy, as distinct disciplines, each bring different assumptions and objectives to bear on the study of language. As mentioned above, I think these differences are often over-looked or under-valued when linguists and philosophers critically examine each other’s work. Briefly, I want to emphasize those which I think are most important to keep in mind when seeking to make an evaluation of theoretical linguistics. (I will not return to consider these explicitly elsewhere in the paper; as I say, I just want to put them in the back of the mind.)
Linguistics is a discipline primarily concerned with studying, cataloging, and, where possible, categorizing the diversity of natural languages spoken by human beings. Even generative linguistics, with its rather fancy theoretical clothes, is concerned with languages in this way. This can, I think, be readily attested to by anyone familiar with the form and content of linguistic literature. In journal articles, the bulk of expository weight typically falls on the presentation and explanation of new data (e.g. material from foreign language, newly realized grammatical patterning, etc.). This presentation is, of course, couched in the consideration of a "theoretical principle"; however, the real work of linguistics still consists in the studying and organizing of linguistic data with an eye to structural similarities. Consequently, it is a mistake to construe linguistic theory and meta-theory as objects of a supreme importance. Rather, theory is itself a sort baggage which is picked-up and carried through an article, but which does not pose a real significance when it is compared to the places one travels in studying languages. This relationship between the practice of linguistics and its theory is something which is frequently ignored by philosophers.

In philosophy, on the other hand, the study of language is more of a means-to-an-end than an end-in-itself. As noted in section one, the study of language is philosophically significant because of how it bears on what Chomsky calls "classical questions" about human beings and human mindedness. Along this line, concerns with language figure strongly into philosophy of mind and philosophy of psychology. Furthermore, they also play a significant role in contemporary empiricist philosophy and its approach to science. (This is demonstrated by Quine in his "Five Milestones of Empiricism" quite clearly.) However, nowhere would it be right to say that philosophy is really concerned with languages themselves. Philosophy's interest is always with language as it reveals things about human beings and their endeavors. This fact I emphasize as neither a fault nor virtue of philosophy, but as a means of distinguishing the character of this discipline from that of linguistics.

These are rather rough generalizations to say the least. They do, however, capture

1 W.V. Quine, *Theories and Things*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1981), In this essay, Quine
something of an essential difference between these disciplines. Taken loosely enough, they should be valid. Having emphasized them, I will now drop them

Now I want to consider two efforts—one from linguistics and one from philosophy—to evaluate the conflicts between theoretical linguistics and Wittgenstein’s remarks. The efforts we consider are most significant in that they lead us to improper conclusions. The first of these is by Chomsky, the second by Baker and Hacker, and both proffer broad claims about the confusions of the other’s discipline. Following a criticism of this, I hope it will be easier to see grounds for fairer evaluations and criticism after the deadwood of these one-sided, sweeping proclamations of justification and damnation have been cleared away.

In LPK, Chomsky makes a half-hearted attempt at discrediting the Wittgensteinian notion that knowing a language is an ability. He charges that such talk is a ploy of philosophers which amounts to nothing but “verbal maneuvers” which “plainly achieve nothing” (LPK pg.11). To demonstrate this, he posits an individual, named Jones, who previously spoke English, but has suffered a brain injury and subsequently has been unable to speak. Upon administration of a drug, or by chance, Jones recovers his ability to speak. In light of this recovery, it is desirable to say that Jones’ knowledge of English remained even when his ability to speak it did not. From this situation, Chomsky draws the conclusion that knowledge of language cannot meaningfully be construed as an ability—and the implication here is that it must rather be viewed as a state of mind (LPK pg.11).

The example which Chomsky employs, while interesting, succeeds at evading any substantive consideration of the Wittgensteinian position. Frustratingly, he demonstrates no desire

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2 It is interesting to note that Chomsky construes the Wittgensteinian position as claiming that “knowledge of language is an ability” (italics added). I do not know where he gets this quote from (probably from something by Kenny), but it expresses the Wittgensteinian position in the most awkward way possible. A better way to phrase this position is to say that knowing language is an ability, or that having knowledge of language is manifest in terms of an ability, or even that knowledge of language, given the criteria by which it may be attributed or denied, essentially reduces to talk of an ability. By focusing on this awkward example, it is easy for Chomsky to misconstrue the Wittgensteinian position.
to consider, or even comprehend, the arguments which found philosophers like Kenny and Wittgenstein in seeing language—and knowledge of language—in this way. Ultimately, Chomsky’s attempt at criticism of (and defense from) this idea reveals nothing but a confusion about what is at issue and a disturbing shallowness of intent.

Similarly, G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, in their book *Language, Sense and Nonsense* (LSN), initiate an uncompromising attack on truth-conditional semantics and the rule-based ‘generative theories of understanding’. Obviously, their attack is directed against Chomsky, his traditions, and the approaches to semantics which he and they have engendered. It should, I think, go without saying that Baker and Hacker have a tremendous understanding of the philosophy which they preach. They have a great faculty for making clear the Wittgensteinian insights which they expound, as well as for tying these to early work in logic and the semantics of formal languages. On top of this, however, they also effect an informed understanding of generative linguistics. Yet, as with Chomsky above, I think they do not put a genuine enough effort into comprehending the program which they attack. This charge will be substantiated below.

Although Baker and Hacker use the technical language of theoretical linguistics correctly (e.g. they speak coherently of traces, move-a, and derivations from d-structure (LSN pg.248)), they show no appreciation of the linguistic phenomena which this language was developed in consideration of—i.e. the complex restrictions on syntactic well-formedness which arise in a child despite a poverty of stimulus. In criticizing linguistics, they move too fast, obscuring potentially valid criticisms of Chomsky’s program beneath a ponderous, all-encompassing attack on the discipline which takes its direction as much from emotion as from argument³.

Essentially, the substance of their criticism amounts to this: They seek to discredit linguistic terminology on the basis of its divergence from the sensible forms of our ‘ordinary-language’ concepts. Their charge is that Chomsky’s talk about a speaker’s capacity for understanding and knowing linguistic rules, because it is intimately connected to talk of internal and unconscious states of the brain, is necessarily nonsensical; i.e. it contradicts the clear and correct everyday sense in which we use these terms. (Normally, an ascription of understanding or

³ This is not a fair characterization of their tone generally in LSN.
knowing to a person depends on seeing their performances conform to a social practice. Likewise, they insist that rules are normative.) From this fact of divergence Baker and Hacker attempt to draw the conclusion that all of generative linguistics, because it is founded on nonsensical conceptions of understanding, knowing, and rule-following, is ill-founded and hence pointless.

This conclusion, I think, is too hasty. Doubtless, there are many confusions and ambiguities in linguistic terminology, and these need to be sorted out. Probably, it is even the case that considerable portions of linguistic theory need to be revised or abandoned. But regardless of this, whatever the current faults with linguistic research are, the mere divergence of its terminology from the standards established by our ordinary-language usage does not by itself provide a basis for dismissing all aspects of generative inquiry as nonsense.

I take it that an appeal to the rightness of ordinary-language concepts has significance when it seems that such concepts have been maligned by philosophical carelessness and ambition. An arguable example of this is the attempt of Cartesian philosophy to treat a person's mental faculties—his mind—as a sort of second substance. Keeping this in mind, however, we must realize that the possibility of such an appeal does not prohibit the invention of a new terminology which addresses new concepts (Wittgenstein himself that the forms of language are not given once and for all (PI §7)). There are, of course, certain constraints on what can count as legitimate terminological invention. Specifically, the new terms we invent must serve a purpose—in.e. have a use/be part of a language-game—and they must be verifiable in the sense of having public criteria and being part of a social practice. But insofar as these conditions are met, new inventions should, in principle, be allowable.

An example of this sort of invention might, for instance, arise in the development of new theoretical terms in a science. Chomsky's use of terms like understand, know, rule, etc. in a novel way (i.e. in connection with talk about states of a speaker's brain) arguably reflects just this sort of inventiveness. These terms, as they are used by Chomsky, simply differ in meaning from how they are normally used. In the first case, they refer to a nomological process inside a speaker's mind/brain; in the second, they refer to something like the presence of a normative agreement in the

* This position is argued by Gilbert Ryle in his book Concept of Mind.
practices of a speech community. Regrettably, this tacit difference has been a source of much confusion. Possibly new terms should be employed, or at least clarifications made, to alleviate this. However, given a possibility for inventiveness, Chomsky’s deviation in the use of these terms can in no way constitute prima facie evidence for the assertion that he employs them nonsensically. Conceivably, this could prove to be the case, but it is, it certainly needs more showing.

Baker’s and Hacker’s attempt at a grand dismissal of linguistics is also disturbing in a second way. They do not present, or even recognize the need for, an alternative account of the linguistic phenomena which generative inquiries seek to explain. Possibly, they suppose that such alleged phenomena, as well as the questions which call for their investigation, are merely phantoms which exist solely through the confusions of improperly wielded language. This supposition, I argue, lacks any foundation. By and large the issues which linguists consider are not phantoms, and the confusions are really Baker’s and Hacker’s.

It is simply a mistake for Baker and Hacker to ignore issues linguists deal with and the problems they seek to resolve. Although it is conceivable that the structural regularities which linguists observe both in studies of individual languages well as in cross-linguistic surveys could somehow (someday) be accounted for in Wittgensteinian terms — that is, in terms of training, practices, and normative uses — it is incredibly unlikely that this should turn out to be the case. At any rate, it is certainly not possible to make such an account presently. Furthermore, if it were the case that structural forms of language were determined by a speaker’s training in normative rules, we would expect that the character of syntactic well-formedness to be much different than it is. This is an important point, and I’ll try to substantiate it with further considerations.

Whereas there are compelling reasons to believe that linguistic meaning and understanding of linguistic meaning are the result of social practices, there is no real basis for making the same

\footnote{Good evidence for this would be showing that a) two senses of ‘understanding’, ‘knowing’, etc. cannot be differentiated between Chomsky’s work and that of Wittgenstein, or b) that Chomsky uses his term inconsistently—i.e. in absence of a meaningful language game. From my experience with linguistics, I suspect neither of these to be the case.}
claim on structural aspects of linguistic utterances. The syntactic rules which linguists postulate and which they claim govern the structural well-formedness of our utterances have a character very different from that which we attribute to the meaningful significance which our utterances carry. Particularly it seems right to say that, with regard to their syntactic form, our utterances are neither normative nor transparent. (These I take to be two big criteria for something’s being a social practice.)

The forms of our utterances are rigid in a way which suggests that it is more appropriate to analyze them as determined by natural (or nomological?) as opposed to normative constraints. Consider, for instance, the diversity of ways in which our expressions may mean things (e.g. the diversity of things we call games). No comparable freedom is found in the structural nature of our speech. Structural forms are typically such that any deviation from them produces linguistic garbage (There is noting equivalent to ‘family resemblance’ with respect to a syntactic form). It is also the case that structural forms of our language are the part of our linguistic knowledge most resistant to change. From a historical perspective, when one language is overrun by another (as in the case of one country invading another) an exchange in vocabulary (i.e. the incorporation of new language-games) occurs relatively quickly. In contrast, it may take generations of strong influence before significant syntactic changes develop. Also, whereas it is possible to invent new meanings (new language games), it is virtually impossible to do so with natural language syntax. As with flexibility, we see no possibility for syntactic invention in our speech. The grammar (Chomsky’s sense) we learn for speaking natural languages is not just a grammar, it is the grammar: it is

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6 In referring to ‘structural aspects’ of linguistics utterances, I mean syntax, morphology, and phonology. These I consider in contrast to the semantic and pragmatic character of utterances.

7 There is an interesting side note to this point. According to linguistic analysis, the sentence “Flying planes can be dangerous” is ambiguous between to literal readings. Likewise, it is analyzed in term sof having two different syntactic forms. However, if we go by Wittgenstein and suppose that the utterance has as many meanings as it does uses, we do not find a corresponding explosion in the number of syntactic forms it has. It simply has two.

8 In qualification of this, let me emphasize that inventing a new meaning generally must entail more than making a stipulation “x means y”. As is the nature of knowing a language-game, some sort of thorough-going training must be involved. Any real invention must be characterized by a knowing-how, and not merely a knowing-that. Relatedly, anyone who insists that they can invent new syntactic forms is, I think, only thinking of knowing that a form could (hypothetically) be different; they are not thinking of how it could be so. For instance, though we could imagine a language, say English, which did not mark (in)definiteness on determiner phrase; we could not know how it is to speak this language. And significantly, this sort of syntactic innovation is simply not to be found normally.
comprehensive across the forms we speak, and exists to the exclusion of other sources of influence. (Unfortunately, in order to make a more thorough argument than this about the non-normativity of syntactic forms, I need to be able to ground the notion of a 'syntactic category' in obviously non-semantic features of utterances. Whereas I do believe this is possible, I have not yet thought how to argue for it. For this reason I am going to leave part of my claim open and in need of further demonstration.)

There are good grounds for also saying that the structural forms of our utterances cannot be characterized as transparent. If we consider the form of an utterance, we see no reason why it has to be as it is. The structure of our syntactic forms in this sense appears arbitrary. It is true, of course, that the grammatical rules which are used to model well-formedness constraints demonstrate consistency with respect to each other, and in this sense the structural forms of a language do not appear arbitrary. (The consistency of these rules probably reveals more about what it is to model a grammar than what it is to be a grammar itself.) Regardless, we cannot find a reason why constraints on well-formedness exist, or why they impose the particular structures which they do.

Linguistic meaning, in contrast, is not similarly arbitrary. Although it is perhaps arbitrary that the phonetic form /dog/ typically means as it does (e.g. the form /cat/ might have been used instead), it is not arbitrary that the meaning which the form has is as it is. The meaning of a term is determined by its use; the significance it has is established by our training in particular language-games. Importantly, in our language/culture, the word "dog" is in the 'language-game'. We are trained in its use, and it signifies for us in particular ways. However, our particular training with it is neither a necessary nor an arbitrary fact. Rather, it simply reveals something about ourselves and how we live. The meaningfulness of the term reflects (part of) our form of life. (In contrast, we have no word for referring to any two out of the dog’s four legs. This is typically not a meaningful distinction to us, though it could, in principle, be otherwise.)* To rephrase the point here more clearly, we see that our words mean as they do because of the life we are immersed in, the discriminations we make, the relationships we acknowledge, etc. Our training with and use of

*I am thinking here especially of an example which Wittgenstein gives in §64 of the Investigations.
words reflects these things. Given this, it is sensible to conclude that meaning is transparent—and this in the sense that meaning and understanding our language requires (and can require) nothing ‘deeper’ than being trained in humanly significant activities.

Similar considerations simply do not apply to the structural forms of our utterances. Structural constraints do not correspond to discriminations in the significance of our linguistic practices. Similarly, syntactic structure is not indicative of any particular form of life. To see this we need only realize that syntactic structure does not correspond to meaning; consider that it is both the case that one structural form may have many meanings, and also that we can imagine a language with a syntax very different from ours, yet which still allowed its speakers to employ similar language-games. Furthermore, as above, it seems that the structural form of our utterances is merely arbitrary fact. Considering all of this, characterizing a syntactic form as transparent would be nothing but a meaningless and misleading move. If we did this, someone might ask, “But to what are these forms transparent?” and lamely, we could only respond, “Err, ah well… to nothing.” Plainly, this must be the wrong way to think about the structural character of linguistic utterances\textsuperscript{10}. What we are seeing suggests that we should try another approach.

This has all been by way of arguing that it is misguided to think of the structural constraints in language as things essentially normative and transparent. It seems clear that they are not. And hence, they are not the sort of thing to be rightly accounted for by a Wittgensteinian approach to language either. There is a clear difference between the structural and meaningful nature of linguistic utterances. In light of this difference, the approach which linguists take in explaining structural characteristics of utterances appears both plausible and intriguing. Even with its imperfections, it seems a better candidate than anything else we have.

Finally, considering that Baker and Hacker are unable to say anything interesting about the structural constraints on utterances, and considering that concern with such constraints comprises a large part of the work done in theoretical linguistics, it is amazing that they should be so eager to see the entire discipline abandoned. In their readiness to do this, as well as in their readiness to

\textsuperscript{10}It should be emphasized that thinking of syntax as opaque would be equally misleading. Both terms are simply inapplicable.
dismiss linguistics on grounds of terminological confusions, they reveal a nearsightedness in their understanding of the discipline they criticize. As suggested above, the hastiness with which they seek to lay waste to linguistics reflects an insufficient consideration of goals and assumptions which linguists themselves bring to their work. With a more strenuous effort to see what motivates linguists and why they believe what they do, Baker and Hacker might admit a greater legitimacy and usefulness to the terminology which linguists use. Regardless, one might hope that they would refrain from referring to trace-theory as “pseudo scientific patter” (LSNpg.248) given their own inability to make any account of the regularities in natural languages which it tries to explain. In conclusion, given the examples we have just considered, I think it is not too harsh to say that both they and Chomsky need to show more sincerity, thoughtfulness, and patience in their attempts to evaluate each other’s work.

To return to our considerations at the beginning of this section, the difficulty of evaluating the Chomskyan claim for “inner linguistic processes” against the Wittgensteinian denial of them comes from the “missed-understanding” which characterizes each side’s consideration of the other. Chomsky, if we take him for his argument in LPK, has no appreciation of the criticisms he seeks to defend himself from. Likewise, Baker and Hacker are confused about the real substance to and motivations behind linguistic research. No one seems to give a fair address of the claims which they seek to evaluate and criticize. There is no comprehensive perspective which shows for certain that “inner linguistic processes” are either legitimately appealed to or refuted. Given the differences between the Chomskyan and Wittgensteinian positions, we may even begin to doubt that there are solid grounds for a comparison between them. All that is undeniably clear is that each side makes claims about the nature of understanding and meaning, and about the reality of inner processes, and that each treats of some seemingly common thing called language.

If we start naively with just this over-lap in terms, I think it is possible to fairly compare the Chomskyan and Wittgensteinian positions, and to make a reasonable evaluation of certain aspects of theoretical linguistics. However, in doing this, we must abandon all grand claims of complete
justification and refutation which characterize the previous examples from Chomsky and Baker and Hacker. We need to look freshly at the claims made by each position, seeing both its insights and shortcomings. Moreover, in matching up various claims against each other, we must take care not to treat anything with too much generality. For example, a philosophical denial of inner processes does not reject the notion of a state or process in the brain altogether. It only denies validity of such states/processes when they are used to ground the significant (i.e. meaningful) nature of our language-use. (The possible validity of explanations in terms of inner processes will be considered more below.) Furthermore, given the difference in the backgrounds from which Chomsky and Wittgenstein approach language, when we make any criticism of one in terms of the other, we must look sympathetically on what we criticize, trying hard to find an unfamiliar but intelligent consistency to what is asserted. Poignantly, Wittgenstein writes: “You must not let yourself be seduced by the terminology in common currency. Don’t take comparability, but rather incomparability as a matter of course!” Accordingly, we should not let ourselves be seduced by the common terminologies of either Wittgensteinians or Chomsky. Finally, we must not wed ourselves to any one conception of “language”, or even to there being only one conception of language. Different conceptions may arise, and we should not cling to preconceived notions of the real or the true of language. Rather, we should simply accept well-founded diversities when they appear.

Trying to keep these warning in mind, I want to advance my own evaluation of Wittgenstein and Chomsky on their contrasting points of understanding, meaning, and inner processes. In doing this, my goal will be to be as unbiased as possible. If successful, I hope to be in a position to indicate how both linguists and philosophers should proceed if they seek an understanding of language which incorporates the insights of Chomsky’s and Wittgenstein’s approaches to language, and which overcomes the respective shortcomings of each. At any rate, this is my ambition.

With regard to understanding language, I think we must admit the possibility that two distinct and potentially legitimate uses of this word occur in the works of Chomsky and

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I don’t know where this comes from. I get it from an essay by G.P. Baker, “Later Wittgenstein: grammar and necessity”. I don’t know where this is from either.
Wittgenstein. As above, I do not think there sufficient grounds have be found to dismiss Chomsky's use on the basis of its divergence from the more conventional one appealed to by Wittgenstein. Though it may turn out that Chomsky's use of this term is incoherent, this has not been conclusively demonstrated, and claiming this prematurely can do nothing but produce confusions. For now we should live and work with the distinct senses, trying to reduce ambiguity, and alleviate confusions arising from such ambiguity as much as possible.

On the other hand, it does seem that there is a substantive issue involved in the contrast between Wittgenstein's and Chomsky's respective positions on linguistic meaning. In fact, as has been rumbled about for sometime now, certain criticisms seem clearly to be in order.

In analyzing our semantic competence, Chomsky has asserted: "[Conceptual] facts come to be known on the basis of a biological endowment that is prior to any experience and that enters into determining the meaning of words with remarkable precision..." (LPK pg.,30) In this passage, he is claiming both that there are semantic primitives and that they are somehow known innately by speakers. In consonance with the rest of his program, he further characterizes a speaker's knowledge of these semantic primitives in terms of representational states in the mind/brain. These commitments, both to (innate!) semantic primitives and semantics representations, position Chomsky in an undeniable opposition to Wittgenstein and his dismissal of conceptual essences and mental processes as possible grounding for how linguistic forms get meaning. Unlike the case of linguistic understanding, the two are in very plain contradiction on this point, and the tension between them needs to be relieved.

Two things about this tension. First, I think there are straightforward reasons for suspecting that Wittgensteinians are correct in criticizing Chomsky for his treatment of meaning. Wittgenstein shows that meaningfulness can be explained only if we think of language as an activity which occurs between people, which is governed by social practices, and which is inextricably tied to the things people do. As illustrated in section two, the motivations behind this position are a) that it is nonsense to think that there is an essence to meaning, and b) that thinking of meaning in terms of mental representations is both superfluous and vacuous (—this because
meaning is an ability, an it is in no way revealed by the notion of a ‘representation’). Nevertheless, Chomsky claims that meaning can be thought of in just this way. However, Chomsky, to his own detriment, makes virtually no defense of his claim (though he does pretend to take the opportunity with Jones). He neither finds critical fault in what Wittgenstein demonstrates contrary to him, nor does he further substantiate his position in such a way so as to bring in considerations which could exclude it from the scope of what Wittgenstein dismisses. In light of this shortcoming, it is hard to see what sort of plausibility there is to Chomsky’s position. Wittgenstein’s dismissal of semantic representations and primitives does seem to effectively cut him at his foundations. He is simply asserting what is has been refuted. Until Chomsky brings himself to address and call into question some relevant aspect of Wittgenstein’s work in the Investigations, there is little more to say than that he is asserting himself boldly in the absence of an argument.

Second, there is, to my experience, a common misunderstanding of the Wittgensteinian position on the part of many linguists. In light of it, many argue that it is possible to pursue semantic representations even allowing for what Wittgenstein shows. It is important to address this misunderstanding as it keeps many unaware of the charges being leveled against semantics and hence of possible reasons for being skeptical of this aspect of Chomsky’s generative theory.

It is maintained that when Wittgenstein considers questions of meaning, what he reveals pertains to utterances as they appear in a context; his concerns relate to pragmatic features of speech. The motivation for thinking this comes, as I understand it, from the fact that his investigations focus on the use of terms. On the other hand, when linguists, particularly semanticists, approach questions of meaning, their interests are in those aspects of meaning which an utterance has independently of any context. The distinction which is typically drawn here differentiates between the literal and contextual significance of an utterance. Importantly, it is the literal, context-independent meaning of a sentence which semanticists try to model with grammatical representations; it is only this limited aspect of meaning which they seek to explain in terms of semantic primitives and rules for composition.

In light of this distinction between literal and contextual meaning, linguists suppose that
Wittgenstein’s arguments about the impossibility of grounding meaning in primitives and representations do not rightly apply to their work. Wittgenstein, it is contended, deals only with a very broad conception of meaning, considering both literal and contextual facets of an utterance’s significance. Correspondingly, his remarks show only that meaning, broadly conceived in this way, cannot be modeled in terms of linguistic representations. Crucially, they do not show that more limited aspects of an utterances meaning can’t be modeled representationally. Particularly, they do not show that literal meaning can’t be explained in such terms. Consequently, insofar as semanticists do restrict their attention to the literal aspects of our utterances, they need not be deterred by the difficulties which Wittgenstein shows arise if we attempt to get a handle on all of what we call meaning.

The problem with this maneuver is that its characterization of the Wittgensteinian position is simply incorrect. It plays on a misconception about what Wittgenstein is up to when he speaks about the *use* of a word. As indicated above, for most linguists, talking about ‘the use of a word’ brings to mind questions about pragmatics. The *use* of a word is something which may be contrasted with the word itself. The word — with its literal meaning — is produced (spoken) in a particular context through a speech act. The context in which a word is used imposes an external and independent influence on the overall significance of the speech act. This way of thinking about use is plainly very different from what is intended by Wittgenstein. For him, use is not an aspect of meaning, it *is* meaning; there is nothing to the meaning of a word except what is shown by its use. Consequently, it is, according to Wittgenstein, a confusion to think of words as having a literal (essential) meaning which is “context-independent”. The distinction which linguists draw between literal and contextual meaning is, under Wittgenstein’s assumptions, incoherent. (Note: drawing this distinction is not merely impossible, it is nonsensical.) Therefore, any attempt to evade the force of his remarks which relies on this distinction is simply unfounded. Given this, I think linguists have no choice but to accept the challenge which he poses to the notions of a semantic primitives and a semantic representation.

Of course, linguists may still dispute the force of Wittgenstein’s dismissal of primitives

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12Tacit to this difference between ‘use as an aspect of meaning’ and ‘use as meaning’ is a shift in emphasis from *where* words are used to *how* they are used.
and representations. They may doubt that what he demonstrates is as comprehensive as those who interpret him like to think. One might anticipate questions like: "Why does meaning have to be this way, and only this way? Even if Wittgenstein does show something interesting about meaning, why are other explanations necessarily invalid? How is it proven that his way is right, and is so at the expense of so much else?" These questions are obviously important — if the explanations which linguistics provides for semantic competency are mistaken, linguists have a right to inquire why this is so.

Though I find Wittgenstein's approach to linguistic meaning compelling and well-founded, I can't produce a comprehensive argument for why someone must accept it and the negative implications it has for semantic theory. (This is a too large an undertaking to accomplish convincingly here.) Earlier, I have emphasized the difficulties with construing meaning as a property of essences (semantic simples), as well as those with believing that it is by their representational properties that language and the world are properly revealed. Hopefully, this provides some indication of the motivations there are for dropping these approaches to meaning and adopting Wittgenstein's instead.

In any case, I think the following point needs to be emphasized in response to questions and doubts that should rightly be expected from linguists. Wittgenstein shows linguistic meaning to be very unlike it had previously been conceived. For this reason, his approach does not compete with other approaches on a field of common foundation; it simply replaces them. Given the radical differences in his approach, there is no common ground to support substantial arguments or questions of proof. Consequently, we should not go demanding any. However, this is not to suggest a blind acceptance (or rejection) of what Wittgenstein's claims. As is apparent in the Investigations, his purpose is not merely to investigate language, but also to clear up philosophical confusions through such investigation. The greatest appeal of Wittgenstein's work is perhaps that by seeing language as a social practice and by emphasizing the importance of everyday uses and understanding, he succeeds at this purpose. Ultimately, it is for this reason that we are most strongly compelled to accept his views about language and meaning above possible others. Also, it is important to remember that the criticism which bears on Chomsky's commitment
to semantic primitives and representations is not so much a refutation as more of a revelation of confusions.

At this point, I see nothing premature in concluding that it is a confusion to adopt the approach meaning which is assumed by Chomsky for theoretical linguistics. Whatever insights into language and mind his program has to offer, we have no reason to think that explanations of meaning and understanding meaning can be among them.\(^\text{13}\)

Lastly, we must evaluate the disputed possibility of "inner linguistic processes". What are we to say about their reality? In light of our previous considerations, some well-founded waffling is due on this point. Chomsky’s claim that they form the basis for all of our linguistic competence is simply too strong: certain aspects of our competence simply evade this sort of analysis. On the other hand, the flat rejection of them as a valid explanation for any aspect of our linguistic competence is too strong as well: they may provide needed insight into the structural nature of natural languages. Hence, in considering the possibility of their reality, we should place ourselves in an intermediate position between these extremes.

We should, I think, accept the possibility of inner linguistic processes, but only with strong qualifications. First, they are admissible as potential explanations of the structural character of natural language, and nothing more. Second, if it ever becomes clear that there is nothing to structure in natural language beyond what is explainable in terms of normative practices, then we should abandon the pursuit of inner processes altogether. Taken with these qualifications, the role of inner linguistic processes—as I advocate them—is clearly very different from that which is conceived by Chomsky and most linguists. As conceived above, inner linguistic processes only model 'dumb' constraints on possible forms of natural language grammars; they do not—by

\(^{13}\) I am not comfortable saying that semantics, as a branch of linguistics, should be abandoned entirely. Clearly, endeavors by linguists to elucidate the 'conceptual primitives' advocated by Chomsky, to explain the literal meaning of an utterance in terms of truth-functions for its composition, or to define the semantic properties of a predicate in terms of a generalization for determining its extension (Fodor 1975, 59) must be given up. However, once these things are give-up, I am not sure where this leaves semantics; my understanding of the field is too limited to support well-founded statements about this. Therefore, to be fair and accurate, I resist drawing conclusions about something I am not qualified to speak on. However, putting my own shortcomings aside, we can fairly say that the validity of much of the subject matter of semantics is questionable, and further investigation needs to take place.
stipulation—have any bearing on our competence with linguistic meaning. Consequently, they cannot be criticized for trying to improperly reduce intelligent aspects of human mindedness to a matter of brute physical reality. Indeed, given the rigidity and non-transparency of our grammatical constraints, we should think they have little to do with human mindedness or intelligence at all. In trying to model grammatical constraints in terms of inner processes, linguists are merely trying to deduce certain cognitive predispositions in the brain. Ultimately, if their efforts are fruitful, what they reveal about grammatical structure and language acquisition will prove nothing about a human being’s capacity for intelligent (i.e. meaningful) behavior. Rather, it will only reveal something about the biological foundations upon which such behavior rests, and through which human intelligence and meaningfulness expresses itself.

To recapitulate the preceding points, I think we should evaluate theoretical linguistics in the following way in light of its contrasts with Wittgenstein’s approach. Its hopes of explaining linguistic meaning should be abandoned; its role in explaining linguistic competence should be limited to issues of grammatical, and not semantical, competence; and, its use of expressions like ‘understands a sentence’, ‘knows a rule’, etc. needs to be clearly disambiguated from their normal (non-technical) usages. Allowing for these points, I think there is nothing philosophically objectionable about how theoretical linguistics approaches certain mysteries of natural language. Rather, we should conclude that it is a potentially useful research program. Given a task appropriate to its assumptions and methods of inquiry, theoretical linguistics may provide compelling explanations of grammatical structure, acquisition, and cross-linguistic variation. Considering how these are aspects of natural language which have not been sufficiently accounted for by the Investigations, this is plainly an important accomplishment. Furthermore, by accepting the generative perspective on language we actually enhance our understanding of Wittgenstein’s own remarks. We realize that the incompleteness of Wittgenstein’s perspective is just as important as the insights which it poses. We learn to better evaluate the significance of his remarks as they stand in relation to broader interests in language and languages. Finally, by accepting certain criticisms of theoretical linguistics and thus coordinating it with the insights of Wittgenstein’s work, we attain a better understanding of natural language its possibilities for meaningful expression than would be possible from either perspective on its own.
Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to sketch more fully the picture of theoretical linguistics which arises from our preceding considerations. Among other things, I should acknowledge the controversial nature of the changes I am suggesting for linguistics more thoroughly. Following this, I will finish by explaining how I see this evaluation I have made as significant.

I argue that in spite of various philosophical objections otherwise, theoretical linguistics should be accepted as a legitimate discipline, with the one revision that explanations of linguistic meaning and of speakers’ competence in producing and understanding meaning be abandoned. (Though I am hesitant to explicitly admit it, I am essentially advocating a linguistics program with the exclusion of semantics.) At base, the coherency of this move depends on the assumption of a fundamental division between structure and meaning in natural languages. (This division might also be cast in terms of a distinction between the logical and grammatical forms in a language.) Admittedly, this assumption is not uncontroversial—it is clearly in need of more articulation and investigation. It may prove unsound. Nonetheless, I think it is presently the best move we can make if we seek an understanding of language which is true to both the insights and shortcomings of Wittgenstein’s and Chomsky’s programs.

In terms of Chomsky’s overall program for the investigation language and mind, there is an important consequence to dropping inquiries into semantic competence and theories of meaning. It is that linguistics can no longer be seen as a total theory of linguistic competence or a means of investigating the creative and intelligent faculties of the human mind. As above, I think it must take the less glorious but still important task of explaining grammatical competence as this can be investigated independently meaning. This means that structural forms of natural language, as well as the generative processes which account for such forms, must be conceived of only as a sort of background material to the intelligent and creative things we do with as human beings. The reason for this being that, in light of Wittgenstein’s remarks in the Investigations, meaningfulness, and intelligent/creative aspect of human behavior generally—including speech production—cannot
be posited to exist or explained in terms of a world of 'inner representations'.

In considering what I advocate, I think that in principle most linguists should not be upset at this notion of limiting the scope of theoretical investigations. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with restricting the scope of one's inquiry if such restriction can be well motivated in terms of theoretical and empirical precepts. Essentially, the breadth of a theory's explanatory power can be traded on sufficient benefits which increase the efficiency and cogency (and plausibility) with which the theory explains a depth of empirical data elsewhere. (E.g. Many were willing to accept that some aspects of meaning—i.e. pragmatics—could not be adequately accounted for in terms of generative theory; I am just seeking to restrict the scope of investigation somewhat further.) This "in principle" clause aside, however, I also realize that the change I am recommending will very difficult to produce in practice.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that I am drawn to advocate the position I do not in virtue of any clear vision but more through feelings of confusion and distress which swell in me. The confusion is with how to make the two approaches to language we have been considering commensurable with each other. Because of a haze which surrounds the relationship between meaning and structure in natural languages, it is currently unclear what claims each approach is justified in making. Until this situation is made clearer, the approaches are, despite similarities in topic, incomensurable, and they cannot be sensibly compared until their terms and claims are reconciled with each other. The distress I feel is with how the differences between these approaches have been treated by scholars like Baker and Hacker and Chomsky. As I have argued, their attempts at evaluating each other leave much to be desired. In connection with these feelings, I am left with an unsatisfied need for a reconciliation between Chomsky's and Wittgenstein's approaches. My desire is that in evaluating theoretical linguistics as I do, and in assuming the difference between meaning and structure as I have, I make a plausible account of how a reconciliation should start. In this sense, my purpose is less to establish well founded

14 Chomsky tries to account for aspects of human intelligence and linguistic creativity by forging a connection between this creativity the fact that our grammatical competence does appear to be generative in nature—i.e. we can produce a virtually infinite number of sentences as a result of our competence. The intuition, as I understand it, is that

15 Perhaps I am not thinking clearly here, but one could argue that this is done any time one maintains the plausibility of a scientific practice in conjunction with free will. (?)
conclusions about the differences between Chomsky and Wittgenstein, and more to demonstrate how important the need for this reconciliation is and to identify the sort of issues linguists and philosophers should be chasing in pursuit of it. I hope I have had some success.