Analytic Truths and Grammatical Propositions

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I

There is a well-known view that analytic statements are true simply in virtue of the meanings of the ingredient words. They are typically used as linguistic explanations. Instead of

(1) The word ‘cygnet’ means: young swan.

one can also, and more idiomatically, say:

(2) A cygnet is a young swan.

The two sentences have the same use, fulfil the same function in language, and hence have the same meaning. A statement of (1) is true because the word ‘cygnet’ does mean a young swan. That is to say, (1) is true in virtue of the meaning of the word ‘cygnet’. But as (1) functions in the same way as the corresponding analytic statement (2), the same can be said about (2). This too can be verified simply by looking up the meaning of the word ‘cygnet’ in a dictionary. Of course the truth of (1) and (2) is dependent not only on the meaning of the word ‘cygnet’, but also on the meanings of their other words. If, for example, the word ‘young’ meant: black, the statements would be false. So just like (1), (2) is true in virtue of the meaning of the whole sentence.

However, this account of analyticity is widely regarded as untenable owing to a number of objections. I shall consider them in turn.
1. Quine’s Attack on the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

The analytic/synthetic distinction was famously attacked by Quine in his article ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ (1953). Quine observed that the notion of analyticity could not be defined ‘extensionally’, that is, in terms of ‘truth’ or ‘reference’, but only in terms of a cluster of other ‘intensional’ words (such as ‘synonymous’, ‘self-contradiction’, or ‘necessity’), that is, words that, again, cannot be defined in terms of ‘truth’ or ‘reference’ alone. He regarded such definitions as viciously circular and dismissed the analytic/synthetic distinction as ill-founded. The weakness of this line of argument has been well exposed by Paul Grice and P.F. Strawson, and further by H.-J. Glock, who concluded that:

Quine’s circularity-charge comes down to the rather odd complaint that ‘analytic’ can be explained only via notions with which it is synonymous, and not via notions with which it is not synonymous. . . . The idea that legitimate concepts must be translatable into a purely extensional language presupposes that intensional notions have been discredited, which is what the circularity-charge set out to do.4

Another line of argument in Quine’s paper is based on his holism, the view that our statements do not admit of confirmation or disconfirmation individually, but face the tribunal of experience only as a whole.5 Thus, when a scientific prediction turns out false, it is really the whole web of our beliefs, including mathematics and logic, that is in conflict with experience. We could resolve the conflict in numerous ways, even by abandoning some of our logical or mathematical statements. Hence no statement is a priori and immune from revision in the light of new experience, not even the axioms of logic and mathematics.6 Apart from the fact that this holistic picture appears to exaggerate the extent to which our beliefs are logically interrelated, it seems hard to imagine how we might possibly give up our ordinary logical thinking without undermining the whole idea of

4 Glock, Quine and Davidson, 75.
5 Quine, ‘Two Dogmas’, 41.
a web of interrelated beliefs and, indeed, the very idea of confirmation or disconfirmation by experience. But the most telling weakness in Quine’s argument is this: The fact that any sentence, even ‘2 + 3 = 5’ or ‘¬(p. ¬p)’, may in future be rejected as false, does not show that they do not now express an a priori (mathematical, logical or analytic) truth. Rather, if future generations decide that ‘2 + 3 = 5’ is false, we know that at least one of these signs must have changed its meaning.⁷ For the current meaning of those signs is such that ‘2 + 3 = 5’ is an a priori truth, a norm of representation which we do not regard as subject to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation.

Although it is widely acknowledged that Quine’s attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction was unsuccessful, many philosophers have misgivings about the idea that some statements are true in virtue of meanings or conventions. Another radical attack on the traditional account of analyticity is:

2. Williamson’s Denial of Conceptual Truth

Timothy Williamson disputes that there are any analytic or conceptual truths ‘in the epistemological sense’, i.e. statements that one cannot fully understand without knowing that they are true.⁸

Note, first of all, that Williamson does not distinguish between analytic truths and trivially analytic truths.⁹ A proponent of the view that analytic truths are true in virtue of meaning is not committed to the claim (which Williamson is trying to attack) that their truth is self-evident to anybody who understands their meaning. It may require some calculations or reasoning to work out that a given statement is indeed analytically true, calculations in which one may easily make a mistake that would not betoken linguistic incompetence. Just as one can easily get an arithmetical calculation wrong without any misunderstanding of the mathematical symbols involved. Anyway, this can be set aside, as the standard examples of analytic truths are indeed claimed to be self-evident.

Williamson argues as follows:

Consider the proposition

(3) Every vixen is a vixen.

Peter and Stephen both understand the meaning of (3). However, Peter takes universal quantification (in English) to be existentially committing and he believes that in fact there are no vixens.¹⁰ Stephen believes that there are some borderline cases for ‘vixen’: and ‘for such an animal as the value of “x”, “x is a vixen” is neither true nor false, so the conditional “x is a vixen → x is a vixen” is also neither true nor false’. Hence, Stephen argues, (3) is also neither true nor false.¹¹ Thus, both Peter and Stephen, although they understand (3), do not accept it as true. Williamson takes this to show that there are no analytic truths ‘in the epistemological sense’.¹²

The first of these alleged counterexamples can be dismissed fairly quickly. Peter takes (3) to have empirical content. On his understanding, it has the logical form:

(3a) (∃x)Fx . (∀x)(Fx → Fx).

By contrast, those who take (3) as an example of an analytic truth, construe it as:

(3b) (∀x)(Fx → Fx).

Perhaps both readings are possible. Then, (3) is ambiguous. Similarly, someone might reject the statement:

(4) All bachelors are unmarried.

on the grounds that, in fact, some bachelors of arts are married. But, obviously, this would have no tendency to show that on another, more natural, reading, (4) is a self-evident analytic truth. In both cases, rejection of the analytic statement betokens a divergent understanding.

Williamson seems to think that Peter is actually mistaken in his belief that (3) has existential implications.¹³ Be that as it may, we can certainly agree that Williamson’s second example (‘Stephen’) is of somebody who is mistaken. An empirical statement of the form ‘Every F is G’ may be threatened by a borderline case F that is not G; for allowing the borderline case would make the statement false. Not so in this case (of ‘Every F is F’): Since it is logically impossible for anything to satisfy the antecedent

predicate, but not the consequent predicate, the possibility of borderline cases becomes patently irrelevant. Stephen’s view that (3) implies that there are no borderline cases for the predicate ‘vixen’ is mistaken. By asserting (3) I do not make (or commit myself to) any such empirical claim. But then Stephen’s misguided construal of (3), as having empirical import, fails to be the counterexample it is meant to be. The claim at issue is that one cannot understand a trivially analytic statement without ipso facto understanding it to be true. Stephen can obviously not provide a counterexample to that claim if he misunderstands the statement in question. Williamson, however, tries to resist the diagnosis that Stephen and Peter (assuming that Peter too is mistaken about (3)) have a deviant understanding of the meaning of the sentence. Though, why he should resist it, is not so easy to make out.

First he notes that Peter’s and Stephen’s deviant views make ‘little difference in practice’. That may be true, but is patently irrelevant. Some semantic misunderstandings are big, some are small and hardly ever noticeable. Still, Williamson labours the point: Peter and Stephen defend their misconceptions fluently; they have even published articles in English; their English is better than that of young children or foreigners still learning the language. As if in order to make a semantic mistake one needed to be semi-inarticulate!

Secondly, Williamson notes that Peter and Stephen are emphatic that they intend their words ‘to be understood as words of our common language, with their standard English senses’. Of course they do. Otherwise, if they intentionally flouted linguistic conventions, it wouldn’t be a misunderstanding.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Williamson claims that the understanding which Peter and Stephen lack ‘is logical, is not semantic’. What they disagree with us about is not the meaning of an expression, it is the ‘logical facts about “every”’. Now, where do those ‘logical facts’ about specific words spring from? Supposing that it is a ‘logical fact about

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“every”’ that a proposition of the form ‘Every \( F \) is \( F \)’ has no existential import: that its logical form is \((3b)\), rather than \((3a)\), this is evidently a conventional fact. After all, we can easily imagine, or even create, a language in which the corresponding word (the word used to make a claim about everything of a certain kind) does have an existential implication. Indeed, we may change the meaning of ‘every’ in English, or at least a dialect of English, so that from now on it is a ‘logical fact about “every”’ that propositions of the form ‘Every \( F \) is \( F \)’ have the logical form \((3a)\) (or that they are to be understood to carry the implication that there are no borderline cases of \( F \)). Consider some real examples. Is it a logical fact about the negation sign that two negation signs in succession cancel each other out? That depends on the language, and thus on the meaning of the words used as negation signs. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. Many languages, or dialects, allow for double negation to be used as a straightforward or emphatic negation. Again, consider the English sentence:

\[(5)\] She must not come.

and its word-by-word translation into German:

\[(6)\] Sie muß nicht kommen.

In fact the latter means: ‘She need not come’. The ‘logical facts’ about the English words ‘must’ and ‘not’ are slightly different from the ‘logical facts’ about their German counterparts. ‘Logical facts’ about words are conventional semantic facts.

It is of course true that there are logical mistakes that are not semantic mistakes. For instance, the fallacy of denying the antecedent is not a semantic error: it does not normally betoken a misunderstanding of the meaning of any words. Is it plausible to regard Peter’s and Stephens’s deviations as defects in their ‘deductive competence’, as Williamson seems to suggest,\(^{21}\) rather than semantic errors? For this diagnosis to be plausible it is not enough that their deductions lead to the wrong result, since that, of course, also happens when one is wrong about the meaning of words. For example, someone under the impression that ‘if’ means ‘if and only if’, will accept the argument: ‘If \( p \) then \( q \); not \( p \); therefore not

\(^{21}\) Williamson, ‘Conceptual Truth’, 22.
q’—not because of any deductive incompetence, but simply because of a semantic misunderstanding. In order to make out that it was deductive incompetence, we would have to establish first that both premises were correctly understood: that there was agreement as to when the conditional is to be regarded as true and when it is to be regarded as false. If the disagreement about an argument can be traced back to a disagreement about the truth conditions of one of its premises, a simple conditional, it is obviously a semantic disagreement, and not distinctively logical. Similarly in the case of our disagreements with Peter and Stephen: it is not just (and not primarily) the results of deductive arguments that they get wrong (indeed, no deductive arguments figure in Williamson’s example). It is simply that in a given situation (viz., when there are no vixens, or when there are borderline cases of vixens, respectively) they regard proposition (3) as false, thus contradicting the conventionally accepted understanding of this kind of proposition. Deductive competence doesn’t come into it.

Note, incidentally, that Williamson’s example (3) is, anyway, slightly out of focus. Obviously, it is not a typical analytic statement in that it is a logical truth (an instance of a theorem of the predicate calculus). Later on in his paper Williamson moves on to a related analytic truth that is not a logical truth, namely:

(7) Every vixen is a female fox.

—arguing that his conclusions about (3) hold for (7) as well. It is worth noting, however, that (7) is not idiomatic English, but a philosophers’ translation of:

(8) A vixen is a female fox.

The expression ‘every vixen’ (rather than ‘a vixen’) is naturally used for empirical generalisations about vixens, and, hence, misleading when—as is typically the point of analytic statements—the explanation of a word is at issue.

The philosophers’ misleading assimilation of analytic statements to empirical generalisations is driven by a commitment to a system of formal logic that lacks the resources to distinguish between empirical generalisations and statements such as (8). It is worth noting that Williamson’s argument is not only unconvincing, but based entirely on complications that arise from this problematic assimilation.
Finally, let us briefly consider Williamson’s alternative picture. If, as he has tried to argue, the understanding of the meaning of a trivially analytic statement does not bring with it an understanding of its truth, the question arises of how else we are to know that it is true. How, according to Williamson, do we know that all vixens are vixens? Or do we? ‘What strike us today as the best candidates for analytic or conceptual truth some innovative thinker may call into question tomorrow for intelligible reasons’.¹² This sounds as if Williamson doesn’t take himself to know for certain that vixens are vixens!

Williamson’s opinion is that one can have a ‘minimal understanding’ of a word without yet grasping the concept in question. Thus, for example, one can understand the words ‘furze’ and ‘gorse’ without knowing that furze is gorse. A shared understanding of a word doesn’t require a shared stock of platitudes; rather, what holds a linguistic practice together is that different uses of the same word are causally related, together with the fact that individual speakers allow the references of their words to be fixed by its use over the whole community.²³

The first claim is true if ‘minimal understanding’ is taken to mean: partial understanding. You can know that ‘furze’ and ‘gorse’ are names of plants—even that they both name some yellow-flowered shrubs—without being aware that they are synonymous. It is of course true that of a huge number of words in our language we only have such a ‘minimal understanding’: we can only vaguely classify them as denoting, say, a flower, a mineral or some part of a combustion engine.²⁴ And it is also true that in many conversational contexts such a ‘minimal understanding’ is quite enough to get by. However, if you don’t know which kind of yellow-flowered shrub is called ‘gorse’: if you are unable to identify gorse and tell it apart from other yellow-flowered shrubs, you can hardly be credited with a full understanding of the word. Just as a full understanding of the word ‘magenta’ requires more than the knowledge that it is a colour word; or even that it denotes a shade of red. To know what exactly ‘magenta’ means you need to be able to tell that colour apart from other shades of red.

Now, that somebody with only a ‘minimal’, or partial understanding of the meaning of a word may fail to recognise the truth of an analytic

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²⁴ But note also that the most common words are not like that.
statement involving that word is small wonder, and in no way at odds with the traditional account of analyticity. Again, that there are causal relations between different speakers’ uses of the same word where some of those speakers have only a partial understanding of the word’s meaning and defer to the experts’ account of what exactly it means is perfectly true—but quite irrelevant to the question of analyticity. Where Williamson goes wrong is in setting up this picture of a ‘division of linguistic labour’ as an alternative to the view that ‘a shared understanding of a word requires a shared stock of platitudes’. In fact, what characterises such cases of ‘division of linguistic labour’ is exactly that the understanding of a word is not fully shared. When the man at the garage says to me: ‘I’m afraid we’ll have to replace the dog flange’, then (although he and I can up to a point communicate: I can tell him to go ahead and do so) it is quite evident that I don’t fully share his understanding of that technical term. To the extent that the understanding of a word is shared, so is the knowledge of trivial analytic truths that constitutes this understanding. Consider:

(9) What has been refuted is false.

For those who use the verb ‘to refute’ in its standard sense, this is an analytic truth. Yet a considerable number, perhaps the majority, of English speakers today would not accept (9) as true, because they have a different understanding of the word ‘refute’ (as meaning merely: to deny). Disagreement over an analytic truth indicates a misunderstanding. (Note the difference between this case and a case of ‘division of linguistic labour’, which should never lead to an actual disagreement. If all I know about furze and gorse is that they are yellow-flowered shrubs, I am in no position to know that furze is gorse, but neither can I have reason to deny it. If somebody were to deny the analytic truth that furze is gorse, he would thereby betoken a misunderstanding of at least one of the terms, not just an only partial understanding.)

More common than the radical denials of analyticity discussed so far is the view that analyticity, although an undeniable phenomenon, cannot be explained as truth in virtue of meaning.

3. Argument from the Use/Mention Distinction

(1) cannot be synonymous with (2), for the word 'cygnet' is used in (2), but only mentioned in (1). Therefore an understanding of (2) requires an understanding of the word 'cygnet', whereas one can fully understand (1) even if one doesn't know that word.

It is a curiously widespread prejudice among analytic philosophers that when a linguistic expression is mentioned (presented in inverted commas) it cannot at the same time be used. The truth is that mentioning, or quoting, a word or sentence is one—quite common—way of using that expression. I can utter the words:

(10) As Macbeth puts it: 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly'.

mentioning a well-known sentence from Macbeth, in order to admonish somebody to act without delay. Again, the response:

(11) This is what in court is called 'a leading question'.

mentions an expression while at the same time applying it.

Anyway, it is a mistake to think that one can generally fully understand a statement without understanding any of the expressions it contains in inverted commas. It is of course true in the case where what is presented in inverted commas is not a meaningful expression: where there is nothing to understand. For instance:

(12) 'srxx' is not a word.
(13) My neighbour's owl goes: 'Oohoo'.

But consider:

(14) My neighbour's wife often says: 'Jöögd het keen Döögd'.
(15) The word 'подросток' is difficult to translate into English.

Who would seriously maintain that these two statements are fully understandable without any knowledge of foreign languages? (Note that (14) conveys information not only about the noises made by the speaker's neighbour's wife, but about what she says.)

It is of course true that somebody as yet unfamiliar with the word 'cygnet' will understand:
(1) The word ‘cygnet’ means: young swan.
as an explanation of that word. But clearly, the same is true of:
(2) A cygnet is a young swan.

Just as the sentences:
(16) This colour is sepia.
(17) This colour is called ‘sepia’.

are both equally suitable for an ostensive explanation of the term ‘sepia’.

4. Argument from the Contingency of Meaning

Analytic propositions are necessary propositions. But to suppose an analytic statement
to be a statement about linguistic meaning amounts to saying that it is not a necessary
truth. The negation of a true statement about linguistic meaning is contingently false,
whereas the negation of an analytic statement is self-contradictory, i.e., arguably,
not false, but nonsensical.

First of all, it is worth noting that in ordinary conversation the negation
of an analytic statement would not in fact be regarded as self-contradictory.
Rather, it would be treated as a linguistic error: as false. Somebody who
said:
(18) A cygnet is not a swan, it’s a farming tool with a semicircular blade.

would not be taken as contradicting himself, as making an illogical claim.
Rather, we would take the speaker as having confused two different words.
What he means is obviously a sickle. We would not take him to express
a self-contradictory belief, but a false linguistic claim (a false association of
sound and meaning).

However, it is of course true that, disregarding linguistic error and
insisting on the correct meanings of the words, (18) is inconsistent (for it
implies that a swan of a certain description is not a swan). But the same
inconsistency can be found in a negation of (1):

(19) The word ‘cygnet’ does not mean: young swan.

Here it is important to remember that a word is not just a sound or a
sequence of letters. A word is essentially a word of a language: it is a sound
or a sequence of letters that has been given a certain meaning. Thus, ‘nguxâ’
is not a word; and the English 'also' is a different word from the German 'also' (which means: therefore). That is to say, the meaning is part of the word: it makes it the word it is.²⁶ It follows that:

(1) The word 'cygnet' means: young swan.

is just as much a necessary truth as the corresponding analytic statement (2). The English word 'cygnet'—that is, 'cygnet' with its current meaning in English (viz., young swan)—has its current meaning in English (viz., young swan). That could not possibly be otherwise, for a word with a different meaning would be a different word—not the English word 'cygnet'. A word with a different meaning could at most be a homonym: a different word with the same spelling. That is to say, (1) must not be confused with:

(20) The sequence of letters 'cygnet' is used in English to denote a young swan.

This is a contingent statement. The same sequence of letters might have been given a different meaning (and still be the same sequence of letters). By contrast, the correct statement that a given word (partly defined by its meaning) has a certain meaning is as much a necessary truth as the claim that a bachelor is an unmarried man.²⁷

Does that imply that the meaning of a word cannot change? No, our criteria of diachronic identity are not as pedantic as that. A word may change slightly in meaning and still remain, recognisably, the same word; just as a word may change slightly in spelling (e.g. from 'chace' to 'chase') or pronunciation (e.g. from /kneɪv/ to /neɪv/) and still be called the same word. On the other hand, a radical semantic change produces a new word. The Middle English word 'nice', for example, meaning: stupid, silly (from Latin *nescius*: ignorant), can hardly be regarded as the same word as its modern descendant.²⁸

It is of course true that at the bottom of the necessity of an analytic truth is nothing more than a contingent socio-linguistic fact. There are

²⁶ A homonym is 'a word of the same spelling or sound as another but of different meaning' (Oxford Concise English Dictionary). In other words, a different (and unrelated) meaning makes a different word. However, one may prefer to say that some words have more than one meaning. That does not affect the point I am stressing: that a word is not just a sequence of letters or sounds, but to be identified also by what it means.

²⁷ In *Tractatus* terminology: a word is a symbol, not just a sign (TLP, 3.32).

²⁸ Or should we say 'descendant'? A nice question.
two perspectives: an internal one, from inside the practice, where the norms are taken for granted, and an external one, from the outside, where other norms are equally conceivable. Inside the game of chess, it is not negotiable that the white queen’s bishop moves only on black squares: it is a necessary truth, as opposed to the contingent truth that in a given game its first move is to b2 (and not, say, to d2). We can explain this necessity by citing the rules of chess (the form of the chessboard, the way the pieces are set up, the way they are allowed to move). Thus, given that we want to play chess, it is a necessity that the white queen’s bishop moves only on black squares. Different rules would make a different game. But then of course, (moving now to the external perspective) we could have invented and played a different game (or a variant of the same game). The invention and subsequent popularity of the game of chess is a historical contingency. Similarly, the establishment of certain linguistic norms is a historical contingency. Still, when we speak a language (taking up the internal perspective) we accept its norms, and what they prescribe is accepted as not negotiable.

5. Argument from the Apparent Difference in Subject Matter

(1) says something about a word, whereas (2) says something about a certain kind of animal; so evidently, they do not mean the same.

That is what one is inclined to say when considering only the formulation and not the use. It is at the heart of Wittgenstein’s philosophy that that is a recipe for error or confusion. Frequently, similar formulations hide crucial differences in use; and occasionally different formulations disguise striking similarities in use.

First, consider the pair:

(21) He kicked the bucket.
(22) He popped off.

They too might appear to have different subject matters. But in fact, (21) is merely an idiomatic variant of (22). Again, metaphors are idiomatically

²⁹ Slightly different rules would more naturally be said to make a variant of the same game, rather than a different game, and if the deviation from the rules of an established game was unintended, the result might still be regarded as the same game although played incorrectly. Likewise, there are different variants of English and there is faulty English.
succinct ways of drawing comparisons, while on the face of it, taken *au pied de la lettre*, they usually appear to say something absurd or pointless.

Secondly, can one really make sense of the suggestion that analytic statements are *not* about words or concepts? On the face of it (2) seems to say something about a certain kind of animal: but *what* does it say about that kind of animal? That it is the kind of animal it is. Remember, ‘cygnet’ and ‘young swan’ are synonymous expressions. Their meaning is exactly the same. So what (2) tells us about cygnets cannot be different from what the following tells us:

(23) A young swan is a young swan.

—namely nothing.\(^{30}\)

Some philosophers would protest that (23) is not empty as it ascribes to young swans the quality of self-identity. But what quality is that? Quine says that it is ‘an obvious trait of everything’.\(^{31}\) Gilbert Harman calls the fact that everything is self-identical ‘a general feature of the way the world is’.\(^{32}\) Here language has evidently gone on holiday.\(^{33}\) Of course nothing can prevent a philosopher from defining a predicate (be it ‘entity’, or ‘self-identical’) to apply to everything. But then to call it a ‘quality’, ‘feature’ or ‘trait’ of things that this predicate applies to them is, arguably, a misuse of those words, which in ordinary English are used for *distinctive* attributes. Anyway, call self-identity a ‘quality’ or a ‘trait’ if you like, the fact remains that by ascribing such a Pickwickian ‘quality’ to something—you haven’t really said anything. The problem with the attempt to construe analytic statements as statements about objects (such as cygnets), rather than words or concepts, is that it would make them entirely vacuous and pointless. It fails to account for the fact that, unlike (23), an analytic statement such as (2) can be *informative* and *useful*. It can be used to explain the meaning of words. So it is plausible to construe it as a statement about words.

Consider also the following analytic statement in German:

(24) *Sonnabend ist Samstag.*

\(^{30}\) Of course one can say that (2) tells us what a cygnet is; but so does (1). In general, the explanation of a word ‘*F*’ (in a dictionary, for example) tells us what (an) *F* is.


\(^{33}\) Cf. PI, 216.
It is impossible to translate it into English. Is that, as Heidegger might have suggested, because the German language is closer to the pulse of being than other languages (with the possible exception of ancient Greek), so that certain profound metaphysical insights cannot possibly be rendered in English? No, it is simply because German has two words for ‘Saturday’, English (as far as I know) only one. So, following a dictionary, the only possible translation of (24) is:

(25) Saturday is Saturday.

But obviously, (24) and (25) differ in meaning: (25) is utterly trivial, of the form ‘A is A’, whereas (24), of the form ‘A is B’, might well be news to some people (especially in the south of Germany). And what could that news possibly be if not that Sonnabend is another word for the day called Samstag? By the same token, (2) and (23) differ in meaning, even though the one can be derived from the other by the substitution of synonymous expressions. That is exactly because (although phrased in material mode, without inverted commas) those statements are in effect about the expressions in question. Hence the difference between those two expressions matters even if it is not a difference in meaning. (2) and (23) differ in meaning just as the potentially informative ‘‘A’’ is synonymous with ‘‘B’’ differs in meaning from the trivial ‘‘A’’ is synonymous with ‘‘A’’—even if ‘A’ is synonymous with ‘B’.

6. Argument from Translation

The two analytic statements

(26) Red is a colour.

and

(26D) Rot ist eine Farbe.

have the same meaning, which would not be the case if (26) was a statement about an English word, while (26D) was a statement about a German word.

The claim that analytic statements are about words seems to be contradicted by the fact that usually (although, as just shown, not always) they can be translated into another language. But the contradiction is only apparent. As noted above, a word is not just a sequence of letters; an essential part of a word is its meaning. And two words of different languages can have the
same meaning, for instance: ‘red’ and *rot*. Indeed, of the two aspects of a word—the sequence of letters and the meaning—the latter (the semantic aspect) is clearly the one that matters. The former (the graphic/phonetic aspect) is just a tag or marker, which by being used in a certain way acquires a certain meaning. The tag is necessary, no doubt (you can’t have the meaning without a bearer), but essentially replaceable. Any other combination of letters could have fulfilled the job just as well.

According to these two aspects of a word, there are two kinds of statements one might make about a word: One can comment on its spelling (or pronunciation) or one can comment on its meaning. Now it should be evident that where what we say about a word concerns its meaning (and not its spelling) it applies equally to any other word with exactly the same meaning. Thus, what we say about the meaning of the English word ‘red’ can also be said about the meaning of the synonymous German word *rot*. And what we say *in English* about the one word, we can say *in German* about the other one. Thus:

\[(27) \text{‘Red’ is a colour word.}\]

is correctly translated into German as:

\[(27D) \text{‘Rot’ ist ein Farbwort.}\]

Both statements make the same semantic claim about a word with the same semantic characteristics. Therefore, (27D) is (in most contexts) a correct translation of (27), and vice versa. If (27D) occurred in a German novel—say, in a primary school classroom scene—it would have to be rendered into English as (27). Even though, to be sure, the two sentences are not identical in meaning: (27) is about an English word, (27D) is about a German word. The alternative English translation of (27D):

\[(28) \text{Rot is a colour word.}\]

would (in most contexts) be unacceptable. For (28) is about a *foreign* word, whereas both (27) and (27D) are about a word in their respective languages; and that is something a good translation (for most purposes) needs to preserve.

Now it should be clear where the objection under discussion goes wrong. The two statements (26) and (26D) do not have exactly the same meaning. They are indeed about different words. The reason why they
appear to have the same meaning and are indeed adequate translations of each other is that they make the same semantic claim about two words that have the same meaning, that take up exactly the same position in their respective languages’ ‘grammatical space’ (BT, 30).

Of course we are strongly inclined to believe that (26) and (26D) must have the same meaning since they are constructed in the same way out of words with the same meaning. But the analogous pair of sentences shows that this reason is not conclusive: (27) and (27D) are constructed in the same way out of words with the same meaning, and yet differ in meaning. And what I have been arguing is that (26) and (26D) should be seen as variants of the other pair.

This point is also relevant to another standard objection:

7. Argument from Analytic Truth’s Apparent Independence of a Given Language

What is expressed by, say,

(8) A vixen is a female fox.

cannot be true in virtue of the meaning of the English word ‘vixen’, because it would still have been true if English had never existed.

This objection, too, is based on the—not entirely correct—assumption that analytic truths are synonymous with their translations into other languages. The meaning that (8) and its translations share is then thought to be a truth that exists independently of any language. However, as argued above, (8) and its equivalent in another language are not strictly synonymous, but only semantically analogous. (8) expresses a logical relation among the three English predicates ‘vixen’, ‘female’ and ‘fox’, and the same relation can be said to hold among the three corresponding French predicates renarde, femelle and renard. Hence, although it is not true that (8) is used in English as an expression of a language-independent and timeless truth, it may be said that such a language-independent, timeless truth can be derived from (8), which might be put like this:

(8*) The concept of a vixen is identical with the conjunction of the concept of a female and the concept of a fox.

In short, although English analytic statements are about English words, implicit in them are truths about the concepts expressed by those words, concepts that could obviously also be expressed by words of other languages.
Nonetheless it is important to bear in mind that analytic statements are not only about those concepts, but about specific words in our language expressing them. It is true that we are interested in the meanings of certain words, the concepts they express (which are independent of our language), but at the same time we are interested in the meanings of certain words (which are not).

8. The Lewis—Lewy Objection

Another standard objection to the traditional account of analyticity can be traced back to C.I. Lewis, but was also put forward by Casimir Lewy and more recently by P. Boghossian:

What could it possibly mean to say that the truth of a statement is fixed exclusively by its meaning and not by the facts? Isn’t it in general true—indeed, isn’t it in general a truism—that for any statement S,

S is true iff for some p, S means that p and p?

How could the mere fact that S means that p make it the case that S is true?

Or, as Glock puts it in plain English, ‘all that linguistic conventions do is to determine what a sentence says; whether what it says is true is another question, to which linguistic conventions are irrelevant’. Glock notes afterwards that that is not strictly true: conventions are obviously not irrelevant to the truth or falsity of statements about conventions. But, he urges, truths about conventions—e.g.:

(29) In 1795 France adopted the metric system.

—are not true by convention.

That, however, is too quick. Statements about conventions need not be reports of historic events, such as the introduction of a standard of measurement, they can also be reports or explications of what those conventionally agreed standards are. Thus,

34 This label is taken from H.-J. Glock, ‘The Linguistic Doctrine Revisited’, Grazer philosophische Studien, 66 (2003), 159.
35 C.I. Lewis, An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1946).
38 Glock, ‘Linguistic Doctrine’, 158.
One metre is 100 centimetres.

— is also a truth about a convention (or at any rate, a true report of a conventional fact). Yet unlike the historic statement (29), (30) is true by convention. It is true because what it reports to be the case is indeed what has been conventionally agreed to be the case.

Analytic statements express (the contents of) a linguistic convention about a word by using the word according to that convention, i.e., in a way that is true by linguistic convention. For instance, the linguistic convention that the word ‘cygnet’ is applicable to a young swan makes it true to say:

(31) This is a cygnet [pointing at a young swan].

Hence, naturally, it makes it also true to say:

(2) A cygnet is a young swan.

Both (31) and (2) are correct applications of the word ‘cygnet’. The difference is that whereas (31) happens to be true (as the object referred to happens to be a young swan), the truth of (2) is not in such a way dependent on the circumstances. (2) makes explicit what qualities an object must have to count as a ‘cygnet’, according to the meaning of that word. It is an explanation of meaning, and it is true because the word does have that meaning.

So, ‘how could the mere fact that $S$ means that $p$ make it the case that $S$ is true?’ Well, evidently, in order to explain how truth can be due to meaning alone, something more needs to be said about the meaning of a given statement than that the statement ‘means that $p$’—i.e., that it has the meaning it has. As long as we content ourselves with staring at some sentence letters, Boghossian’s question may indeed seem puzzling. But as soon as we say a little more about an analytic statement’s meaning, the puzzle can be dissolved. For instance, whenever in a statement of the form ‘An $F$ is a $G$’, the expressions ‘$F$’ and ‘$G$’ are synonymous, the statement (typically used to convey that synonymy) is regarded as true—owing to the meaning of the terms involved (‘is’, ‘an $F$, ‘a $G$’) and the way they are meaningfully combined. That is the type of explanation that answers Boghossian’s question.
II

Wittgenstein, in his later philosophy, does not use the expression ‘analytic truth’. Instead, he introduces the term ‘grammatical statement’ (or ‘statement of grammar’, or ‘grammatical proposition’) for ‘a statement which no experience will refute’ (AWL, 16) and which can be used to ‘explain the meaning of its terms’ (AWL, 31). He also says that grammatical propositions are rules about the use of words (AWL, 105). Is ‘grammatical proposition’ just another name for ‘analytic truth’? That is emphatically denied by G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker in their magisterial essay ‘Grammar and Necessity’,⁴⁰ which offers by far the most detailed and illuminating account of Wittgenstein’s concept of a grammatical proposition. Baker and Hacker argue that there are three significant differences between analytic truths and grammatical propositions:

[First:] The analytic/synthetic distinction is framed in terms of the forms and constituents of type-sentences, whereas whether an utterance expresses a grammatical proposition depends not only on its form, but on its roles on occasions of utterance.⁴¹

[Secondly:] Many of the propositions which [Wittgenstein] calls propositions of grammar have no place in anybody’s catalogue of analytic truths.⁴²

Thirdly, whereas analytic truths are said to follow from the meanings (definitions) of their constituents, grammatical propositions are rules that partly constitute the meanings of their constituents.⁴³

These points are persuasive vis-à-vis the logical positivist account of analyticity which was grounded in a concept of meaning that Wittgenstein came to criticise as far too narrow. I am, however, going to argue that when we adopt Wittgenstein’s own construal of meaning as use, those three points can be answered. To be sure, there remain differences between the concept of an analytic truth and that of a grammatical proposition, but there is a substantial overlap: typical examples of analytic truths can also be described as grammatical statements, and vice versa. I shall now consider the three points in turn.

First: Analyticity is defined in terms of truth, so that only bearers of truth can be called analytic. That, to my mind, makes it rather implausible to classify type-sentences as analytic or synthetic, especially if type-sentences are construed in such a way that they can be ambiguous. For instance, the sentence:

\[(32) \text{ Ladies don't swear.}\]

may be used as a (dubious) empirical generalisation based on the speaker’s experience, or it may be used to make an analytic statement, partly explaining a certain concept of a lady (as a woman with refined manners). Again, the ambiguous sentence:

\[(33) \text{ A lime is a tree with heart-shaped leaves.}\]

—can be used to express an analytic truth, and yet in another context an utterance of the same sentence might be dismissed as false: when the word ‘lime’ is taken to mean *Citrus aurantifolia* (rather than *Tilia europaea*). Hence, the analytic truth at issue is not the type-sentence (33). Admittedly, this conclusion can be avoided by construing ambiguous sentences as two different sentences, just as ‘lime’ may be regarded as two different words (different in meaning, though identical in spelling). But even if type-sentences are in this way individuated by form and unambiguous meaning, many of them containing indexical elements can obviously be neither true nor false. At most one could say that such a sentence is true or false when uttered on a given occasion, in which case the bearer of truth would appear to be a token-sentence. I find it more natural, however, to say that the statement made, or the proposition expressed, with that sentence is true or false. Hence, in this respect, analytic truths are plausibly construed just like grammatical propositions: as statements in a suitable context, rather than type-sentences.

One might perhaps suggest that since grammatical propositions are characterised as rules, they are identified by their purpose (teaching, correcting, justifying), unlike analytic truths. Therefore, when used for different purposes (or uttered without any purpose) an analytic truth would not count as a grammatical proposition. Thus,

\[(34) \text{ What I have written I have written.}\]

\[\text{Cf. Section I.4 above.}\]
would be an analytic truth, but not a grammatical statement. It is of course possible to construe the concept of a grammatical statement in this way, but it is not clear that following Wittgenstein’s characterisation we have to. For it is not true that rules are expressed only for didactic or justificatory purposes. I may, for example, cite a rule of chess (‘Knights can also move backwards’), not because my addressee isn’t fully conversant with the rules, but as a hint of a good move.

However, even if a rule can be expressed without any didactic or justificatory purpose, it would hardly be called a rule if it could not also be used to explain, correct or justify. Hence there is a difference between rules and the logical consequences of rules unsuitable for any such purpose. For example, it may be called a rule of chess that the white queen’s bishop is placed on a black square, but one hesitates to call it a rule that the white queen’s bishop can never move to b8. And one would certainly not call it a rule of chess that in the position White: Kc3, Qa8, Be4; Black: Ka1, Ba2, White can mate in three moves. And yet as these statements are true in virtue of the meanings of their terms (defined by the rules of chess), they qualify as analytic. So the concept of an analytic truth is wider than that of a grammatical proposition.

Baker and Hacker claim, on the contrary, that the concept of a grammatical proposition or rule is more inclusive (their second point). Examples of grammatical propositions that one may perhaps hesitate to call analytic are:

(35) Nothing can be red all over and green all over simultaneously.
(36) Black is darker than white.

It is true that none of these propositions is what one might call ‘Frege-analytic’: it is not possible by substituting synonyms for synonyms to transform any of them into a logical truth. But if we follow Wittgenstein in taking the meaning of a word to be its use in the language (PI, 43), and if we note further that knowledge of the use of a word cannot be identified with knowledge of a synonymous expression—we should not expect analyticity to boil down to Frege-analyticity. In other words, if meaning comprises more than can be captured by paraphrase, we should not expect truth in virtue of meaning always to be susceptible of a formal proof by

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paraphrase. It characterises the meaning of primary colour words that—like different values on a scale—their applications are mutually incompatible: when a surface is correctly described as ‘red’ it cannot also be called ‘green’. This aspect of the use of these words makes (35) true—analytically true. Again, knowledge of the correct use of the words ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘darker than’ is enough to make out that (36) is true.

In some 1950–1 manuscripts (‘Remarks on Colour’), Wittgenstein suggests that the following propositions are conceptual truths:

(37) There is no reddish green.

(38) There is no transparent white.

If Wittgenstein is right, they may well be regarded as analytic. Indeed, he himself calls them the results of ‘conceptual analysis’ (ROC II, 16). He does not call them ‘grammatical rules’, and rightly so. Far from being (suitable as) didactic instruments, these truths have to be discovered. (They are perhaps comparable to the discovery that in a certain chess position one can mate in three moves.) The logic of our colour concepts is far more complicated than it seems (ROC III, 106), and thus we can find ‘internal properties’ of colours of which we had not thought before (ROC III, 63).

Finally, let us consider ostensive explanations, of which Wittgenstein suggested in the 1930s that they could be regarded as grammatical rules (PG, 88; BB, 12), e.g.:

(39) This is black [pointing at a sample: ■].

Such an explanation is not an analytic statement, for its truth depends not only on the meanings of its words but also on the colour of the sample. (The empirical element is more obvious when the sample cannot be presented in print, e.g.: ‘This is an elm tree ⇒ . . . ’) But then (39) should not be regarded as a grammatical rule either. Roughly for the same reason: the sample (unlike a canonical sample, such as the metre bar in Paris) only happens to instantiate the predicate. It is not a linguistic convention, but an empirical fact that the particular coloured patch I point to is black. Of course, as a means to teach someone the meaning of the word ‘black’ it will

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⁴⁶ In one passage he speaks of a ‘rule of spatial interpretation of our visual experience’, but this to be a ‘rule for a painter’, rather than a linguistic rule (ROC III, 173).

⁴⁷ Cf. BT, 244.
do, but this is teaching by exemplification, rather than teaching by giving a rule. An everyday ostensive explanation, such as (39), is an exemplification in two respects: Not only do we point out a suitable object, say, a blot of ink (or an elm tree), as an example of something black (or of an elm tree); our utterance itself is also an example: an example of the correct application of the predicate ‘black’ (or ‘elm tree’). As Wittgenstein remarked in 1931, an explanation such as (39) is ‘the paradigm of the transition... which is made by an empirical statement’.\(^{48}\)

Baker and Hacker’s diagnosis of the third point of difference between analytic truths and grammatical propositions appears to be based mainly on the following passage from notes of Wittgenstein’s lectures in 1932–3:

Are the rules, for example, \(\sim\sim p = p\) for negation, responsible to the meaning of a word? No. The rules constitute the meaning, and are not responsible to it. . . . Rules are arbitrary in the sense that they are not responsible to some meaning the word already has. If someone says the rules of negation are not arbitrary because negation could not be such that \(\sim\sim p = \sim p\), all that could be meant is that the latter rule would not correspond to the English word ‘negation’. The objection that the rules are not arbitrary comes from the feeling that they are responsible to the meaning. But how is the meaning of ‘negation’ defined, if not by the rules? \(\sim\sim p = p\) does not follow from the meaning of “not” but constitutes it. (AWL, 4; cf. PG, 52 f.; 184; LFM, 282; RFM, 106)

What Wittgenstein is concerned to undermine is the idea of the meaning of a word as ‘something over and above the use of the word’; some abstract or psychological entity ‘attaching to the word itself’ (RFM, 42), from which the rules for its use could be derived and against which they could be checked. To use a chess analogy: one may be tempted to think that each piece has an inner nature that determines its possible moves, and that the rules of chess have to be derived from, and must be in accord with. The truth is, of course, that the rules of the game were not derived from anything, but are arbitrary stipulations; and the rôle of a piece in the game is determined, or constituted, by the rules.

However, there is no need for the concept of analyticity, as truth in virtue of meaning, to commit itself to the implausible account of meaning rightly criticised by Wittgenstein. Rather, we should understand an analytic statement as one that is true in virtue of the use of its constituent words, in particular of the expression it is meant to explain. Now, is it plausible to object that a would-be analytic statement, such as:

(2) A cygnet is a young swan.

should not be seen as true in virtue of the established use of the word ‘cygnet’, because it is a rule, partly constituting the correct use of that word? I don’t think we need to choose between these two views. Consider a rule of chess:

(40) The bishop moves only diagonally.

This rule can indeed be said to constitute the way the bishop moves (rather than being derived from the alleged ‘inner nature’ of that piece). However, at the same time it is true that the bishop moves only diagonally: it is true because the bishop has indeed been defined to be the piece that moves only diagonally. Thus (40) can be said to be true in virtue of the rules of chess; one of which it correctly reports.

Against this, one may want to object that although the sentence (40) can indeed be used either normatively, as a rule, or descriptively, as a report that something is a valid norm, it cannot be used in both ways at the same time. I disagree. An utterance of (40), as part of an explanation of how to play chess, is both descriptive and normative. It provides a rule according to which a bishop’s move can be assessed as correct or incorrect, but at the same time this is implicitly claimed to be a valid rule of chess. After all the learner asked me to teach him the game of chess, and not some other game of my own invention (where I would be free to stipulate a rule). Most linguistic explanations—whether spoken or printed in a dictionary—have the same double character: they tell us how to use words by describing how those words are used in the language. The normative aspect owes its authority to the descriptive aspect: ‘That is the way you should speak because that is the way one speaks’. Even where there is no explicit reference to common usage, the expression of a linguistic rule
can be criticised as *false* if it deviates from common usage. Wittgenstein appears to acknowledge this amalgamation of description and normativity when he speaks indiscriminately of grammatical *statements* and grammatical *rules*. ‘Grammar is a description of the language *ex post*’ (MS 109, 110), yet grammar is essentially normative.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Hans-Johann Glock, John Hyman, John Preston and Daniel Whiting for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.