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DISCUSSIONS AND REPLIES
On translating the *Tractatus*: Jaap van der Does and Martin Stokhof in debate with Michael Beaney

Concluding Dialogue

Michael Beaney   Jaap van der Does   Martin Stokhof

JAAP, MARTIN:[1] Thank you very much, Michael, for your extensive response to our note. It raises a number of issues that call for a further exchange of views, and we are happy to kick that off by getting straight to the core of our dispute: the English translation of 'Satz'. Your idea is that 'Satz' is *connectively polysemous*. That is an interesting approach, but it comes with an obligation to show that the connected polysemy of 'Satz' and that of its translation 'proposition' are sufficiently identical.

On your approach this seems hard to do, as at the time Wittgenstein wrote the *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* the use of 'proposition' was already highly varied, and in the case of Russell even needs to be timestamped. From the present point of view, the term 'proposition' in your translation functions like a peg for Wittgenstein's different uses of 'Satz'. What you postulate as its core meaning – i.e., description with a truth-value – is indeed comparable with variants in the historical context, but most other uses become rather unnatural. Would you agree?

MICHAEL: In asking this question, you are setting up too simple a dichotomy: either 'natural' or 'unnatural'. The whole point of the idea of connective polysemy is that there are subtle relations between the various uses of a term, some aspects shading off and other aspects highlighted as the term is used in different contexts. Throughout we are meant to recognize this connected polysemy, even if we find it more problematic than those who use 'Satz' or 'proposition' in this way.

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[1] It may be a bit unnatural for two persons to be one of the parties in a dialogue. But we (JvdD and MS) agree on the issues involved, and since this is a written dialogue, we assume that no confusion arises.

I do agree, though, that 'Satz' in German and 'proposition' and 'sentence' in English all have different ranges of meanings, ranges that have also changed through history. This makes it impossible to find a single English term to translate 'Satz', as used by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, that has exactly the same range of meanings and connections. 'Proposition' comes closest, however, and Wittgenstein endorsed this rendering. In his detailed correspondence with Ogden, and in the records of his discussions with Russell, Ramsey, and others about the ideas and translation of the *Tractatus*, he never once raised any objection to translating 'Satz' as 'proposition'.

JAAP, MARTIN: By using 'rather unnatural' we had hoped to suggest something more subtle than a dichotomy. We too find it noteworthy that when commenting on the Ramsey-Ogden translation early Wittgenstein did not discuss its use of 'proposition' in detail. Did he really assume its use could range from what bears the hallmark of being meaningful to something with no sense and even to nonsense? That sounds unlikely, to say the least. But perhaps it is not surprising after all if in this role we interpret Wittgenstein as one who asks "What's in a name? It will take care of itself in the context it is presented in", rather than one who is searching for das 'erlösende Wort'. Here it might also be worthwhile to observe that, like Kant and Frege, Wittgenstein refrained from using 'die Proposition'. At the time it was a term that was used in connection with early Greek and medieval philosophy, and it is only nowadays that it is more commonly used to refer to meaning.

Given what you say, though, about the different meanings of 'Satz', wouldn't it be better to talk of connected ambiguity? This motivates the approach that we advocate: using a small set of terms that are sufficiently related to capture Wittgenstein's different uses of 'Satz'. According to your response you expect this to result in "a bewildering array of explanatory notes", but given our experience with existing Dutch translations, we know it works rather elegantly. If one opts instead for connected polysemy, some such set of terms is needed anyway in annotating or explaining one's translation, to help the reader sort out the different aspects of the polysemous term. So that complexity cannot be avoided, it seems. Do you agree?

MICHAEL: I do agree with this. The connective polysemy needs to be explained, and I did some of this in the editorial material to my translation. Perhaps I should have done more on Wittgenstein's key use of 'Satz', and I have been addressing this in follow-up work, including in my response to your critique. But this is where I emphasize the distinction between translation and interpretation. In *interpreting* the *Tractatus*, we must indeed explain the different – though connected – uses that Wittgenstein makes of 'Satz', but *imposing* our interpretation on the text itself by choosing different renderings of 'Satz' throughout the text obscures the fact that Wittgenstein did see his uses of 'Satz' as connected. I would avoid talk of 'ambiguity', though, as that suggests that Wittgenstein was in simple error in not *disambiguating*. I think that there are indeed tensions and problems in Wittgenstein's central conception of 'Satz', but it is not our job as translators to *correct* what Wittgenstein says in the text itself.

JAAP, MARTIN: We agree that there are delicate variations in Wittgenstein's use of 'Satz'. But is your use of 'to correct' appropriate here? It would be, if we suggested altering the German text, an approach which is sometimes used in case of older texts and one which we abhor. Of course, calling a translation also 'the text' goes too far given the many differences between source language and target language. However, we see no reason to call the often subtle choices that have to be made in order to create a translation 'corrections'. Rather, we regard Wittgenstein's contextual use of key terms as adding to the philosophical and literary qualities of the text, one that a translation ought to preserve as much as possible.

MICHAEL: Well, if we see Wittgenstein's use of key terms as to be understood contextually, then we can allow the reader to interpret what each use means in its context in the English translation, just as the German reader has to. On your approach, you are *prescribing* how the reader should interpret it, at the same time as obscuring the connected polysemy.

JAAP, MARTIN: We do seem to agree on the importance of the context the *Tractatus* provides. Since its remarks often resemble definitions, its

context is even so strong that the interpretation of each occurrence of any relevant term will be heavily constrained. But do we 'prescribe'? We suggest translating most occurrences of 'Satz' with 'sentence', which we think for today's reader is more neutral as far as its interpretation is concerned than 'proposition' and thus more sensitive to the context in which it occurs. You yourself said that translations are 'children of their time', and fresh translations surely allow the reader to find new, perhaps unexpected takes on a text. Even though Wittgenstein did not object to the use of 'proposition', we think that today it is better to translate 'Satz' by 'sentence', for two reasons. First, 'sentence' normally means 'meaningful sentence', with 'meaningful' philosophically unrestrictive. Thus, the use of 'sentence' is philosophically neutral unlike that of 'proposition' and so results in a translation that is less restrictive regarding possible interpretations. Secondly, since the first translation of the text, the term 'proposition' has become overloaded with various philosophical views, as you also stress in your response, and this overload hinders rather than helps today's reader.

For these reasons we think that there is a definite tension between the use of 'proposition' as a translation of 'Satz' and the idea of translations being 'children of their times', precisely because today the term 'proposition' is far from philosophically neutral. This is what we meant when we called your approach an 'historical' one. Do you also notice this tension?

MICHAEL: This issue needs careful handling. Translations are 'children of their times' in at least this sense: that the terms chosen to translate those in the foreign text typically (or should ideally) have the meaning – or range of meanings – today that reflects most closely the meaning(s) of the terms as they were used in the original text as intended by the author at the time. Part – and arguably the most important part – of what Wittgenstein intended in his use of 'Satz' in writing the *Tractatus* was to reflect the use of 'proposition' by philosophers in Britain at the time – most notably, Russell and Moore. I say 'reflect' here rather than 'capture' since Wittgenstein transforms Russell's and Moore's conception of 'proposition' in subtle ways in attempting to elucidate that conception (or conceptions of 'proposition', in the plural, if we want to do justice to Russell's continual changes of mind). Rendering

'Satz' by anything other than 'proposition' distorts Wittgenstein's own project. If this is what is meant by calling my approach 'historical', then I have no objection.

What I objected to was your opposition between 'historical' and 'systematic', with the implication that 'systematic' approaches are better because they make more explicit the tensions in a text. Again, I do not deny that there are tensions in the *Tractatus*, but this is the job of the interpreter to elucidate, not the translator. If you are right that 'proposition' now means many more (problematic) things than it did even in Wittgenstein's time (which would need some arguing), then your view would imply that we should 'translate' Russell's and Moore's writings as well to help us sort out the tensions in their philosophies. But I take that as a *reductio ad absurdum* of your view, at least as far as translation is concerned.

JAAP, MARTIN: We think the assumption of having access to Wittgenstein's intentions at the time his *Tractatus* was translated is problematic. Generally, we would be reluctant to use supposed access to authorial intention as a decisive argument in interpretation or translation. But your answer does makes clear why you think the older use of 'proposition' is still helpful today: you assume this use is available up until now, if supported by sufficient annotation.

The assumption that the work of Moore and Russell needs 'translation' due to their use of 'proposition' is absurd, for sure. We think your argument here conflates *editing* older texts with *translating* them. An editor will clean up a text to the extent possible and may add clarifying notes where needed, in a way that leaves reader enough space to make up their own mind. Clearly, editing and translating are different activities, just as translating and interpreting are.

MICHAEL: Well, I'm glad you agree that 'translating' Russell's and Moore's works to smooth out the tensions in their thinking is absurd. And I agree that editing, translating, and interpreting are all different activities, even if skills in one require skills in the others. But just as editing a text to smooth out tensions is wrong, so too is translating a text to smooth out tensions wrong. That is not conflating editing and translating; it is just saying that there is a similarity in this respect. (That

is why I put 'translate' in scare quotes in talking of 'translating' Russell's and Moore's work.)

JAAP, MARTIN: Of course we agree that it would be absurd to 'translate' the texts of Moore and Russell. As we already stated, changing an original text to capture new insights is never an option. What is left is to edit, and the kind of editing we describe is as open as possible and, of course, does not aim at eliminating any tensions in the original, on the contrary.

The same holds for actual translation, and the translation of 'Satz' provides a nice illustration. Your polysemic approach and ours produce similar results in a large number of cases. However, we think that differences between the specific source language (German) and target language (English) show that a strict adherence to the polysemic approach sometimes becomes strained. For example, it forces one to maintain that propositions can be senseless or even nonsensical. But how on earth can that be, given the *Tractatus* concept of sense? Here the commitment to the use of 'proposition', even polysemously, actually hides rather than reveals. And one might even say that it distorts. The contextual approach does not take away any tensions in the source, on the contrary, it makes them transparent in the target. Yes, translation here is based on interpretation. But that is something that holds across the board, and it applies to your translation as well, as you state in so many words in your introduction. So *this* is not a real difference between our approach and yours, right? It's rather the concrete results that show where they differ.

MICHAEL: You say that my approach "forces one to maintain that propositions can be senseless or even nonsensical". Now what do *you* mean by 'propositions'? What you should say, to be precise, is "forces one to maintain that *what Wittgenstein calls 'Sätze'* in the *Tractatus* can be senseless or even nonsensical". But Wittgenstein does claim that some 'Sätze' can be senseless or nonsensical. He is not claiming that what *you* understand by 'propositions' can be senseless or nonsensical. In using 'proposition' to translate 'Satz' throughout, I (and many other translators and commentators) intend that 'proposition' be understood as reflecting the polysemy of Wittgenstein's use of 'Satz'. And to stress

again: Wittgenstein raised no objections to 'proposition' being used to translate 'Satz'. It is *your* understanding of what 'proposition' means (today) that prevents you from accepting this translation. But this is your problem, not mine (or others').

We are clearly not going to agree, it seems to me, on the translation of 'Satz' as 'proposition'. So on what do – or can – we agree? We agree that that there is a tension in Wittgenstein's use of 'Satz' in the *Tractatus*, and this interpretive claim is perhaps the most important thing on which we agree. Perhaps we might also agree, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, that translations are ladders by which someone not fluent in the language of the text can understand the text. And both of our approaches can help someone do this. The irony of trying to translate the *Tractatus*, of course, lies in Wittgenstein's own claim at the end that the *Sätze* of his work should ultimately be seen as themselves nonsense. Our dispute is also, at least partly, a consequence of this. So we should not beat ourselves up – or each other – too much in this regard. On the other hand, we might also agree that engaging in the dispute we have had is yet another way to help a reader understand the *Tractatus* in the way that he wanted.

JAAP, MARTIN: You are right, we still find it impossible to relate Wittgenstein's use of 'Sätze', which surely allows them to be senseless or nonsensical, with the current variety of uses that 'proposition' has in philosophy and elsewhere. In order to obtain a translation that is a 'child of our time' we prefer the use of a more neutral term such as 'sentence'. Yet, we have also suggested that for a reader of your translation who is able to ignore the current uses of 'proposition' and manages to view the term as a fairly 'fresh' one with related meanings determined to a large extent by the different contexts the *Tractatus* presents it in, the tensions between our positions might be strongly reduced.

We surmise that there is much more that we tend to agree on. Like you we think that translation and interpretation are intricately related, yet different. We do hold that if a translator makes choices that are philosophically significant, a form of interpretation is involved. But this clearly does not imply that all aspects of translation are interpretive, nor that each interpretation is like a translation. Translations should capture the sense of the original while mimicking its other features as closely as

possible, but interpretations are under no such constraints. We also agree that new translations may suggest new interpretations. However, they may also block them or make them harder to defend. This interaction between translation and interpretation may make a translation more convincing than another one for a specific target audience. Of course there is no such thing as an absolutely best translation. However, this relativism is not as absolute as you suggest in your note. Both translation and interpretation require the 'openness' that we referred to earlier. This is not the 'egocentricity' that you ascribe to us, far from it. It is the openness of hermeneutics, where 'the other' is, of course, the text that one interacts with. All in all, we would be rather surprised if there were any strong disagreement between us concerning these more generic views on translation, interpretation and openness.

MICHAEL: In drawing to a conclusion, on my part then, let me just pick up on the point about the relevance of the specific target audience. Your translation project is presumably aimed at a target audience of philosophers who may have in mind many of "the current uses of 'proposition'", as you put it – especially philosophical uses. My target audience was the readership of books in the Oxford World's Classics, which includes philosophers but also many others who have a more general interest in philosophy. It also meant that the original German could not be printed alongside the English translation, which would have enabled readers to see for themselves what the corresponding German words were. If a reader knows from the editorial material, however, that 'Satz' is translated throughout by 'proposition' (and 'proposition' is not used to translate any other term), then they can make up their own mind as to what it means on any given occasion of use, guided by – hopefully elucidatory – translator's notes. A translation can be allowed to be more 'interpretive' when the original text accompanies it. That said, I wouldn't have changed my translation if the German text had been included!

Ramsey's original translation was rather clunky in places, but Wittgenstein did not mind too much when the German was printed alongside it, at a time when most philosophers could read German. If many people today do not read German, then the bar is set higher in producing a translation. But I take it we also agree, on a final point, that

having different translations helps both philosophers and others appreciate the importance of translation, not least in opening up the interpretive issues for deeper discussion.

JAAP, MARTIN: Readers who are able to also read the German original are indeed in a different position, and it is to be hoped that more students of German-language philosophy keep trying to master German. We wholeheartedly agree that having a few high-quality translations available, preferably annotated, should help different types of readers and might lead to new views. Thus, all that remains for now, as far as we are concerned, is to thank you for this rich exchange of perspectives. We hope it will contribute to making readers of translations aware again of the complexities involved in the translation and interpretation of such fundamental texts as the *Tractatus*.

Biographical notes

Michael Beaney (毕明安) is Regius Professor of Logic at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland and Honorary Professor of History of Analytic Philosophy at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Educated at Oxford, he taught at various universities in London and Yorkshire before taking up his current posts. Recent books include *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (edited, OUP, 2013), *Analytic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2017), a new translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in the Oxford World's Classics series (OUP, 2023), and *The Joy of Chinese Philosophy* (De Gruyter, 2025). He was Editor of the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* from 2010 to 2020, and remains an Associate Editor. As well as the history of analytic philosophy, his research interests include Chinese philosophy (especially ancient Chinese philosophy of language and logic), creativity, philosophical methodology (especially analysis), historiography, and philosophical translation.

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