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Anthropologism, naturalism, and the pragmatic study of language

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Abstract

This paper is a critical assessment of Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective and Quine's naturalistic perspective as solutions to the problem of semantic indeterminacy. The three stages of my argument try to establish the following points: (1) that Wittgenstein and Quine offer two substantially different philosophical models of language learning and cognitive development; (2) that unlike Quine's naturalism, Wittgenstein's anthropologism is not committed to semantic skepticism; and (3) that Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective is a more promising approach to pragmatics because it avoids the pitfalls of intellectualism and the philosophical strictures of empiricism and behaviorism. The central conclusion of the argument is the *thesis of contextual determinacy*, according to which meanings are only radically indeterminate in the abstract but become *contextually determinate* in specific conversational settings and interactions. I offer further support for this thesis in a discussion of recent ethnomethodological research in conversation analysis.
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Keywords: Context/contextualism; Conversation analysis; Language learning; Meaning; Semantic skepticism; Wittgenstein

1. Introduction

In the last two decades there has been an increasing interest in comparing the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein with that of Quine.[1] In his sceptical reading of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Kripke found a strong convergence between Wittgenstein's rule-following arguments and Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of transla-

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[1] See esp. the essays in the collection edited by Arrington and Glock (1995).

tion and the inscrutability of reference.[2] Following Kripke, many commentators have argued that, despite important differences of detail and orientation, the two philosophers are of one mind on essentials:[3] Wittgenstein's and Quine's indeterminacy arguments, they claim, support the same holistic view of language and a similar pragmatic approach to semantics. In this paper I will contend that this line of interpretation is misguided. I will argue that the surface similarities between Wittgenstein's and Quine's arguments hide deep differences and that their arguments ultimately lead to incompatible views of language.

Following Jacquette's interpretation (1999), I will argue that Wittgenstein's view is a "thoroughgoing *anthropologism*" that focuses on actual practices of language use and the role they play in the life of human communities. Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective treats language as a living thing with a cultural natural history. As Jacquette puts it, this perspective offers the following *adequacy test*: whether or not a theory of language is adequate depends on "whether or not it can satisfactorily explain how ordinary language works to express *determinate meaning in everyday applications*" (Jacquette, 1999, pp. 306–7; my emphasis). However, on my view, the *determinacy* of meaning is a *gradable* phenomenon, as is semantic *indeterminacy* as well. Following Wittgenstein, I will argue that everyday contexts of communication subject our linguistic interactions to substantive constraints in such a way that our meanings can acquire certain degrees of determinacy, even if some degrees of indeterminacy still subsist. Through contextual constraints the meanings of our situated linguistic interactions can become *contextually determinate*, that is, determinate enough so that the communicative exchange can go on and proceed successfully. Contextual determinacy is achieved when the participants in communication narrow down the set of admissible semantic interpretations through a process of negotiation in which different interpretations are tacitly or explicitly rejected. It is important to distinguish between this contextually achieved form of determinacy that only comes in degrees and the idea of *absolute determinacy* advocated by meaning realists, which involves the *thesis of semantic uniqueness*, namely: the thesis that there is only a single interpretation that fixes the meaning of a term. Unlike absolute determinacy, *contextual determinacy* does not preclude the possibility of alternative interpretations within a *constrained* set; and, therefore, it admits certain degrees of indeterminacy even in smooth and successful communicative exchanges. However, the indeterminacy admitted in my contextualist view has to be distinguished from the *radical indeterminacy* defended by meaning sceptics, which involves the *thesis of cognitive egalitarianism*, namely: the thesis that *all* rival interpretations are equally belief-worthy or equally rational to accept.

In short, following Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective, I will develop an anthropological contextualism, centered around the *thesis of the contextual determinacy of meaning*. I will argue that the meanings that sustain successful communi-

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[2] See esp. Kripke (1982, pp. 55–57). For a discussion of significant differences between Quine's indeterminacy arguments and those of Kripke's Wittgenstein (though not Wittgenstein's), see Humphrey (1999).

[3] Cf. e.g. Roth (1987). There have been exceptions to this trend in the recent literature. A notable one is Williams (1999, chapter 8, pp. 216–239).

cation in everyday contexts are neither completely determinate nor radically inde-terminate. I develop the thesis of contextual determinacy through a critical engage-ment with Quine as a representative of meaning skepticism; my critique of Quine offers a diagnosis as to why his semantic approach fails to account for contextually determinate meanings.

I develop my argument in three steps. First, I put Wittgenstein's and Quine's indeterminacy arguments in their own philosophical contexts and show that they are at the service of very different views of language (Section 1). Secondly, I explore the central differences between Wittgenstein's and Quine's views by examining the dif-ferent accounts of language learning that they offer (Section 2). Thirdly, I consider a possible objection against my argument that will help to bring into sharper focus the substantive differences between Wittgenstein's and Quine's views (Section 3). I con-clude that, despite surface similarities, there is an unbridgeable gap that separates Wittgenstein's anthropologism and Quine's naturalism; and that the former is a better theoretical framework for the pragmatic study of language. In the concluding section, I discuss the implications of my thesis of contextual determinacy with some illustrations from ethnomethodological research in conversation analysis (Section 4).

2. Indeterminacy and holism

In the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1958), we can find a whole battery of inde-terminacy arguments that Wittgenstein uses to disarm different views of meaning. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the Regress Argument as it appears first in the critique of ostensive definition and later in the rule-following discussion. With this argument Wittgenstein tries to establish that neither ostensive definitions nor interpretations can fix meaning. First, Wittgenstein emphasizes that ostensive defi-nitions are used to introduce very different kinds of words: "one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on" (1958: §28). So, far from fixing meaning, ostensive definitions are utterly ambiguous, for they "can be variously interpreted in *every* case" (1958: §28). One might think that the indeterminacy of an ostensive definition can be easily dispelled by disambiguating the ostension with a sortal, that is, with a classificatory term that specifies what *sort* of thing the word defined is supposed to name, saying for instance "This *colour* is called so-and-so" (1958: §29). But Wittgenstein replies that sortals can also be variously interpreted according to different classificatory systems; and since they are not self-explanatory, "they just need defining [...] by means of other words!" (1958: §29). But in order to guarantee the univocity of these further words, more defining is needed. So we are thus led to a regress. "And what about the last definition in the chain?", Wittgenstein asks (1958: §29). We can always interpret the terms used in the last definition in different ways. So the upshot of the argument is that meaning cannot be fixed by definition, for no matter how much is added to the definiens, the definiendum remains indeterminate.

A similar Regress Argument can be found in the discussion of the continuation of a numerical series according to the rule '+ 2' (1958: §§186–198). We tend to think

that an algebraic formulation of this rule can fix what counts as the correct continuation of the series. But an algebraic formula can be variously interpreted, and therefore different continuations of the series can be regarded as correct applications of the same formula (§146). We are likely to reply that it is not the mere expression of the rule, the algebraic formula, but its *meaning* that determines correct usage. For we are "inclined to use such expressions as: 'The steps are *really* already taken ...' [...] as if they were in some *unique* way predetermined, anticipated-as only the act of meaning can anticipate reality" (§188). So it may appear that if we fix the interpretation of the rule, we thereby fix its meaning and hence its applications. We may think that how the formation rule '+ 2' is to be applied to the series of natural numbers can be fixed by giving the following interpretation: "write the next but one number after *every* number" (§186); and we may think that all the numbers in the series follow from this sentence. To this suggestion Wittgenstein responds: "But that is just what is in question: what, at any stage, does follow from that sentence. Or, again, what, at any stage we are to call 'being in accord' with that sentence (and with the *mean*-ing you then put into that sentence-whatever that may have consisted in) " (§186). The interpretation of the rule does not really get us any further, for it can in turn be understood in different ways: it is in fact just another formulation of the rule, like the algebraic formula, and it can also be variously interpreted. So Wittgenstein concludes at §198 that "any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning".[4]

So, according to the arguments of the *Investigations*, definitions and interpretations leave meaning indeterminate. *Prima facie* these indeterminacy arguments seem very congenial with Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of translation and the inscrutability of reference. Quine bases these arguments on his thought experiment of *radical translation* in which a field linguist faces the problem of how to interpret the linguistic input of a newly discovered language. In all his different formulations[5] of this thought experiment Quine imposes the same constraints on the construction of a translation manual. The only data available to the linguist are native utterances and their concurrent observable circumstances. So, for instance, the linguist hears a native utter 'gavagai' in the presence of a rabbit and she formulates different hypotheses as to what the term may designate: the entire animal, its parts, its color, its movement, etc. To test these hypotheses, the linguist utters "gavagai" in different circumstances and waits for the native's assent or dissent. In this way some hypotheses get refuted and others confirmed. The linguist will continue in this fashion, confirming hypotheses about individual sentences as well as about grammatical trends, until she designs a translation manual which enables her to interpret any arbitrary sentence that the natives can utter. The problem is that no matter how much evidence is available to the linguist and no matter how well her translation

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[4] For a full analysis and discussion of Wittgenstein's indeterminacy arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations*, see "Normativity in Practice: Learning and Techniques", in Medina (2002).

[5] See esp. Quine (1960, chapter 2, pp. 26ff; 'Epistemology Naturalized', 1969: esp. pp. 80ff; 1990: ch. 3, esp. 37ff).

manual fits this evidence, we can always construct an alternative manual that fits the evidence equally well. In other words, it is in principle possible for two radical translators following the same procedure to come up with incompatible translation manuals. Quine draws two conclusions from this argument: first, the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, namely, that the meaning of a sentence is not determined by facts, but it is relative to the translation manual of our choice; and second, the thesis of the inscrutability of reference, namely, that the reference of a word is not determined by facts, but it is relative to the apparatus of individuation of our choice, that is, to the ontology built into our translation manual.

So it appears that Quine's argument establishes with respect to translation what Wittgenstein's arguments established with respect to rule-following: namely, that meaning is indeterminate. There is indeed something that Wittgenstein's and Quine's indeterminacy arguments have in common: they play a similar *negative* role against *meaning realism*. That is, these arguments undermine the view that the meaning of a word or a sentence is a definite, pre-determined *thing* that can be preserved in translation and that can be fully captured in an interpretation. But after rejecting meaning realism, Wittgenstein and Quine part company and they use their indeterminacy arguments to develop very different views of language.

Quine generalizes the conclusions of his thought experiment and argues that *radical* indeterminacy is a *basic* and *unavoidable* feature of language. Quine's indeterminacy thesis concerns not just the peculiar activity of a radical translator, but all language use. As he puts it, 'radical translation begins at home'.[6] On the other hand, on Wittgenstein's view, our linguistic practices are not radically indeterminate. According to Wittgenstein, radical indeterminacy arises when we adopt a detached and absolute perspective, that is, when we become persuaded by decontextualised philosophical theories that distort language use by searching for unassailable *foundations*. Wittgenstein's indeterminacy arguments constitute an attempt to refute semantic foundationalism by showing that there are no 'superlative facts' that determine meaning, that these facts are philosophical fictions (cf. 1958: §192). With these arguments, Wittgenstein tries to clear the way for a fresh approach to the everyday use of language. As he puts it, his goal is to get rid of semantic foundations or 'philosophical superlatives' and to go 'back to the rough ground' of our ordinary linguistic practices (1958: §107). It is because we have been 'held captive' by a foundationalist picture of language that we have unreasonable expectations with respect to the meaning of our words (1958: §115). And when we realized that these expectations cannot be fulfilled, we are tempted to conclude that meaning is *radically* indeterminate because it cannot live up to our philosophical standards. But the *radical* indeterminacy of meaning disappears when we stop looking for semantic facts that uniquely determine meaning and go back to the ordinary contexts of everyday communication. So, according to Wittgenstein, *radical* indeterminacy is the result of an unnatural, foundationalist standpoint and, therefore, we should be suspicious of any philosophical theory that makes language radically indeterminate.

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[6] He writes: "I have directed my indeterminacy thesis on a radically exotic language for the sake of plausibility, but in principle it applies even to the home language." (1990: 48).

Hence, if we agree with Wittgenstein, we should also be suspicious of the Quinean conception of language that derives from the model of radical translation.

We realize that indeterminacy arguments are not as troublesome as they seem when we notice that these arguments only play with logical possibilities. Most (if not all) of the logical possibilities considered by indeterminacy arguments are equally valid candidates for the interpretation of a term in the abstract, but not in particular situations where the state of the linguistic interaction and the knowledge available to participants, as well as various socio-historical circumstances affecting the use of the term, impose all kinds of interpretive restrictions. So, contextual factors heavily constrain semantic interpretations, rendering many logical possibilities unreasonable. As Laudan (1990) has suggested in philosophy of science, indeterminacy arguments establish the *thesis of non-uniqueness*, that is, the thesis that for any interpretation there is always the *possibility* of an alternative interpretation that is logically compatible with our entire body of knowledge. But these arguments fall short of establishing the *thesis of cognitive egalitarianism*, that is, the thesis that *all* rival interpretations are equally belief-worthy or equally rational to accept. In other words, we can accept that our interpretations are *underdetermined* without being forced to conclude that they are *radically indeterminate*, for *underdetermination does not warrant radical indeterminacy*. The auxiliary assumption that enables us to go from underdetermination to indeterminacy is the assumption that there must be isolable semantic foundations that render our meanings fully determinate and fixed.

According to the semantic foundationalism of meaning realism, in the absence of semantic foundations, anything goes: that is, any semantic interpretation is equally valid; and hence meaning is radically indeterminate. It is only when we have been antecedently persuaded by semantic foundationalism that it makes sense to argue that in the absence of semantic foundations there is no determinacy whatsoever. Wittgenstein's diagnosis of meaning scepticism unmasks this foundationalist assumption and questions its plausibility or reasonableness. In order to show how gratuitous this assumption is, the next step is to sketch a nonfoundationalist picture of meaning in which *underdetermination does not warrant indeterminacy*. This picture blocks the inferential moves that meaning skeptics want to make with their indeterminacy arguments, showing that the impossibility of semantic foundations by itself does not warrant semantic skepticism. At the core of this nonfoundationalist picture is the *thesis of contextual determinacy*, which accepts and integrates the thesis of underdetermination while rejecting the thesis of radical indeterminacy. According to this thesis, our meanings do not live up to the standards of absolute determinacy and fixity of semantic foundationalism, but they are not radically indeterminate: they are *contextually determinate*, that is, they acquire a transitory and always imperfect, fragile, and relativized form of determinacy in particular contexts of communication, given the purposes of the communicative exchanges, the background conditions and practices, the participants' perspectives, their patterns of interactions, etc. In the next section I will argue that the thesis of contextual determinacy is implicit in Wittgenstein's elucidations of the relation between meaning and *agreement in action*.

The different significance that Wittgenstein's and Quine's indeterminacy arguments have can be further appreciated by examining the different holistic views of language that these arguments invoke. As Quine himself has emphasized, his view of language and translation rests heavily on the holism of Pierre Duhem (cf. e.g. 1954: 48). This holism concerns the logic of confirmation and disconfirmation of scientific theories. Its central point is that the evidential relation between an observation statement and a theoretical hypothesis can only be determined against the background of an entire theory. According to Duhemian holism, the meaning and reference of scientific statements are always theory-relative. According to Quine, what holds for the scientific use of language also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for everyday communication. Quine's thought seems to be that since meanings are only possible within a theory, ordinary language must contain a stock of background theories from which our words get their meaning. As Hylton (1994) puts it, "for Quine, 'theory' and 'language' become more or less interchangeable [...] and to speak a language at all is to accept a body of doctrine" (1994, p. 273). Quine urges us to think of language as a vast network of interconnected sentences, as "a single connected fabric including all sciences, and indeed everything we ever say about the world" (1960, p. 12). Each individual speaker only masters a small portion of this vast network. This idiosyncratic portion of language is what Quine refers to as the speaker's 'web of beliefs', which contains the background theories according to which the speaker understands the sentences of her language. Different speakers may understand sentences according to different background theories, just as different translators may interpret utterances according to different translation manuals. And since there are no meanings independent of particular theories, meaning thus remains intrinsically and unavoidably underdetermined. But does that mean that meaning is also *radically* indeterminate? Focusing on the ordinary contexts of everyday communication, Wittgenstein's anthropological holism makes clear that this is not so.

Wittgenstein's regress argument also conveys a holistic point about language: namely, that meaning cannot be decontextualized and encapsulated in an interpretation. But Wittgenstein's holistic view of language reflects a *contextualism* that bears very little resemblance to the Duhemian holism of scientific theories. Indeed, given the anti-theoretical spirit of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, it would be very surprising if he were willing to accept the idea that ordinary language functions just like a scientific theory.[7] Wittgenstein's arguments emphasize that meaning is crucially dependent on a particular context of language use, but this holistic point does not involve an appeal to background theories. For Wittgenstein, the context of language use is not a theoretical context; it is the context of a shared practice. Quine and Wittgenstein agree that the activities of speaking, translating and interpreting are only possible against a certain background. But they disagree about what this

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[7] By contrast, Wittgenstein would accept the opposite suggestion: that scientific theories function like ordinary language. For their functioning depends on a tacit background of shared assumptions and attitudes. This shared background is constituted by what Wittgenstein describes as "agreement in action" and "in form of life" (cf. 1958: §241 and pp. 226–227). This anthropological perspective on the functioning of scientific theories and their normative presuppositions has been developed by ethnomethodology (cf. Garfinkel, 1967). (I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point in his/her comments.)

requisite background is: for Quine, it is a set of theories; for Wittgenstein, it is a set of techniques or common procedures, that is, the ways of doing things that competent speakers share. Thus Wittgenstein's pragmatic contextualism[8] differs substantially from the theoretical holism of Quine's scientific naturalism.

There are two central differences between Wittgenstein's and Quine's holistic views of language. In the first place, Wittgenstein's view of language as a practice reflects an *action*-oriented holism that contrasts with the heavily theoretical holism of Quine. It is precisely to emphasize the tight connection between language and action that Wittgenstein introduces the expression 'language game', which he defines as "the whole consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven" (1958: §7). For Wittgenstein, the most basic unit of significance, the whole within which words acquire meaning, is not a set of sentences, but a practice of use, an activity.[9] On Quine's view, what is required in order to make sense of a sentence is that it be related to other sentences within a theoretical structure; to understand a sentence is to assimilate it to a network of interconnected sentences or a 'web of beliefs'. By contrast, for Wittgenstein, to understand a sentence is to know what to do with it, to know the role it has in a shared linguistic activity, to be able to use it appropriately in a language game.

In the second place, Wittgenstein's contextualist holism contains a *social* component which is missing from Quine's view of language. On Wittgenstein's view, the background against which understanding takes place is something which is intrinsically social, a shared "form of life" (cf. 1958: §19 and §23). For Quine, however, the background that is constitutive of understanding is a "web of beliefs", which may or may not be shared by different speakers of the same language. Quine would certainly protest against a characterization of his view in individualistic terms since he has repeatedly emphasized the social character of language. However, Quine has a very thin notion of the social. According to Quine, what the webs of beliefs of different speakers have in common is the same empirical content, the same evidential basis. He emphasizes that what communication requires is that the speakers' background theories or translation manuals be "empirically on a par" (1990: 33). On this view, the social basis of language is a set of associations between words and "publicly observable situations" (e.g. 1990: 38). Thus the *social* character of language is reduced to its *public* character. Quine explicitly describes sociality in terms of publicity.[10] By contrast, Wittgenstein's view of language involves a more robust notion of what is intersubjectively shared. On his view, sociality is not reduced to publicity;

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[8] For a full account of how this *pragmatic contextualism* is developed in Wittgenstein's philosophy, see Medina (2002).

[9] To emphasize this point, Williams (1999) has drawn a contrast between *heterogeneous* and *homogeneous* holism (cf. pp. 227–228). According to Williams, Wittgenstein holds a heterogeneous holism since he views language as composed of heterogeneous elements: words and actions. By contrast, Williams argues, Quine holds a homogeneous holism in which everything is assimilated to a network of interrelated sentences.

[10] "Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues" (Quine, 1960: ix). "[Language] is a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behavior under publicly recognizable circumstances" (Quine, 1969: 26–27).

the social basis of language is not what is publicly accessible to potential observers: it is a set of normative standards *actually shared* by the members of a practice.[11] For Wittgenstein, language involves 'a consensus of action'; it involves shared customs and techniques. This is the core idea of Wittgenstein's anthropologism, namely, that to share a language is to share 'a form of life'. As Wittgenstein puts it, what is at the bottom of our linguistic practices, the "bedrock" of language, is "human agreement"; and this is a practical agreement: "not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (1958: §241). In order to clarify this anthropological perspective, I will examine in the next section how a practical agreement can be effected through training processes and in what sense it is constitutive of the linguistic competence that learners acquire.

The differences between Wittgenstein's and Quine's holistic approach to language that I have emphasized are not just differences of detail. These differences reflect opposed views of language which are at the core of incompatible philosophical positions. What animates Quine's naturalistic approach is what I would call, echoing Dewey,[12] a *spectator view* of language, that is, a view that privileges the perspective of an observer engaged in theory-construction. By contrast, what informs Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective is a *participant view* of language that privileges the perspective of a social agent engaged in practices. It is these different views that lead Wittgenstein and Quine to adopt different positions on the issue of indeterminacy. Radical indeterminacy arises when we look at language from a detached perspective, the perspective of an observer or theoretician who abstracts from particular contexts in order to codify information. This is the theoretical perspective of Quine's linguist or radical translator. Quine contends that this is also the perspective that we all adopt as competent speakers of a language, which allows him to conclude that radical indeterminacy is intrinsic to language use and inescapable. Wittgenstein, however, would have serious doubts as to whether the methodology of radical translation can provide an appropriate model for the explanation of linguistic competence. For, on Wittgenstein's view, the perspective of a competent speaker is not the detached perspective of an observer who theorizes about language, but rather, the engaged perspective of a participant in a practice. And from the perspective of the participants in a language game there is no *radical* indeterminacy. Meaning becomes determinate in particular contexts of action. It is contextually defined by the techniques of use shared by the members of a practice. These techniques do not draw a sharp boundary around the meaning of our terms, but they make meaning *contextually determinate* (often as determinate as it seems to be necessary in the communicative exchange in question). The degrees of determinacy required in linguistic interaction vary according to the purposes of particular activities. (For example, whether the term 'rabbit' refers to rabbits, to rabbit-stages, or to undetached rabbit-parts is a doubt that simply does not enter into the minds of hunters

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[11] All *social* practices are public (that is, in principle accessible to potential observers), but not all *public* phenomena are social (that is, dependent on the actual consensus of a community).

[12] I am referring to the famous expression Dewey coined to describe the target of his critique, namely, 'the spectator theory of knowledge'. See Dewey (1988).

who use this term to coordinate their actions.) It is important to note that contextual determinacy is a fragile and transitory achievement that remains always dependent on the negotiations and transactions of the participants in linguistic interactions—a point that will be elaborated in my discussion of conversation analysis in Section 4.

So, for Wittgenstein, *radical* indeterminacy is the artifact of philosophical theories that lose sight of the contextual character of language use. The upshot of Wittgenstein's indeterminacy arguments is that the use of language cannot be separated from particular activities and the concrete contexts in which they take place. These arguments show that the normativity of a language game cannot be fully captured in a list of explicit rules or, we could add, in a network of interconnected sentences or a translation manual. The norms of even the most basic linguistic activity become wholly indeterminate when they are decontextualised. *Radical* indeterminacy arises when we detach the rules of a language game from their technique of application. And this technique is something that necessarily remains in the background: it is not a further set of rules, it is a skilled activity, something that can only be *shown* in actions. Techniques are embodied in what practitioners do ''as a *matter of course*''. (1958: §238).

According to Wittgenstein, when we adopt the situated perspective of a competent practitioner, the indeterminacy of language is significantly reduced: our shared techniques of use do not leave room for radical indeterminacy. But Wittgenstein owes us an account of how we acquire the mastery of these techniques, of how we become competent practitioners. On the other hand, Quine owes us an account of how language can be learned at all, given its radical indeterminacy. In what follows I will examine Wittgenstein's and Quine's accounts of language learning. With this examination I hope to bring to the fore the irreconcilable differences of perspective that separate Wittgenstein's anthropologism and Quine's naturalism. On Quine's view, language is a natural phenomenon that has to be studied empirically according to the methodology of the natural sciences. This *scientific naturalism*, I contend, fails to show how meanings become contextually determinate in everyday practices of language use. I will try to show that the arguments that Wittgenstein develops in support of his anthropological perspective have critical force against the empiricist and behaviorist tenets of Quine's naturalism.

3. Language learning and the reduction of indeterminacy

Despite his famous critique of empiricism, Quine is deeply committed to an empiricist account of language learning. He contends that ''two cardinal tenets of empiricism remain unassailable [...] to this day. One is that whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence. The other [...] is that *all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence*'' (1969: 75; my emphasis). For Quine, language learning is an inductive process of accumulation of evidence and theory-construction. His account of this process is based on an analogy between the epistemic position of the child learning her first language and that of the linguist studying an exotic language: both the child and the linguist possess no knowledge

whatsoever about the target language and both face the same challenge, namely, the construction of a complex theory using sensory experience as their sole evidential basis. Quine argues that what makes this challenge a manageable task is the patterns of sensory stimulations that the child shares with the adult speakers and the linguist with her informants. According to Quine, the learnability and teachability of language has to be explained by appealing to salient features of the environment that stimulate our sensory receptors in a similar fashion. He insists that there must be sentences which are directly tied to these shared stimulations. He calls them 'observation sentences' and they are typically one-word sentences such as 'Mama', 'Milk', etc. The range of stimulations associated with these sentences is what Quine calls their 'stimulus meaning' (cf. e.g. 1990: 3). He writes: "any treatment of language as a natural phenomenon must start with the recognition that certain utterances are keyed to ranges of sensory stimulation patterns; and these ranges are what stimulus meanings are" (1969: 157). Observation sentences and their stimulus meanings provide the child with the evidential basis through which she can have access to language; they are, in Quine's words, "the entering wedge in the learning of language" (1990: 5). On the basis of this meager evidence the child, like the linguist, will have to guess at the meaning of non-observational or 'theoretical sentences', that is, sentences which get their meaning from their interconnections with other sentences.

So, for Quine, the process of language acquisition has two distinct parts: the learning of observation sentences and the learning of theoretical sentences. The former is a process of conditioning: "Observation sentences [...] become associated with stimulations by the conditioning of responses" (1990: 5). On the other hand, theoretical sentences are learned through an inductive process of hypothesis formation and testing: "the linguist [...] rises above observation sentences through his analytical hypotheses; there he is trying to project into the native's associations and grammatical trends rather than his perceptions. And much the same must be true of the growing child" (1990: 43). With the accumulation of well-confirmed hypotheses, a theoretical structure is formed that binds together the sentences one has learned into a network or web of beliefs. It is always possible to come up with alternative theoretical structures that fit the evidence equally well; that is, one's evidential basis always allows for the re-organization or re-structuring of one's web of beliefs. Hence the indeterminacy of meaning.

A very different picture of linguistic competence emerges from Wittgenstein's discussions of language learning. Like Quine, Wittgenstein emphasizes that in the initial stages of language learning, certain associations between words and objects are established through causal processes (1958: §6). These are processes of habituation such as the following: "the learner [...] utters the word ['slab'] when the teacher points to the stone. And there will be this still simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the word after the teacher" (1958: §7). With these drills the pupil learns to articulate certain sounds and to utter them in the presence of certain objects. In these exercises, Wittgenstein remarks, we can see "processes resembling language" (1958: §7). These processes resemble but are not yet language, for a language involves more than articulate sounds repeated in certain contexts and after certain signals. What we have here is a *protolanguage*, a language that we extend by courtesy to the primitive

behavior of the initial-stage learner. But how does the child move from mere causal associations between words and objects to higher levels of linguistic competence? Wittgenstein rejects the idea that this can be achieved by means of inductive processes of hypothesis formation and testing, for these processes require sophisticated linguistic capacities that the child does not yet have. Wittgenstein warns us against accounts of first-language acquisition which appeal to learning processes that can only occur in the acquisition of a second language-that is, processes that already presuppose the mastery of a language. According to Wittgenstein, this mistake has been pervasive in the history of philosophy. We can see it, for instance, in Augustine: "Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak" (1958: §32).

Wittgenstein argues that the Augustinian view of language learning misrepresents the interactions between the child and the adult by describing these interactions as part of a *guessing game* in which both participants have equal cognitive competence, but one of them knows something the other does not. On this view, language acquisition is a process in which the learner exercises her *autonomous* cognitive capacities in an independent fashion: she formulates hypotheses about what words mean, and confirms or disconfirms them in the light of the evidence available to her. Against this view, Wittgenstein insists that in first-language learning the goal is not to gather linguistic information which one is already able to employ; the goal is, rather, to learn to do things as others do, that is, to master certain *techniques of use* by imitation (Wittgenstein, 1958: §§6–7; 1978: VI.2–9). According to Wittgenstein, those accounts that assimilate first-language learning to second-language learning exhibit two interrelated flaws: first, the emergence of certain basic linguistic skills is left *unexplained* in these accounts; and second, as a result, these accounts *overly intellectualize* the process of learning a first language by endowing the child with rich cognitive capacities. Quine's account of language learning seems to be open to these two objections. In the first place, Quine does not explain how the language learner makes the transition from the associative processes of conditioning to the inductive processes of hypothesis formation and testing. Quine's account leaves us in the lurch as to how the capacity to utter certain words in the presence of certain stimuli in a parrot-like fashion can enable the learner to formulate hypotheses concerning the meaning of theoretical sentences. So this account does seem to leave the acquisition of some linguistic skills unexplained. In the second place, Quine's analogy between the child and the linguist does seem to involve a strong intellectualization of the process of language learning, for this analogy leads Quine to treat the child as a little scientist whose task is to gather evidence and to construct a theory, and who has the cognitive capacities involved in the inductive processes of hypothesis formation and testing.

Wittgenstein's discussion of language learning underscores that there are certain aspects of the mastery of language that a behaviorist and empiricist account such as Quine's cannot in principle explain. Such an account cannot explain how the behavior of the learner becomes structured by *norms*; for the norms or standards of correctness that underlie language use cannot be reduced to either behavioral

dispositions or empirical generalizations. According to Wittgenstein, what is acquired in language learning is more than a set of verbal dispositions and well-confirmed hypotheses; it is a set of normative standards for the application of words-what he calls 'a technique of use'. For Wittgenstein, language learning involves a process of normative structuration of behavior that goes beyond mere conditioning (cf. 1958: §6). His remarks on learning suggest that this normative structuring of behavior is accomplished through a process of *socialization or enculturation*, that is, by being trained into rule-governed practices of language use. This aspect of language leaning has been underscored by the recently developed paradigm of cultural learning in psychology. According to Tomasello (1999) and Tomasello et al. (1993), language learning requires a *social bond*: it requires seeing others as peers engaged in a cooperative activity.[13] This is at the core of Wittgenstein's anthropologism, which rests on an *enculturation view* of language leaning. There are two central features of this view that contrast sharply with Quine's behaviorist and empiricist view of language learning.

In the first place, according to Wittgenstein, the process of language learning is a *social* process through and through. Of course it doesn't escape Quine's attention that language learning takes place in a social environment. But on Quine's view, the role of the social environment is simply to provide exposure to certain stimuli that need to be associated with certain words. On Wittgenstein's view, however, language learning is social in a stronger sense: here, the process of learning is not only occasioned, but also mediated and structured by the social environment. In other words, language is learned not just *from* another, but *through* another. In this regard, Wittgenstein remarks that learning a language game requires 'stage-setting', that is, a context structured by norms governing the correct use of words (cf. 1958: §257). This normative context can only be provided by a competent practitioner who frames, selects, and feeds back the learner's use of words. Wittgenstein could not stress more the importance of the guidance provided by the masters of a linguistic practice to the initiate learners. The teacher or master of a practice plays an indispensable *structuring role* in the learning process; the very process is made possible only thanks to her guidance.

What characterizes the early stages of language learning is the relation of cognitive dependence of the learner on the teacher. It is only against the normative background provided by the teacher as a competent language user that the learner's utterances and actions acquire a normative dimension and become significant. The normative background that the teacher brings to bear upon the behavior of the novice is progressively made available to the learner through the training, up to the point where the learner's behavior becomes regulated by norms without the assistance of the teacher. By interacting with masters who structure and regulate the learning

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[13] Tomasello and his colleagues distinguish three different processes of cultural learning: *imitative* learning, *instructed* learning, and *collaborative* learning. The study of these different learning processes of increasing sophistication and the different cognitive mechanisms on which they rely is what the enculturation view of language learning calls for. It is interesting to note that all these processes are alluded to in Wittgenstein's remarks on language learning.

environment, novices come to adopt structuring and regulatory activities of their own. The process of language learning is, therefore, a process of acquiring autonomy or gaining control in normative practices. This process consists in a gradual shift of responsibility and authority, a developmental progression *from other-regulation to self-regulation*. Language learning is thus conceived, on Wittgenstein's view, as a process of enculturation or *apprenticeship*[14]: linguistic norms are learned by being acculturated into shared practices. In the training process, the teacher, by virtue of her competence in the practice, functions as a representative of the community of practitioners; and, as such, she has the capacity and authority to bring the behavior of the novice into harmony with the behavior of the rule-following community. The goal of the training process is to bring the pupil into the practice, and this is achieved by effecting a 'consensus of action' between the pupil and the teacher and hence, by the same token, between the pupil and the community of practitioners. As Wittgenstein puts it, "instruction effects [...] *agreement in actions* on the part of pupil and teacher" (1978 VI.45; my emphasis). This practical agreement in ways of doing things entails a stronger notion of intersubjectivity than the one we found in Quine's view. For Quine, language learning requires nothing more than a perceptual agreement between pupil and teacher, an agreement based on shared stimulations. For Wittgenstein, however, the intersubjectivity required for the mastery of language involves more than sharing the same sensory receptors; it involves sharing the same ways of proceeding and the normative standards that go with them.

This brings us to a second point of contrast between Wittgenstein's and Quine's views of language learning. According to Wittgenstein's enculturation view, the learner's 'entering wedge into language' is not observation, but *action*. As noted above, Wittgenstein proposes a *participatory* view of learning. On this view, mastering a linguistic practice requires the learner's active participation in the practice. Initially, the novice participates in the practice by imitating others. Learning by imitation does not have the passivity of conditioning, nor the disengaged character of the inductive processes of forming and testing hypotheses. It is a process of 'learning by doing',[15] by actively engaging in actions. However, this process does not take place spontaneously and without aid. It is prompted and corrected by a teacher or experienced adult. Wittgenstein remarks that if I want to train someone in a uniform activity, I show him what to do first and then I provide him guidance to follow my lead: "I do it, he does it after me; and I influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement. I let him go his way, or hold him back; and so on" (1958: §208). Wittgenstein emphasizes that in order to respond appropriately to the teacher's guidance and correction, the learner needs to exhibit certain 'natural reactions'. But these natural reactions that are prerequisites for

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[14] For a detailed account of learning through apprenticeship, see Tomasello et al. (1993).

[15] This practical view of learning derives from Dewey (1988) in the pragmatist tradition and from Vygotsky (1986) in the tradition of cultural psychology. There are interesting points of convergence between these two traditions and Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

learning are not just perceptual reactions to salient features in the environment; they are also interpersonal reactions oriented towards action. The learner needs to be sensitive and responsive to certain signs of approval and disapproval that are used to structure her behavior normatively.

According to Wittgenstein's enculturation view, the process of language learning is completed when the novice starts applying the learned procedures "as a *matter of course*" (1958: §238). This involves not only the establishment of a regularity in the learner's behavior, but also the inculcation of a *normative attitude* towards how to proceed. Through repeated practice, the novice internalizes the normative standards of the linguistic community; and by the end of the learning process the novice regards the road she has been taught to go as the only way to proceed. Wittgenstein emphasizes that the training process, if successful, makes the learner *blind to alternatives*: the learner is taught to follow rules *blindly*, without considering alternative courses of action as possible applications of the rules. The alternative-blindness that according to Wittgenstein is characteristic of the mastery of a technique should not be confused with the blindness of reflexes and conditioned responses. The blind rule-following of competent practitioners is not the product of causal mechanisms; it results from the internalization of standards of correctness, it is informed by normative considerations as to how things *ought* to be done. Wittgenstein describes the adoption of normative standards through training with the image of the learner going "in a circle". He remarks that when the pupil sees how things *must* be done, "he has gone in a circle" (1978: VI.7). The "circle" created by the process of training into a technique consists in the following: what the learner is trained to do becomes the criterion that defines what she is doing; that is, her activity is circularly defined by her own actions: how things must be done is defined by how things are actually done, according to the learned procedure.

Wittgenstein's enculturation view of language learning can be read as an account of how indeterminacy is reduced in our ordinary linguistic practices.[16] This account shows that we can have semantic determinacy in our situated language games (although this is never the absolute determinacy imagined by semantic foundationalism; see Section 1 above). This contextual determinacy is achieved through a consensus of action that is established by training processes. Through these processes, the shared procedures and techniques of a practice become *second nature*. And this second nature that we acquire through training reduces indeterminacy. Wittgenstein argues that, from the perspective of the competent practitioner, the use of a term in a language game is *not radically* indeterminate. From this perspective the application of a term may even appear as *overdetermined*: it is "overdetermined", Wittgenstein remarks, by "the way we always use it, the way we are taught to use it" (1978: I.2, VI.16). But, of course, what is "overdetermined" from within will appear utterly indeterminate from without. That is, if we break the connection between language use and shared techniques of application, *radical* indeterminacy will

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[16] For a full discussion of this point, see Williams, "The etiology of the obvious: Wittgenstein and the elimination of indeterminacy" (1999: 216–239).

ensue.[17] For it is only against the background of a practical agreement in form of life that contextually determinate meanings become possible: "words have meaning only in the stream of life" (Wittgenstein 1980: §687).

4. Biperspectivalism and naturalism

I have drawn a contrast between Wittgenstein's and Quine's views of language and I have emphasized the different attitudes towards indeterminacy that these views recommend. However, those who were previously convinced by Kripke's sceptical reading of Wittgenstein are not likely to be persuaded by my argument. They will reply that Wittgenstein's remarks on learning in fact support the sceptical conclusions of the rule-following discussion, and that what I call 'the reduction of indeterminacy' is simply what Kripke (1982: ch. 3, esp. 66–69) calls Wittgenstein's 'sceptical solution' to his sceptical paradox about meaning and rule-following. According to Kripke, Wittgenstein's view is that his sceptical doubts about meaning can be neutralized but not refuted. Kripke compares this mitigated scepticism about meaning with Hume's scepticism about induction. Just as Hume argued that there are no *a priori* reasons that can ground our inductive practices, Wittgenstein argues that there are no superlative facts that can determine meaning. Like Hume, Wittgenstein is drawn to the conclusion that the sceptical problem he raises is in fact unanswerable. And this makes his response to the problem a *sceptical* solution. What makes it a *solution*, according to Kripke, is the recognition that our linguistic practices do not require the semantic grounding that has been shown to be unattainable. Just as Hume argued that our inductive practices do not rest on a priori arguments but on customs, Wittgenstein argues that our linguistic practices do not rest on semantic foundations but on customs. This so-called solution concedes to the sceptic that our ordinary practices are indeed groundless; at the same time, however, we are reminded that this sceptical truth does not undermine what we do in our everyday life because our psychology makes up for the lack of grounding of our activities.

Kripke's sceptical interpretation of Wittgenstein has been heavily criticized in recent years.[18] In my opinion, the most problematic implication of this interpretation is that it commits Wittgenstein to a Humean *biperspectivalism* that recommends scepticism 'in the study' and realism in everyday life. Kripke explicitly contends that Wittgenstein's view of language involves a biperspectival view of meaning (1982:

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[17] This is what the regress of interpretations is intended to show. It is important to notice that in this argument, Wittgenstein does not appeal to learning as a *deus ex machina* that solves the regress. His account of learning is not a solution but a *dissolution* of the regress problem. For Wittgenstein, learning is not the locus of privileged interpretations; it is, as he puts it, where 'interpretation comes to an end' (1978: VII.47). What Wittgenstein's account of language learning shows is that rule-following does not consist of interpretations all the way down, that 'there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*' (1958: §201).

[18] See Baker and Hacker (1984: esp. pp. 57–97); Horwich (1990); Diamond (1991): 39ff; Williams (1991); and Read (2000).

69). This view rests on a twofold notion of meaning: the philosophical notion that the sceptic examines and the pragmatic notion that figures in our ordinary uses of language. But this is not Wittgenstein's view. He does not develop his indeterminacy arguments only to undermine *specific* theses concerning the philosophical notion of meaning. His arguments are more radical: they are intended to show that there is *no coherent philosophical notion of meaning* that is separable from the ordinary notion of meaning embedded in our actual practices. Unlike contemporary neoHumean philosophers such as Quine or Goodman, Wittgenstein is not willing to make any concession to the sceptic. Far from acknowledging that sceptical doubts about meaning reveal an important truth about language, Wittgenstein objects to the very standpoint from which these doubts are raised. His arguments show that the philosophical context that gives rise to these doubts is intrinsically distorting because it involves a detached perspective that decontextualizes language use. To avoid this decontextualization, Wittgenstein urges us to remain within the *internal* perspective of our situated practices. It is this thoroughgoing internalism, this anthropologism, that dissolves the sceptical paradox about meaning. But this dissolution of the paradox should not be confused with a direct solution, not even an sceptical one which, while denying that there are semantic facts that determine meaning, tacitly acknowledges that there should be. For Wittgenstein, the only perspective from which we can inquire about the meaning of a term without invoking a foundationalist picture of language is the perspective of the competent practitioner engaged in particular activities. And where there is only room for one perspective, there is no room for a biperspectival view of meaning.

We can certainly find in Quine (especially in his pragmatist moments) the impetus to look at our linguistic practices from the perspective of an insider and to develop an internalist view of meaning. But his *scientific naturalism* undercuts this impetus. According to Quine's naturalism, our linguistic practices are to be examined from the detached perspective of an observer, which is in fact the perspective that we all adopt as competent language users. It is also this naturalism that recommends us not to try to overcome the radical indeterminacy of meaning underscored by sceptical arguments, but to do away with meaning altogether. But the semantic scepticism of the naturalistic approach belies the normative dimension of language use. As discussed in the previous section, linguistic practices are normatively structured activities, forms of cooperation regulated by implicit norms that are exhibited in a consensus of action or a shared way of doing things. However, on a naturalistic view, the normative aspects of language use are illusory and need to be explained away. This is typically done by explaining all aspects of language use in purely causal terms, thus reducing the normative elements of language to non-normative ones. These naturalistic accounts try to subsume all verbal behavior under causal laws and to explain speakers' responses to verbal stimulations as causal reactions. In this vein, Quine has argued that our philosophical accounts of language have to be reduced to causal explanations in neurophysiological terms (cf. e.g. Quine, 1975: 79ff). By contrast, one of the central points of Wittgenstein's discussions of language is that meaning cannot be naturalized in this way and that, therefore, the natural sciences cannot tell us everything there is to know about our linguistic practices.

However, it would be a mistake to think that this rejection of a naturalistic reduction turns Wittgenstein's anthropologism into a form of antinaturalism or idealism. In fact, Wittgenstein's discussions of language underscore the importance of what he calls the facts of 'our natural history'.[19] But, according to Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective, our natural history is not the product of blind causal forces, but the result of creative human activities. On Wittgenstein's view, what our use of language is contingent on is a historically constituted form of life, a tradition of shared practices. So conceived, our natural history is the condition of possibility of human *solidarity*. It is because we share a natural history that we can achieve a consensus of action and be members of the same practice. And the important point is that this solidarity underlying our linguistic practices cannot be explained in neurophysiological terms. This is the root of Wittgenstein's contempt for the hegemonic ambitions of the natural sciences: a reductive naturalism that explains language in purely causal terms and does away with normativity leads to a dehumanized picture of our everyday practices. The human solidarity exhibited in our everyday practices can only be captured from a perspective that is internal to these practices and to the consensus of action on which they are based. This is the upshot of Wittgenstein's philosophy: that a philosophical elucidation of our practices requires an anthropological perspective. For the philosophical problems concerning meaning and language use call for an anthropological elucidation of our practices and cannot be answered by means of an empirical investigation of natural facts.[20]

5. Contextual determinacy and conversation analysis

The anthropological contextualism I have developed in this paper overcomes the false dichotomy between meaning realism and meaning scepticism by arguing that the determinacy of meaning is not an all or nothing issue, but a gradual one. I have argued that degrees of semantic determinacy can only be achieved in communicative interactions that have a tacit consensus of action as their precondition. On the anthropological and contextualist picture of language I have defended, meaning is subject to substantive contextual constraints and normative presuppositions. In what follows I will briefly examine some of the mechanisms that we can find in linguistic interaction for achieving and maintaining the contextual determinacy of meaning required by communication. In particular, I will look at mechanisms of semantic contextualization identified by conversation analysis (Boden and Zimmerman,

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[19] Wittgenstein draws attention to 'facts of nature' in order to stress the *contingency* of our linguistic practices. He repeatedly argues that if certain 'general facts of nature' were different, then our concepts and language games would be different (e.g. 1958: II.xii).

[20] As Wittgenstein puts it: "If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in that in nature which is the basis of grammar? Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature [...] But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts; we are not interested in natural science." (1958: II.xii).

1991; Sacks 1992 and Silverman and Sacks, 1998). It is my contention that the research in conversation analysis produced in recent decades gives empirical support to the philosophical framework I have developed to tackle the issue of indeterminacy, that is, to my anthropological contextualism.

Drawing on ethnomethodology[21] and especially on the work of Garfinkel (see Garfinkel and Sacks 1970), Harvey Sacks contributed more than anybody to the development of conversation analysis. Following Garfinkel (1967), Sacks (1992) studied how everyday reality is 'accomplished' and made 'observable/reportable' or 'storyable'. In his *Lectures on Conversation* he argues that we acquire 'routine ways' of dealing with scenes which enable us to understand each other. These 'routine ways' are embedded in particular communicative contexts and their normative structures; and it is in virtue of them that linguistic understanding becomes attainable in local contexts, that is, *in situ*. Sacks' pioneering work in conversation analysis as well as subsequent research (see the various papers in Boden and Zimmerman, 1991) give empirical confirmation to the thesis of contextual determinacy I have developed from a Wittgensteinian perspective. In his analysis of the sequential organization of conversation, Sacks (1992) identifies two central sources of contextual constraints: one *institutional* and the other one *interactional*. In the first place, conversation is an integral part of activities that take place in 'appropriate' places, in institutionalized settings for linguistic interaction; and this conventionalised situatedness constrains what can be said and how to interpret what is said. In the second place, conversational exchanges are '*chained*'; and given the sequential, 'chained' nature of conversation, the significance of each utterance is constrained by what has been said before and by what will be said thereafter, that is, by the *previous and future utterances* to which the utterance in question is 'chained'. The constraints arising from the institutional and interactional dimensions of conversation contribute to make meanings contextually determinate. As we saw in Section 1, contextual determinacy is a fragile and transitory interpretive achievement that remains always dependent on the transactions of the participants in communication. To illustrate the contextual constraints impinging upon the interpretive negotiations between speakers, let us consider four mechanisms identified by the research in conversation analysis carried out by Sacks and his followers. These conversational mechanisms that contribute to make meanings contextually determinate are 'heckling', 'delayed interpretation', 'averting', and 'repairing'.

Sacks identifies the phenomenon of '*heckling*' in his analysis of storytelling as it appears in conversational exchanges. 'Heckling' occurs when the storyteller is interrupted and questioned about the intelligibility of her story. 'Heckling' can take the radical form of challenging intelligibility altogether: 'That sounds crazy', 'That doesn't make sense', 'That's nonsense', etc.; or it can take the weaker form of requesting an explicit articulation or explanation of meaning: 'What does that

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[21] It is important to note that Wittgenstein has been a central source of inspiration for ethnomethodological research, providing-along with Schutz (1962)—the theoretical foundations of this anthropological perspective. See Garfinkel (1967).

mean?', 'And what's the point of that?', etc. Sacks emphasizes that 'heckling' is always a possibility; and accordingly, he remarks, storytellers "designs their stories so as not to invite heckling, or to be in some way invulnerable to heckling" (p. 287). This is the phenomenon of 'anti-heckling'. Among the examples of 'anti-heckling' that Sacks cites are 'This sounds crazy but...' and 'you may have heard this one before'.

As important as the phenomenon of 'heckling', if not more, is the fact that very often hearers hold off asking a storyteller what something means because they expect to find out later. This 'delayed interpretation' is not specific to storytelling, but it is in fact a general feature of conversation. As Silverman (1998) puts it, "in conversation we do not always expect to find out what things mean right at the start." (p. 120) Sacks explains this feature by saying that hearers follow 'a delay-interpretation rule', according to which they are not supposed to interpret the speaker's words as they come out, but rather, they are expected to accumulate 'some storage' of information until the 'chaining' of utterances provides enough context for the interpretive process to get off the ground (cf. Sacks, 1992: 315). The phenomenon of '*delayed interpretation*' and the attitude of interpretive patience that goes with it are crucial for communication, for they allow for the full development of a contextual determinacy that is already in the making. This phenomenon involves a communicative attitude of cooperation in the construction of semantic determinacy. Hearers often exhibit a collaborative attitude that recognizes contextual determinacy in progress and tries to facilitate its construction.

A third conversational mechanism that contributes to the construction and maintenance of contextual determinacy is what we can call '*averting*', that is, the act of trying to prevent misunderstandings, to discard possible misinterpretations. Attempts at averting misunderstandings are often preceded by such phrases as 'I mean...' or 'The point is...'. There are all kinds of deviant interpretations that could in principle become compelling at one point or another in the conversation. It is obviously not feasible to anticipate all *possible* misunderstandings and, therefore, speakers restrict their 'averting' to what they consider to be likely misinterpretations. Typically, 'averting' occurs only when there is some reason or indication to expect a misunderstanding. Otherwise, speakers address the instances of misinterpretation or lack of understanding of their words as they come up. This piecemeal mending or patching up of the interpretation of one's words is what Sacks calls the phenomenon of '*repairing*'. According to Sacks, 'repair mechanisms' operate as mechanisms of 'local cleansing' triggered by 'remedial questions' that occur immediately after the problematic term, phrase, or sentence, whose intelligibility requires clarification (cf. Sacks, 1992: 560). By default, Sacks points out, in the absence of requests for clarification or 'repairing', speakers are entitled to assume that their words were heard and understood (see Sacks, 1992: 352).

What is most interesting about the phenomena of 'averting' and 'repairing' is that they are not just the individual duty of the speaker, but rather, the collective responsibility of all participants in communication. 'Averting' and 'repairing' are in fact very often executed through the collaboration of different partners in conversation. This shows that contextual determinacy is collectively achieved through

collaborative efforts. Narrowing down interpretive possibilities and keeping meanings contextually determinate are the result of joint communicative efforts of conversational partners. Excellent illustrations of collaborative 'averting' and 'repairing' can be found in the transcripts from news interviews studied by Heritage and Greatbatch (1991). Both interviewed subjects and news anchors collaborate to facilitate the audience's understanding, in some cases by jointly 'averting' likely misunderstandings or inaccurate interpretations, and in other cases by jointly 'repairing' ambiguous phrases or terms hard to interpret in impoverished conversational contexts. I reproduce here two short excerpts from the transcript of a news interview. They come from a BBC interview of British ex-Prime Minister James Callaghan (Labour), conducted by (the politician turned political journalist) Shirley Williams. The first excerpt illustrates collaborative 'averting' (or preventive 'repairing'): Callaghan's reference to education can be understood in many ways, from improving literacy to promoting social awareness; so trying to 'avert' plausible misinterpretations, Williams suggests a qualification ('You mean *political* education'). In the second excerpt there is an interesting instance of collaborative 'repairing', in which one speaker clarifies the other speaker's utterance, and the latter in turn expands on the clarification of the former; so that we go from a very vague and ambiguous reference ('a lot') to a more specific point about originality ('new ideas'), and from there to an even more specific point about the productivity of new ideas.

EXCERPT 1 (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991: 111)

Callaghan: We've neglected education. We've allowed it all to fall into the hands of the militant groups. (I mean) they do more education than anybody else.

Williams: You mean *political* education.

Callaghan: Yes, political education.

EXCERPT 2 (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991: 118)

Callaghan: There is at the moment a gap in our thinking. I think that's got to be filled. Because a number of the things for example that uhm . . . Tony Benn says have got a lot to be be er- er- er- have got a lot in them. I mean some of his analysis has got a great deal in it.

Williams: Oh yes. He's got a great deal of er of . . . thinking. [. . .] his are new ideas.

Callaghan: He's a very fertile . . . well uh he- he- he expounds these new and fertile ideas. hhh uhm And I think that we shouldn't neglect them wherever they come from.

So, in accordance with the philosophical framework I have defended in this paper, research in conversation analysis shows that meanings are not static entities, but

dynamic structures that emerge from contextualized linguistic interaction. As Silverman (1998), for one, has put it, even the most apparently obvious and fixed categories "should be viewed as accomplishment of members' local, sequential interpretation" (p. 109). These situated interpretive interactions are orchestrated so as to produce *contextually determinate* meanings. According to Wittgenstein's anthropological view, language games always have a *point* that normatively structures the communicative exchanges that take place in them. Wittgenstein (1975) emphasizes that it is 'immensely important' that our uses of language have 'a *point*' (p. 205), that is, that they play a role in regulating our dealings with the world and with one another, that they are integrated in our forms of life. But having a point, he remarks, is always 'a matter of degree'; and the extent to which the use of a term has a point depends on the context in which that use figures. Thus, meaning becomes determinate in particular contexts. What we say and do acquires significance only against the background of a tacit agreement underlying these contexts. When our interpretations are detached from particular contexts and their underlying consensus, meanings become *radically* indeterminate: all possible interpretations become equally reasonable or belief-worthy (as the sceptical thesis of *cognitive egalitarianism* suggests; cf. Section 1). We cannot rule out *a priori* any logically possible semantic interpretation, no matter how far-fetched. But in particular linguistic contexts and activities, as we have seen, there are many constraints that restrict our interpretive negotiations, narrowing down the set of admissible interpretive possibilities significantly and deeming many logical possibilities deviant and unreasonable as interpretations. For example, as I said against Quine, rabbit-hunters do not entertain the skeptical doubt of whether the term "rabbit" refers to rabbits, to rabbit-stages, or to undetached rabbit-parts. The sceptic will insists that what is in question is not whether as a matter of empirical fact these alternative interpretations are in fact considered, but rather, whether they should be. Ignoring nonstandard interpretations of our words, or pretending that they don't exist, won't do if these interpretations have a legitimate claim to be considered. Our refusal to consider these interpretations out of mere stubbornness would undermine the normative validity of our claims concerning meaning. But the point of my argument is that sceptical interpretive hypotheses are normatively excluded from local communicative contexts: for example, hunters *cannot* entertain Quinean sceptical doubts as long as they remain engaged in the activity we call 'rabbit-hunting'.

The crucial move of my argument in this paper has been to shift the burden of proof onto the shoulders of the sceptic. According to my argument, Wittgenstein's contextualist considerations show that the normative structure of our practices *excludes* certain interpretations from the meaning of our words; and this *normative exclusion* constitutes a *prima facie* reason against considering them, as this would run against the tacit agreement in action underlying our practices and threatens these practices with 'losing their point'. So, with a *prima facie* reason *against* interpretations that don't fit the background consensus of a practice and in the absence of any reason *for* them, the balance tips against the sceptical semantic hypotheses and, therefore, they should be considered an illegitimate intromission in our appraisals of meaning. But it is important to note that these interpretive hypotheses are deemed unworthy of con-

sideration, being an illegitimate intromission in our semantic evaluations, *only insofar as they are mere logical possibilities*, that is, *until reasons for them are given*. It is important to note that this is a shift of the burden of proof and not a direct and final refutation of semantic scepticism. For indeed, on the contextualist view under consideration, we cannot exclude the possibility of the sceptical hypotheses (or of *any* interpretive hypothesis for that matter) becoming relevant and reasonable to entertain. To rule out these interpretive hypotheses from consideration once and for all simply because they can threaten our consensus of action and the intelligibility of our practices, would be to say that we refuse to consider them simply because we dogmatically and arbitrarily want to stick to the current background agreement and preserve the *status quo*, come what may. But there is no room in Wittgenstein's anthropological contextualism for a conservative attitude towards semantic innovations.[22]

Through my interpretation of Wittgenstein's anthropologism, I have tried to show that the determinacy of meaning is not an all or nothing issue, but that it comes in degrees. In a nutshell, semantic determinacy is the always fragile and relative accomplishment of communicative interactions which rest on a tacit agreement in action that is always undergoing transformation. Meanings become *contextually determinate* through the practical consensus achieved by participants in situated linguistic interactions against the background of shared practices.

Uncited references

Hylton, 1994; Wittgenstein, 1958a; Wittgenstein, 1969 and Wittgenstein, 1979 are not cited in the text.

Acknowledgements

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[22] As I have argued elsewhere (Medina, 2002), Wittgenstein's view of language emphasizes meaning change, but it also underscores the constraints to which semantic changes are subject. Our linguistic practices can always be extended in different ways, but these possible extensions are constrained by contextual factors. Margolis' account of predication (1996, 1999) offers an explanation of this point. In the application of a term to new contexts, Margolis points out, we are confronted with a "choice among various lines of extension amid an indefinite run of such possibilities"; but our learned linguistic skills make this choice manageable by narrowing down the set of relevant possibilities: "our aptitude for discerning relevant similarities in a run of would-be cases-any cases-signifies our mastery of the same *sittlich* practices within whose bounds such similarities obtain or are reasonably extended." (1999: 64).

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