SOME REMARKS ON ‘LANGUAGE’ AND ‘GRAMMAR’*

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My original intention was to present a systematic, if schematic, account of Wittgenstein’s employment of the words ‘Sprache’ and ‘Grammatik’. The ultimate aim was to effect a kind of genre-identification, to make some tentative steps towards clarifying his conception of language and grammar in order to locate his work on the map of modern philosophy. By making use of unsuitable landmarks, there is an acute risk of misconceiving the whole spirit of his philosophical investigations and consequently of misunderstanding many individual remarks.¹

To what extent is it illuminating to label him an ‘analytic philosopher’ or a ‘philosopher of language’? What are the resemblances and differences between his ‘descriptions of the grammar of our language’ and Ryle’s mapping of the ‘logical geography of ordinary language’? How do his investigations compare with Austin’s fine-grained examination of English idiom or with Strawson’s account of the most general features of our conceptual scheme? How does his conception of meaning as use relate to truth-conditional semantics à la Carnap or Davidson, to Dummett’s ‘anti-realism’, to Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar, to theories of speech acts and illocutionary force, etc.? Or we might raise the yet more radical question whether it even makes sense to locate Witt-

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¹. In respect of his philosophy of mathematics, I have tried to demonstrate that the widespread practice of labelling his thinking ‘conventionalism’ does not square with his overall intentions and distorts understanding of many of his best-known remarks (e.g. ‘Arithmetical equations are rules of grammar’ and ‘The sense of a mathematical proposition is given by its proof’). Cf. Part II of my book Wittgenstein, Frege and the Vienna Circle (Blackwell, Oxford and New York, 1988).
genstein’s thinking within the logical space generated by these fixed points within analytic philosophy.

Any detailed treatment of these questions was clearly beyond the scope of a single paper of manageable proportions, but I found the same to be true even of the more modest synopsis that I had first envisaged. The data are extraordinarily complicated and wide-spread, while unpacking the subtleties of individual remarks often requires extensive argument and textual comparisons. The attempt to produce an übersichtliche Darstellung of this material risks degenerating into a series of controversial but unsupported dogmas, and that eliminates the possibility of achieving anything very important in this way.

The heir of the original paper is an unsystematic description of a few aspects of Wittgenstein’s use of the terms ‘Sprache’ and ‘Grammatik’, particularly in the phrases ‘die Sprache’, ‘unsere Sprache’, ‘die Grammatik’, and ‘unsere Grammatik’. Since my aim is principally to raise questions rather than to answer them, I shall make no pretence at giving a complete or exhaustive treatment of these expressions in his writings. Moreover, I shall restrict attention to his speech-patterns (his idiom, his jargon, etc.), leaving out of account such vexed question as whether he himself did not misuse or stretch the term ‘Grammatik’ (e.g. in his characterizing the arithmetical equation ‘2 + 3 = 5’ and an ostensive definition of ‘red’ as ‘substitution-rules for symbols’ or ‘rules of grammar’). My modest hope is that some careful scrutiny of some of his own carefully formulated remarks may encourage others to further investigations which might throw some light on a wide range of issues which seem to be imperfectly understood and inappropriately debated.

I. ‘Die Sprache’: the craving for generality

There is a tendency among translators to treat ‘die Sprache’ and ‘die Grammatik’ as abstract mass-nouns, parallel to ‘der Gedanke’, ‘das Denken’, or ‘die Wirklichkeit’; and there is a corresponding tendency among commentators to take remarks incorporating these phrases as generalizations (e.g. about natural languages or about