

# Λεκτόν and Use Wittgenstein and the Incorporeal

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**Abstract** Any theory of language – ancient or contemporary, philosophical or cognitive – faces the same problem, i.e. how to reconcile the unequivocally corporeal character of the speakers and the world they speak of with the somewhat ‘incorporeal’ character of the meanings of linguistic expressions. It is for this reason, for example, that direct-reference theories of language seek to eliminate the Fregean notion of ‘sense’ (*Sinn*) from semantics. What is at stake is a completely corporeal account of language. However, such an attempt clashes with the fact that the vast majority of linguistic expressions do not refer either to any objects in the world or to the pre-scientific intuition that words have an autonomous ‘meaning’ (that is, that the ‘sense’ of a word does not coincide with the referent, *Bedeutung*). To solve such a problem, the Stoics introduced in their theory of language the notion of *lekton*, i.e. what is ‘said’ or is ‘sayable’. Even if the *lekton* is, properly speaking, incorporeal, at the same time it is the corporeal product of what human speakers do when they utter a verbal utterance. In this paper I propose to compare the notion of *lekton* to the similar notion of ‘use’ (*Gebrauch*), much debated in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. This paper does not theorise a direct philological connection between the Stoic notion of *lekton* and the notion of linguistic ‘use’ in Wittgenstein (even if this cannot be excluded either). Instead, the idea is that when one wants to propose an adequate theory of language, one cannot but introduce a notion such as that of *lekton* or ‘use’.

**Keywords** Stoicism. Wittgenstein. Lekton. Meaning as use. Pragmatics.

**Summary** 1. The Place of ‘Meaning’ in a World of Corporeal Entities. – 2. The ‘Meaning’ of Meaning. – 3. From Semantics to Pragmatics. – 4. Conclusion: The Life of Signs.



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You might say: The sense of a proposition is its purpose [Zweck]. (Or, of a word 'Its meaning is its purpose'.) But the natural history of the use [Gebrauch] of a word can't be any concern of logic.  
(Wittgenstein 1975, 59)

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there - like our life.  
(Wittgenstein 1969, 73e)

## 1 The Place of 'Meaning' in a World of Corporeal Entities

"The Stoics say that voice is a body" (Aëtius, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 92). Since voice is the medium of verbal language, this means that language should be considered a kind of corporeal entity. Indeed, the quote continues, "for everything which acts or has effects is a body. And voice acts and has effects. For we hear it and perceive it striking our ears and making an impression like a seal-ring on wax. Again, everything which stimulates or disturbs is a body". However, such a theory poses a major problem for every theory that aims to offer a comprehensive and adequate description of language. Take the case of what is called, in many and different traditions of thought, the 'meaning' of a linguistic expression: in which sense can the 'meaning' be considered a 'body'? It is difficult to regard 'meaning' as a corporeal entity, at least in the same sense in which the voice is unquestionably corporeal, since it is the vibration of an air mass emitted from our lungs ("an utterance is air that has been struck", Diogenes Laërtius, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 14). Therefore, since "neither does anything incorporeal touch a body" (Nemesius, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 98), how can the incorporeal 'meaning' affect the speaker of a language? It is in order to solve such a problem that the Stoics developed the famous and controversial doctrine of incorporeals (ἀσώματα, Bréhier 1907), namely: *lekta*, place (τόπος), void (κενός), and time (χρόνος). In particular *lekta* have two important characteristics: *lekta* are the "things said" and they are also "incorporeal" (Diogenes Laërtius, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 53). According to a famous and much commented upon passage by Sextus Empiricus:

there was yet another quarrel among the dogmatists; for some located the true and false in the thing signified, some located it in the utterance, and some in the motion of the intellect. And the Stoics championed the first view, saying that three things are linked with one another: the thing signified, the signifier, and the object. Of these, the signifier is the utterance, for example, 'Dion'. The thing signified is the thing indicated by the utterance and which

we grasp when it subsists in our intellect and which foreigners do not understand although they hear the utterance. The object is the external existent, for example, Dion himself. Two of these are bodies, the utterance and the object, and one incorporeal, the signified thing, i.e., the thing said [*lekton*] which is true or false. (Sextus Empiricus, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 89)

What is at stake is precisely the peculiar notion of *lekton*, what is said, or, more accurately – since *lekton* is derived from the Greek verb *legein* ('to say') – what is 'sayable'.<sup>1</sup> What does it mean that the *lekton* is an incorporeal (Grosz 2017)? The problem arises because we want to keep together these two apparently contradictory assertions: that 'voice is a body', on the one hand, and that *lekton* is an incorporeal, on the other. The problem is that while the voice of language is the result of a corporeal activity, the main linguistic entity, i.e. meaning, is not corporeal. How are we to keep together these two facets of language, the corporeal and the incorporeal?

Let us go back to the Sextus Empiricus quote. The Stoic semiotic model (Frede 1994; Manetti 2009) is a triangle whose three terms are: 'the thing signified, the signifier, and the object'. The last of these is the thing denoted by the sign. The signifier is the 'utterance' which actually denotes the thing. Both entities are corporeal. Between them there is the 'thing signified', that is, the 'thing said', i.e. *lekton*. This entity, on the contrary, is incorporeal. There is an obvious ontological tension between corporeal entities, on the one hand, and incorporeal ones, on the other. The Stoics' proposal looks for a way to overcome such a tension by transforming a seemingly irremovable 'mental' dimension of language into somewhat that can ultimately be traced back to a corporeal entity: the voice of the speakers' actual bodies. That is, even if *lekton* is not a fully ontological entity on its own, it somehow 'exists' in connection with the corporeal entities – the human speakers – that physically produce it. What is at issue is the whole situation concerning any effective act of speaking:

they say that what subsists in accordance with a rational presentation is a thing said [*lekton*] and that a rational presentation is one according to which the content of a presentation can be made available to reason. (Sextus Empiricus, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 90)

A *lekton* 'exists' when someone utters an appropriate utterance in the appropriate context;<sup>2</sup> as a consequence, what is said 'can be made

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive account of this notion so far is Bronowski 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Greaser 1978; Hülser 2012; de Harven 2018.

available to reason', that is, it can be understood by the participants in the linguistic act. Therefore, *lekta* are perfectly adequate participants in any linguistic act, even if they are not corporeal entities in themselves. As Ada Bronowsky correctly notes,

the *lekta* are the Stoics' answer to the Platonic Forms. Though the Stoics reject the reality of the Forms, the Stoic analysis of the various roles and foundational contributions of the Forms to the framework of reality leads to the re-interpretation of that framework with the introduction of *lekta* into ontology. The introduction of *lekta* as ontological items leads the Stoics to tackle complexities, some of which are born out of the need to remedy or overcome the difficulties met by the presence of Platonic Forms. (Bronowski 2019, 8)

The notion of *lekton* highlights the need to admit the existence of 'meaning' in any theory of language seeking to account for all linguistic facts, that is, to admitting that there must exist something similar to a Platonic form - the meaning - if one wants to understand how language actually works. At the same time a *lekton* is not, properly speaking, a Platonic form, because the "substance is, according to the Stoics, body" (Diogenes Laërtius, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 56). The key point when it comes to the *lekton* is that it is not a simple articulate sound; what is necessary is for such a sound to be part of a complex linguistic situation, that is, that to be part of a unitary linguistic form of life:

Utterance and speech differ in that utterance also includes echoes, whereas only what is articulate [counts as] speech. And speech differs from rational discourse in that rational discourse is always significant, and speech [can] also [be] meaningless—like the 'word' '*blituri*'—whereas rational discourse cannot be. There is a difference between saying and verbalising. For utterances are verbalised, whereas what is said are facts (which [is why they] are also 'things said' [*lekta*]). (Diogenes Laërtius in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 14)

Even if the verbal sound 'blituri' could perfectly well be a Greek word, it is not because it does not have any function in human language, that is, Greek speakers cannot carry out any rational action using such a sound, for

what subsists in accordance with a rational presentation is a thing said [*lekton*] and [...] a rational presentation is one according to which the content of a presentation can be made available to reason. (Sextus Empiricus in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 90)

According to this interpretation, *lekta* are not mental or rational entities in themselves; rather, a *lekton* is ‘rational’ if it can be used in an effective linguistic situation:

speech, according to the Stoics, is an utterance in letters, for example, ‘day’. Rational discourse [*logos*] is an utterance that signifies, emitted from the intellect, <for example, ‘It is day’>. (Diogenes Laërtius in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 14)

The utterance ‘It is day’ is a linguistic action that is rational because it can be effectively used in an actual linguistic exchange between human speakers. Rationality does not exist as a separate entity (there is no such a thing as the Platonic form, *Logos*); what is rational is the actual and meaningful use of language.

Therefore there is no such a thing as a *lekton* in itself, as an autonomous mental entity or as a simple ‘meaning’: for, as Austin once wrote, “‘the meaning of a word’ is, in general, if not always, a dangerous nonsense-phrase” (Austin 1961, 24). On the contrary, there are human beings who uses language in their life in order to act in the world with words and sentences. In this sense, *lekta* are inseparable from the actual use of language, just as the ‘existence’ of the void (which is another incorporeal) is indirectly attested by the fact that things can move ‘into’ empty space. The void is not a thing like a bottle or a spider, since “the void is what can be occupied by bodies but is not occupied” (Diogenes Laërtius in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 53). The corporeal existence of things implies the indirect existence of void; in a similar vein, the actual use of ‘speech’ indirectly implies that such a use is meaningful for human beings. For this reason “they say that a proposition is a complete *lekton* [thing said] which makes an assertion on its own” (Sextus Empiricus, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 27).

## 2 The ‘Meaning’ of Meaning

Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, wrote that “only the proposition has sense [*Sinn*]; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning [*Bedeutung*]” (Wittgenstein 1922, § 3.3). A name in isolation has no meaning at all, that is, it does not refer to an object. A name has a meaning, that is, it can refer to an object, only when it is included in a meaningful proposition - i.e. one provided with a *Sinn*. This means that the basic unit of language is the proposition which, in turn, “is a picture of reality. The proposition is a model of the reality as we think it is” (§ 4.01). That the proposition is a ‘model of the reality’ means that the proposition is a hypothesis about the world, that is, a possible action in the world. It is not sufficient, for a proposition, to refer to an object in the world (Frege’s *Bedeutung*) in order

for it to be meaningful, that is, to be endowed with *Sinn*. Only in this case can the proposition be part of some actual linguistic use. Since the proposition is a ‘picture’ of the world, in turn the proposition’s sense consists in its ‘meaningful’ relation with the world: “what the picture represents is its sense” (§ 2.221). In other words, a proposition is meaningful when it can be applied to reality: “thus the picture is linked with reality; it reaches up to it” (§ 2.1511). The relationship between picture and reality is similar to that of a “a scale applied to reality” (§ 2.1512). For example, one measures a wooden board in order to make a table. For this reason, “the picture is a model of reality” (§ 2.12): for one needs to develop a model to prepare and plan a possible action on reality. As in the case of the *lekton*, the proposition is neither properly nor eminently a logical entity; moreover, it is the peculiar way human beings operate in the world: “colloquial language [*Umgangssprache*] is a part of the human organism and is not less complicated than it” (§ 4.002).

Wittgenstein proposes changing the usual philosophical attitude towards language. According to the traditional philosophical stance, one must look for the ‘essence’ of language, that is, what makes it what it *properly is*. Typically, the answers to such questions are something like: ‘proposition’, ‘reference’ or ‘meaning’. However, the case of the *lekton* suggests a completely different explanatory strategy: instead of looking for the ‘essence’ of language, whatever this might be, one has to investigate what human beings do when they use language.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, such a strategy does not propose a new and dif-

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**3** Against this hypothesis, an anonymous referee has objected that in the *Tractatus* “linguistic picture has a meaning due to form, not to use”. Logical form represents the essence of language; therefore, at least the ‘first’ Wittgenstein would not accept to consider meaning to be analogous to use. In order to support this criticism, the referee refers to a passage from Wittgenstein’s conversations with Friedrich Waismann, where the philosopher seems to criticise the analogy that he had previously formulated in *Tractatus*: “§ 2.1514 The representing relation consists of the co-ordinations of the elements of the picture and the things. § 2.1515 These co-ordinations are as it were the feelers of its elements with which the picture touches reality”. Wittgenstein, conversing with Waismann, stated: “Once I wrote, ‘A proposition is laid against reality like a ruler. Only the end-points of the graduating lines actually *touch* the object that is to be measured.’ I now prefer to say that a *system of propositions* is laid against reality like a ruler. What I mean by this is the following. If I lay a ruler against a spatial object, I lay *all the graduating lines* against it at the same time” (Waismann 1979, 63-4). However, Wittgenstein is criticising his own previous logical characterisation of propositions; in this new perspective, he considers that no proposition exists in isolation from all the other propositions of language – the ‘*system of propositions*’. This self-criticism does not represent a critique of the interpretation proposed by this paper, which attempts to trace back to the *Tractatus* the conception of meaning as use explicitly laid out in the *Philosophical Investigations*. More generally, there are two points to be made with respect to this referee’s observation: first, the essay’s suggestion to interpret the *lekton* as use is not diminished by it, since the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* explicitly supports it. Secondly, and more importantly, when one reads the *Tractatus* through the lenses of the *Philosophical Investigations*, one can find several pas-

ferent ‘essence’ for language, quite the contrary: it makes apparent that the whole attempt to find such an ‘essence’ is useless. The focus now is on the role of language in human life, while the classical philosophical strategy frequently loses sight of its actual use. From this point of view, the shift from the ‘meaning’ as a mental entity to the *lekton* as a linguistic activity implies a completely different way of understanding language:

This finds expression in the question of the *essence* of language, of propositions, of thought. – For although we, in our investigations, are trying to understand the nature of language – its function, its structure – yet *this* is not what that question has in view. For it sees the essence of things not as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes *surveyable* through a process of ordering, but as something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we perceive when we see *right into* the thing, and which an analysis is supposed to unearth.

‘*The essence is hidden from us*’: this is the form our problem now assumes. We ask: ‘*What is language?*’, ‘*What is a proposition?*’ And the answer to these questions is to be given once for all, and independently of any future experience. (Wittgenstein 2009, § 92)

Now the problem is not to look for what is ‘*beneath* the surface’ of language, that is, beneath what human beings do with language in their actual lives; quite the contrary, the problem is to describe the complex human activities which are inextricably intertwined with language use. In particular, what do human beings do with language? The concept of ‘*language-game*’, which “is used here to emphasise the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (§ 23), is introduced by Wittgenstein to mark the shift

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sages that – at least to some degree – confirm this paper’s thesis. Take the case of the famous note in the *Notebooks*: “in the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally. (As when in the law-court in Paris a motor-car accident is represented by means of dolls, etc.” (Wittgenstein 1961, 7). What is an experiment if not a kind of action? An action where the proposition has the function of envisaging a situation, that is, a possible arrangement of objects. Wittgenstein’s example is very clear: to each proposition there corresponds a different manipulation of the objects of the situation. For this reason, Wittgenstein wrote that “the way in which language signifies is mirrored in its use” (82), already explicitly linking meaning and use at the time of the *Tractatus*. Indeed, in the *Tractatus* he wrote: “§ 3.326 In order to recognise the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use”. The sign is the mere signifier, while the symbol is the sign in action. At the same time, a sign is “meaningless” when it “is not necessary” (§ 3.328), that is, when there is no use for it. As for what he says to Waismann, in *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein wrote: “what does it mean, to understand a proposition as a member of a system of propositions? Its complexity is only to be explained by the use for which it is intended” (Wittgenstein 1975, 10). Also in this case what is at stake is the use of a proposition.

from the first kind of philosophical work – that based on the search for essences – to this different approach, which is no longer interested in essences. Now the focus is on the linguistic activities:

it is interesting to compare the diversity of the tools of language and of the ways they are used, the diversity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (§ 23)

Once what is at stake is this “diversity of the tools of language”, the ancient (Platonic) question about the essence of language acquires a completely different form. In *The Blue Book* Wittgenstein writes:

What is the meaning of a word?

Let us attack this question by asking, first, what is an explanation of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look like?

The way this question helps us is analogous to the way the question ‘how do we measure a length?’ helps us to understand the problem ‘what is length?’. The questions ‘What is length?’, ‘What is meaning?’, ‘What is the number one?’ etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can’t point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it).

Asking first ‘What’s an explanation of meaning?’ has two advantages. You in a sense bring the question ‘what is meaning?’ down to earth. For, surely, to understand the meaning of ‘meaning’ you ought also to understand the meaning of ‘explanation of meaning’. Roughly: ‘let’s ask what the explanation of meaning is, for whatever that explains will be the meaning.’ Studying the grammar of the expression ‘explanation of meaning’ will teach you something about the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ and will cure you of the temptation to look about you for some object which you might call ‘the meaning’. (Wittgenstein 1958, 1)

If one wants to define what *the* ‘meaning’ of a word is, one should first ask oneself what could be an acceptable explanation of such a word. Indeed, in order to explain the so-called ‘literal’ meaning of the word ‘word’, for example, one has to use other words. ‘Meaning’ is a normal linguistic entity which exists on the very same logical level as any other linguistic entity:

One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word ‘philosophy’, there must be a second-order philosophy. But that’s not the way it is; it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals



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with the word ‘orthography’ among others without then being second-order. (Wittgenstein 2009, 54<sup>e</sup>)

This means that even if one could find the supposed literal ‘meaning’ of a word, such a ‘meaning’ would not stop being a normal word like any other word in the language. This is a point that Wittgenstein made again and again. In the *Tractatus* he wrote: “All propositions are of equal value” (Wittgenstein 1922, § 6.4) – that is, human beings cannot part from language and move to an alogical and transcendent level of ‘meaning’ beyond the level of language use. Therefore, the English word ‘meaning’ is a word exactly like ‘socks’ or ‘potato peeler’. In a similar vein, if one wants to establish what ‘length’ is, one must pay attention to how human beings measure lengths and why they do so.

The ‘meaning’ of ‘length’ cannot be ascertained without placing the explanation into the ‘form of life’ where such an activity actually takes place. As Wittgenstein explicitly notes, what is at stake is “bring[ing] the question ‘what is meaning?’ down to earth”. Take the case of ostensive definition in the language-game in which you must ‘explain’ the use of a word by indicating the object to which it refers. Even in this seemingly simple case, ostension is not sufficient to understand the meaning of a word:

The definition of the number two, “That is called ‘two’ – pointing to two nuts – is perfectly exact. – But how can the number two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know *what* it is that one wants to call ‘two’; he will suppose that ‘two’ is the name given to *this* group of nuts! – He *may* suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake: when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might take it to be the name of a number. And he might equally well take a person’s name, which I explain ostensively, as that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say, an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *any* case. (Wittgenstein 2009, 17<sup>e</sup>)

If not even a direct ostension of the reference allows us to understand what is the ‘meaning’ of a word, how can such a ‘meaning’ be understood?

So, one could say: an ostensive definition explains the use [*Gebrauch*] – the meaning of a word – if the role the word is supposed to play in the language is already clear. So if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me, the ostensive explanation “That is called ‘sepia’” will enable me to understand the word. (Wittgenstein 2009, 18<sup>e</sup>)

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Wittgenstein clarifies that the ‘meaning’ of a word is nothing but the ‘use’ of such a word in the context of human life. As he famously writes, for a large class of cases of the employment of the word ‘meaning’ – though not for *all* [the metalinguistic use of the word ‘use’ is a case that does not fall under this definition] – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use [*Gebrauch*] in the language”. (Wittgenstein 2009, 25<sup>e</sup>)

The notion of ‘use’ allows us to develop a theory of language that no longer requires us to assume the existence of the Platonic notion of ‘meaning’. Language falls completely within the world of corporeal entities, as the Stoics’ philosophy suggests. At the same time, the notion of ‘use’, like that of *lekton*, allows us to keep on taking into account the idea that the ‘meaning’ of a linguistic expression is somehow an incorporeal entity. The basic metaphysical assumption according to which in the world there are only corporeal entities is maintained; however, such an assumption does not require us to abandon the fundamental notion of ‘meaning’.

### 3 From Semantics to Pragmatics

What is properly the function of incorporeals? As we have already seen, incorporeals are not things in themselves, but they allow us to place corporeal things in a rational space, that is, they allow us to perceive, think and speak of them. In order for us to be able to talk about something, it must at least occupy a place in the void of space and time. That is, it must be identified as this or that precise thing. From this point of view, all incorporeals have to do with language, so in a sense all of them are *lekta*:

*lekta* are, after all, quite like void, place, and time: they can be listed among the incorporeal although ‘objective’ conditions, without which the interaction of bodies in the world would neither be analysable nor fully intelligible. (Brunschwig 2003, 219)

One can find a somewhat similar position in the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein writes that

just as we cannot think of spatial objects at all apart from space, or temporal objects apart from time, so we cannot think of any object apart from the possibility of its connexion with other things. (Wittgenstein 1922, § 2.0121)

This means that the prior existence of objects is a condition for language to exist. For this reason, Wittgenstein continues, “the object

is simple" (§ 2.02), because *object* is not an empirical fact, quite the contrary: objects have to exist in order to allow language to exist, for otherwise there would be nothing determinate that language could say about the world. That the object is 'simple' (even if it may be empirically complex) means that simplicity is a prerequisite for any meaningful language use: "the demand for simple things is the demand for definiteness of sense" (Wittgenstein 1961, 63<sup>e</sup>). In the same vein, we need objects to exist in order to act in the world. One could not act in a determinate way in the world if one does not presuppose that the world is made up of distinct objects:

to anyone that sees clearly, it is obvious that a proposition like 'This watch is lying on the table' contains a lot of indefiniteness, in spite of its form's being completely clear and simple in outward appearance. So we see that this simplicity is only constructed. (Wittgenstein 1961, 69<sup>e</sup>)

Once we understand that the simplicity of the object is not an empirical character of real objects, but rather the result of our action - practical and mental - in the world, then semantics transforms itself into pragmatics. What is at stake is not the dualistic relationship between propositions on one side and things on the other side: what matters is what human beings *do* with language. In this pragmatic perspective, the dualism between language and world collapses on itself.

The logical function of the *object* for Wittgenstein is analogous to that of the *lekton* for the Stoics; in drawing such an analogy, one might say that the proposition is a peculiar kind of action:

in the proposition we-so to speak-arrange things *experimentally*, as they do not have to be in reality; but we cannot make any *unlogical* arrangement, for in order to do what we should have to be able to get outside logic in language. (Wittgenstein 1961, 13<sup>e</sup>)

An '*unlogical* arrangement' would be a situation in which the object is not individuated through the incorporeals. Any proposition is a kind of experiment, that is, it is a possible action in the world that sometimes succeeds and sometimes does not. For this reason "the proposition constructs a world" (Wittgenstein 1961, 16<sup>e</sup>), that is, it does not simply describe the world, but constructs it. To be more precise, the proposition constructs the world where language - in a circular way - can grasp the objects that it labels. Language does not properly represent the world, as if language and the world were separate from each other; more precisely, language is the human way to create possible linguistic situations. This means that language and the world are tightly connected, and that the human world is made of *lekta* as language-mediated-objects. For this reason, "at any rate [...] we quite

instinctively designate [...] objects by means of names" (Wittgenstein 1961, 48<sup>e</sup>) – that is, just as a beaver builds a dam with its teeth and paws, so a human animal constructs her world through propositions.

The *lekton* is a 'thing said', that is, the verbal activity that mediates between the proposition and the object to whom it refers:

Aristotle teaches what is primarily and immediately signified by utterances, saying that it is thoughts and that through these as intermediaries, objects are signified. And we need think of nothing beyond these which is between the thought and the object. But the Stoics hypothesised that such a thing exists and thought it should be called a 'thing said'. (Ammonius, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 90)

According to a direct-reference semantics (Stroll 1999) there is nothing in between propositions and objects; however, such a theory does not explain why human beings should speak of the world simply to match propositions and objects. That is, such a theory deprives language of any function in actual human life. On the contrary, the notion of *lekton* – understood as verbally mediated action – brings disembodied semantics back to earth, since language is the human way of acting in the world:

think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities). (Wittgenstein 2009, 9<sup>e</sup>)

Take the case of the hammer. First of all, it is a corporeal entity. However, the function of this object in the human world is not contained in the object itself. A hammer can function as an object to drive nails in only for those animals naturally endowed with hands. This means that the utilitarian character of the hammer, its *function*, is an incorporeal character that can only be actualised when the hammer is grasped by the fingers of a hand. The *use* of the hammer is incorporeal, yet it materially depends on the corporeal characteristics of the hammer and of the hands that grasp it. Another consequence of the shift from a disembodied semantics to an embodied and situated pragmatics is that while in the former case one can imagine a situation where someone learns how to use a language, in the latter such a situation cannot exist. Indeed, in the former case language and the world are originally separate from each other: this means that in principle a person who is learning how to use a language is already capable of thinking in an articulate way without the mediation of language. In the latter case, on the contrary, language is not simply another capacity which is added to the human mind like any other cognitive capacity: for in this case language and mind are seen

as having developed together. According to this perspective, a human mind that is independent of language does not properly exist:

But this means that any kind of explanation of a language presupposes a language already. And in a certain sense, the use of language is something that cannot be taught, i.e. I cannot use language to teach it in the way in which language could be used to teach someone to play the piano.-And that of course is just another way of saying: I cannot use language to get outside language. (Wittgenstein 1975, 54)

This is the key difference between a semantic model of language and a pragmatic one. In the former case it is possible to imagine that a human being could be cognitively separated from language. In the latter case, on the contrary, such a possibility does not exist, since to be human means to be able to speak and think through a language. Significantly, the Stoic position is similar to this one:

‘You say,’ he says, ‘that every animal first has an affinity to its own constitution; but a human being’s constitution is rational and so a human being has an affinity not to his animality but to his rationality; for a human being is dear to himself in virtue of that part which makes him human’. (Seneca, in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 191)

Wittgenstein has always held a similar position, arguing that it is impossible for a human being to place herself outside language and logic (Seneca’s ‘rationality’). For example, already in the *Tractatus* he wrote that “to be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world” (Wittgenstein 1922, § 4.12). Since one needs logic in order to ‘represent the logical form’ of a proposition, it is apparent that if one places oneself outside logic, one cannot have the logical form of any proposition represented. This means that language is not a capacity that a human being can do without, at least if she does not wish to lose what makes her properly human. The anthropological shift from the dualistic model of semantics - where language and the world are separate from one another - to the pragmatic one implies that language and the world are now two facets of a unitary biological entity, the human form of life.

Take the case of the linguistic game of ostension, where someone points to an object and labels it. What Wittgenstein points out is that, in order to understand such a peculiar use of language, it is not sufficient to see the object and hear the associated linguistic label: first of all, one has to realise why one should name an object - that is, what the aim of this peculiar action is. Such an aim is not found either in the object named or in the corresponding linguistic label. This *use*

is an ‘incorporeal’. In the human form of life actions on objects are mediated by language. For this reason, as Wittgenstein notes in *Philosophical Remarks*,

what characterises propositions of the form ‘This is...’ is only the fact that the reality outside the so-called system of signs somehow enters into the symbol. (Wittgenstein 1975, 120)

The symbol can only stick to the object because such an object is already a linguistic entity, that is, an object whose individuation *qua* object already implies the linguistic label. It is precisely this circularity that marks the passage from semantics to pragmatics. While in the former case there is no intermediate entity between the proposition and the named object, in the latter what keeps them together is the notion of meaning as use. The fact that the use is an incorporeal means that it consists in the functioning of linguistic expressions in human life. This use is not a dualistic mental entity (therefore, it is not a Platonic entity); however, it is necessary in order to make language-games meaningful – that is, endowed with an anthropological sense. ‘Use’ transforms a bare logical and disembodied symbolic formula into “a *move* in the language-game” (Wittgenstein 2009, 14<sup>e</sup>). That is, it transforms logical semantics into living pragmatics:

Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? – In use [*Gebrauch*] it *lives*. Is it there that it has living breath within it? – Or is the *use* its breath? (Wittgenstein 2009, 135<sup>e</sup>)

#### 4 Conclusion: The Life of Signs

What does it properly mean that ‘use’ is the ‘breath’ or ‘life’ of symbols? First of all, it means that linguistic symbols are no symbols at all in the absence of such a use, that is, they are not actual moves in the human language-game. Language needs a breath of life to become alive, and such a breath is use. Perhaps this is only an impression but it comes quite naturally to assimilate the notion of ‘use’ to the Stoic one of *pneuma*, “a kind of matter proper to the soul”: as such, *pneuma* is not a special transcendent essence, but “a qualified blend of airy and fiery substance” (Galen in Inwood, Gerson 2008, 99). *Pneuma* is to the living body what use is to the symbol. It is the actual ‘life’ of living bodies. In a similar vein, linguistic use is what brings life to logical symbols, which would otherwise be dead:

The mistake we are liable to make could be expressed thus: We are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign. (One of the reasons for

this mistake is again that we are looking for a ‘thing corresponding to a substantive.’)

The sign (the sentence) gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs. Roughly: understanding a sentence means understanding a language.

As a part of the system of language, one may say, the sentence has life. But one is tempted to imagine that which gives the sentence life as something in an occult sphere, accompanying the sentence. But whatever accompanied it would for us just be another sign. (Wittgenstein 1958, 5)

We keep on searching for something “hidden in an occult sphere” (typically a mental meaning) that “gives the sentence life”. Indeed, what makes language alive is nothing but the actual use of language in the human form of life:

it is misleading then to talk of thinking as of a ‘mental activity’. We may say that thinking is essentially the activity of operating with signs. This activity is performed by the hand, when we think by writing; by the mouth and larynx, when we think by speaking; and if we think by imagining signs or pictures, I can give you no agent that thinks. (Wittgenstein 1958, 6)

Take the case of the mouth and larynx: they are corporeal entities whose social and regular functioning produces a meaningful proposition, that is, an incorporeal meaning:

if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*. (Wittgenstein 1958, 4)

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