From "Sharp, Wittgenstein, is" to "Wittgenstein is Sharp"

De "Perspicaz, Wittgenstein, es" a "Wittgenstein es perspicaz"

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John Collins, The Unity of Linguistic Meaning. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015 (2011), 201 pp.

By drawing upon an implicit interpretation of philosophy as a task of conceptual clarification and taking the science of linguistics to be ancillary to such mission (via generative syntactic theory), Collins' thesis in this volume is that if the *unity of the proposition problem* is to be resolved, it needs first, to be reframed as a problem about *the unity of linguistic meaning* (hence this volume's title). Such a maneuver sheds light on some of the explanatory demands that have been hitherto neglected, paramount amongst which is "how the individual items of a complex linguistic structure combine to form a meaningful whole, where the means of combination cannot be just another part of the whole (that way regress beckons) nor be wholly exiguous, for how the parts are combined matters to what the whole means" (IX). This book is Collins' own attempt to answer such question.

The first section, entitled 'Thoughts, Sentences, and Unities', deals with some preparatory groundwork concerning the relation between thought and language as a means to clarify the notion of *unity*. To begin with, the unity problem is not concerned with mereological unities (where the latter group is to be understood as involving structures that can be reduced to the existence of their relevant constituents). Second, a key aspect Collins wishes to clarify is the scope and object of his analysis. Although the author takes the concern of his book to be "for unity just as it holds for propositions" (2) (the unity of linguistic meaning being his target), he devotes the rest of this chapter to analyzing linguistic meaning "in its own right (...) as a narrower realm of entities than propositions" (3). Given both his understanding of language as an actual phenomenon whose properties are not to be stipulated (but discovered) and his narrow conception of semantics as a theory whose goal is to offer an stable interpretation of syntactic structures

requiring independent specification, Collins replaces the term *linguistic meaning* with that of *interpretable unities* (on grounds that the latter name highlights the fact that how such linguistic material ought to be interpreted depends on further theoretical elaborations). Thus, by arguing that those unities are "syntactic forms that have stable interpretation as an aspect of the relevant speaker/hearer's linguistic competence" (3) Collins concludes that the object of his inquiry are "structured propositions" (7).

In chapter two, called 'The Unity Problem(s)', Collins begins by drawing upon Russell's interpretation of the unity problem in 1903. Early Russell faced the following paradox: how do we move from a mere enumeration of terms to a structured complex without resorting to such complex being a part of the referred list? Having acknowledged this difficulty as unsurmountable, late Russell would drop his talk about propositions and embrace instead a synthetic judgement act, thereby re-formulating the unity problem, rather than accounting for it. Collins then suggests that the so-called *unity problem* actually consists of two unity problems: *the interpretive problem* and the *combinatorial problem*. The interpretive problem poses the question of how to specify the content of unities whose existence we take for granted, i.e., how to describe the meaning of a given unity in a compositional vocabulary. The combinatorial problem, on the other hand, arises once we inquire into the very existence of unities as structured wholes: "given lexical items with their semantic properties, what principle or mechanism combines the items into structures that are interpretable as a function of their constituent parts?" (28). In order to account for the latter, three desiderata are to be satisfied: (i) *generativity*, or an answer to how each of the unboundedly many structures interpretable by each competent speaker can be combined as sensical units; (ii) *explanation*, i.e., an explicatory combinatorial principle that is, at the same time, independent from interpretable units; and (iii) *exclusivity*, that is, an account of the difference between interpretable and uninterpretable unities (namely, of sense and non-sense) on the mere basis of their respective compositionality. The author concludes that no extant solution (e.g. Frege's, Dummett's, Burge's) has accounted for all three desiderata.

In the third chapter, whose title is 'The priority thesis: judgement over naming', Collins tackles the deficiencies of the such a proposal (e.g. as in Frege's contextualism) as regards the fulfillment of the above-referred three desiderata. Indeed, Collins remarks that by conceding explanatory priority to the sentence or judgement over the word, the priority thesis fails to account for the exclusivity criterion, i.e., it is unsuccessful at explaining the difference between sense and

non-sense. This need not be the case should we adopt a weak priority thesis along the lines of positing judgement-level limitations on possible units, yet it is certainly unavoidable provided we take those constraints to dissolve the unity problem on grounds that the interpretation-relevant aspects of constituents are to be understood as abstracted from unities. In this sense, neither Dummett's distinction between *recognition* and *explanation* nor Davidson's idiolectal argument fit the bill. As far as Collins is concerned, the key idea to bear in mind is that an adequate account of the interpretable unit should shed light on the vicissitudes of the interplay between lexical meaning and structural relations, where the constraints that certain lexical items pose as regards the determination of sense/ non-sense at the level of judgement are not to be explained at that very level, for it is not there that they originate.

Chapter four, which goes by the name of 'The Reign of Disunity', explores a non-exhaustive list of unsuccessful solutions to the unity problem. Such proposals, all of which are essentially descriptive, can be divided into three main groups: (a) rule-based accounts (Horwich's unity-conferring rules, Wiggins' unity-as-a-function-of-the-copula and Gaskin's further suggestions), (b) naturalistic theories involving causal factors (Gibson's theory on the causal asymmetry account of unity) and (c) Russell's multiple relation theory, which is premised on the rejection of the dyadic analysis of judgement and the postulation that by virtue of an act of synthesis the subject brings unity to the unrelated elements of the proposition. This last theory, however, falls prey to the *narrow direction problem*, the *wide direction problem*, the *uniformity problem* and a regress on its own (since the subject is merely a further simple). In this sense, Russell's further introduction of the form as a presentational mode of predication schematizing the judgement constituents does not solve the *uniformity problem* (it is actually subject to a dilemma analogous to that of rule-based proposals). Collins' main criticism is that none of Russell's theories can account for the intrinsic structure of interpretable unities (neither Hanks' nor Peacock's rejoinders on behalf of such theories being able to ameliorate this predicament), yet the author does credit these proposals as pointing out in the right direction, namely: towards the idea that some independent, synthetic principle needs to be considered above the constituents (without thereby becoming one more element or a complete abstraction from them) if the combinatorial problem is to be solved.

The fifth section, entitled 'Syntax and the Creation of Objects: Towards an Explanation of Unity', contains Collins' positive account on the unity problem (as opposed to both his negative account in chapters 1-4 and his anticipation of objections to his own theory in chapters 6 and 7). Collins initially acknowledges

that Russell and Frege realised that the unity problem arises from a compositional relation. A second aspect is that both Frege and Kant hypothesized the agent of such combination to be based on the recognition of truth-evaluability via an external entity, whether defined in subjective (Frege) or objective (Kant) terms. In this sense, Kant's *transcendental unity of apperception* constitutes a highly relevant concept, not the least because it allowed him to envisage the combinatorial principle as already implicit in the very structure of experience (versus the idea of such combination being derived from it). Nevertheless, Collins points out that Kant cannot be the last word concerning the solution to the unity problem, *inter alia* because his *transcendental unity of apperception* is an extra component of judgement whose relevance is exhausted by the interpretable structures which it engenders. Rather, as Collins stresses, "we should be able to (...) view the combinatorial principle to which we must make appeal as not exhausted by the interpretable structures to which it gives rise, but which nevertheless is interpretable (...), while not being an extra component of judgement" (105). To that effect, Collin puts forward *Merge* as an independent principle targeting a pair. *Merge* is recursive and features heads, thus resulting in the simplest operation towards the creation of hierarchical asymmetry, while all the same respecting the distributive/collective distinction. Whereas its first version (Chomsky, 1995) featured a couple of components (set formation [targeting two items] and labelling [accounting for projection]), its improved one (Chomsky, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008) includes structure building and movement as elements of a single unitary operation. It is important to know, however, that *Merge* alone is not enough, for *eo ipso* it cannot produce just interpretable structures, nor is headedness enough for interpretability (i.e. *per se*, merge is indifferent to the distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable structures, yet that is not a problem, for its stability is ensured by the fit between the inherent properties of its lexical items).

Chapter six commences with Collins' clarification and defence of his positive account on the unity problem. He does so by addressing various philosophical and formal objections to it as they are raised by Gaskin, King and Soames. Thus, Gaskin's criticism are as follows: (i) why a collection has the appropriate structure to begin with (ii) the derivativeness of the unity-conferring power of syntax from propositional unity and (iii) the circularity of grounding the unity of a proposition on the unity of a set given that the latter presupposes the former. Second, King's suggestion is that syntax structures propositional facts alone. Then a digression ensues on the internalism vs. externalism dispute in semantics where Collins makes it clear that on the one hand, *pace* Burge and Stanley, (Chomsky's)

internalism is compatible with an intimate relation between truth and meaning (albeit, to be sure, not an externalist one) and on the other one, Stanley's and Kennedy's reading of both Chomsky's internalism and Austinian/Wittgenstinian semantics as being incompatible with Chomsky's stance are both wrong, for "of course we refer to things, not ideas, but our capacity to do so neither presupposes nor entails an independent status to the things to which we refer" (146). Finally, Soames' criticism rests upon his appeal to syntactic structure on the basis of what he claims to be a "neglected insight" in Russell's multiple relation theory. To my mind, Collins refutes all the above charges while, at the same time, keeping his argument consistent with all three desiderata on the unity problem.

Finally, chapter 7, entitled the 'Linguistic Status of *Merge*', witnesses Collins' treatment apropos of the linguistic status and interpretation of *Merge qua* recursive binary set formation featuring headedness as a lexical interaction effect. Within this frame, Collins addresses (i) some objections against the primitiveness of *Merge* (Culicover's and Jackendoff's), (ii) some recent alternative conceptions of *Merge* (Pietroski's and Hornstein's notational variants of *Merge*, as well as Boeckx's, Bickerton's and Hornstein's ill-founded argument on *Merge* as a mere evolution from a more ancient concatenation plus a subsequent labelling function) and (iii) further potentially problematic topics, such as type theory (unlike Montague's generalization of type theory, *Merge* is neither a meta-theoretic description of strings nor a translator of strings into a formal language, but an explanatory principle), the semantic neutrality of *Merge* (which, as explained above, is a virtue, rather than a vice) and the link between models and reality (where we need to distinguish between the elements of the model and the meanings themselves).

Despite its occasional lack of accessibility (the linguistics jargon [c-command, Montague grammar] and the use of unnecessary archaisms [*pro tem*, nigh on] are not unfrequent), its dispersed nature (the author attempts to cover too much ground, not to mention the abrupt occurrence of certain subsections, such as 2.6. 'States of Affair and Unity' or 3.5 'A <<solution>> after Wittgenstein') and its (potentially undermining) tail-that-wags-the-dog structure (at the end of the day, its *pars construens* lasts for as short as a paper-length chapter), Collins work is indeed a well-argued one and an indispensable resource for the debate on the unity of the proposition.

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