



A defence of the austere view of nonsense

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Received: 21 October 2022 / Accepted: 18 March 2023 / Published online: 20 April 2023
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Abstract

The austere view of nonsense says that the source of nonsense is not a violation of the rules of logical syntax, but nonsense is always due to a lack of meaning in one of the components of a sentence. In other words, the necessary and sufficient condition for nonsensicality is that no meaning has been assigned to a constituent in a sentence. The austere conception is the key ingredient of the resolute reading of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that presents a therapeutical interpretation of the work, and rejects a possibility of conveying some ineffable truths by means of nonsensical sentences. In this paper, I defend the austere view against the most important objections. Firstly, I discuss textual sources for ascribing to Wittgenstein the austere view that have not been sufficiently thoroughly discussed yet. Next, I indicate that the apparent occurrence of words out of the context of a sentence on lists of verbs and in definitions is not in conflict with the version of the context principle recommended by austere theorists, since this argument does not sufficiently take into account the distinction between sign and symbol. Furthermore, I argue that the austere conception and the principle of compositionality are jointly tenable, for the former view does not exclude the existence of syntactic and semantic rules, but only shows that they are recognizable conditionally. Finally, I indicate that the austere view of nonsense should be seen as a viable option by a contemporary theorist of nonsense, for it helps us to avoid making controversial assumptions about the nature of meaning and content.

Keywords The austere conception of nonsense · The resolute reading · Category mistakes · *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* · The early Wittgenstein

1 Introduction

There are two main positions concerning what nonsense is in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. More traditional and well-known is the substantial

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view of nonsense. It is the view holding that the main source of nonsense is a clash in the logical categories of words. That view of nonsense has been criticized and rejected by the proponents of the austere view of nonsense. The adherents of the austere conception claim that nonsense is never a matter of category mismatch, but it always results from the absence of meaning in one of the components of a sentence. The exchange concerning the correct view of nonsense is at the heart of the debate between the standard readers of the *Tractatus* and the resolute readers of this work.¹ The standard reading has it that the main aim of the work was to pass on some ineffable truths concerning the nature of the world, language, logic and ethical life (Anscombe, 1965; Baker & Hacker, 2005; Geach, 1976; Glock, 1996, 2015; Hacker, 1986, 2000; Pears, 1987; Proops, 2001; White, 2011). That position would be false without the substantial view of nonsense, since nonsensical sentences consisting of categorially incompatible words are supposed to be the main bearers conveying unsayable insights. On the other hand, the resolute readers of the *Tractatus* reject the substantial conception of nonsense in favour of the austere view (Conant, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2011; Conant & Diamond, 2004; Diamond, 1995, 2010, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Floyd, 1998, 2007; Goldfarb, 1997, 2011; Kremer, 1997, 2001, 2007). They claim that there are no ineffable truths, and the aim of the work was, in fact, anti-metaphysical and therapeutic. The austere conception of nonsense is the favourite object of attacks for the critics of the resolute reading. Nevertheless, I believe that the austere view is attractive both for exegetical and substantive reasons. It is appealing from the exegetical point of view because it is more coherent with the rest of the *Tractatus* and other Wittgenstein's early writings than the substantial view. Furthermore, the austere view and the matter of its assessment should be interesting to the broad philosophical audience, since it is a position that can play an important role in the latest revival of interest in the nature, understanding, and scope of nonsense in philosophy and scientific discourse in general. For that reason, the last part of my paper concerns the substantive merits of the austere view that prove the need for broader interest in this view.

The paper is intended as a defence of the austere view of nonsense against its most important critics. I want to consider four main issues crucial for the acceptance of the austere view. Firstly, I discuss passages of Wittgenstein's works witnessing that the author of the *Tractatus* accepted the austere conception, and I point out some previously neglected passages in Wittgenstein's works. Both the proponents and critics of the austere view put a lot of emphasis on the rational reconstruction of Wittgenstein's philosophy. This strategy has some advantages, since it leads to a number of interesting interpretations, and shows how to link the very particular strand of *Tractatus* to the more general aim of the work. However, it proves to be inconclusive and questionable on methodological grounds. For these reasons, I begin with a

¹ There has emerged a third reading over time. According to this 'elucidatory' reading, the *Tractatus* consists in neither theory nor therapy. It involves elucidations that function in a similar way to definitions. Marie McGinn (1999), Danièle Moyal Sharrock (2007, 2017) and Oskari Kuusela (2019a, 2019b) are the main proponents of the elucidatory conception. Their views on nonsense are closer to Hacker's/Glock's proposal in some cases (Moyal-Sharrock, 2007), but in other cases, they are closer to the austere view (Kuusela, 2019a). In general, I think that the elucidatory reading is not any real alternative to the standard reading and the resolute reading; it must choose ultimately between theoretical and therapeutical function of the *Tractarian* sentences. Unfortunately, there is no space to discuss this issue here.

discussion of Wittgenstein's texts rather than a detailed reconstruction of his views. Secondly, I defend the austere view against an argument saying that the main component of the conception, namely the context principle, should be rejected as an obvious falsehood. Thirdly, I argue that the austere view and the context principle are consistent with the principle of compositionality. The principle of compositionality is the basis of contemporary semantics, hence the incoherence between the austere reading and compositional view of language would make the Tractarian view of nonsense unpalatable for most philosophers interested in how language works. Finally, I show that the austere view is attractive beyond the restrictions of the exegetical debates, since it is a view that can be appealed to by all semantic frameworks, and allow us to avoid many controversial debates without resigning from the useful role that the notion of nonsense can play in philosophical debates. Additionally, when discussing the aforementioned points I also want to shed light on some confusions and misunderstandings occurring in the debate between the resolute and standard readers. At the same time, I do not consider some important topics that were raised by Peter Hacker (2000, 2003) and answered back by James Conant (2001; Conant & Diamond, 2004) and Cora Diamond (2005).² I am going to focus on arguments against the austere view that are crucial for the whole debate and have not been satisfactorily answered yet.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the main aspects of the austere conception of nonsense and contrasts this conception with the substantial view of nonsense. In Sect. 3, I discuss textual support in favour of the austere view of nonsense that can be found in Wittgenstein's writings. In Sect. 4, I challenge an argument against the austere conception and the context principle saying that they contradict well-known facts about meaning, such as the occurrence of meaningful words on the lists of verbs and in definitions. In Sect. 5, I examine the view that the austere conception of nonsense leads to a conflict with the principle of compositionality. In Sect. 6, I argue that a contemporary theorist of nonsense should be interested in the austere conception of nonsense because of its independence from theories of meaning and content.

2 Conceptions of nonsense in the *Tractatus*

As it is well-known, Wittgenstein states in the penultimate thesis of the *Tractatus* that some/all of his thesis are nonsensical, and for that reason they must be thrown away. In detail, his claim is as follows:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them — as steps — to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

² Some problems raised by Hacker (2000, 2003) also recur in articles written by Proops (2001), Sullivan (2003) and White (2011), which were—in my opinion—effectively rejoined by Conant and Dain's paper (2011). Edmund Dain (2006, 2008) considers some problems with Glock's interpretation of the austere view, which I do not bring up here.

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright (TLP, 6.54).³

How should we understand the term ‘nonsensical’ and what is the aim of repudiating the Tractarian sentences? These two questions are interconnected, and so are the answers to them. As I noted in the introduction, there are two basic conceptions of nonsense in the *Tractatus*, namely the substantial view and the austere view. I will start by presenting the substantial conception.

Everyone knows some down-to-earth instances of nonsense, for example the sentences ‘Peter is Derek’ and ‘Mark is a very abnegate person’ are devoid of sense. The first sentence is not a grammatical one, the second sentence includes the word ‘abnegate’, which lacks any meaning (at least in English). According to the substantial view of nonsense, there is a second kind of nonsense that is more philosophically interesting.⁴ The second kind of nonsense comes from the incompatibility of logical categories of words in a sentence. It includes primarily sentences that are excluded by the logical syntax of language. The two well-known examples are the following category mistakes: ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ (Carnap, 1931), ‘There are objects’ (TLP, 4.1272).⁵ Sentences of the second kind of nonsense are nonsensical because some of its components cannot be connected, for instance by means of predication, on the basis of logical categories of words. According to the *Tractatus*, existence cannot be attributed to formal concepts, but it needs a proper concept to be attached to. On the other hand, the Carnapian view of syntax holds that the abstract properties like being a prime cannot be predicated about a concrete object such as Julius Caesar. In both cases, the logical categories of words are incompatible, and the resulting sentences are nonsensical. However, sentences involving category mistakes can be used in a philosophically useful way to convey some insights. For instance, we can gain insights

³ I follow here the translation by Brian McGuinness and David Pears. It correctly renders the term ‘*unsinnig*’ as ‘nonsensical’. Charles Ogden’s version has ‘senseless’ instead. All references are to the McGuinness/Pears translation unless otherwise indicated. I will cite the text of the *Tractatus* (and of the *Philosophical Investigations*) by numbered proposition and use the standard abbreviations for Wittgenstein’s work.

⁴ Hanjo Glock (1996, 2004, 2015) and Peter Hacker (2000, 2003; Baker & Hacker, 2005) are the main exponents and defenders of the substantial view of nonsense against the critique of the resolute readers. Occasionally, some other useful voices are raised in this debate (McManus, 2014; Moore, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; White, 2011; Williams, 2004). For some recent defence of the substantial view and excellent discussion of the austere view, see Cerbone (2022).

⁵ In TLP, 4.1272, Wittgenstein claims that:

(...) Wherever the word ‘object’ (‘thing’, etc.) is correctly used, it is expressed in conceptual notation by a variable name... (...) Wherever it is used in a different way, that is as a proper concept-word, nonsensical pseudo-propositions are the result. So one cannot say, for example, ‘There are objects’, as one might say, ‘There are books’. And it is just as impossible to say, ‘There are 100 objects’, or, ‘There are \aleph_0 objects’. And it is nonsensical to speak of the total number of objects. The same applies to the words ‘complex’, ‘fact’, ‘function’, ‘number’, etc.

According to the standard reading, the Tractarian theory of syntax excludes such sentences as ‘There are objects’, ‘Atomic facts are independent of one another’ (TLP, 2.061) and ‘A function cannot be its own argument (...)’ (TLP, 3.333), since all these sentences try to use a formal concept as a proper concept. Most of the Tractarian sentences involve such improper use of formal concepts, and for that reason should be regarded as nonsensical.

into the nature of formal concepts and the proper symbolism by means of sentences consisting of improper use of notions such as ‘object’, ‘fact’, ‘function’.⁶

The austere view holds that there is only one kind of nonsense, namely mere nonsense.⁷ All nonsense is a matter of privation, since the sentence is nonsensical if and only if it involves a component deprived of meaning. The proponents of the austere view reject nonsense of the substantial kind, namely nonsense having a source in contravention of the rules of logical syntax. However, this does not mean that sentences involving category mistakes are meaningful.⁸ They are not. The sentences ‘Mark is a very abnegate person’ and ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ are of the same kind, since they have a word that lacks a meaning. The only difference between these two sentences is that in the former sentence it is obvious which component lacks a meaning, while the latter one can be fixed in two ways.⁹ Wittgenstein’s diagnosis was that generally in the case of sentences apparently involving category mistakes we oscillate between regarding different components as devoid of sense.¹⁰

Let me discuss some important aspects of the austere view of nonsense. Firstly, it is worth emphasizing that according to this conception, a violation of a rule of logical syntax is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of nonsensicality, since we can always use a word in a new and innovative way, which is not in agreement with the logical category of past uses (Diamond, 2005). Famously, Gottlob Frege claims that in the sentence ‘Trieste is no Vienna’, the word ‘Vienna’ is used as a

⁶ Famously, Hacker (1986/2021, p. 26) distinguished between misleading and illuminating nonsense. Philosophical theses tend to go beyond the limits of language. Traditional philosophers contravene the bounds of sense unconsciously and produce misleading nonsense. Wittgenstein uses nonsense intentionally to show the limits of thinkable. His use of nonsensical sentences is illuminating. For a similar description of the uses of the substantial nonsense, see Geach (1976), Hacker (2000) and White (2011).

⁷ The austere conception of nonsense was proposed by Diamond (1978, 1981) quite a long time ago, but this position gained prominence along with the whole resolute reading around 2000. Other important works are Bronzo (2011, 2013), Conant (1998, 2001, 2002) and Diamond (2005, 2018), see also Conant and Dain (2011) and Conant and Diamond (2004). Recently, the austere view was discussed and argued for by Pérez-Navarro (2021).

⁸ The position holding that category mistakes are not a reason for nonsensicality, but only for necessary falsehood were accepted by, for instance, Bradley (1978), Quine (1960, 1980) and Prior (1954). For a recent discussion and defence, see Magidor (2009, 2013).

⁹ Let me consider the example of the sentence ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ (‘prime number’ is used here in its adjectival meaning; if you are disquiet with this example, take any other predicate that can be attributed only to abstract objects). We know that, according to rules of our language, the proper name ‘Julius Caesar’ is usually used to refer to concrete objects (e.g., to the well-known Roman general). Also, we know that ‘a prime number’ functions typically as a predicate assigned to abstract objects. However, we are not familiar—according to rules of our language—with the case of predicating ‘is a prime number’ of a concrete object. Could we find any new use here? If we were able to find a new logical role to one of the two phrases used in our sentence, then we would have a meaningful proposition. That would be the case analogous to the sentence ‘Trieste is no Vienna’ (see my discussion of this sentence below). If we were not able to find any meaning for the components of the discussed sentence, then the sentence would be nonsensical. We generally know how to use the word ‘Julius Caesar’ and we generally know how to use the phrase ‘is a prime number’, but—for now—we do not know what these words are supposed to mean in the sentence ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’. It is not the case of a violation of logical categories of words, since we do not know which logical categories these words possess here.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the last claim, see Conant (2002, especially pp. 405–410).

concept word (Frege, 1892, p. 189).¹¹ Usually, ‘Vienna’ functions as a proper name, but in the discussed sentence we were able to find a new logical role for it. Therefore, the sentence ‘Trieste is no Vienna’ is meaningful even though ‘Vienna’ is used in contravention of the rules of logical syntax. The lack of sense of a sentence does not come from the incompatibility of logical categories of words, but from the lack of appropriate meaning conventions.¹² If we are not able to find any logical role for a word in a sentence, then we should recognise it as nonsensical. A violation of some rules of logical syntax is irrelevant here.

Another important aspect of the austere view of nonsense is the context principle. The resolute readers maintain that the context principle enabled Wittgenstein to recognise what nonsense is (Diamond, 1978, p. 201, 1981, p. 21, see also: Conant, 2002, pp. 384–385, 401–403). To see this we should ask: how do we identify the semantic values of words? How do we recognise the meaning and syntactic category of a word?¹³ The context principle says that in order to discover the logical role of a word, we must attend to its use in the given sentence. We cannot recognise the meaning and syntactic role of an expression in isolation, i.e. without taking into account the context of a sentence. Frege showed by means of the context principle that both mental ideas (anti-psychologism well-known from *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (Frege, 1884)) and our previous uses of a word do not sufficiently determine the meaning of a word.¹⁴ The aforementioned example of the sentence ‘Trieste is no Vienna’ demonstrates that we must attend to a particular use of a word to recognise its logical role. Outside the context of a sentence, we cannot ascribe to a phrase the category of, for instance, proper name or first-level concept. The word ‘Vienna’ plays a role of the proper name in such sentences as ‘Vienna is the capital of Austria’ and ‘Vienna is my favourite city’. However, ‘Vienna’ has a predicative role in ‘Trieste is no Vienna’, being something incomplete and unsaturated.

The next question that we have to consider is the following: How can we identify the logical role of component words if they appear in a nonsensical sentence? The proponents of the austere conception emphasize that if the whole sentence is nonsensical, then we cannot ascribe logical roles to its constituents (see especially Diamond, 1981, pp. 10–11, 1978, pp. 200–202). If the sentence ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ is devoid of meaning, then we are not able to identify meanings and the logical role of ‘Julius Caesar’, ‘is’ and ‘prime number’. Furthermore, we cannot say that the sentences ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ and ‘5 is a prime number’ have some

¹¹ In another famous sentence, ‘Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy’, the typically proper name ‘Jack Kennedy’ was used predicatively by Lloyd Bentsen.

¹² The slogan that the source of nonsensicality is that we have not given any meaning to the constituent expression has often been misunderstood in the literature (Hacker 2003, pp. 16–17; Sullivan, 2003, pp. 207–209; White, 2011, pp. 34–35). As I already explained, it means that the contravention of the rules of logical syntax are both not necessary and not sufficient to classify a phrase as devoid of meaning.

¹³ I mean by the phrase ‘logical role’ both the meaning of an expression and its logical category, i.e. it refers both to semantic and syntactic aspects of the word’s usage. The phrase ‘logical role’ and its cognate ‘logical element’ were introduced by Diamond (1978, 1981) without explicit definition.

¹⁴ I do not want to take a stance here on the exegesis of the context principle in Frege’s philosophy. I believe that Frege’s view shares its core with Wittgenstein’s use, but it is different, nevertheless (for the justification of this claim, see my Bogucki, 2022). For a range of interpretations, see Janssen (2001), Linnebo (2019) and Sluga (1980, pp. 90–95, 130–137).

components in common, although, the second sentence has elements in common with the sentence ‘7 is a prime number’.¹⁵ Signs composing a sentence are to be recognized as semantic or syntactic elements only in a meaningful sentence. According to this approach to nonsense, semantic and syntactic rules work conditionally: syntactic rules determine compositionally, i.e., based on the meanings of the component words, the meaning of a sentence. If I know a language, then I know its rules. If I know the rules of the language, I know what a proposition will be expressed by a sentence composed of such and such words. However, I cannot know that such and such components have such and such meaning unless the sentence involving these components is meaningful. In other words, I cannot know the meaning of an expression in the appropriate sentence unless I know that it functions according to rules determined by language. The recognition of this requires grasping the sense of a proposition (Diamond, 1981, pp. 10–11, see also Diamond, 1978, pp. 200–202).

The substantial view of nonsense is an essential part of the standard reading, while the austere view of nonsense is a basic tenet of the resolute reading. No wonder that a significant part of the debate between these two readings consists in the critique of opposite conceptions of nonsense. In particular, the standard readers have claimed that both the austere view and supporting it the context principle are untenable, and, in fact, do not find any support in Wittgenstein’s writings. In the next section, I consider fragments of Wittgenstein’s works that demonstrate that the author of the *Tractatus* accepted the austere conception.

¹⁵ To be precise, Wittgenstein would hold that the sentences ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ and ‘5 is a prime number’ have common signs, but do not share any symbols.

In the *Tractatus*, signs and symbols were distinguished in theses 3.32–3.328. There are different renderings of this distinction (Conant, 1998, 2002; Glock, 1996; Johnston, 2007; Potter, 2000, pp. 164–166). I follow Conant (1998, p. 233–238, 2002, pp. 398–405), however, I think that there is no significant difference between his reading and Glock’s and Potter’s position. On the other hand, Johnston (2007) claims that symbols are inherently syntactic, but not semantic entities. In my opinion, his view leads to a number of difficulties and I reject it, but there is not enough space to discuss these problems here. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein states that ‘A sign is what can be perceived of a symbol’ (TLP, 3.32) and ‘In order to recognize a symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense’ (TLP, 3.326). Sign is an orthographic unit, which the perceptible expressions for propositions share (a sign design, inscription, icon, grapheme, etc.). On the other hand, symbol is a logical unit, which meaningful propositions have in common (i.e., an item belonging to a given logical category: proper name, first level function, etc.) (Conant, 2002, p. 400). One and the same sign can be common to two different symbols (TLP, 3.321). Consider three sentences: (a) ‘Green is green’, (b) ‘Green is Green’, (c) ‘The colour green is the colour green’. They share the sign ‘is’ that in each of these sentences plays a different role. In (a), the sign ‘is’ symbolizes the copula (a relation between a concept and an object); in (b) we have the ‘is’ of identity (a relation between objects); in (c), we have the ‘is’ of coextensionality (a relation between concepts) (Conant 2002, p. 403, TLP, 3.323).

The *Tractatus* holds that ‘A sign does not determine a logical form unless it is taken together with its logico-syntactic employment’ (3.328). As we saw, we have to attend how a sign is used with the sense to recognize the symbol in it. That implies that if a sentence is devoid of sense, then we cannot recognize the symbol in the sign. We are not able to discover its logical categories. Therefore, a nonsensical sentence and a meaningful one can have only some signs in common, but it is not possible to recognize common symbols.

3 Textual arguments in favour of the austere view

Let me begin this section by highlighting the key fact for our discussion on conceptions of nonsense: the austere view of nonsense is the one and only conception of nonsense discussed in detail by both early and late Wittgenstein. Furthermore, even the main proponents of the standard view acknowledge the fact that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* never speaks of violations of logical syntax (Hacker, 2003, p. 13, see also Hacker, 2000, p. 365). In support of their conception of nonsense, they mainly cite papers from the middle period of Wittgenstein's philosophical development (circa 1929–1933) when his position was not fully worked out and in a state of constant change (Glock, 2004, pp. 231–232; Hacker, 2003, pp. 11–12).¹⁶

The first excerpt from Wittgenstein's work that I want to consider is the following:

Though it is nonsense to say 'I feel his pain,' this is different from inserting into an English sentence a meaningless word, say 'abracadabra' ... and from saying a string of nonsense words. Every word in this sentence is English, and we shall be inclined to say that the sentence has a meaning. The sentence with the nonsense word or the string of nonsense words can be discarded from our language, but if we discard from our language 'I feel Smith's toothache' that is quite different. The second seems nonsense, we are tempted to say, because of some truth about the nature of things or the nature of the world. We have discovered in some way that pains and personality do not fit together in such a way that I can feel his pain. The task will be to show that there is in fact no difference between these two cases of nonsense, though there is a psychological distinction in that we are inclined to say the one and be puzzled by it and not the other. We constantly hover between regarding it as sense and nonsense, and hence the trouble arises (Wittgenstein, 1935).¹⁷

As counterintuitive as the austere view of nonsense may seem, we see from the above fragment that Wittgenstein formulated such a position. The author of the *Tractatus* states that his aim is to show that there is no logico-semantic difference between a mere nonsense 'abracadabra' and the apparently metaphysically loaded nonsense of the sentence 'I feel Smith's toothache'. 'Abracadabra' is not a part of our language, and it does not have any semantic rule assigned to it, hence it lacks meaning in the simplest possible way. On the other hand, the sentence 'I feel Smith's toothache' may

¹⁶ See discussion of this middle period in Conant (2011) and Stern (1991).

¹⁷ This fragment can be found in Diamond's paper (1981, p. 16). It is set to be published in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Lectures on Personal Experience* (editors: J. Conant, C. Diamond, notes taken by Margaret Macdonald). It comes from Wittgenstein's lecture of 24 October 1935. Though this and the following three fragments occurred in Wittgenstein's late writings, I do not make Glock and Hacker's mistake of invoking later Wittgenstein's works in support of a view accepted by Wittgenstein in his early period. Now, I want to mainly demonstrate that the author of the *Tractatus* really discussed and accepted such a theory at some point. It seems to me that without such an introductory discussion, the early writings would have been much more ambiguous and unclear. However, it is worth pointing out that both resolute readers and standard readers usually assume that the same conception of nonsense was accepted by Wittgenstein in all periods of his philosophical work. Especially, the proponents of the standard view maintain that the early Wittgenstein believed that nonsense results from violations of the rules of logical syntax, while the later Wittgenstein holds that transgressing the rules of grammar is the source of nonsense.

seem to be excluded by the very nature of the thing; it seems to be a negation of a necessary truth concerning the privateness of pain. Wittgenstein emphasizes that the reason for the nonsensicality of the sentence concerning Smith's pain is not the fact that the true nature of things turned out to be incompatible with saying that we feel someone else's pain. There is not a special kind of nonsense occasioned by the incompatibility of metaphysical categories of things. For this reason, 'abracadabra' and 'I feel Smith's toothache' belong to the same category of nonsense. The discernible differences between them are only of a psychological variety. That means that a sentence apparently concerning Smith's pain can be accompanied by a number of feelings, ideas and beliefs that do not arise along with 'abracadabra' or other mere nonsense, but they do not influence the logico-semantic status of this concept. The main role of the context principle was to convince us that mental images have no influence on the meanings of words. Therefore, the difference between the two nonsensical expressions discussed by Wittgenstein remains in the sphere of psychology without leading to any logico-semantic consequences.¹⁸

The next paper in which Wittgenstein considers the austere view of nonsense comes from the thirties too. Its main hallmark is once again the fact that Wittgenstein explicitly states that there is only one kind of nonsense since differences between nonsensical sentences have only psychological nature.

It is queer that we should say what it is that is impossible, e.g., that the mantel piece cannot be yellow and green at the same time. In speaking of that which is impossible it seems as though we are conceiving the inconceivable. When we say a thing cannot be green and yellow at the same time we are excluding something, but what? Were we to find something which we described as green and yellow we would immediately say this was not an excluded case. We have not excluded any case at all, but rather the use of an expression. And what we exclude has no semblance of sense. Most of us think that there is nonsense which makes sense and nonsense which does not – that it is nonsense in a different way to say 'This is green and yellow at the same time' from saying 'Ab sur ah'. But these are nonsense in the same sense, the only difference being in the jingle of the words (AWL, pp. 63–64).¹⁹

In Wittgenstein's view, the sentence 'This is green and yellow at the same time' has only the semblance of sense. In fact, it is not semantically or logically different from any other random sequence of signs (iconographic, phonic etc.). The difference between patent nonsense ('Ab sur ah') and latent nonsense ('This is green and yellow at the same time') lies in their psychological association. There is no difference in semantics, since nonsensical signs do not possess meanings, and there is no variation

¹⁸ In the time of Gricean theories of meaning, this claim is much more controversial than at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it is common knowledge that Frege, Wittgenstein and other founders of analytic philosophy were far less friendly towards psychological accounts of meaning than their heirs (see Lycan, 2002, chapter 5 and 7).

¹⁹ It is interesting that, as far as I know, Glock (2004, p. 236) was the first person who pointed to this fragment, and he even acknowledged that it supports the austere view. However, in his opinion, the austere view in general 'is incompatible with other aspects of Wittgenstein's later work, and untenable in its own right' (Glock, 2004, p. 237).

in logic, since nonsensical signs do not belong to logical categories ('[...] the only difference being in the jingle of the words').

The further fragment points to another important aspect of nonsense. The substantial view of nonsense suggests that there are illogical thoughts, i.e. propositions consisting of expressions that do possess incompatible meanings, and for that reason, they are nonsensical. Wittgenstein warns us in *Philosophical Grammar* and *Philosophical Investigations* that such a view is misleading:

How strange that one should be able to say that such and such a state of affairs is inconceivable! If we regard thought as essentially an accompaniment going with an expression, the words in the statement that specify the inconceivable state of affairs must be unaccompanied. So what sort of sense is it to have? Unless it says these words are senseless. But it isn't as it were their sense is senseless; they are excluded from our language like some arbitrary noise, and the reason for their explicit exclusion can only be that we are tempted to confuse them with a sentence of our language (PG, p. 130).

When a sentence is called senseless, it is not, as it were, its sense that is senseless. Rather, a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation (PI, 500).

It may occur to us that we infringe the bounds of sense by means of metaphysical statements; that way we try to express something, which cannot be expressed. We tend to think that these sentences have 'sense that is senseless'. Sentences of the substantial kind of nonsense try to represent thoughts about which, at the same time, we claim that they are nonsensical. Their nonsensicality come from the logical categories to which they belong, since, for example, 'There are books' involves compatible combinations of symbols, but 'There are objects' consists of incompatible symbols. However, Wittgenstein states that we exclude nonsensical sentences from our language like 'some arbitrary noise' and the reason for that is only that 'we are tempted to confuse them with a sentence of our language'. We eliminate nonsensical sentences masking philosophical thoughts in no other way than we rule out mere nonsense like 'ab sur ah'. There is no reason to claim that the sentence 'There are objects' conveys something ineffable though it is nonsensical. There is no reason to think that there are propositions that 'would be true if they could be said' (Anscombe, 1965, p. 162). If a sentence is nonsensical, then it is no different in kind than an arbitrarily chosen sequence of signs devoid of meaning, since there are no illogical propositions, i.e., sentences having senseless sense.

The fragments of the works discussed so far prove that Wittgenstein really did consider the austere view of nonsense and the problems that follow from the rejection of this conception. But do we know of any works written before 1929 that lead us to the same conclusion? Did the early Wittgenstein discuss the problem of illogical thoughts? Was he interested in the existence of different kinds of nonsense? Let me start from an inconspicuous remark from *Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway*:

An illogical language would be one in which, e.g., you could put an event into a hole (NM, p. 107).

What would it mean to put an event into a hole? What would be a language that allows for putting an event into a hole? What is a language in which there is no such thing as that? Let me take as an example the sentence s_1 ‘The event: the execution of Charles I in 1649, is in the crater of Vesuvius’.²⁰ An illogical language would be one in which such a sentence would say of the event (the execution of Charles I) that it is in the crater. The situation would take place if and only if it were possible to make a category mistake in a way described by the substantial view of nonsense. Only the sentence in which illogical combinations are possible would really have the structure that—we think—we can perceive in that sentence. Nevertheless, according to Wittgenstein, there is no such thing as saying that an event is in a crater, since there is no illogical language. There is no such thought that the execution of Charles I is in the crater; there is only a string of words imitating an expression of thought. This example illustrates a confusion characteristic for the substantial view of nonsense. The substantial conception holds that s_1 would consist of logically incompatible symbols. An illogical language is a language in which you can put an event into a hole. So it is a system of symbols in which you can really do what the substantial conception of nonsense proposes in the case of category mistakes, namely to combine symbols in an illicit manner. To put it another way, illogical languages would allow us to genuinely combine logically incompatible symbols.

The proponents of the austere view maintain that there is no such thing as a combination of incompatible symbols resulting in a nonsensical sentence. Wittgenstein’s view does not say that it is impossible to put an event into a hole. There is simply no such thought: there is no thought that an event is into a hole; there is only a string of signs imitating the thought. This aspect of the austere view is challenged by Hacker (2003, pp. 7–8). He emphasizes that Wittgenstein accepts the possibility of putting an expression in an illicit sentential position.²¹ According to Hacker, the acceptance of illicit combinations of symbols does not lead to the confused idea of an illogical language. Now, how would Wittgenstein react to this opinion? He comments on his new way of sentence analysis in a letter to Bertrand Russell (16.01.1913) in the following manner:

But if I analyse [it] (as I do now) into Socrates and $(\exists x)x$ is mortal or generally into x and $(\exists x)\phi(x)$ it becomes impossible to substitute the wrong way round, because the two symbols are now of a different kind themselves. What I am most certain of is not however the correctness of my present way of analysis, but of the fact that all theory of types must be done away with by a theory of symbolism

²⁰ This example comes from Diamond (1981, p. 15). See discussion there as well.

²¹ Hacker (2003, p. 7) states:

This is confused, since far from its being logically impossible, there is no difficulty at all in putting an inappropriate expression into a sentential position from which it is precluded by a rule. More importantly, as both Wittgenstein (cf., RLF, p. 162) and Carnap agreed, there is no difficulty in putting an inappropriate expression into a certain sentential position, *while still conforming to the ordinary rule of syntax*, which do not suffice to exclude all logical errors, and do ‘not in all cases prevent the construction of nonsensical pseudo-propositions’ (*ibid.*).

In Hacker’s view, the early Wittgenstein and Rudolf Carnap see the source of nonsense in the similar way, since they find the main source of nonsense in the contravention of rules of logical syntax.

showing that what seem to be different kinds of things are symbolised by different kinds of symbols which cannot possibly be substituted in one another's places (WiC, p. 38).

Wittgenstein claims in his letter to Russell that in the theory of symbolism it is impossible to combine symbols in the wrong way. It is impossible to substitute something in the wrong way. The fact that there is no substitution of one word by another leading to an illogical language was part of Wittgenstein's view that 'logic must take care of itself'.²² The correct view of logic must show that an inappropriate substitution of logical categories for one another is not possible (NB, pp. 11–12; TLP, 5.473).

The above considerations lead to the following idea: there is only one kind of nonsense and nonsense results from the absence of meaning of one of the components of a sentence. In the *Notes Dictated to G. E. Moore in Norway*, one can read:

The reason why $\neg x$ is meaningless, is simply that we have given no meaning to the symbol $\neg\varepsilon$ (...). The reason why, e.g., it seems as if 'Plato Socrates' might have a meaning, while 'Abracadabra Socrates' will never be suspected to have one, is because we know that 'Plato' has one, and do not observe that in order that the whole phrase should have one, what is necessary is not that 'Plato' should have one, but that the fact that 'Plato' is to the left of a name should (NM, p. 115).

The expressions ' $\neg x$ ' and 'Plato Socrates' are nonsensical due to the lack of appropriate meaning conventions. In the former case, we have given no meaning to ' x ' as to the possible argument of operation of negation. In the latter case, there is no meaning convention saying that we can predicate another name about 'Plato'. Alternatively, we can just say: 'Socrates' has no meaning as a predicate.²³ Wittgenstein suggests that 'Plato Socrates' and 'Abracadabra Socrates' are no different in terms of the kind of nonsense they are. In both cases, one of the components of a sentence lacks a meaning, so the whole sentence is devoid of sense. The author of the *Tractatus* does not say that these combinations are prohibited or violate any other semantic condition. Nonsense is explained there as the absence of an appropriate meaning convention that could be adopted in other circumstances.²⁴

²² Unfortunately, the view staying behind the slogan 'logic must take care of itself' is one of the most complex in the whole *Tractatus*. Furthermore, its rendering is partly dependent on the preferred reading of the work. See discussion in Kremer (2001, 2002), Kuusela (2019a, 2019b), McGinn (1999) and Ricketts (1996).

²³ This case is similar to other apparent category mistakes when we can hover between regarding one of the elements as devoid of meaning, and the other one as meaningful. For instance, as I already noted, I can oscillate between regarding 'Julius Caesar' as proper name and 'prime number' as second-level concept, however, to use Conant's phrase, I can't have it both ways.

²⁴ In the next paragraph after the quoted fragment, Wittgenstein asserts:

The reason why 'The property of not being green is not green' is nonsense, is because we have only given meaning to the fact that 'green' stands to the right of a name; and 'the property of not being green' is obviously not that (NM, p. 115).

It would be much easier to simply say that 'green' does not belong to the appropriate logical category that can be ascribed to 'the property of being green'. However, Wittgenstein chooses to note a meaning convention that has not been accepted. That meaning convention could have been adopted since no combination is inherently illogical.

Let me note that in the last quoted passage Wittgenstein talking about nonsense has used the same phrase ‘abracadabra’ as nearly twenty years later discussing the austere view in the notes taken by Margaret Macdonald.²⁵ Moreover, I think that the remarks from the *Tractatus* that are routinely cited in support of the austere view of nonsense will seem clearer and less confusing now. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein devoted a number of theses to his conception of nonsense:

Logic must look after itself.

If a sign is possible, then it is also capable of signifying. Whatever is possible in logic is also permitted. (The reason why ‘Socrates is identical’ means nothing is that there is no property called ‘identical’. The proposition is nonsensical because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination, and not because the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate.)

In a certain sense, we cannot make mistakes in logic (TLP, 5.473).

We cannot give a sign the wrong sense (TLP, 5.4732).

Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a meaning to some of its constituents.

(Even if we think that we have done so.)

Thus the reason why ‘Socrates is identical’ says nothing is that we have not given any adjectival meaning to the word ‘identical’. For when it appears as a sign for identity, it symbolizes in an entirely different way — the signifying relation is a different one — therefore the symbols also are entirely different in the two cases: the two symbols have only the sign in common, and that is an accident (TLP, 5.4733).

In TLP, 5.473, Wittgenstein explicitly states that the only reason why an expression is nonsensical is the absence of a meaning convention. No sign is logically incoherent or illicit, but a sentence is nonsensical if its component lacks a meaning. In TLP, 5.4732, Wittgenstein alludes to the idea that nonsensical sentences do not possess senseless sense, since their components are devoid of meaning. This is the essence of the austere view of nonsense, and this is also the main message expressed in TLP, 5.4733. In this remark, Wittgenstein reiterates the view that there are no illegitimate combinations of symbols. The sentence ‘Socrates is identical’ is nonsensical since there is no adjectival use of the expression ‘identical’ in our language. A fate of ‘identical’ is similar to the previously discussed case of ‘Plato’ that has no meaning as a subject of attribution of other names. According to the *Tractatus*, both ‘identical’ and ‘Plato’ are only signs in these contexts, but not symbols.

I believe that the above excerpts from Wittgenstein’s works are evidence strong enough to ascribe the austere conception of nonsense to the early Wittgenstein. In the remainder of my article, I will discuss some important objections to the austere view. In the next section, I will defend the austere conception of nonsense against the criticism that it involves a version of the context principle which is obviously false,

²⁵ See footnote 17. I cited the appropriate passage on p. 8.

for it excludes meaningful uses of words outside the context of a sentence on the lists of verbs and in definitions.

4 The restrictive context principle is defensible

It is hard to question that Wittgenstein believes in a form of the context principle, since he seems to embrace it explicitly:

Only propositions have sense; only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning (TLP, 3.3).²⁶

An expression has meaning only in a proposition (...) (TLP, 3.314).

(...) If I can imagine objects combined in states of affairs, I cannot imagine them excluded from the *possibility* of such combinations (TLP, 2.0121).

The proponents of the standard reading do not reject the context principle completely, but only its version that leads to the austere view. I will devote this section to some of Glock's (2004, 2015) and Baker & Hacker, (2005, p. 159) arguments against the 'restrictive' reading of the context principle without delving into the question of the alternative renderings of the context principle.²⁷

Glock notes that the restrictive context principle plays a crucial role in one of the main arguments in favour of the austere conception of nonsense. He formulates the argument in the following way (Glock, 2004, pp. 225–226, 2015, pp. 122–123):

P₁ A word (name) has meaning only in the context of a proposition

P₂ A proposition is a sentence with a sense

C No component of a sequence of signs that lacks a sense can have a meaning.

The above argument implies that none of the elements of the sentence 'Socrates is identical' possess any meaning, since this sentence is not meaningful. On the basis of the second premise, if the sentence is not meaningful, then it isn't a proposition.²⁸ The first premise, in turn, says that only parts of a proposition have meaning, i.e. components of a sentence without a sense are devoid of meaning themselves. Therefore, none of the components of a nonsensical sentence have sense.

Glock believes that the second premise is obviously true, since it is implied by the following Tractarian remarks: 3.1, 3.31, 3.5 and 4. It is very difficult to challenge this premise, because it is a slight modification of the mentioned thesis 4 'The thought is the significant proposition'. Glock does not question it, and I do not want to question it either. He rejects the first premise, which amounts to the restrictive view of the context principle. According to Glock, it should be obvious that this premise is false. He supports his claim by two arguments. Firstly, consider the following two columns

²⁶ Translation slightly amended.

²⁷ For instance, Liptow (2018) accepts Glock's critique of the restrictive version of the context principle, and he proposes an ontological interpretation instead. A similar view of the context principle is supported by Morris and Dodd (2007).

²⁸ From the point of view of the contemporary philosophy of language, we could formulate this premise more precisely by saying that only sentences with a sense express a proposition.

(the first list is derived from the list of auxiliary verbs, the second one is from the list of irregular verbs):

to be	to abide
to have	to arise
to do	to awake

In Glock's view, there are two indisputable things about these words. Firstly, they are not part of a proposition. Secondly, they do possess a meaning. They are neither nonsensical nor meaningless. Hence, the (restrictive) context principle must be false (Glock, 2004, p. 226, 2015, p. 122).

Glock's second argument is as follows. Take this definition of nonsense from the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*:

nonsense n 1 a: words or language having no meaning or conveying no intelligible ideas b (1): language, conduct, or an idea that is absurd or contrary to good sense (2): an instance of absurd action 2 a: things of no importance or value: trifles b: affected or impudent conduct.

According to Glock, it would be 'absurd' to maintain that the word 'nonsense' on the left side of the definition is devoid of meaning. He points to the fact that the *definiens* specifies the meaning of the *definiendum*. If this specification of the meaning is going to work, the *definiendum* must have some meaning in the first place. Moreover, Glock rejects the invocation of the type/token distinction, and emphasizes the difference between having a meaning and being used to say something. Therefore, the only possible conclusion is that the (restrictive) context principle is wrong (Glock, 2004, p. 226, 2015, pp. 122–123).

What do we have to think about this argument? Let me start from the lists of irregular and auxiliary verbs. Should a backer of the austere view believe that 'to be', 'to have' etc. figuring on this list are devoid of meaning? I do not think so. At least, it is not clear that they should say that they are devoid of meaning until we determine whether we are talking about signs or symbols. In each case, we have a sign that can be used as a different symbol. As I already explained in Sect. 2, the context principle tells us that we have to examine the whole sentence in which an expression occurs to identify its logical role. The identification of the logical role of an expression allows us to ascribe to it syntactic and semantic rules existing in our language. So, this procedure enables us to discern the symbol in the sign, and in the wake of it we gain a well-defined semantico-syntactic item that was previously just an orthographic unit. That means that without attending to the logical role of an expression in a sentence, we are not able to determine whether, for instance, the word 'is' has a role of the symbol of identity, of coextensionality or of copula in the particular sentence. Without examining the use of a sentence, we can only recognise a sign having multiple potential rules and roles in our language. In fact, we have to do with such a situation in Glock's example of the lists of verbs. For instance, the verb 'to be' has different logical roles in each of these three sentences: (a) 'Green is green'; (b) 'Green is Green'; (c) 'The colour green is the colour green'. Without taking into account the context of a sentence, we do not even know whether some signs are independent items or whether they are just part

of other expressions. This is the difference between ‘Smith has Parkinson’s hat’ and ‘Smith has Parkinson’s disease’ (Diamond, 1981, p. 8). The word ‘Parkinson’ has an independent meaning in the first sentence, but it is not a working part of the second one. To take a different example, ‘have a good day!’, ‘have dinner’, ‘have a smoke’ involve different uses of ‘have’. In the first sentence, ‘have’ is not probably a self-subsistent expression, but an ineliminable part of the meaningful unit. In the last two phrases, we encounter different symbols having only common signs. Hence, there is a need for the identification of the logical role of expressions in the case of verbs too.

Wittgenstein’s use of context principle is epistemological rather than ontological.²⁹ There are signs, symbols, meaning conventions and syntactic rules. Language possesses well-defined semantics and syntax. The context principle concerns our recognition of these rules and meaning conventions in particular cases, and leads to some conclusions on the general working of a language. It points to the fact that, according to our language’s lexicon, the same sign can have different semantic and syntactic rules assigned to it, so that we cannot know which rules govern it until we examine it in the context of a sentence. Glock’s lists of auxiliary and irregular verbs consist of well-defined signs associated with many rules of our language, but they have to be used in a sentence to enable us to identify the symbols behind them.³⁰

The case of definitions is quite similar to the example of columns of verbs. Moreover, it further reinforces the observation that the number of expressions that are not perspicuous in terms of symbols is not limited only to logically confusing words, such as ‘to be’. According to the definition of nonsense cited by Glock, we can attribute the property of being nonsensical to such different types of entities as (1) words; (2) language; (3) ideas; (4) actions. Words are syntactic entities, language consists of the semantic content of sentences, ideas are mental entities, actions are performed by some subjects, and hence—in contrast to other categories—are used in an adjectival way. In fact, we attribute the property of being nonsensical to completely different ontological categories in each case. I think it is fair to say that each of these uses of the sign ‘nonsense’ symbolises in a different way, and is therefore a different symbol. This is supported by the fact that it has traditionally been assumed that logical syntax ranks category categories according to their possibilities of combination (Pap, 1960; Russell, 1908; Ryle, 1938, 1949). Mental properties cannot be attributed to abstract objects, so they belong to different logical categories, and so on. The word ‘nonsense’ in Glock’s definition is a sign that can be used according to different syntactic and semantic rules; it is not a well-defined symbol. On the right side of the definition, in the *definiens*, we have given a set of semantic and syntactic rules that reports how we can use the phrase ‘nonsense’ in our language. These sets of rules determine different logical roles of

²⁹ I write ‘rather’ because I am not convinced that the difference is important in general when we have to deal with real cases of language use. It may be doubted whether it makes sense to talk about the existence of a concept in a sentence independently of our grasp of it. After all, we recognise the epistemological and ontological dimensions of language simultaneously in real cases. However, the ontological/epistemological distinction can help us to explain some of the differences at hand. See also the discussion below of the compositionality principle, where I make use of the distinction between epistemological and semantic aspects of language.

³⁰ In fact, every expression can be used in a new and innovative way (‘Trieste is no Vienna’, ‘Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy’), hence we do not have to assume anything about the number of rules associated with an expression.

symbols. Furthermore, it is possible to use the word ‘nonsense’ in a new, unknown way that does not automatically make it nonsensical.

In the next section, I will argue that we can embrace both compositionality and the austere view, since the restrictive context principle is not in tension with the standard features ascribed to compositional languages.

5 The austere view is compatible with the principle of compositionality

One of the most important and acute problems in the resolute/standard reading debate is an issue of the compositionality of language. Routinely, the principle of compositionality maintains that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by its syntactic structure and the meanings of its constituents. Hence, the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of its parts together with the method by which those parts are combined (see Pelletier, 1994; Szabo, 2022; Westerståhl, 2015). The principle of compositionality is at the bottom of contemporary philosophy of language (Lycan, 2002, pp. 3–4). Furthermore, a number of remarks from the *Tractatus* suggest that Wittgenstein believed in the compositionality of language.

A proposition is not a blend of words.—(Just as a theme in music is not a blend of notes.) A proposition is articulate (TLP, 3.141).

Like Frege and Russell I construe a proposition as a function of the expressions contained in it (TLP, 3.318).

(...) It is understood by anyone who understands its constituents (TLP, 4.024).

When translating one language into another, we do not proceed by translating each proposition of the one into a proposition of the other, but merely by translating the constituents of propositions (...) (TLP, 4.025).

It belongs to the essence of a proposition that it should be able to communicate a new sense to us (TLP, 4.027).

A proposition must use old expressions to communicate a new sense (TLP, 4.03).

The principle of compositionality seems to be an important part both of the contemporary vision of language and the one proposed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. However, it is claimed that the austere view of nonsense is at odds with the compositionality of language (Glock, 2004, pp. 226–227, 228; Liptow, 2018, pp. 231–232). The critics of the austere view blame the restrictive context principle for the conflict. They believe that the compositional view of language is substantively and (in the case of the early Wittgenstein) exegetically justified³¹. The critics maintain that the context principle in its restrictive version is incompatible with compositionality; therefore,

³¹ Glock (2004, p. 227) and Baker and Hacker (2005, p. 176) argue that the later Wittgenstein does not support the principle of compositionality. Baker and Hacker (2005, pp. 173–187) attribute to Wittgenstein a number of objections to the compositional view of language. If Glock, Baker and Hacker are right, then the alleged conflict of the austere conception of nonsense with the principle of compositionality should not have been so important for them. Furthermore, at times, Glock (2004, p. 228), Hacker (2003, pp. 17–18) and Hacker and Baker (2005, pp. 170–171) acknowledge that the early Wittgenstein accepted the restrictive version of the context principle, and limit themselves to stating that it was just a mistake made by Wittgenstein and caused by the (anyway flawed) picture theory of language. But if the early Wittgenstein believed in the

they conclude that we should reject the restrictive context principle, and—in the wake of it—the austere conception of nonsense.

To explain the conflict of the context principle with the compositionality of language, Glock points to the fact that we ascribe meanings primarily to words. The paradigm of explanations of meanings are dictionary definitions, and not sentences. Sentences are not a primary vehicle of meaning or a unit of significance, since sentences are complex signs themselves the meaning of which depends on the meaning of constituents. Furthermore, understanding the components and the mode of composition of a sentence is a necessary condition for the understanding of the whole sentence (Glock, 2004, pp. 226–227). One understands the meaning of a sentence by means of the understanding of its components and syntax. We have to understand the simple signs first to communicate with sentences. Similarly, in translations we do not translate the whole proposition, but only its constituents. Words have primacy in the order of understanding. According to Glock (2004, p. 228), this suggests that the early Wittgenstein does not interpret the context principle in the restrictive way. Liptow sees the main problem in the primary unit of understanding as well. In his formulation, the principle of compositionality says that ‘the only way we can ever understand a sentence is by understanding its parts and the way they are put together’ (2018, p. 232). Liptow claims that the conditional interpretation of semantic and syntactic rules assumed by the austere reading implies the possibility of grasping the sense of a proposition without the understanding of its components. Understanding of a sentence must be prior to an interpretation of its components, but this contradicts the principle of compositionality. Hence, Liptow concludes that the restrictive reading of the context principle challenges the compositionality of language, and we should reject the restrictive reading along with the austere view (Liptow, 2018, p. 232).

Now, is the restrictive reading of the context principle incompatible with the compositionality of language? There are—at least—two different aspects of this issue worthy of consideration. To begin with, Diamond’s intention, in her original papers (1978, pp. 199–201, 1981, pp. 19–20), was to comply with the principle of compositionality. She speaks about semantic and syntactic rules on which language is founded. *Prima facie*, there is not much in them which is potentially incompatible with the principle of compositionality. In fact, the identification of these rules is based on the compositional interpretation of meaning. The idea behind this interpretation is as follows: a symbol in a sentence is that element that makes an appropriate compositional contribution to the meaning of that (actually applied) sentence. The sign ‘is’ plays the logical role of copula in the sentence ‘Mark is ill’, since it (actually) determines the thought that Mark is ill, but it does not determine (now) the thought Mark is Mark. If the contribution of a sign had been different, then the symbol represented by it would have changed as well. The semantic rules are fully compositional since the meanings of words (symbols) determine the meaning of a sentence (a propositional symbol). Diamond’s position is not much different from Glock’s and Liptow’s accounts in this regard. They agree that the meaning of an expression is that semantic item that has an appropriate compositional contribution to a sentence. Glock and Liptow believe that it

Footnote 31 continued

restrictive context principle, then we should have concluded that he also held the austere view. As we know, Baker, Glock and Hacker reject such a conclusion.

is sufficient for a word to only have a given potential meaning. Diamond, on the other hand, maintains that this contribution must be actual, and not potential, to determine a meaning. Both conceptions postulate compositional determination of meaning, but they differ with respect to the methods of the individuation of meaning. Once more, Glock and Liptow support the individuation of symbols in terms of a potential use, while Diamond backs attending to an actual use.

As I indicated in the second section, Diamond postulates conditional understanding of semantic and syntactic rules. That means that we can use the general rules of our language to characterize the meaning and structure of a sentence, but only conditionally. If a sentence is nonsensical, then there is no way to identify its elements. Consider the sentence ‘Venus is more massive than Mercury’ (Diamond, 1981, p. 19). This sentence can be taken to consist of a two-term relation expression completed by the proper names ‘Venus’ and ‘Mercury’ if and only if the thought expressed by the whole sentence is meaningful. If I know the rules of language, I know that the meaning of the sentence ‘Venus is more massive than Mercury’ is determined by the meanings of ‘Venus’, ‘Mercury’ and the relational expression ‘ x is more massive than y ’. However, we can identify the meaning of ‘Venus’ as Venus (the planet, not the ancient goddess or a song), ‘Mercury’ as Mercury (the planet, not the chemical element) and ‘ x is more massive than y ’ as the relational property of being more massive only in a meaningful sentence. The restrictive context principle tells us how to identify the meaning of an expression, and its identification is not possible in a nonsensical sentence. This conditional dimension of semantic and syntactic rules seems to stay partly behind the worry that the context principle is inconsistent with compositionality.³² The context principle dictates conditional understanding of rules that require the primacy of understanding of a sentence. On the other hand, the principle of compositionality requires the primacy of understanding of words. Now, the question is what is first: understanding of a sentence or understanding of its components? The conflict seems inevitable.

I believe that the conflict in the order of understanding between the context principle and the principle of compositionality is apparent, since the latter principle is not concerned with the way people understand sentences. Glock’s and Liptow’s argument is based on the misunderstanding of what compositionality is. I must delve into the character of the principle of compositionality a little bit deeper to demonstrate why that is. The compositionality of language is an empirical hypothesis postulated to explain two important features of natural languages, namely their productivity and systematicity.³³ Roughly, productivity is a property of language that comes down to the possibility of immediate understanding of a sentence that we have never heard before. This possibility can be explained by a thesis that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meanings of its components (and their mode of combination) that were known to us beforehand. The thesis, of course, amounts to the principle of

³² Liptow (2018, pp. 230–231) precedes his argument for the incoherence between the context principle and compositionality of language with the discussion of conditional character of rules. As I indicate below, his worry is that understanding of rules should precede understanding of a sentence, and the austere view says something opposite.

³³ Apart from the pressure of empirical phenomena that are to be explained by compositionality, there are some other limitations such as learnability, see discussion in Cohnitz (2005).

compositionality. Systematicity is far more contested (Johnson, 2004; Robbins, 2005). It is based on the observation that there are definite and predictable patterns among the sentences in natural language. For instance, if the sentences ‘The cat is awake’ and ‘The dog is asleep’ are meaningful, then a systematic change of the same grammatical categories should have led to new meaningful combinations such as ‘The dog is awake’ and ‘The cat is asleep’. The most popular proposal to explain the regularity of these meaningful recombinations is once again the principle of compositionality. The principle of compositionality is a thesis concerning determination. Glock and Liptow seem to confuse the principle of compositionality with the following principle: we understand a complex expression by understanding its structure and its constituents.³⁴ However, the arguments from productivity and systematicity only justify the standard view of compositionality.³⁵ The principle of compositionality is not a claim about understanding. Szabo notes in his paper (2010, p. 257) that the fact that we understand complex expressions we have never heard before is a reason to think that sometimes we do understand complex expressions in the way described by the thesis about understanding, but it does not lead to the conclusion that we always do so. In my view, in the case of complex expressions, which are used very frequently and regularly in our community, it is possible that we understand them automatically rather than interpreting each expression separately.³⁶ In this way, their understanding is similar to the understanding of idioms. Therefore, understanding of complex expression is not always based on the understanding of their components.³⁷

Glock and Liptow’s confusion of the principle of compositionality with the thesis about understanding has important consequences. On the one hand, the notion of understanding suggests that either the sentence or the constituents of the sentence (exclusive disjunction) must have priority in this relation. The relation of priority is an asymmetric relation. If x is prior to y , then y is not prior to x . However, the standard version of compositionality concerns determination, and this relation is not

³⁴ Zoltan Szabo (2010, p. 257) indicates that these two principles are quite often confused.

³⁵ I only present the argument that productivity does not lead to a thesis about our way of understanding complex expression, since the case of systematicity is more controversial and complicated, see again the discussion in Johnson (2004) and Robbins (2005).

³⁶ Szabo (2010, p. 257) emphasizes that we understand certain complex expressions regularly by tracing a structure different from their syntactic structure.

³⁷ Surprisingly, there is an issue of consistency of the substantial view of nonsense (and hence non-restrictive version of the context principle) with compositionality. Ofra Magidor (2009, pp. 556–565) argues that the substantial conception is in tension with the principle of compositionality. Roughly speaking, the constituents of the sentences ‘Green ideas sleep furiously’ and ‘Theory of evolution eats apples’ are different, but they determine the same meaning—as it were a null meaning. In other words, if all constituents of a sentence are meaningful, then their syntactic combination should have meaning as well. This leads to the conclusion that category mistakes are meaningful if we are to obey the principle of compositionality. I do not want to settle this debate, but it is worthy of emphasis that Glock (2015, pp. 127–128), in his response to Magidor’s argument, makes use of conditional understanding of rules. In his opinion, the proper interpretation of the principle of compositionality implicitly involves conditional understanding of rules; it must take into account whether the sentence as a whole is meaningful or nonsensical. If so, Glock should not feel reluctance to Diamond’s proposal of conditional understanding of rules in the principle of compositionality. Secondly, there is an open question how to square conditional understanding of rules with the substantial view of nonsense and the non-restrictive reading of the context principle. As we saw, a conditional interpretation of rules in the restrictive context principle opens the way to the austere conception of nonsense.

asymmetric. That means that if x determines y , y may determine x .³⁸ The meaning of words determines the meaning of a sentence, but a change of the meaning of the sentence may change the meaning of words as well. This shows that the meaning of a sentence sometimes determines the meaning of words. In my view, the context-dependence of some sentences and lexical items needs to be explained in this way.³⁹ For example, the sentence ‘this tree has green leaves’ means that tree t_1 has naturally green leaves when uttered in context c_1 , but it means that tree t_2 has painted green leaves when uttered in context c_2 .⁴⁰ This example does not contradict the principle of compositionality since the change of the meaning of the sentence is accompanied by the change of the meaning of its constituents.⁴¹ Moreover, once we distinguish between the principle of compositionality and its psychologically oriented cognate, it is possible to postulate independently that a sentence or its components must be prior in the order of understanding. The principle of compositionality is a thesis only about determination, so that it can be squared with different views on the order of understanding. Glock and Liptow’s confusion of the principle of compositionality with the thesis about understanding disguised this possibility. That said, in my view, the resolute readers do not interpret the context principle as a view holding that a sentence is prior in the order of understanding. I think that a hearer grasps the meaning of a sentence and its constituents simultaneously and these two phenomena are unified. However, as I said, this issue is independent from the very question of the principle of compositionality. Finally, the fact that neither sentences nor words are prior to each other, and that the context principle and the compositionality of language are therefore compatible, has also been recognised by Silver Bronzo (2011). He argues that the conflict between the two principles arises from the identification of the context principle with contextualism and the principle of compositionality with compositionism. I agree with Bronzo that the conflict is superficial. However, in my view, his formulations of contextualism and compositionism are too strong, and no Wittgensteinian scholar would accept them. Bronzo does not specify the proponents of compositionism, and he identifies Glock as a moderate proponent of the principle of compositionality who avoids the paradoxical consequences of compositionism. Furthermore, Bronzo rejects standard arguments for the principle of compositionality. I find this problematic, since it is impossible to determine the content of the principle of compositionality without standard empirical arguments.⁴²

³⁸ In such a case, x and y determine each other. A relation of determination is formally neither symmetric nor asymmetric. It is similar to a relation of being a sibling. The relation of being a brother is symmetric in a set of men, but it is asymmetric in a set of men and women. I think that the relation of determination is symmetric for meaning, but this does not exclude that determination is asymmetric in some other cases (e.g., A’s height partially determines her weight, but not vice versa).

³⁹ Szabo (2022, Subjects. 1.4 and 1.5) discusses different classes of sentences potentially demonstrating that the meaning of a sentence sometimes determines the meaning of its constituents. Peter Pagin (1997) considers some other relevant issues concerning determination, especially its relations to more holistic accounts of meaning.

⁴⁰ This example comes from the paper by Charles Travis (1994). John Searle (1980) provides other interesting cases of context-dependence.

⁴¹ For a discussion of context-dependence in relation to compositionality of language, see Recanati (2012) and Szabo (2010).

⁴² I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on the issues discussed in this paragraph.

As we saw in the last two sections, Glock's, Hacker's and Liptow's exegetical arguments against the austere view of nonsense are not effective. They do not provide sufficient grounds to think that the early Wittgenstein rejected this view. In the next section, on the other hand, I will consider some reasons why the austere conception of nonsense can be attractive by today's standards of theory of nonsense.

6 The austere conception of nonsense is substantially plausible

The topic of nonsense was in the mainstream of philosophy of language and analytic philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century. Thereafter, there was an observable decline in interest in this issue. It is hard to find any serious consideration of nonsense in the main strands of philosophy of language in the Post-Kripkean era. Recently, Herman Cappelen (2013) has appealed for a revival of interest in this notion, since he believes that nonsense possesses high theoretical significance, and can be useful in the debates concerning, for instance, the role of intuitions in philosophy and the nature of verbal disputes.⁴³ Hence, there arises a natural question, what is the most useful conception of nonsense? In this section I will argue that the austere conception has some properties that may be appealing to contemporary theorists of nonsense. This issue matters because the critics of the austere view maintain that this conception is inherently unattractive and unpromising (Glock, 2004, 2015; Hacker, 2003; Liptow, 2018).⁴⁴ On the one hand, they stress (apparent) problems with the principle of compositionality and with words on the lists of verbs that I have already discussed. On the other hand, Glock and Liptow suggest that the substantial conception is generally more fruitful than the austere view. In contrast to this opinion, this section will prove that Wittgenstein's view of nonsense can be of interest not only for historical reasons. Furthermore, the following discussion will show how the austere view can be reconciled with the background of more contemporary views (e.g., a direct reference theory) and problems. I will begin with a discussion of Cappelen's (2013) work to point out some interesting properties of the austere conception.

First of all, Cappelen notes that there are two main rationale behind the decline in interest in the notion of nonsense. The first one is a rejection of the normative aims of the philosophy of language. Carnap, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein perceived the construction of concept-script as a way of distancing from some misleading aspects of natural languages and improving our cognitive conditions through a clarification

⁴³ There are other signs of the resurrection of the study of nonsense. Firstly, there is an interest in the category mistakes and no-nonsense view indicated by, *inter alia*, Magidor work's (2009, 2013). Secondly, literature and art are full of category mistakes that pose questions for the fiction theory of which approach to nonsense is the most suitable for the accounting of this phenomena (for discussion, see Nolan, 2021). Thirdly, there is a newly resonating question of how do we 'understand' nonsensical sentences (McManus, 2014; Oza, 2022; White, 2011). This problem is related to the issue of the role of nonsense in fiction, since there are well-known works using nonsense (e.g., Lewis Carroll's books, Mauritus Escher's woodcuts and lithographs; for further examples, see again Nolan, 2021). The third field of study seems to me particularly promising and interesting.

⁴⁴ Glock's work (2015) is mainly a non-exegetical defence of the substantial view of nonsense; Liptow's article (2018) is partly a non-exegetical critique of the restrictive context principle and the austere view.

of language. On the other hand, the Post-Kripkean philosophy of language was programmatically descriptive. The normative aims were regarded either as a symptom of excessive philosophical ambitions or as a methodologically flawed idea. The second reason for abandoning the study of nonsense was the very strict connection between a particular theory of meaning, namely the verification theory, and theory of nonsense proposed by logical positivists. Rudolf Carnap developed his theory of nonsense by relying on the verification principle. Then, the verification theory has been broadly rejected and theory of nonsense has been discarded as well, since the latter seemed closely related with the conception of meaning preferred by the logical positivists.⁴⁵

Cappelen believes that both rationale for disregarding nonsense were misguided, especially as the connection between the theory of nonsense and the verification principle is not essential. He proposes a theory of nonsense that programmatically abstracts away from theories of meaning. This theory introduces the notion of nonsense that can be appealed to by all semantic frameworks and all theories of what content is (Cappelen, 2013, p. 22). Furthermore, Cappelen maintains that nonsense should be regarded as neutral towards various subject matters. According to this view, nonsensicality is not a domain of the specific discourse (e.g. ethics, religion, aesthetics or metaphysics), but the sources of nonsense are defective and irresponsible ways of language use. A diagnostic of nonsense requires detailed empirical knowledge of how language is and has been used by the particular individual, and it cannot be done without a detailed investigation of the history of its uses within a community (Cappelen, 2013, p. 34). Before going into the details of Cappelen's proposal, I want to point to the fact that should be obvious to the attentive reader: Cappelen's requirements for a correct theory of nonsense are fully fulfilled by the austere conception of nonsense. To begin with, the austere view of nonsense discards the association of the theory of nonsense with any theory of meaning. It rejects the view that nonsense has to be traced back to transgressing rules of logical syntax or any particular theory of meaning (Conant & Diamond, 2004, pp. 42–43).⁴⁶ The austere conception of nonsense says that the only source of nonsense is a lack of meaning in a component of a sentence. It does not have to point to any specific theory that further substantiates the claim that such-and-such component is devoid of meaning.⁴⁷ The reason for nonsensicality of an expression is an absence of a meaning convention. In other words, the austere

⁴⁵ I have no space to discuss the historical picture sketched here. However, it is worth adding that the later Wittgenstein's theory of nonsense was broadly perceived as based on another specific theory of meaning, namely use theory. People who did not share Wittgenstein's affection for this account of meaning did not feel obliged to accept his broad and bold theory of nonsense. On the other hand, the philosophical success of Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam and other direct reference theorists has caused the retreat from such holistic accounts toward more traditional and atomistic views.

⁴⁶ The resolute readers believe that every proposal postulating the transgressing of the bounds of sense (by means of theory of syntax, bipolarity or the verification principle) as the source of nonsense in the *Tractatus* must be inevitably challenged by the problem of self-reference. In TLP, 6.54, all possible proposals are overturned by the requirement of the rejection of the ladder. Otherwise, the Tractarian theory of meaning is supposed to be a critique of all philosophical theories without invalidating itself. It is anything but obvious how that is possible (Conant & Diamond, 2004, p. 43; Diamond, 2018, p. 274). The austere view proposes the discarding of philosophically loaded conceptions of nonsense to restore the coherence of the *Tractatus*.

⁴⁷ See Diamond (2019b, pp. 71–96) for discussion of the issue of how to demonstrate nonsensicality of a sentence in the framework of the austere view and resolute reading. She provides a useful example of dealing with nonsense as well.

conception is primarily the negative view that treats nonsense as a matter of privation. It rejects ‘positive nonsense’ resulting from illegitimate combinations of meaningful expressions. ‘Negative nonsense’—accepted by the austere theorists—comes from our not having assigned a meaning to the expression in a certain context. The austere view arises out of the rejection of the very idea of a theory of sense that might give rise to more substantial kinds of nonsense being over-and-above our ordinary conception.⁴⁸

The second common feature of Cappelen’s proposal and the austere view is the need for a detailed investigation of someone’s uses of language to diagnose nonsense. According to the austere conception of nonsense, we cannot diagnose a domain of discourse as devoid of meaning in one fell swoop, but we have to keep track of particular uses of an expression.⁴⁹ This account of nonsense requires a case-by-case approach since the rationale for nonsensicality are not meant to be derived from a theory of meaning. The dealing with sense and nonsense calls for a detailed examination of the discourse that should reveal whether we use an expression in a meaningful way. As I already explained in the Sect. 2, every expression can be used in a new and innovative way. It does not suffice to point to a contravention of logical rules to prove that a sentence is nonsensical. It does not suffice to refer to some kind of theory of sense to declare the whole field of thinking (e.g. ethics, religion, aesthetics or metaphysics) as nonsensical. We really have to take into account the use of a sentence and how its components work. Hence, this kind of thinking about nonsense requires a serious empirical and detailed investigation of language use.

In fact, Cappelen in his work accepts the austere view of nonsense or something of the kind. He observes that Carnap (1931) operates with two kinds of nonsense and choose to work with ‘the view of nonsense as sentences that have parts that lack meaning’ (2014, p. 24).⁵⁰ Cappelen (2013, p. 26) sees nonsense as a matter of privation, since he claims that nonsense is a failure of some type (failure to have a proper semantic content, failure to assert a content, or failure to have a thought). Such a failure can take place, because we are fallible with respect to grounding facts of content. That means that we believe that an expression is not devoid of sense, but it turns out that for

⁴⁸ This sentence was inspired by Edmund Dain’s (2008, pp. 108–109) discussion of the notion of the meaning operative in the austere view. I agree in the main points with his description of this issue. The distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ nonsense comes from Glock (2004, p. 222). Curiously enough, Dain raises an objection in his paper (2008, p. 108) that Glock underestimates how much ‘negative’ and how little ‘positive’ the austere conception of nonsense really is.

⁴⁹ The distinction between ‘fell-swoop readings’ and ‘not fell-swoop readings’ was introduced by Diamond (2018, pp. 273–275). Fell-swoop readings present ‘the general critique of philosophy that supposedly can be derived from the *Tractatus* theory of meaning’. Not fell-swoop readings do not take Wittgenstein to be putting forward some kind of fell swoop argument. Diamond (2018, p. 275) complains that fell-swoop readings do not allow us to get rid of an illusion of sense:

Fell-swoop readings take the aim of the *Tractatus* to be that of showing that such-and-such things that we have taken to be thinkable lack the essential nature of thought; but they do not take Wittgenstein to have provided ways of actually undoing the impression these things make, the impression of being thinkable.

⁵⁰ In footnote 4, Cappelen refers to Conant (2001) and Diamond (1981). However, in the next footnote, he toys with the idea of a hybrid view tracking back nonsense to an absence of meaning but taking category mistakes as meaningful propositions (an idea known from Magidor’s, 2009, 2013 and other’s works).

some reason the meaning has not been given to it.⁵¹ Cappelen (2013, p. 35) indicates two possible rationale for failure. Firstly, the term *T* can be introduced in a defective way.⁵² Secondly, the transmission of *T* through a chain of communication may be defective. Both scenarios are not hard to imagine. For instance, we can imagine that some explorers discover a new island, and call it, let's say, 'Smogyrofsky'. We belong to a chain of communication, and we intend to use the newly introduced term to refer to the island. Sometime later, however, it turned out that the matter was more problematic. Our fellow explorers adopted the term 'Smogyrofsky' from the natives, who invented it to mock the arrogant conquerors. The introduction of the term 'Smogyrofsky' was defective: it does not refer to anything; therefore, in our scenario, we use a sentence consisting of a component that has no meaning. The sentences that we have used to communicate about the newly discovered island turned out to be nonsense.⁵³ Diagnosis of this sort requires a detailed knowledge of empirical facts concerning a linguistic practice. However, there is nothing in our discourse that excludes the possibility of defective uses of the kind that lead to nonsense.

To sum up this section, I believe that the austere conception can be attractive for contemporary theorists of nonsense. As the comparison with Cappelen's views shows, it has a number of useful and interesting properties. Firstly, the austere view can be appealed to by all semantic frameworks. This property allows us to avoid controversial claims concerning theories of content and theories of meaning. Secondly, the austere view enables us to pursue the debate on nonsense without delving into the difficult terrain of semantic positions, arguments and disputes. The questions 'what is nonsense' and 'what is meaning' can be examined separately and independently from each other. Notice that the substantial view of nonsense obliges the supporters of the *Tractatus* to argue for the picture theory of meaning and the particular view of logical syntax; on the other hand, a friend of the substantial view of nonsense and of *Philosophical Investigations* must justify the use theory of meaning and the specific view of philosophical grammar. It should not surprise anyone how difficult it is to pursue a debate on nonsense under such circumstances. Thirdly, the austere conception of nonsense helps us to reject a diehard view that some philosophical domains are inevitably nonsensical. If

⁵¹ I do not suggest that Cappelen's position is fully identical with Conant's, Diamond's and other austere theorists' views. There is the common core that I described above. Furthermore, as I have just pointed out, Cappelen and the austere view maintain that nonsense is something negative; it is a kind of failure on the speaker's side. On the other hand, Cappelen proposes to justify this kind of failure by means of some theory in the next step though he lets everyone choose their favourite theory of content. This strategy is difficult to implement in the case of the *Tractatus* due to the problem of self-reference. On the other hand, Cappelen, in the later part of his work (2013, p. 38), gives a number of explanations why the word 'intuitive' is nonsensical, which seem to be easily acceptable to the austere view theorists. At the same time, the case of intuition is even more interesting, since it comes from the contemporary debates. It is possible that the above differences between the austere view and Cappelen's idea are not so important and that the similarities between the two prevail.

⁵² The possible cases of defective introductions may involve a lack of appropriate dubbing, demonstration or intention by the person introducing the term (Cappelen 2013, p. 36).

⁵³ The case of 'Smogyrofsky' is, of course, analogous to the famous example of 'Madagascar' (Evans, 1977). The main difference is that 'Smogyrofsky' refers to nothing, hence the problem lies in the way the term was introduced; there is nothing to defer to in this case. Moreover, I assume that there was no ceremony of baptism, hence it is better to say that the word 'Smogyrofsky' is nonsensical, without use than to postulate the truth-value gap and think of 'Smogyrofsky' in terms of an empty name.

metaphysics or ethics is full of nonsense, then we should demonstrate the correctness of this view in specific cases by discovering confusions staying behind uses of some sentences. This cannot be done without a detailed study of someone else's past and present use of language. According to Wittgenstein, at least, a diagnosis of nonsense requires attention to detail rather than the development of new philosophical theories. This attitude encourages careful examination and philosophical modesty.

7 Conclusion

There are good reasons to believe that the early Wittgenstein accepted the austere view of nonsense, since he discussed and embraced this conception in a number of writings written throughout many years. Moreover, the most important challenges to the austere view of nonsense are not tenable. In my article, I explained why the restrictive version of the context principle is a crucial component of the austere conception. Then, I showed that this version of the context principle does not contradict the well-known facts about meaning (e.g. the uses of language in the dictionary entries, and the functioning of words on the lists of verbs). Next, I demonstrated that the context principle is consistent with the compositional view of language. In the last section of the work, I indicated that the austere view of nonsense should be regarded as an interesting proposal by contemporary theorists of nonsense. Its main advantage is independence from any specific theory of meaning or semantic framework. This feature can help us avoid making controversial assumptions about the nature of meaning and content while preserving the theoretical significance of the notion of nonsense.

Acknowledgements The preparation of this paper was supported by the National Science Center, Poland, Grant No. 2022/44/C/HS1/00054. Special thanks to Joanna Odrowąż-Sypniewska, two anonymous referees for this journal and the audiences at the SIFA 2021 conference, the Sign-Language-Reality seminar and the SOPhIA 2021 conference.

Funding National Science Centre, Poland (Grant Number: 2022/44/C/HS1/00054).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The research presented in this article was partially carried out by me at the University of Warsaw. I have no other relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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