PARTICULARLY GENERAL AND GENERALLY PARTICULAR: LANGUAGE, RULES AND MEANING*

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> Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes. (Wittgenstein 1974, 4.002)

1. *Introduction*

Semantic generalists and semantic particularists disagree over the role of rules or principles in linguistic competence and in the determination of linguistic meaning, and hence over the importance of the notions of a rule or of a principle in philosophical accounts of language. Elsewhere, I have argued that the particularist's case against generalism is far from decisive and that by moderating the claims she makes on behalf of her thesis the generalist can accommodate many of the considerations that the particularist cites in support of her position.[1] In a recent article in this journal,[2] and in part in response to my work, Anna Bergqvist tries to strengthen the cases against generalism and for particularism. While there is much that I admire in Bergqvist's careful and considered discussion — and while I share Bergqvist's sense that the gap between particularism and generalism, though real and important, is not large — I am ultimately not convinced by her arguments. In this paper, I shall explain why and, in doing so, take the opportunity to clarify further what the generalist is, or should be, committed to.

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[1] See Whiting 2007a and Whiting 2009, which include references to the prominent particularists.

[2] Bergqvist 2009. All references, unless otherwise indicated, are to this paper.

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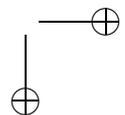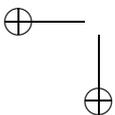
2. *Parts and wholes*

Generalism is a thesis in the theory of linguistic meaning, one which suggests a corresponding thesis in the theory of linguist understanding. According to generalism, very roughly, the meaning of an expression is determined by general rules governing its use; hence, understanding an expression is a matter of grasping the rules for its use.

One might expect particularism to involve a rejection of the generalist's claim that the meaning of a term is determined by a general rule for its employment. Surprisingly, however, the particularist seems to *accept* this and take it to show that expressions do *not* have meanings! As Bergqvist says, 'there just is no such thing as the invariant core meaning of a term' (p. 344). Of course, the particularist does not really think that expressions are entirely bereft of significance; rather, the suggestion is that the kind of significance they have is not the kind that the generalist has in mind. What an expression *has*, Bergqvist tells us, is a kind of meaning only possessed in 'particular contexts of use' (p. 344);[3] correspondingly, what an expression *lacks* is an 'invariant' meaning. (Since 'invariant' suggests that such meaning does not change — and since an important part of revealing generalism to be a defensible position involves recognising that such change can and does occur — I prefer to talk of a 'context-independent' meaning, one that is not inextricably tied to a particular occasion of utterance.)

So, the dispute comes to this. Generalists claim that expressions possess context-independent meanings, of the sort that might be determined by context-independent rules which are brought to bear on particular occasions, while particularists deny this. Bergqvist presents this as a dispute over the following:

Atomism   every meaningful term is such that it would make the same contribution to the meaning of any complex expression of which it may be a part (in any context).

According to Bergqvist, 'semantic particularism amounts to [. . .] the denial of atomism' (p. 347). In rejecting that thesis, particularists advance the following:

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[3] Although, as will emerge below, particularism *does* allow for a context-independent kind of meaning.

Holism   every meaningful term is such that it can make different contributions to the meaning of any complex expression of which it may be part (in different contexts).[4]

So far, so good. The trickier issue is what the generalist's position is with respect to the above theses, which turns on what is to be understood by the 'meaning' of a complex expression as it occurs in each formulation. According to Bergqvist, she uses 'the terms "meaning", "semantic purport", "thought", "content", and "what is said" interchangeably' (pp. 343–4 fn 1). Thus, a 'meaning' in Bergqvist's sense is a truth-evaluable proposition or thought expressed in the use of a sentence. In light of this, one can reformulate the relevant theses as follows:

Atomism*   every meaningful term is such that it would make the same contribution to the thought expressed by (the utterance) of any complex expression of which it may be a part (in any context).

Holism*   every meaningful term is such that it can make different contributions to the thought expressed by (the utterance of) any complex expression of which it may be part (in different contexts).

The particularist's rejection of atomism* in favour of holism* is typically based on reflection on particular examples.[5] Consider:

(1) The twelve-year old is tall.
(2) The professional basketball player is tall.

What it takes for the predicate 'is tall' to have been correctly applied in each case appears to differ. The relevant person's being two metres in height might be a reason for applying it in one case but not the other. It is in this sense that the 'contribution' a term makes is determined in part by what other expressions it is combined with on a given occasion — what is expressed by 'is tall', what *being tall* amounts to, appears to differ in different contexts.

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[4] Meaning holism in this sense is not to be confused with meaning holism understood as the claim that what meaning an expression has is determined in part by the relations in which it stands to other expressions. Meaning holism of the sort that concerns us is often called 'contextualism'.

[5] For a comprehensive defence of holism*, see Travis 1989 and Travis 2008. The example involving (3) below is an adaptation of one of Travis's.

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Similar considerations arguably apply to whole sentences. The same sentence might make different 'contributions', i.e. express different thoughts, in different contexts. Consider:

(3) Milk is in the fridge.

Suppose that David utters (3) and that, on opening the fridge, Kelly finds only a few drops of milk on a shelf. Whether Kelly should evaluate what David said in uttering (3) as true or false, and so what he said, arguably depends on whether he uttered it in response, say, to her asking if the fridge was clean or her asking whether there is enough milk for cereal. Depending on the context, in uttering (3) David might have expressed different things. Although in each context the words uttered are the same — as, in one sense, is the state of the fridge — what it takes for what is said to be true or false, what *milk's being in the fridge* amounts to, differs (and with it what is said).

Insofar as it is straightforward to see how one might tell stories such as those sketched above for virtually any expression in a language, so the argument goes, holism* seems to be true. Of course, one might not find these considerations especially forceful but, with the particularist, I shall accept them. While I do not doubt that many advance a form of generalism incompatible with it, generalism is not *as such* incompatible with holism*.

Recall that the generalist claims that expressions have context-independent meanings. A generalist need not, however, view the meaning of an expression — which, she claims, is determined by rules of use — as truth-evaluable, as a thought or proposition; instead, she could view the meaning of an expression as a kind of context-independent significance *in virtue of which* it can be used on a given occasion to express a particular thought. On this account, the meaning of a sentence is a kind of schema or template for thought, not a thought proper, which constrains but does not determine what thought is expressed in its use. Correlatively, the meaning of a word plays a part in constraining but not determining what is expressed in its utterance.

Hence, returning to holism*, a generalist can surely accept that the same expression might express different things — make different 'contributions' — in different contexts of utterance. Her claim that those expressions have context-independent meanings determined by general rules of use is not at odds with this, since the meanings they possess are not to be identified with what is expressed. On this generalist view, it is both necessary and sufficient for a word to possess a given meaning that its use be governed by rules but having such a context-independent meaning, and so being governed by rules, might only be necessary and *not* also sufficient for a sentence involving it to express a particular thought on a given occasion. The extra work, the generalist that accepts holism* can allow, is done by the context.

It is to Bergqvist's credit that she recognises a form of generalism that allows for the 'sort of context-sensitivity in the theory of meaning' that holists* call attention to (p. 348). Following Bergqvist, I shall call this 'moderate generalism'. Unfortunately, having registered this position, Bergqvist seems quickly to lose sight of it. Consider:

> Semantic particularism claims that questions about what semantic contribution the presence of a word can make to the meaning of the sentence, utterance or phrase of which it is a part — what the relevant sentence or utterance *says* — can only be answered in context. (p. 349)

On this, particularists and generalists need not disagree. An expression has a context-independent meaning fixed by general rules of use, says the generalist, but this meaning does not determine (though it does constrain) what is expressed in its use in a given context (i.e. the 'meaning' in Bergqvist's sense).

Bergqvist seems to overlook moderate generalism again when she suggests that the dispute between particularists and generalists concerns the following:

Strong compositionality   the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts, and their mode of composition, and its parts would make the same semantic contribution to any other complex expression in any other context.

According to Bergqvist, what distinguishes particularism from generalism is the former's claim 'that there just is no invariant core meaning of the sort that advocates of strong compositionality assume' (p. 348). However, consider again the relevant thesis, formulated so as to make explicit how 'meaning' is to be understood in this context:

*Strong compositionality**   the thought expressed by (the utterance of) a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts, and their mode of composition, and its parts would make the same semantic contribution in any other context.

Surely, in rejecting atomism* in favour of holism*, the generalist should reject strong compositionality*. For the moderate generalist, the meaning of a complex expression *is* determined by the context-independent meanings of its parts, and hence by the context-independent rules governing them, but

the meaning of the complex expression, in the relevant sense, *underdetermines* what is expressed in its utterance. A particular thought is expressed by a meaningful expression, according to moderate generalism, only given an appropriate context.

So, Bergqvist is right to insist that the debate between particularists and moderate generalists is not over holism; by the same token, however, it is not over strong compositionality either. What the debate comes down to is, again, whether expressions can be said to have context-independent meanings of the sort that might be fixed by context-independent rules for their employment.[6]

3. *Defaults and standards*

It is worth noting that, having insisted that terms do not have context-independent meanings but only meanings on occasions of use, Bergqvist grants on behalf of the particularist that they have 'default' or 'standard' meanings.[7] This might seem like taking back with one hand what one gives with another. However, for the particularist, an expression's 'standard' meaning is not to be viewed as determined by a general standard for its employment, but rather by 'its "common usage"', by 'how the expression in question has actually been used in the past' (p. 353). Correlatively, understanding that expression, grasping its 'default' meaning, is a matter of having the right

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[6] It is interesting to compare the particularist's case against the view that there are general rules for the use of expressions which determine their meanings and which competent speakers grasp with Davidson's (see Davidson 2005, essays 7 and 8). Very roughly, Davidson claims that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication that interlocutors grasp shared linguistic rules. Guided by the thought that 'success in communicating [. . .] is what we need to understand before we ask about the nature of meaning' (2005, p. 120), Davidson concludes that the notion of a rule-constituted meaning should be replaced in accounts of language by the notion of what speakers intend to communicate by their words. While superficially similar in their emphasis on the importance of specific contexts of language-use, the particularists' opposition to generalism differs from Davidson's in at least three ways. First, as seen above, the particularist does not rest her case on what is involved specifically in communication. Second, Davidson is hostile, not only to the idea of general principles, but also to the idea that one's present use of language is normatively constrained by past usage (cp. Davidson 2005, pp. 117, 143), whereas particularists are not (see next section). Third, particularists do not typically recommend replacing the notion of rule-constituted meanings with that of communicative intentions; they do not identify what is expressed by an utterance in a given context with what the speaker means by those words.

For some critical discussion of Davidson's views, see Whiting 2007b and Whiting 2010.

[7] In a similar way, Dancy denies that 'the terms of ordinary language have invariant core meanings' while granting that there is a sense in which a 'term has the same meaning wherever it appears' (2004, pp. 197 and 194).

'linguistic expectations [. . .] as to what counts as a reasonable projection of that term in novel contexts of use' given its past (p. 353).

One might wonder why 'common usage' could not be in accordance with a rule. The particularist's answer, Bergqvist tells us, is that 'it is not true that the kind of understanding that a competent speaker has in knowing the [standard] meaning of a term (as manifested in the way she employs it) can be captured in a specifiable semantic rule for correct use'. And the reason for this is supposedly that competent language-users are able appropriately to project any given term into (or withhold it from) an open-ended range of contexts, and so guidance with respect to those contexts cannot be 'articulated in a specifiable rule' (p. 350). The particularist typically defends such claims by examining examples of semantic rules of the sort the generalist might provide and showing that there are cases in which the rule does not provide suitable guidance although subjects are able to make appropriate judgements as to whether or not the relevant term applies.[8]

Bergqvist summarises a generalist response to this:

> what might initially look like a clear case of fluidity and open-endedness in the particularist's sense is really just a case of *under-specification*, which a more precise rule could make fully explicit. (p. 350)

While I accept the spirit of this, I think the letter is in danger of misleading. It is not clear that a generalist should claim that semantic rules can be made fully explicit *if* this precludes the use of, say, indexical terms in specifying the rule. Among the rules governing the use of an expression might be a rule that one could only articulate by saying that the relevant term is (not) to be applied to things like *that* (along with a suitable demonstration). There is a sense in which the rule has not been made 'fully explicit' — the rule is more fine-grained than and is underdetermined by the words used to specify it — but to accept that some semantic rules are only specifiable in this form is not to forgo generalism. According to generalism, semantic rules hold generally for the use of the term they govern — that is, those rules provide guidance with respect to the use of an expression generally — which is not to say that one must only use general terms in articulating them.

However one construes it, Bergqvist objects to the generalist's appeal to under-specification. First, she points out that that appeal 'does nothing to show that ascriptions of linguistic competence entail ascriptions of knowledge of some specifiable criteria for correct language use' (p. 351). This is true, but recall the dialectic. The particularist is putting forward putative

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[8] For examples and discussion, see Whiting 2007a and Whiting 2009.

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counter-examples to the generalist's examples of semantic rules, counter-
examples which the generalist tries to explain away by appeal to under-
specification. Hence, the generalist is not making that appeal so as to *prove*
her thesis but so as to *defend* it.

Strategic considerations aside, Bergqvist objects that 'the generalist's ap-
peal to under-specification does not address the alternative positive sugges-
tion that the mark of linguistic competence is simply *displayed* in the way
a competent speaker is prepared to project a given term in new directions
on future occasions' (p. 351). Again, this is true, but that might be because
the generalist has no need to challenge the positive suggestion. Competence
with a semantic rule, she can happily grant, is displayed in the way that a
subject is prepared (or otherwise) to project a given term.

Bergqvist continues:

> Moreover, no matter how carefully a putative meaning-rule is for-
> mulated, room is always left open for contextual variation in deter-
> mining what counts as satisfying the necessary conditions for cor-
> rect use that the rule would lay down. Settling such questions is
> itself a contextual matter, which requires sound judgement and ap-
> preciation of the nature of the speech-situation itself, or so I claim.
> (p. 351)

So I claim too. In a paper Bergqvist discusses, I accept the particularist's
observation that whether the conditions laid down by a rule for the correct
application of an expression can be said obtain 'is *itself* a circumstantial
matter' (2009, p. 126). But, I point out, this hardly shows that no semantic
rules are in force, only that 'operating with them requires varying degrees of
imagination and judgement, and that they could only be applied by creatures
with the appropriate sensitivity to the salient features of a context' (2009,
p. 131). We have still, then, to reach a point over which the particularist and
the generalist disagree, and so we have yet to see a consideration that might
show that the particularist's account of what constitutes context-independent
or 'default' meanings is preferable to or in competition with the generalist's.

Bergqvist is aware that the moderate version of generalism I defend is
compatible with many of the particularist ideas discussed so far. She char-
acterises my view as holding that the meaning of a term '*need not* be seen
as determined by fixed rules of a formal calculus, but rather by reference to
paradigmatic examples, which serve as *standards* for a term's correct appli-
cation' (p. 354). It is certainly correct to attribute to me the view that certain
'examples' can serve as standards for the correct use of certain terms, al-
though perhaps 'exemplars' would be a better label for them. That said, I do

not think (as some of Bergqvist's remarks seem to suggest) that all semantic 'standards' take this form. In my view, specifications of rules can take a variety of forms, depending on the expression such rules govern, and also on the needs of the occasion on which the rule is formulated, especially the needs of those to whom the formulation is given. As appropriate, one might express a rule using general terms, or using singular terms and exemplars of the thing to which the relevant word is (not) to be applied, or one might simply present exemplary uses of the relevant word that serve as a benchmark for others and from which the rule might be gleaned. But this liberal conception of rule formulations is not, I think, central to moderate generalism. What *is* central is the idea that, however they are specified, semantic rules do not determine (though they do constrain) what thought is expressed in an utterance, in just the same way that the context-independent significance a term possesses does not determine (though it does constrain) what thought is expressed in an utterance of any sentence involving it.

As noted above, Bergqvist recognises this version of generalism. In that case, however, it is unclear why she saddles it with the view that semantics is 'in the business of predicting what proposition would be expressed in some given utterance of a sentence' and that 'such things *are* predictable' (p. 355).[9] Denying this is precisely what makes room for a moderate generalism that acknowledges holism*, according to which the circumstances of utterance, alongside rules, make an ineliminable contribution to determining what thought is expressed in an utterance of an expression.

4. *Matters of substance*

Let us turn to the example Bergqvist offers with the aim of showing the inadequacy of moderate generalism, namely Wittgenstein's use in the *Tractatus* of the term 'substance'. According to Bergqvist, that use is 'non-standard' (p. 357). She writes:

> On the moderate generalist analysis, granted that Wittgenstein is not using 'substance' *incorrectly* (nor applies a different, though presumably closely related term), the only option left is to say that Wittgenstein is tacitly *revising* the specifiable standards for the correct application of 'substance' that determines its invariant core meaning. I think this sounds wrong. (p. 357)

[9] Bergqvist is here quoting Travis 2008, p. 152.

One complication with the exegetical issue Bergqvist draws attention to
is that it might principally concern how to understand what (if anything)
Wittgenstein intends his readers to understand by the term 'substance'. This
is a matter of what (if anything) a speaker means by the use of an expres-
sion, not of what (if any) invariant meaning that expression has, or of what
(if anything) is literally expressed in its utterance. Thus, arguably, the issue
is at one remove from the concerns of particularists and generalists.

Setting this aside, it seems to me that there are any number of things one
might say about Wittgenstein's use of the term 'substance', in line with gen-
eralism, where what exactly one should say is not something that one should
expect generalism itself to decide; it is only to be decided by a careful read-
ing of the *Tractatus* itself, which evidently I cannot attempt here.

For example, study of the *Tractatus* might reveal no coherent pattern in
the use of the term 'substance', and so might show the sentences involving
that term literally to express no thoughts. For the generalist, this would be
to find no rules with which Wittgenstein's employment of that term could
be perceived to be in accordance with. Recall Wittgenstein's own notorious
claim that the remarks of the *Tractatus* are 'nonsensical' (1974, 6.54), a
result of having 'failed to give a *meaning* to some of [their] constituents'
(1974, 5.4733).

Instead, close scrutiny of Wittgenstein's use of 'substance' might reveal it
to in fact be, by and large, in accordance with established usage, and hence in
accordance with the rules traditionally governing its use (although of course
the moderate generalist will insist, as a holist*, that what exactly is expressed
in that use is determined in part by its surroundings). Indeed, one might take
this to be the view of Michael Morris who, in a recent commentary, claims
that Wittgenstein picks up on 'a key strand in the traditional (Aristotelian)
notion of substance' (2008, pp. 40–1). This possibility is a live one and
certainly does not clash with generalism.

Alternatively, supposing one grants to Bergqvist that Wittgenstein's use of
'substance' is indeed non-standard, what is the objection to viewing, in a way
compatible with generalism, the term 'substance' as it occurs in the *Tracta-
tus* as a 'different, though presumably closely related term' to that found in
the tradition, and so one governed by different, though presumably closely
related rules? Consider Ian Proops suggestion, in another recent commen-
tary, that the term that one finds in the *Tractatus* is an 'analogue' of Kant's
term 'substance' and 'alludes' to it (2004, pp. 109 and 106). A generalist
might interpret this as the suggestion that Wittgenstein's 'substance' is gov-
erned by rules that, though distinct, are connected to and call to mind those
that govern Kant's term.

Bergqvist simply does not say why this is not a legitimate possibility.
Moreover, it is not obvious that this way of viewing the matter differs sub-
stantially from the way Bergqvist says the moderate generalist must view

it. To say that Wittgenstein's expression 'substance' is different, though related, to the traditional expression *is* effectively to say that Wittgenstein is revising the standards for the use of 'substance'. One sympathetic to this assessment might take the remarks in which Wittgenstein introduces the term (1974, 2.021ff) as precisely seeking to establish such novel standards (perhaps exploiting our familiarity with traditional ones).

While insisting that this is far from the only way for the generalist to 'analyse' Wittgenstein's use of the term 'substance', and that exactly which analysis should be given depends on exegetical matters, I have granted to Bergqvist that, in accordance with generalism, one might view Wittgenstein as revising the rules for the use of that term. What exactly is her objection to this proposal? According to Bergqvist, we need to hold on to the idea that Wittgenstein's allegedly novel use 'does not change the *default* meaning of "substance" as such' (p. 357), where the default meaning is not that which it is has only in the context of the *Tractatus*. But why is the moderate generalist unable to hold on to this idea? The 'default' or traditional meaning, on the generalist picture, is determined by the rules traditionally governing the use of 'substance'. Wittgenstein's novel use, *ex hypothesi*, institutes slightly different rules but that need not affect the rules 'substance' is subject to on other, perhaps more traditional, occasions. Hence, the moderate generalist can do justice to 'the intuitive distinction between the "standard" meaning of a term like "substance" and the special meaning that the term has in the wider context of the *Tractatus*' (pp. 357–8) on which Bergqvist insists.

Indeed, arguably it is the particularist that cannot hold on to the above idea. Since Wittgenstein's use of 'substance' amounts to a new chapter in the history of the term's use, and since, according to particularism, that history is determinative of the word's meaning, surely it follows that Wittgenstein's use changes to some degree the 'default' meaning of 'substance'.

In her discussion of Wittgenstein's use of 'substance', Bergqvist once again seems to lose sight of the moderate generalist position when she suggests that the generalist cannot recognise, with the particularist, that 'the wider context of the *Tractatus* as a whole *enables* the term to have a certain semantic significance' (p. 357). First, it is precisely the moderate generalist's claim that what exactly is expressed in the use of an expression is partly determined by the surrounding circumstances. Second, the moderate generalist can insist that, if Wittgenstein's early use of the term 'substance' is not according to established rules, the wider context of its employment might make clear which rules are operative.

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5. *Concluding remarks*

I have suggested that the generalist is free to evaluate the particular case
Bergqvist draws attention to in various ways, and that which is appropri-
ate turns entirely on exegetical matters. This suggests that the particularist
should not rest her case on how generalism copes with specific examples,
since those examples will typically be underdescribed, leaving the generalist
free to fill out the details in a way that accords with her view. I suspect that
the dispute is best settled by considering the explanatory potential of each
position and, especially, how each accounts for linguistic competence.

According to particularism, the default meaning of an expression is de-
termined by its history. An obvious concern with this suggestion is that
competent language users are supposed to be sensitive to the default mean-
ing of an expression, but for the most part language users are not sensitive
to the history of an expression's use. Past utterances (unlike rules) may be,
and typically are, beyond the ken of subjects for a significant number of
expressions.

Needless to say, so stated, the objection is far from decisive, but it seems
to me that future discussion should focus on it. The point of the present
paper was to suggest that generalism can have its cake and eat it; it can ac-
knowledge both the particularly general aspects of language — the context-
independent semantic rules — and the generally particular aspects — what
is expressed on a given occasion.

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