1 Problems of the Proposition

The same thing goes for the word “proposition” as for the word “object”, and others: They’re only permitted when applied to a limited sphere, and therefore they’re natural. If the sphere is to be expanded so that the concept can become philosophical, then the meaning of the words evaporates and they are empty shadows. We have to abandon them there and use them back within their boundaries.


1.1 Introduction

In his article “Propositions” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Matthew McGrath calls ‘proposition’ a “quasi-technical word”. What does that mean? An instant reply could be that propositions are the units of language and thought, and that people do not talk much about the units of language in their everyday lives – they simply use them in their dealings with each other and the world. In line with this reply, the proposition is “quasi-technical” because most people know what propositions are although they can’t give an outright definition of them.

McGrath does not specify what he means by “quasi-technical” but goes on to give an overview of what propositions are taken to be in philosophical contexts: “the primary bearers of truth-value, the objects of belief and other “propositional attitudes” (i.e., what is believed, doubted, etc.), the referents of that-clauses, and the meanings of sentences”. He sets out to discuss the question “how a single class of entities can play all these roles” and doubts whether the conception could be “captured in a consistent definition”.

This thesis is a collection of essays on some problems of the proposition in the philosophy of language. What is the proposition? That is one of the questions one would expect to be answered before another step could be taken into the investigation itself. In fact, that is one of the questions that this investigation as a whole aims to shed light on. Instead of following McGrath’s lead in taking the problem to be about giving a definition or stipulation, I will render some

questions which have been asked by philosophers lately, questions which concern the nature of the proposition and its role in philosophy and in particular in the philosophy of language.\(^3\)

Hence, the main themes of this investigation are the concept of nonsense and the tangle called Moore’s paradox. Both of these themes, I hope to show, are related to certain pictures of the proposition and discussions of them may shed light on different conceptions of ‘language’ at play, an often misunderstood Wittgensteinian concept of ‘use’ as well as on some tensions and connections between the different ways in which philosophical problems, philosophical method and the aim of philosophy are conceived.

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How should the area of study which deals with the proposition be rendered? One formulation may be found in the distinction between theory and practice. Direct questions about the nature of the proposition may be labeled theoretical questions of the practice of philosophy. In this light, they are questions about the justification of philosophical concepts and hence concern the nature and aim of philosophy; a field commonly known in analytical philosophy today as metaphilosophy. Questions about the proposition concern the method of philosophy, and are in the end connected with issues concerning what philosophy is or should be.\(^4\) However, his rendering of the area of study may be misleading. One reason is that the picture of ‘fields’ in philosophy may invite the unproblematic idea of a previously set regimentation in philosophy. Another reason is that the questions, which may be taken to belong to the theory or method of philosophy, should not and cannot be treated apart from other philosophical work. The latter is one of the lessons I take it I have learnt from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), whose views of philosophical method(s) have inspired this work.

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\(^3\) This rendering of some current discussions serves to connect my investigation to a current debate.

\(^4\) There is no given or clear way to distinguish metaphilosophy from “philosophy as such” but philosophers can and do turn to scrutinizing the concepts they themselves make use of in the course of their investigations. Utmost care is called for here. I do not wish to claim that this division is necessary for the description of philosophical method. This remark is merely meant to prepare the reader for the kind of discussion that will be pursued in this thesis.

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1.2 The aim and scope of this investigation

This thesis concerns philosophy of language and logic in a broad sense. The concept of a proposition leads its life in these areas of research and my contention is that lack of clarity about the notion of a proposition plays a central role for some philosophical problems, two of which will form the main themes of this investigation: the nonsense debate and Moore’s paradox. Apart from their relation to the proposition, both of these philosophical tangles concern language and both of them connect with the work of Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein engaged philosophically with many different themes, but spent a large part of his philosophical life with questions related, directly or indirectly, to the nature of the proposition. Wittgenstein realized the importance of language for philosophical tangles.\(^5\) Central to Wittgenstein’s work on language is the concept of ‘use’. In my two case studies of tangles connected with the proposition, I aim to investigate the different roles and conceptions of ‘use’ in circulation and the connection between the concepts of a proposition, the concept of use and the methods of philosophical inquiry.

It is not advisable to introduce an investigation with a disclaimer. However, this thesis is Wittgensteinian in character and therefore it falls outside the mainstream of analytical philosophy. A tentative clue to what this difference amounts to is that the aim of a philosophical investigation in a Wittgensteinian view is not to produce a result, to build a system, that is, to construct a theory of language. Hence I will not try to unite the different uses of the term ‘proposition’ under an overarching theory. Neither is philosophy of language a branch of language studies in general and therefore this investigation is not an investigation of the function of objects in the language system called propositions. This is not an umbrella investigation of the different kinds of ‘proposition’ at play in the sciences and in philosophy of language, but an investigation of philosophical tangles the common denominator of which, I claim, is a notion of the proposition. This is a case study of three cases; the first is historical-interpretative (the concept of proposition in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (TLP) and beyond), the second is interpretation-theoretical: a study of the nonsense debate as a tangle of philosophical and interpretative aims, and the third is a study of a problem and its

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\(^5\) For example, in the preface to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (TLP) he writes: “The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood.” The question how the notion of a proposition connects with “all of philosophy” and how the quote at the beginning of this chapter could be understood and developed will be one of the issues discussed in Chapter 2. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, (1921), trans. by Pears & McGuinness, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1961.
contexts: Moore’s paradox, its way from the cradle to my table. The residue, once these investigations have been carried through, will be a collection of problems of the proposition – for exhibition or disposal.

The investigation is historically limited to what lies between that which, according to the internal history of current analytic philosophy, is presented as the beginnings and the end; where philosophers concerned with the proposition are today.\(^6\) However, the choice of material for this dialogue is problem-oriented. Therefore, Gottlob Frege and his concept of “thought” will be involved, although merely through the discussion of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (first published in 1921). The discourses I enter into range from old, “middle-aged” and young analytic constructive philosophy to current debates in Wittgenstein exegetics and philological work. The main weight lies on what lies in between, lines of thoughts which were dominant in the 1940s and have been largely forgotten or whose remains are merely expressed as folklore today\(^7\) – although, I, by using these texts, claim that they are of utmost relevance for the current problems of the proposition. One of my main claims, in the end, will be that our received philosophical terminology is not neutral but carries with it implicit presuppositions.\(^8\)

Perhaps the most difficult feature of this essay for some readers trained in analytical philosophy is that I will try to avoid subscribing to the terminology that they feel most at home in. Although my stepping stone is analytical philosophy, I try to study these problems with a methodology which avoids what I take to be the risk of dogmatism of certain terminologies.\(^9\) In philosophy, terminologies exist to be re-evaluated and discarded. This is the Wittgensteinian feature of this thesis as well as one of the challenges this work is meant to meet. It plays the double role of a suggestion under scrutiny and a basic assumption.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{von Wright, G. H.: "Logic and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century", in Panu Raatikainen: "Analytittinen filosofia", Ensyklopedia Logos, Filosofia.fi <http://filosofia.fi/node/2353> Oct 2 2009, who takes Wittgenstein with his 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to mark the beginning of analytical philosophy as a distinct movement.} \\
\text{I here allude to the discussion about the difference between therapeutic and standard conceptions of philosophy and Wittgenstein’s view which is one of the themes discussed in Chapter 2.} \\
\text{The expression is von Wright’s in "Logic and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century", in *Philosophical Probing: Essays on von Wright’s Later Work*, ed. Frederick Stoutland, Automatic Press, Copenhagen 2009.}
\end{align*}\]
1.3 Some lines drawn: the need for a definition

McGrath aired the suspicion that we cannot give an overarching definition which encompasses all the uses of ‘proposition’ in philosophy. But if no definition is to be given, how should we then go about clarifying the nature of the proposition? I will begin with an aside – a proleptic – in which I argue that an investigation of the notion of a proposition does not have to start out with an attempt at a definition, that asking for a definition, for criteria for calling different instances of ‘propositions’ is not fruitful. Instead, we can take a look at cases where the term ‘proposition’ plays a central role. In this thesis I will try to show one way in which this can be done.

It will turn out that none of these questions are easily settled. The question of a definition involves the ‘use’ of a term or a concept as a way to its clarification runs deep in philosophy in many respects. “Proposition” is a term of wide application in philosophy and there is a lurking disagreement among philosophers of language about what theoretical role the term should and could play.14

Again, since some readers will not content themselves with the program announcement in the previous section, the Wittgensteinian perspective needs to be explored and explained a little further before the investigations themselves can begin.

In what remains of this introductory chapter, these are the three I will explore to lay the ground: (1) The idea that an investigation must begin with a definition; (2) The idea that an investigation into the notion of a proposition must address fundamental ontological questions; (3) The history of the problematic: the received view of the beginnings of the debate about the notion of a proposition.

How does the plurality of propositions connect, what warrants us to use the same name, or ‘label’ for all of them? What is the concept of a proposition if there is not one thing (sometimes called “the dogma of monopropositionalism”15) and if it is not that special meaning-bearing unit? This question seems to not let us be satisfied with the answer given. One response could be to change the picture we have of the unity of a concept, to adjust our expectations and this is what I will try to do in this section.

Wittgenstein’s somewhat overused concept of family resemblance is useful as means to an alternative picture of conceptual unity and in this way opens up for a shift in our expectations of the object of investigation.

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language”.16

The concept “language” does not have an essence, and Wittgenstein uses the family resemblance analogy to show how the idea of an essence or defining feature is not necessary for a concept. There are resemblances, similarities, within a family but the same is not common to all of the members of a family. Wittgenstein gives other examples of families: “number” and “game”.

In Wittgenstein’s also extensively applied but also debated notion of a family resemblance, “a game” may be given as an example of a notion for which it is very difficult to provide one single feature which all games share. Football, chess and hide-and-seek do not share one single feature (an “essence”, if you like). However, one may find by looking closely that one game is similar to another in one way – for example, there are in a sense two sides in both chess and football. This feature does not have to be present in all games for them to be called games, but perhaps football and hide-and-seek have something else in common.17 By analogy, the family resemblance picture shows that the premise that there is a common feature to be found in all propositions can be given up without threatening the whole concept. It is merely a metaphysical expectation which has to go – the possibility of a single definition does not play the role of a warrant, keeping the whole house standing. Wittgenstein’s move is even more radical: his concept of family

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14 The question about the proposition is pressing in many philosophical perspectives. From a realist scientific viewpoint, in which the object of philosophical or scientific work on language is to capture the phenomenon language in theories, disagreement about the content of central concepts is a cardinal problem which requires immediate attention. Unclear terms may risk the whole enterprise of scientific work by reducing mutual understanding (or “intersubjectivity”), a prerequisite for any science and any description. From a non-realistic philosophical viewpoint, unclear terms in the theoretical framework is a risk the whole point of philosophy, aiming for clarity. The result of a tidying up session may be the excision of certain questions which now are demanding time and effort because of their seeming openness.

15 Corazza & Korta 2009, “Two Dogmas of Philosophical Linguistics” (Forthcoming), Aug. 18 2009. This misunderstanding, the idea that there must be one thing called the proposition is common and Corazza & Korta even name it “monopropositionalism” and argue that it must be abandoned.

16 Wittgenstein: Philosophical Investigations I §65.

17 The family resemblance picture is not the same as prototype theory in linguistics although that misconception is common.
resemblance goes against the idea that there has to be grounds for calling something what we do in a specific case. It is a way to dissolve a certain idea of justification: the view of an essence of a concept as a prerequisite for its existence and comprehensibility is a dogma as well.\(^\text{18}\)

I took McGrath at his word when he suggested that it may not be possible to give a general definition of the notion of a proposition and asked how one should then go about investigating the proposition. I have suggested that a shift in view of the concept could rid us of that worry too. The shift in view could be achieved by the family resemblance analogy. However, there may be a difference which is important to note here: ‘games’ are commonly talked about in everyday discourses. ‘Propositions’ are rather part of a philosophical or theoretical discourse. This idea of a distinction between everyday and theoretical concepts will be an important theme in this investigation.

Does the family resemblance analogy warrant me to leave the question “What is a proposition?” behind altogether? Should I not compare the different suggestions of answers to this question and try to choose the best one after all? Of course, the family resemblance analogy does not rule out a traditional question and an attempt at an answer to it.\(^\text{19}\) But what it does do is open up and point out another way to approach the concept.

McGrath mentioned a few conceptions of the role the proposition has been expected to play. I will not go through them and compare them and then pick one as the best one. Instead, in this thesis I will look at some instances where the proposition causes problems. This is a way to include the contexts of investigation in which the notion has its home. This approach allows me to discuss particular philosophical tangles while simultaneously entertaining the discussion about philosophical method, in which special concepts of philosophy can be judged. By a technical concept I mean a concept which at least to some extent is non-naturally occurring in that it has been introduced for a special purpose. If there is a lack of clarity about it, something has gone wrong. An example could be “truth” in truth-functional logic, as opposed to “truth” as the opposite of a lie in everyday life. Theoretical concepts share this feature: they must be “defined” or “well-defined”.

McGrath suggested that the proposition in some sense is a ‘technical word’. By “technical” we may understand it as a part of the terminology or the theoretical apparatus. This idea – implicit or explicit – of a terminology of philosophy is a question of the method of philosophy which I hope to show plays a more important role, than it is often taken to be in philosophy.

However, if ‘proposition’ is a merely technical concept, it is unclear how to understand Wittgenstein’s early contention that it is central to the whole of philosophy. In the investigation, I will look for an answer in his own work, and in the tradition following him.

### 1.4 Ontological issues?

A stipulated definition is only one of the common ways of starting a philosophical investigation of a concept. Another common way which may seem tempting is to ask an ontological question. This is the question whether there is such a thing as a proposition at all, and if there is, what it is like.\(^\text{20}\) The ontological question, I will argue, turns out to be a metaphilosophical question in disguise. This, I take it, is an additional reason which can be given in support of going about the question of the proposition in the way I have chosen.

Is it permissible in philosophy to talk about “propositions” if they are not in some sense ‘real objects’? In a reference-theoretical framework, a word or a sentence or other linguistic sign refers to something which has some kind of existence (is about or connect with something outside itself). The basic setup is that of a

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\(^{18}\) This remark is a remark about the method of philosophy. My setting the demand for a single definition aside is not the expression of a metaphilosophical thesis in the sense that it would be a postulation or principle that I commit to in a general sense. To rephrase it is meant as a remark to the effect that the investigation was directed, distorted or limited by an unnecessary metaphysical conception.

\(^{19}\) The notion of a family resemblance has no relevance for elucidating the unity of a concept, since it leads the question how a general term can mean different particulars into asking for the conditions under which it makes sense to say that two objects are the same, according to Timothy Tessin (“Family Resemblances and the Unity of a Concept,” Philosophical Investigations 19 (1996)). Tessin is right, but the comparison is nevertheless a useful picture for pedagogical purposes. The unity of a concept does not depend on a series of criteria of identity but the other way around; a judgement of identity presupposes that the objects fall under the same concept (Tessin 1994: 69. Tessin is consciously and ironically using Russellian vocabulary). Concept unity is not a matter of decision or investigation but the starting point.

\(^{20}\) For example Andrea Iacona answers “Yes, intuitive evidence has shown that there are propositions” in "Are there propositions?" in Erkenntnis 58 (2003). There was also a discussion in the 1930s to which Abraham Kaplan and Irving M. Copiowosh contributed with their “Must there be propositions?” Mind 192 (1939), in which they discuss the traditional view (the answer of which is yes, there must be) and “the cognitive view” which answers this modal question in the negative. They point out that they are not answering the ontological question, “whatever that many mean” (p. 479).
dualism: on the one hand there are words, language and on the other hand that which they are about. If the proposition is claimed not to exist, it means that philosophers should not be allowed to use the term in their descriptions of how language works, in the “theories of language”, because if the reference is unclear or lacks existence, it lacks meaning.

At the outset, the question whether propositions exist (as they are not material objects like tables and chairs and perhaps electrons) seems to be an ontological one. However, in a case like this, it is better described as a metaphilosophical question in disguise. It is a question which centers around philosophical concepts, not ordinary every day concepts; it is a question about the method of philosophy, not about phenomena in an outside world, set at a distance which allows for non-participatory observation. It is part of a discussion about philosophy, not part of a philosophical discussion about, say, one’s responsibility to help one’s neighbor. In this case, asking about the nature of the proposition is asking about the theory of the philosophy of language, not merely philosophizing about language.

I am now making use of a common picture of philosophy as an academic discipline, a picture often used in describing sciences in general. According to this picture, there are discussions about the theory of science which to some extent are independent of the scientific discussion itself. It is possible to investigate the terminology and the technical concepts used in a science. It sometimes happens that scientists get entangled in conceptual tensions when they mistake a concept for a mere term. An analogous mistake may take place, I am suggesting, in philosophy. In this picture, asking questions about the terms and concepts used by philosophers is an endeavor of metaphilosophy or the theory of philosophy.21

Philosophers of language as well as epistemologists use the word “proposition” and it seems that they themselves are clear about what they are talking about. Yet there is something awkward about the notion; it does not let itself be captured in a simple definition. This apparent transience of its existence could be an answer to the question what can be meant by McGrath’s term “quasi-technical” concept: on the one hand it seems that there must be such a thing, the name of which is “proposition”, on the other hand it turns out that it is difficult to say what that would be.

If the proposition is a technical notion in philosophy, it is an aid or auxiliary in philosophical work and must be judged on its merits in clarifying philosophical tangles. A ‘technical term’ is a term which has been introduced merely as a tool for the sake of clarity, but a term which does not make wider claims of applicability. Debating the ontological question, whether ‘propositions’ exist or not would be expressing doubts as to whether philosophers are mistaken about the essence of the phenomenon they are investigating. Skepticism of this sort about the proposition would have dire consequences: it would entail skepticism about the existence of language and hence, the questions which this investigation would have to deal with would be of a fundamental character: whether anyone can communicate at all; whether there is such a thing as using language. The consequence of a negative result in an ontological investigation of the notion of a proposition would be that the entire question be put at rest along with any philosophical discussions where the concept is used as if it denoted a phenomenon or object of another kind. If there is to be any way to carry on an investigation of the question, instead, must be which terms are used for what purpose in philosophical theories about how language works and how it is best described.

To sum up: the ontological question, whether propositions exist, is after all a question about the methods of philosophy. The question could rather be framed like this: which role does the notion of a proposition play in philosophy of language, and what role should it play? Is it able to do what it purports to do?

Even if we leave aside the demand for a unified definition or description of the notion of a proposition (i.e. McGrath’s question), we need to look more closely at the different suggestions of what roles the proposition has. We need to know when the term is used in a ‘normal’ way and when it is used in a technical way. If we confuse different notions, or a technical use with an everyday use we may end up with philosophical tangles. These two possibilities of use taken together may warrant us in calling ‘the proposition’ a quasi-technical word, but it does not suffice to make clear the nature of the proposition.

McGrath named a few different conceptions of the notion of the proposition. One is the proposition as that which is expressed by the sentence (or sentence sign). The proposition, to use a common terminology in the philosophy of language, is the content part of a propositional attitude – the thought expressed or believed or known by an actual or potential speaker. It is worth noting already at this point that the proposition in this picture need not be a purely ‘linguistic’ (spoken, written etc.) entity, but may be an abstract one. Another conception of the nature of the proposition is that it can (according to some) or must be (according to others) true or false. According to some again, the defining feature

of a proposition (or in German, Satz) that it entails a statement or claim, as opposed to a mere sentence. It is safe to conclude that today’s philosophical debates involving the proposition are of many different sorts, ranging over many of the different domains in philosophy.

By way of introduction I have asked what kind of question asking about the proposition could be, and concluded that rather than a question about existence and definition it is a question about methods in philosophy.

1.5 Background: Where do the problems of the proposition come from?

The received view is that debate about the proposition has been going on at least since the early 1900’s when among others Bertrand Russell contributed to “proposition theory” by trying to give an explicit formulation to what a proposition is, and in the 1940’s the debate boiled up with a critique of earlier dyadic (two-part) theories and the thought that propositions are sentences (a move away from abstract propositions to more concrete ones). 22

Bertrand Russell’s view of what a proposition is in the early 1900’s can be described as closely bound up with a view of language as a labeling system for objects in the physical world. The proposition consisted in the very objects which it was about: the proposition “Hesperus is visible” was a relation between Hesperus and the property of being visible. But Hesperus and Phosphorus are the same planets, and this means that if I know that Hesperus is visible I should know too that Phosphorus is so. According to the common story, Gottlob Frege had a solution to the problem which arises here: how do we know that Phosphorus is the same planet if we only know Hesperus? Frege’s solution was that the proposition expressed is composed of the senses of the two sentences (treated as names), not of the things, the referents. 24 A classical setup in today’s discussions of

22 In The Principles of Mathematics, 2nd Ed. (1937), George Allen & Unwin, London 1950, §13, Russell writes that it is with “genuine propositions” that the propositional calculus is concerned, and that “s is a man” is not one because it is not either true or false (since it contains a variable, but if we give it a constant value instead of the variable, it becomes one and “it is thus as it were a schematic form standing for any of a whole class of propositions”). “A proposition, we may say, is anything that is true or that is false.”


24 Horwich, Paul: Truth, Oxford University Press Oxford 1998, p. 91. Russell’s and Frege’s projects are quite different and one could therefore doubt that Frege provided “a reply” to the notion of the proposition is taking the question of the proposition to start with Frege and Russell and then uniting their different views in some way. 25

The general picture given of the history of the proposition in today’s philosophical discussion is that the concept of a proposition was not an issue until Russell and Frege. 26 Nevertheless, before Frege, there was explicit discussion on the essence of propositions – Jan Sebestik even wishes to dispute the commonly held conception of Frege as the founder of analytic philosophy: “It is Bolzano who is the true founder of the analytical philosophy whose core is logic and which is impregnated with science.” 27 Bolzano (1781-1848) asks “What is a proposition in itself?” 28 He distinguishes between spoken propositions and propositions which are “mental”. “Squares are round” could be a proposition, but not “A round square”, because in the latter instance, something is represented, but nothing is stated or asserted, and nothing, Bolzano writes, is false or true in the latter instance. Bolzano differentiates between the articulation of a proposition and the proposition in itself as well as between a proposition in itself and the thought of it. A proposition in itself should not be confounded with the idea which “is present in the consciousness of a living being” or with a belief or a judgment, Bolzano writes. 29 “The proposition in itself” is the notion prerequisite for one to
be able to distinguish between a proposition and the articulation of it. “The proposition in itself” is an abstract entity.

The view of philosophy displayed by many, in taking the execution signal of the philosophy of language and modern logic to be Frege’s purported discovery of the proposition as the meaning-bearing entity in language, has been disputed by Sören Stenlund. Stenlund has pointed out that it is important to see that modern logic uses a special and technical notion of proposition. Stenlund quotes Kneale & Kneale: “Modern logic simply would not work, unless we had this concept, because it is on the things that fall under it that the logical operations operate.” Propositi‌‌ons at this time were not what they had been in the times of Aristotle and they were not either, according to Stenlund, discovered through some neutral examination of the languages at hand. Instead, modern formal logic demanded a new concept of proposition, which would fit with the formal properties which previously had been introduced. In predicate logic, for example, propositions can serve as arguments for the predicate “true”.

On this view, the proposition goes hand in hand with modern logic. It is also true of Wittgenstein, that his considerations concerning propositions are connected with the project of creating a formal notation as an aid in philosophical work. However, I shall claim that Wittgenstein also took the proposition to be an independent issue and that through his investigations of the proposition he also investigated the role of logic for philosophy and in general. This is a clue as to how some of Wittgenstein’s written remarks are to be understood. It is wrong, however, to understand Wittgenstein, even in the Tractatus, as a formalist philosopher, that is a philosopher aiming at producing a work in or as a basis for formal logic. Stenlund pointed out that a new concept of the proposition came forth with modern logic. The cases where problems of the proposition arise are not formal cases, but sometimes cases in which a formal notion of proposition is used in a context apart from that of formal systems.

Some notions of the proposition hence stem from the movement of formal logic, which was in its time a great achievement. But other notions of the proposition stem from the way we usually understand and describe our language and our beliefs. Suppose we are of the same opinion about something. Then this ‘something’, which we both believe, for example that “All landmines are banned” is expressed in a proposition. In order to be able to be of different opinions, it may seem, we need the proposition, which in many cases is preceded by a “that”. In this case, the proposition may form a part of a theory of judgement. In another case, I may tell you something and that which I say might as well be framed in other words. The content then, of my communication, is a proposition – and it is not the words which I use that determine what the proposition is. It is what you understand it to be and what I meant. A proposition in this case is about the world, something which holds or could hold. This intuitive idea is the starting point for Wittgenstein in his Tractatus, which will receive both philosophical and philological attention in this investigation.

The question about what propositions are is also an ingredient in the recent debate about what Wittgenstein’s conception of nonsense is. This debate will be my starting point in the chapter that follows.

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30 Stenlund, S: Kommentarer till problem i logikens filosofi, Philosophical Studies no 39 published by the Philosophical Society and the Department of Philosophy, University of Uppsala, Sweden, Uppsala 1987.
32 Copilowosh & Kaplan 1939, pp. 476-477.
33 These different ‘propositions’ form a range or a folding fan of items connected to language use.