

Significs and the Origins of Analytic Philosophy

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Studying contemporary literature on the history of analytic philosophy may leave the impression that it was the Vienna Circle (or more appropriately, the Schlick Circle) that was the cradle, if not the birthplace, of the movement characterised, as it was, by its linguistic turn. One may also think that the Circle's chief inspiration was born out of the philosophical and logical contentions of Ernst Mach (1904), followed by Frege, Russell and young Wittgenstein. It is true that the somewhat rapidly-seeming intervention of logical empiricism to the late 19th-century thought had a vast influence on the emergence of topics in the philosophy of language that were markedly analytic, among them accounts of reference, meaning, truth and intentionality. It is equally true that there has recently been some damage-control over the rift made between "continental" and "analytic" philosophies that defined the better part of the last century (Albertazzi 2001; Chrudzimski & Huemer 2004).

Alas, things are not that simple. To answer the emphatic question concerning the relationship between the two, let alone the origins of analytic philosophy, is challenging, and the received publications have either been content with clearing up the complex historical details, or tried to outline the most salient features of these traditions.

In this essay, my purpose is not to discuss the mainstream early modern European philosophical thought, but to bring to light some scientific and philosophical advancements that took place, quite remarkably, during the era that coincides with that of the early history of analytic philosophy but which, in my opinion, have not received enough attention. My hope is to partially fill in the picture of

the intricate links and networks that have been drawn in historical research in terms of a couple of details in European intellectual history that, I believe, partially shaped the views on the role of language in philosophy.

The slighted emphasis on these factors is due not so much to individuals as it is to the philosophical community at large. Especially during the last decades, philosophers have been guilty of committing a “crime against science” by withholding the credit of certain developments closely connected with the history of linguistics, logic and mathematics. The genetic origin of some of the key ideas on the philosophy of language relegated to the analytic genre that are well known and have managed to gain even undeserved attention and publicity, may often be traced back to these forgotten or at least overlooked developments.

A caveat here: it is not in the nature of this paper to try to address what analytic philosophy is or is not. Such a task may invariably be frustrated. The Hon. Rt. Lord Quinton thinks that it began when Wittgenstein arrived in Cambridge in 1912 (sic, 1911) to study with Russell (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 28, OUP, 1995). Sir Michael Dummett prefers Frege and the ‘Context Principle’. But we also know that Wittgenstein’s encounters with Frege were, at best, inconclusive, and that before Frege, thinkers such as Wilhelm Wundt expressed ideas similar to Frege’s Context Principle (and there were other predecessors, too). And so, Dummett’s characterisation seems to amount to the position that both psychologism and anti-psychologism would have to be admitted by analytic philosophers. The upshot is that the history of analytic philosophy appears so convoluted as to be nearly meaningless to be pursued at all.

Nevertheless, one prominent development in the philosophy of language, and the intellectual and cultural heritage even longer than the Vienna Circle’s was the Dutch *Significs Movement*. In the beginning, it was driven by linguists or linguistically-minded philosophers and cultural reformists. This almost entirely forgotten movement was a strong candidate to form the basis of the science of

communication and meaning of the new century. Its initial ideas are found in the Dutch writer-reformist Frederik van Eeden's (1860-1932) *Nachlass* dating from the last years of the 19th century. Its heyday may have coincided with that of the Vienna Circle, but its remnants were upheld much longer, until they bleakly faded in the turmoil of the mid-century's analytic thought.

The *Signific* forum took an open-minded stance towards the interdisciplinary nature of philosophy, while alienating itself from the worshippers of symbolic nature of logic characteristic to the Viennese heritage. Aside from the initial impetus of van Eeden, mathematician-logicians L. E. J. Brouwer (1881-1966, see Brouwer 1946, van Stigt 1982) and David van Dantzig (1900-1959, see van Dantzig 1948), poet-lawyer Jacob Israël de Haan (1881-1924), journalist Henri Borel (1896-1933) and Brouwer's teacher, mathematician Gerrit Mannoury (1867-1956, see Mannoury 1947, 1949) were perhaps the most salient names of the *Significs* movement. Later, psychologist-logician Evert W. Beth (1908-1964) joined its activities. Though Brouwer was no doubt one of the driving forces behind the early phases, Mannoury should be considered to be its strongest and the most influential advocate since the end of 1920s, when Brouwer's decision to dissociate himself from academic life took grim reality.

The ideology lived on for over five decades. Its origins and the name are pre-Viennese, dating back to Lady Victoria Welby's (1837-1912) research on cultural and language philosophy taking place around the turn of the century (Welby 1983, 1985; Schmitz 1985, 1990). Welby and van Eeden were planning the first summit of what was to become the *Signific Circle* already in 1907 (van Eeden 1971: 800). The early stages thus coincide with that of the initial meetings in Vienna that prefigured the Schlick Circle. During the years 1917-1922, attempts were made to institutionalise the *Signific Circle* in Amsterdam in the form of a new philosophy department. When the department soon closed down, the so-called *Signifische Kring* was summoned during the years 1922-1926. In the 1930s, the members of these organisations formed the *International Group for the Study of Significs*. Its activities were finally broadened into what was known as the *International Society for Significs*. That society lived on

until 1960s, without ever gaining considerable international reputation.

Politically, the idea of a social reform was heavily stigmatised in interwar Europe. The reformist wing of the Group faced fiscal as well as intellectual opposition. Moreover, it was never scientifically well-established, lacking a scientific thrust that could only have been carried out by a wide and cohesive enough group of committed scholars. Its members — some sixty people at best — are not to be blamed for lack of skill or enthusiasm. The group simply did not beget followers, and could not survive in the whirlpool of rival trends.

However, the lack of support does not alone explain the demise of the significant movement. Ideologically, it even circumvented the original sin of logical empiricism, the sorting of truths into factual and conceptual, and therefore should not be condemned by the same principles. Its goal was to achieve a much finer analysis of language. Unlike empiricism, significs did not venerate science at the expense of metaphysics. It aimed at tackling the lack of understanding, misinterpretations and ambiguities of language and communication in society, especially scientific communication. It attempted to do this by analysing natural language in terms of different layers that its pragmatic and functional analysis would reveal. The movement finally died in the barrage of Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language and the analytic phase that associated its roots with Fregean thought.

Furthermore, internal tensions on some of the core views on language and logic existed that made the onslaught all too easy for the analytic philosophy. I believe that parts of the remains were, however, integrated into the neighbouring disciplines such as linguistic pragmatics, cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, and the semiotically-inclined communication and information sciences.

What was the core idea of significant language? Welby, the founder of the movement, was in close touch with the linguists of the late 1800s. When the semantics that sprouted up from linguists covered mainly the level of the variance and change of lexical meaning, Welby broadened semantics to include complete sentences, taking a better note of the psychological state of the utterer and the interpreter, and

of the context that served to shape the meaning of an utterance.

Significs indeed boasted semantics as the key point of departure in the analysis of linguistic structures. However, in this context, one must think of semantics in its broadest terms. Including both linguist Michel Brèal's (1832-1915) early lexical studies on the semantic change, and the later, truth-conditional approaches of formal logic on the language/metalinguage distinction, one may conclude that significs was not limited to these opposite strands. Neither did it bog down in merely explaining pragmatic purpose in speech acts. Its aim was to create a comprehensive functional analysis of language as a communicative system, based on its layering into, on the one hand, analytic and synthetic branches that pertain to the methodology of the science of language, and on the other, its gradation into five main functional compartments.

The most fundamental significant layer of language was that of between *analytic* and *synthetic* levels. (This division should not be confused with that of the empiricists between analytical and synthetic declarative sentences). According to Mannoury, the purpose of the *analytic* level was to make empirical comparisons between speech acts and the mental associations caused by them. This does not imply grammatical study of language, nor its any general, social or public use, but rather the empirical examination of the relationships between speech acts and speaker's intentions. In my opinion, remnants of the analytic significs is perhaps most manifest in the methodology of cognitive linguistics. Moreover, in dealing with the question of the analytic function of language, significs applied the division between literal meaning and speaker's intention, later to be rediscovered by H. Paul Grice and his followers in pragmatics. However, analytic significs contained here an important element that the later theories had overlooked: the differentiation of meaning between speaker and hearer that is reciprocal and bidirectional, and that it is this distinction that needs to be operationalised in comparing the differences between speech acts, as well as hear acts, and their mental associations.

According to the *synthetic* branch of significs, opportunities to further develop the understanding

of meanings in speech acts should be studied by the means illustrated by the analytic branch. In this capacity, synthetic significs carried the heavy burden of the cultural and societal task to cure the then-quite-prevaricate situation in political rhetoric, judicial augmentation or the media of its time. It was also aimed at enhancing scientific communication. When Welby anticipated in her letter to van Eeden in 1908 that, in the future, significs would encompass “wireless communication between all sorts of people and situations, compared to the communications of a hundred years ago”, she must have meant not only some telegraphic advancements but normative principles for pre-concerted cooperation and coordination to settle the meaning in language.

A more detailed functional division of language in significs is constituted by five basic levels. First, the *foundation* is formed by its lexicon, its individual items bearing no influence on one another. Preliminary stages of a child language, deep emotions and hypothetical primitive languages belong to this level. This foundational level does not assume the presence of the interpreter, but rather the meaning relations of its components form something like a direct primitive reaction with imagination (at least, according to Brouwer 1946). Uninterpreted artificial languages such as, say, algorithms belong to this group.

The second level is composed of *emotive* strands in which the connections between words create new dynamic meaning relations. Its expressions speak to the interpreter’s mind by way of association and experience, and its understanding is based primarily on those of familiarity of emotions.

The third level of significs is made up of *interactive* language, a system of utilisation. In it, the connections of words play the main role. However, they do not form any notably new kinds of meaning-relations or mental associations beyond the satisfaction of basic human tasks and needs. News broadcasting and standard language of everyday use and business are examples of this third level. (This interactive level is also the most exposed part to the evolutionary effects, giving rise to its overtly diachronic nature.)

The connections of words and their meaning relations produce a language as a system supported by conventions. This is the fourth, *scientific*, level, originating from community's law-like functions. Significians did not appear to have been taken a clear position as to what extent conventions are the result of language as a normative system, but their particular examples are liable to support the conclusion that normativity itself should be regarded as one more independent level.

The fifth level that was delineated is characterised by *symbolic* language, typically in the way it is represented in logical systems. The main purpose of this level was to strip away the misunderstandings and ambiguities in the interpretation, for its expressions were assumed to influence the hearer only if the symbols used have had concrete applications already at the lower levels. Also, *iconic* representations were admitted alongside symbolic ones.

What was the ultimate purpose of this division, and how well did it accomplish its goals? The initial impression seems to reveal the step-by-step growing complexity of language and its learning, presuming among other things the ever-developing skills of use and the gradually-deepening understanding of its fundamental nature. The impression, however, does not offer a sustained explanation of the philosophical essence of the role of language in human communication, although it may well be a tempting hypothesis to experimental linguists.

The view of language in significians was not meant to represent any branch of linguistics, or to play any part in it. It focussed on studying speech and hear acts and their practical consequences. Linguistics, on the other hand, was considered to be a study of a certain permanent or structural element, namely language. (This division that significians made is oversimplifying, however. If one thinks of language as a system with certain properties, in other words if one is a structuralist, then this division could hold some merit. On the other hand, if one takes the functionalist point of view, no profoundly radical ideas exist in significians as to warrant us to classify it as a science altogether independent from general linguistics.) For instance, according to Friedrich Waismann's (1896-1959)

interpretation, the different functional divisions are explained by the fact that every level has its own *logical* system and language acts according to that inherent logic. In other words, the characteristic logic of language is expressed by the level itself (Waismann 1952).

A noteworthy historical detail is that, by influencing Waismann's philosophy of language, it is improbable that signifiacs would *not* have influenced Wittgenstein's thoughts on the communicative and contextual roles of language (Wittgenstein 1998-2000). Indeed, Wittgenstein did not seem to limit his views on the formation of lingual meaning into concrete, actualised speech acts and their synchronic analysis ("a language game does change with time", *On Certainty*, 1969). One should also note that Waismann, together with Otto Neurath (Nemeth & Stadler 1996) and Josef Schächter, was a member of the *International Group for the Study of Signifiacs* since the late 1930s. Publishing in their official periodical *Synthese* many notable writings, they were acquainted with the original ideas of Welby and Mannoury.

In addition, Wittgenstein's relationship with Waismann lasted much longer than the notes of their conversations with Schlick from 1928-1930 would have us believe (Waismann 1979). (In the end, however, the breaking off of their personal and professional relations could not be avoided.)

Third, when Wittgenstein thought that philosophical problems were brought on by attacks against the boundaries of language, he was not thinking of language (in other words, communication) *per se*, but rather the linear structure of written language. In this sense, iconic, many-dimensional representational systems that Neurath and, to a lesser degree Waismann, advocated, would have performed better.

Probing deeper into the above-mentioned conceptions on language, it turns out that they would have caused the destruction of signifiacs even without the mobilisation of Anglo-American philosophy of language. For, signifiacs was internally in discord. On the one hand, the psychologistic wing supported by Mannoury, and on the other, the mathematical and logical wing supported by Brouwer,

van Dantzig and Beth could not have been brought to a coherent single theory in the end. The two camps rivalled on the core principles. Noticeable is that Mannoury's psycholinguistic attitude (taking perhaps its most outright form in his 1934 French translation of *Erkenntnis*, in which the German term "signifik" was readily translated into "Psycho linguistique", Mannoury 1947) was not hostile to mathematical or formal methods as such. However, when it had to take a stance on the role of logic within the study of language fundamentals, this sort of psychologism — one that Husserl had strongly opposed in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900-01) — could no longer be deflected. When, in addition, Brouwer's ideas concerning the relationship between language, logic and mathematics were radically different, the rival views were vitiated in the effort to avoid internal discrepancies. Mannoury indirectly admits this as he notes that both psychologism and popular significs include "certain risks", and that the field of human communication is so broad that it cannot be captured by any single perspective that we possess (Mannoury 1983/1969: xxvi).

And so the predicament was pretty much the same as in early analytic philosophy: psychologism could not serve as a watershed.

Because of these dissensions, one should nevertheless not attempt to locate the kindred spirit of significs within the entirely same *loci* with early analytic philosophy. Indeed, from time to time, significs has been considered to be the precursor to Charles W. Morris' psychological semiotics. Now, van Dantzig testifies that Morris and Mannoury were, indeed, personal acquaintances (van Dantzig 1948), but one must nevertheless take the claim of the converging views of significs and semiotics with a large grain of salt. Mannoury alone supported psycholinguistic analysis of signs akin to Morrisian semiotics. More accurately speaking, significs was rooted in Charles S. Peirce's (1839-1914) pragmatic theory of signs, his semeiotic. However, we should at once remember that Peirce is not altogether outside the characterisation of being an analytic philosopher (Houser 2004).

Another but related historical detail here is that van Dantzig himself represented the formal

branch of significs. In essence, however, what he termed “formal significs” was nothing but semantics in different clothing. While charting relations with neighbouring disciplines, van Dantzig indeed came quite close to the idea of model theory, when he stated, in 1948 that, “semantics in contemporary form does not deal with the relations between words and ‘things’, but rather the relations between words and ‘description of things’” (van Dantzig 1948: 184). This was before Tarski-Mal’tsev-Robinson model theory was baptised and standardised.

More little-known interlinks exist, deserving closer examination than the time permits. Here is just one curiosity. It seems not to have been noticed that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aunt Clara, along with her sister, visited van Eeden in the Netherlands to study Dutch (Menger 1994: 75). Van Eeden was Welby’s close friend. They were in extensive correspondence over many years (van Eeden 1971). Furthermore, van Eeden wrote in 1893-1897 a treatise that remains little known but which was quite ahead of its time, *Redekunstige grondslag van verstandhouding* (Utrecht/Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Het Spectrum; *Rational (logical) foundations of communication*). When reissued in a small circulation in 1925, it was hailed as the first work in the field of philosophy of language in the Netherlands. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1921) strikes one as similar to van Eeden’s treatise in terms of style and, at places, content, too.

It has also been speculated that as a young student, Wittgenstein may have met Welby when enrolled as a post-graduate student in Manchester since 1908 (Nolan 1990: 97), or at least was likely to have made some acquaintance concerning her work. At least the latter is not entirely unsubstantiated, for C. K. Ogden, one of the original translators of the *Tractatus* and the co-author of *The Meaning of Meaning* (begun in 1910, first published in 1923), arrived in Cambridge in that same year and worked as Welby’s assistant in 1910 until late 1911, close to Welby’s death in spring 1912, and quickly became Wittgenstein’s acquaintances ever since 1911 when they convened in Cambridge along with Russell the supervisor. Ogden pays tribute to Welby in his February 1911 address *The Progress of*

Significs (Ogden 1994/1911: 4), noting that “I will now endeavour to trace the development of the leading ideas of significs ..., on which I have expended much time and energy from Adam to Lady Welby — to show how indefatigable labours of the latter have at last caused the problem to take shape — how ten years ago the christening took place, and how for the intervening decade energies were diverted by the appearance of William James”.

However, Wittgenstein’s reception of Ogden’s *The Meaning of Meaning* was lukewarm at its best, and he did not think that it reached a very thorough view of meaning. One can only conjecture that Wittgenstein may have been reluctant to disclose his possible intellectual debts to the early ideas expressed within the signifist thought.

When compared with Wittgenstein’s roots in such well-received names as Bernhard Bolzano or Otto Weininger, or even to that of Peirce (via F. P. Ramsey and other factors, see Pietarinen 2004), the recent knowledge is seriously off-balance when compared to what we know of his thinking owing to the signifist thought. Even the question of such a possibility has not been posed. The substantial connections between the key signific figures and their collaborators and contemporaries that I have outlined in this essay, including the role they have played in the origins of analytic philosophy, suggest that this is negligence. I have suggested some starting points for such further probing, to be including both more extensive biographical data and systematic comparisons on the role of language in both significs and in early analytic philosophy.

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