**Philosophical and Linguistic Intuitions and the Core-Periphery Distinction**

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**Introduction**

The topic of this paper is the connection between philosophical and linguistic intuitions

Intuitions play an important role both in philosophy, or at least metaphilosophical discussions, as well as in linguistics. Many philosophers take intuitions to be essential for philosophical research: intuitions on their view serve as philosophical evidence and as premises in philosophical arguments, and in cases of apparent conflicting intuitions, the basis of philosophical puzzles and paradoxes. There are a range of controversies surrounding the notion of a philosophical intuition. First, of all what are intuitions in the first place? How do intuitions relate to beliefs: are they beliefs of some sort or do they pertain to a distinctive attitude of intellectual seeming, distinct from belief as well as memory and perception?

There are also philosophers that question the status of intuitions as evidence, making it itself the topic of empirical study (experimental philosophy) and some question whether they even play a role in philosophy, controversies that I will set aside in the context of this paper. Intuitions in linguistics are much less controversial: they are widely the basis of linguistic research.

The paper will argue that for a certain part of language (or language use) linguistic intuitions are closely connected to philosophically relevant intuitions, and may even be identified with the latter. It will also argue that natural language display a richer range of what should be recognized as philosophically relevant intuitions, in tune with the development of theoretical linguistics. This connection between linguistic and philosophical intuitions sheds a light on the notion of a philosophical intuition itself, in particular the connection of intuitions to beliefs. This paper argues that philosophically relevant intuitions that are manifest in languages are to be sharply distinguished from the (implicit or reflective) acceptance of philosophically relevant content even when the latter is conveyed by language. This distinction matches a division in language (or its use) itself, namely the distinction between core and periphery.

Throughout history, philosophers have drawn on natural language to clarify philosophical intuitions, in various philosophical domains - metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind. Linguistic intuitions thus have helped uncover philosophical intuitions in those philosophical domains. However, only certain parts of language or uses of parts of languages can serve to clarify philosophical intuitions: the appeal to linguistic intuitions in order to clarify philosophical has always respected a distinction between a core and a periphery in the structure or use of language, and that even though such a distinction between core and periphery has never been made explicit. The core-periphery distinction imposes a limit on the extent on which philosophical intuitions are reflected in natural language.

The connection between linguistic and philosophical intuitions is particularly important in the area of metaphysics and in fact has given rise to a field of study of its own natural language ontology or natural language metaphysics (Chao/Bach 2012, Moltmann 2019a, 2022), a subdiscipline of both linguistics and philosophy whose subject matter is the ontology reflected in natural language. Natural language, though, involves a grammatical-conceptual divide, which displays mismatches in metaphysically relevant content. This imposes a new challenge on the notion of a linguistically manifest philosophically relevant intuition.

**1. Intuitions in philosophy**

Many philosophers in the past and present endorse the value of intuitions for philosophical theorizing. But intuitions have also faced significant philosophical controversy, raising, among others, the question whether intuitions really act as evidence in philosophy. The status of intuitions has been challenged in experimental philosophy, which considers intuitions the subject of empirical study, with their potential interpersonal and cross-cultural inconsistencies. In this paper, I will endorse the view of the importance of intuitions both for philosophy and linguistics, yet recognize the second challenge for intuitions being, in principle, subject of empirical study.

Philosophical intuitions are generally taken to concern philosophically relevant propositions. As such, philosophical intuitions have been considered evidence, playing the role of premises in philosophical arguments.

Let us briefly address the question, what sorts of things are intuitions? Intuitions are not just propositions, obviously. Propositions as such are not evidence, let alone constitute a priori knowledge. But intuitions are not propositional attitudes either and they are not mental states. Intuitions are content bearers, rather than relations to contents. Thus, intuitions share content-related properties with propositions; intuitions enter inferential relation (‘the intuition that p implies q’); and intuitions enter relations of aboutness to a subject matter (‘intuitions about knowledge’). Intuitions also come with their own norms of correctness, in the way indicated by the application of predicates of correctness to intuitions. An intuition being ‘right’ or ‘correct’ does not or does not just amount to its representing what is the case, but rather it means that it is a ‘real’ intuition, an intuition that, as an intuition, can be corroborated by thought experiment or language (see below). Intuitions also come with a part structure based on partial content, rather than the temporal part structure of mental state. Thus it is natural to say *part of her intuition that she has a body is that she has arms*.

With their merger of a propositional as well as attitudinal component, intuitions are best considered attitudinal objects, mind-dependent bearers of satisfaction conditions such as claims, judgments, decisions, claims, and requests (Moltmann 2014). Some attitudinal objects also display a norm of correctness pertaining to grounds for maintaining a propositional content rather than (just) the truth of the propositional content, for example proofs, perceptions, understandings, and conclusions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Given this ontological categorization of intuitions, there are various views about what philosophical intuitions are. Some philosophers take them to be beliefs of a special sort. Others have assimilated them to perception, as attitude of ‘seeming’. Yet others consider intuitions to pertain to a sui generis attitude of ‘intuiting’ (or having an intuition).

For a long time there has been a preconceptions about intuitions that takes them to be immediate and obvious. However, more recent research suggests that this cannot be correct. Intuitions are not easy and immediate, but require work (Bengson 2020). One way of bringing intuitions out is through well-worked-out thought experiments. Another way, less discussed in the literature, is through appeal to natural language, that is, through linguistic intuitions. Very simple, familiar cases, by using predicates,

**2. Intuitions in linguistics**

Linguistic intuitions are much less controversial than philosophical intuitions. Linguistic intuitions make up the very basis of linguistic research. Intuitions in linguistics are about the grammaticality and acceptability of sentences and constructions. They are judgments about what sentences or constructions are grammatical or semantically acceptable. One thing that characterizes linguistic intuitions is that come in degrees – just like all intuitions in fact. In linguistic research, the sensitivity to intuitions has developed over time. Whereas at an early stage no distinctions were made between ungrammatical or semantically unacceptable sentences, soon linguistics became aware that grammatically and acceptability judgments are graded. A refinement of the sensitivity to linguistic intuitions holds not only for the history of linguistics, but generally also for the development of individual researchers. Like philosophical intuitions, linguistic intuitions in fact are not easy and immediate either: they require developing a sense for data and of fine-tuning; the sense for linguistic intuitions generally is developed over time. The subject matter of linguistics of course are the intuitions of native speakers, though these may be the intuitions of a linguists who speaks the same language.

In the case of linguistic intuitions, the distinction between intuition and belief is quite sharp: linguistic intuitions are certainly not beliefs about grammaticality and acceptability of sentences. In a case of uncertainty about one’s own linguistic intuition, it is of no help to find independent evidence, rather one’s intuition can only be sharpened by the very same mental intuition-generating mental faculty. Intuitions is nothing but the knowledge’ or possession of relevant parts of language. Sharpening linguistic intuitions just means recognizing a part of one own language. Linguistic intuitions are not beliefs that particular sentences are grammatical or acceptable, beliefs that could be withdrawn on the basis of evidence or reasoning.

It is also obvious that linguistic intuitions fail to have the status of a priori beliefs. Even if, as generative linguists assume, natural language involve universal innate grammar, linguistic intuitions do not only pertain to the universal aspects, but also language-specific ones.

**3. Philosophical intuitions reflected in natural language**

Throughout history, at some times more than others, philosophers have appealed to natural language in support of e philosophical view or notion.

Natural language most obviously plays a role for descriptive metaphysics, the branch of metaphysics whose subject matter has been characterized as our shared conceptual scheme (Strawson) or better is the ontology reflected in our shared conceptual scheme or the ontology reflected in our ordinary judgments (Fine), that is, in our metaphysical intuitions. Natural language has regularly been used as a way of clarifying metaphysical intuitions. In fact, a specific version of descriptive metaphysics is natural language whose subject matter is the ontology reflected in natural language. Natural language ontology has a more narrow subject matter in that it gives priority to intuitions that have a manifestation in natural language. There is a particularly strong connection between natural language and metaphysics. The notion of an object itself has been tied to language the category of referential NPs, and numerous metaphysical notions are reflected in the grammatical structure and the lexicon of natural languages, including time, space, causation, ontological categories.

Philosophers, however, have drawn on natural language also for other philosophical domains, such as epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. Drawing on natural language in support of a philosophical notion or view does not mean pursuing language-dependent philosophical view or notion. At least this is not the only purpose the appeal to natural language can fulfill. Making use of linguistic intuitions can simply serve to uncover and clarify philosophical intuitions, when those intuitions are not as such obvious. In fact I take that to be the main purpose of the use of linguistic data in support of a philosophical notion or view. Philosophical intuitions in turn are not about linguistic meaning or structure, but about (apparent) reality or concepts. But natural language may serve to make those intuitions apparent. That is, natural language is used then as evidence for intuitions about (apparent) reality or concepts.

Not all areas or issues in philosophy have a linguistic reflection. Philosophy of physics, biology and largely moral philosophy have little connection to language. Natural language can be very relevant when clarifying intuitions about at least certain issues in epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind. In fact, as we have already seen, natural language is helpful also when clarifying the concept of an intuition itself.

**4. Philosophical domains implicit in natural language**

In the following, we will see some examples of how linguistic intuitions bear on issues in different philosophical domains other than metaphysics. Then I will focus mainly on the connection between natural language and intuitions in metaphysics.

In epistemology, philosophers have drawn on the semantic behavior of the verb like *know* is of course relevant for the notion of knowledge as are verbs of perception such as *see, seem, appear, look, taste,* and *sound.* It is not just the lexical content of particular verbs that is relevant for issues in epistemology, but also syntactic constructions or choices of functional words, such as the difference between *know that* and *know how*, which reflects the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Likewise philosophers of mind often draw on the semantic behavior of attitude verbs like *believe, intend, think, hope* and *decide* when discussing the nature of mental attitudes. With attitude reports, what matters is not just the lexical content of attitude verbs, but also the construction of clausal complementation that attitude verbs generally involve. In fact particular linguistic views about the construction of complementation with *that-*clauses has greatly influenced views in both philosophy of mind and language. A common assumption among philosophers has been that that-clauses have the status of referential terms and stand for propositions as abstract bearers of truth; moreover, attitude verbs express two-place relations between agents and propositions. Given the apparent logical form, attitudes thus are relations to propositions, as denoted by *that*-clauses. The nature of propositions is reflected in the apparent behavior of *that*-clauses. Philosophers thus held the view that attitude reports show that attitude are relations to positions and *that*-clauses and terms standing for propositions. Not all clauses are always considered the same in their semantic role for mental attitudes. Thus, different types of complement clauses (*that*-clauses, wh-clauses, *how*- clauses), mood, and verb form (infinitival vs finite clauses) appear to reflect different mental attitudes. Mental states and events are also linguistically reflected in the semantics of verbs and nominalizations

Notions of philosophy of mind may be reflected in other ways in the semantics of natural language. Thus, simulation, an important notion in cognitive science, is arguably involved in the semantics of generic *one* (as involving mental simulation, cf. Moltmann 2010). Given that analysis, natural language provides specific support for the notion of simulation.

Drawing on natural language is less common for philosophy of language. There is a particular reason for that and that is that notions of philosophy of language are generally arrived at through reflection on language. They are not objects of philosophical intuitions, unlike metaphysical judgments and judgments about epistemology and philosophy of mind.

There is one exception, it seems, and that that is the notion of truth. The notion of truth, however, is also part of metaphysics, and philosophical theories of truth do not necessarily aim to provide a notion as the basis for a full semantic theory of natural language. Thus, debate about correspondence, coherence, idealist and pragmatic theories of truth hardly bear on semantic theory. However, natural language can give significant clarification about issues such as what the bearers of truth are. Philosophers generally focus on truth predicates applying to *that*-clauses, taking it for granted that *that*-clauses act as terms referring to propositions. At the same time natural language treats beliefs, reports, claim etc. likewise as truth bearers (Section 3.2.).

There are view cases where philosophers have drawn on natural language to clarify a theoretical notion of semantic theory. A recent case in point is D’Ambrosio’s (2019) analysis of the verb *refer* as an intensional transitive verb, which he takes to provide support for internalist semantics. On might also argue in favor of a particular theory of meaning on the basis of linguistic facts about the verb *mean*. What is striking is that the verb *mean* is not an extensional transitive verb relating an expression to an entity that is a meaning, but rather it applies to two direct quotes:

(1) a. ‘Rouge’ means ‘red’.

b. \* ‘Rouge’ means the concept / meaning / denotation of ‘red’.

There are also potential linguistic data that bear on the ontology of linguistics. There is a debate about the ontological status of words: are words primarily types, abstract objects or tokens, particulars. The semantic status of quotation may on that question, if quotations are primarily nonreferential, acting as predicates of phatic objects, the question may be answered in a particular way.

There is an apparently different appeal to natural language, namely as an object-language support of theoretical notions used in the semantic theory. To give an example from my own work, In Moltmann (2021a), I had argued that truthmaker semantics is reflected overtly in constructions with the noun *case*. Truthmaker semantics is based on a relation of exact truthmaking that between situations and sentences, rather than the notion of sentence being true in a possible world. *Case*-referring NPs as in (2) refer just to the situations making the *in which*-clause true:

(2) the cases in which it rained on a Sunday

Here natural language is not used in order to uncover philosophical intuitions as subject matter, but rather to show that natural language directly reflects a notion of the metalanguage. But the insight can be put differently, namely that a notion of the metalanguage matches a linguistically reflected philosophical intuition; that is, that there is a coincidence between a reflective notion and a linguistically manifest intuitive notion.

Linguistic intuitions have been used in various philosophical domains in order to uncover or sharpen philosophical intuitions about philosophical concepts. The aim has been either a purely descriptive one, to clarify a notion that we implicitly adopt, or to defend a reflective philosophical notion, showing that it an intuitive notion. Given the development of theoretical linguistics, linguistic intuitions can no longer just concern particular subject-predicate sentences with philosophically relevant content. Rather they may concern various linguistic facts, including about syntactic constructions as analysed within a particular syntactic theory.

**5. Metaphysics and linguistic intuitions**

**5.1. The special status of metaphysics**

A special case of a philosophical domain *implicit* in natural language is metaphysics. I will for the remainder of this paper focus on metaphysics since it connection to natural language is particularly important. Moreover it raises particular issues that present novel challenges for the notion of an intuition. In the domain of metaphysics, there are particularly striking discrepancy between ontological beliefs with their possibility of revision and the sort of implicit acceptance reflected in language, to the extent that it is in fact much less clear how to apply the notion of a metaphysical intuition. In fact, even within a given human languages, there are different levels of ontology, going along with the grammatical-conceptual divide (Section 3.5.).

The connection between metaphysics and natural language is particularly important, more so than the connection of epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language and natural language. There are influential views, according to which basic syntactic structure of natural language tied to metaphysics, on a descriptive understanding of metaphysics. Thus a very influential view is that the notion of a referential NP reflects the notion of an object (Frege’s dictum (in a slightly updated version) ‘An object is what a referential NP stands for’). The category of properties is generally taken to be, at least to an extent, reflected in predicates of natural language. Certain ontological categories appear to correspond to syntactic categories: verbs generally describe events; adjectives generally describe qualities or tropes (modes). In addition, syntactic features such as tense and mood obviously relate to metaphysics. In what follows, I will give some examples of a traditional sort of appeal to natural language in metaphysics; then I come to cases where syntactic analysis plays a particular role; finally, I will come to cases of a mismatch between ontologies associated with conceptual and grammatical structure.

**5.2. Appeal to natural language in metaphysics**

Appealing to natural language in support of metaphysical intuitions has been a practice throughout the history of philosophy, as part of the pursuit of descriptive metaphysics. Here are some examples of philosophers appealing to linguistic data for the purpose of clarifying or uncovering metaphysical intuitions.

There is a longstanding debate about the identity of the statue and the clay constituting it. On a parsimonious view on which entities occupying the same spatial region at the same time are identical, the state and the clay should be the same entity; on a more permissive ontological view, the state and the clay are distinct entities. Fine (2005) argued against the identity of the statue and the clay drawing on the understanding and applicability of predicates in natural language. Thus, (3a, 4a) and (3b, 4b) have different truth conditions and (5a) is acceptable, but not so (5b):

(3) a. The statue is nice.

b. The clay is nice.

(4) a. The statue is new.

b. The clay is new.

(5) a. The state is tall.

b. ??? The clay is tall.

Here the understanding of predicates or their applicability to particular types of entities is used to clarify metaphysical intuitions about the distinction between material and objects constituted from it, and in fact the distinctive natures of the two types of entities.

Another example, partly again from Fine’s work, natural language supports the view of events as distinct in type from material objects. This is particularly reflected in the choice of existence and spatial modifiers of existence predicates. Material objects go with the existence predicate exist; events are incompatible with exist and take as existence predicates *happen, occur, take place,* and *go on instead:*

(6) a. The rain is still going on.

b. ??? The rain still exists.

(7) a. The destruction of the temple really occurred / ??? really existed.

b. The temple really existed / ??? occurred / ??? took place / ??? happened.

Moreover spatial modifiers are possible with existence predicates for events, but not existence predicates for material objects:

(8) a. The vase still exists.

b. ??? The vase exists in that room.

c. The attack took place / happened / occurred in Paris.

Again, these differences point not only to an ontological distinction between events and material objects, but rather to a particular distinction among them regarding their relation to space and time (see Fine 2003, Moltmann 2020). They also manifest a non-univocal notion of existence, distinguishing modes of being for events and for material objects.

Philosophers have also drawn on the applicability or reading of different predicates to clarify the ontological events and facts (Vendler 1967). Thus, temporal and causal predicates are applicable to events, but not facts:

(9) a. The speech lasted two hours / triggered an applause.

b. ?? The fact that John spoke lasted two hours / triggered an applause.

Linguistic data have also served the purpose of uncovering an as yet unrecognized ontological category. An example is Twardowski’s (1911) category of products as part of his distinction between actions and products. Twardowski argued for a distinction between mental acts or speech acts (acts of thinking, acts of deciding, acts of claiming, acts or requesting) and their enduring ‘products’, judgments, decisions, claims, requests. The linguistic data he took to display the distinction were two sorts of nominalizations in Polish, German, and French. In English these correspond to gerunds (or explicit act-referring terms) and simple nominalizations. Twardowski showed that different sorts of predicates apply to the two kinds of nouns; in particular only nouns for products allow for predicates of truth or satisfaction, not nouns for actions:

(10) a. John’s claim was true.

b. ?? The act of claiming was true.

(11) a. John’s judgment was

b. The act of judging was correct.

(12) a. The request was fulfilled.

b. The act of requesting was fulfilled.

(13) a. The decision was carried out.

b. ??? The act of deciding was carried out.

The action-product distinction, while not entirely new at the time, is certainly not a distinction that belongs to the standard repertoire in ontology. Natural language here served to put forward an ontological category that is not generally recognized as such. For Twardowski the linguistic data show that it is products that are truth bearers, not abstract propositions, as on standard philosophical views. Drawing on a distinction in natural language allowed him to uncover a philosophical intuition that most philosophers would not even be able to articulate.

Not only can natural language can serve the purpose of distinguishing between philosophical preconceptions and philosophically relevant intuitions. It can also serve the purpose of uncovering philosophically relevant intuitions in the first place when those could not have been articulated otherwise.

**5.3. Metaphysically relevant intuitions and syntactic construction**

There is another area of linguistic data, which bear on philosophical intuitions, but which do not take the form of semantic contents that support or contradict seeming philosophical intuitions. These data involve syntactic structures on particular syntactic analyses.

The way philosophers have traditionally drawn on natural language for the purpose of metaphysics generally involved simple subject-predicate sentences (and perhaps sometimes the use of quantifiers and pronouns). Given the development of linguistics as a contemporary discipline, it is important to recognize that linguistic data are now the subject matter of highly developed empirical and theoretical field of study. This means that for the purpose of clarifying philosophically relevant intuitions, the use of linguistic data should in principle be systematic, taking into account the full range of syntactic structures, possibly against the background of particular linguistic analyses. In fact the use natural language for clarifying or uncovering philosophical intuitions is now confronted with the full range of linguistic facts and theories made available by contemporary semantics and syntax, including syntactic constructions as analysed within a particular syntactic theory, syntactic categories, features, and positions as well as of course crosslinguistic generalizations.

Here are just two examples where syntactic research has become particularly relevant in the use of natural language sentences in support of philosophical intuitions. The first example concerns the ontology of numbers. Frege (18884) argued for numbers being objects on the basis of apparent referential occurrences of number words and functional number terms in apparent identity statements such as:

(14) The number of planets is eight.

Frege took referential NPs themselves to be indicative of objecthood, with his slogan ‘an object is what a referential NP may stand for’. ‘Being able to flank the identity symbol’ for him was one of the criteria for referential NPs – and he took *be* to express identity in sentences like (14). Given these assumptions*, the number of planets* and *eight* in (14) come out as terms referring to numbers as objects. The apparent intuition that numbers are objects was thus supported by the occurrence of apparent number-referring terms in sentences like (14).

Frege’s argument, however, is problematic in view of more recent syntactic research. Ever since Higgins (1973) there has been a different take on the syntactic structure of sentences like (14), namely on which they are not identity statements involving object-referring terms, but specificational sentences, which plausibly convey a relation between a question and an answer, in the case of (14) roughly ‘how many planets are there?’ – ‘there are eight planets’. Alternatively, sentences like (14) have been taken to convey an identity among higher-order semantic values, including that of quantifiers like *eight*, again providing no evidence for number as objects.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Another important example of the involvement of syntactic view in sentences used to support philosophical intuitions is *that*-clauses. Most philosophers took it for granted that *that*-clause complements of attitude verbs like *believe* act as referential terms denoting propositions. The linguistic form of attitude appears to display propositions as entities that are sharable truth bearers and objects of attitudes. However, there is a different emerging view, namely that *that*-clauses are not referential terms referring to propositions, but act as predicates of content-bearers (Moulton 2009, Moltmann 2014), a view that has both syntactic and semantic motivations.

If metaphysical intuitions are uncovered or clarified through linguistic facts (in the broad sense), then such metaphysical intuitions are in fact on a par with linguistic intuitions. In particular, metaphysically relevant intuitions reflected in linguistic data are about the ontology that is part of the semantics of natural language, at least on the standard view of semantics. In that sense metaphysical intuitions reflected in natural language go together with semantic intuitions, and *as intuitions* can hardly have a different status than the linguistic intuitions themselves. The knowledge and use of a natural language goes along both with syntactic and semantic intuitions about that language as well as the philosophically relevant intuitions reflected in the core of that language.

To sum up, with the development of theoretical linguistics, the realm of linguistic data to consider in the interest of clarifying or uncovering philosophical intuitions has significantly expanded, involving not only semantics, but also syntactic data of various sorts, against the background of syntactic analyses within particular syntactic theories.

**5.5. Metaphysically relevant intuitions and the challenge of grammatical-conceptual mismatch**

The use of linguistic data faces another challenge. That is that different sorts of linguistic data may not converge on philosophically relevant issues. In particular, there are various cases of mismatch between the ontology that appears to be reflected in the grammatical structure of language and the ontology reflected in the lexical-conceptual structure that goes along with language (Copley/Roy 2022).

The mass-count distinction is a particularly good case in point, displaying what has been called ‘grammaticized individuation’ (Rothstein 2017) and language-driven ontology (Moltmann 2021c) as opposed to ontological distinctions reflected at a conceptual level.

The morpho-syntactic distinction between singular count, plural, and mass nouns seems to reflect the metaphysical distinction between being one, being many and being neither one nor many. While it applies in some cases in a way that matches the way ontological distinctions are conceived (*stone – stones – sand*), there are various types of cases of a mismatch between the mass-count distinction and intuitive ontological distinctions. *Furniture*-type nouns are a case in point. *Furniture* stands for pluralities of well-individuated entities, yet as a mass noun it presents them as neither one nor many, not permitting the application of cardinal or ordinal modifiers (\* *two furniture*, \**the first furniture*), unless a classifier like *piece* is used (*one piece of furniture, the first piece of furniture*). This does not mean that speakers of English actually fail to individuate tables, chairs etc. as countable. To the contrary, their countability even plays a semantic role, in the understanding of comparative quantifiers as in (16a) as well as formal mass quantifiers in (16b):

(16) a. John has more furniture than Mary.

b. A lot of furniture

*More* and *a lot* in (16) involves counting individual pieces of furniture, rather than measuring sizes of furniture. It is generally agrees that the mass-count distinction does not reflect the distinction between stuff and objects, but is better viewed as a matter of ‘grammaticized individuation’ (Rothstein 2007) and ‘language-driven otology’ (Moltmann 2021c). The choices of mass or count are thus to an extent arbitrary, within a language and across languages (English has both *clothes and clothing*, *shoes and footwear*, English has the mass noun *pasta*, French the plural noun French *pâtes*).

Another example of a mismatch is plurals on a mereological semantic account. If definite plurals like *the children* and conjunctions like *John and Mary* denote sums of entities, as on the standard view in contemporary semantics following Link (1983), then this means there is unrestricted sum formation at the level of grammaticized individuation or language-driven ontology (*the stuff in my room*, *Quine and the Eiffeltower*). However, this does not conform with general intuitions about what constitutes an object or entity, or, equivalently, it does not conform with metaphysical intuitions reflected in the applicability of nouns like *object* or *entity* in English.

**6. The linguistic data relevant for philosophical domains reflected in natural language and the core-periphery distinction**

There is an important limit as to what sorts of linguistic data can be used to uncover or clarify intuitions. This limit is the reason for why philosophical intuitions that have a linguistic reflection and linguistic intuitions are of the very same sort. The appeal to natural language serves to only uncover philosophical notions that are *implicit* in natural language and not philosophical notions that can be described, upon *reflection*, by using natural language. That is, not all of language or language use is suited to uncover philosophical judgments that represent intuitions. Language can also be used to describe judgments or notions arrived at through reflection. How should the two uses or parts of language be distinguished? Here are some criteria that distinguish them.

First of all, philosophical assertions can obviously not considered indicative of philosophical intuitions. Philosophical assertions may be part of *folkmetaphysics* , the ‘naïve’ metaphysics adopted by non-philosophers, but this is not the sort of linguistic support philosophers make appeal to in support of metaphysical intuitions. Of course, philosophical assertions may have as their content the content of philosophical intuitions, but philosophical assertions are not considered linguistic support for philosophical intuitions. In fact, they are never considered evidence. Thus, no philosopher would appeal to (17) in support of an ontology of events or abstract objects reflected in our intuitions:

(17) There are events.

There are instead other data that are taken to be indicative of an ontology of events. These are not so much referential NPs describing events such as *John’s walk* or *the second world war.* While it is uncontested that referential NPs can refer to events, referential NPs as such do not make a particularly good case for an ontological category that is part of our general intuitions. What is generally considered good linguistic support for an ontology of events rather is the semantic behavior of adverbials, which lead Davidson to posit events as implicit arguments of verbs and adverbials to be regarded predicates of events, as in the logical form in (18b) for (18a):

(18) a. John buttered the toast with a knife at midnight.

b. ∃e(butter(e, John, he toast) & with a knife(e) & at midnight(e).

What is generally excluded when drawing on language to support metaphysical intuitions is technical expressions and philosophical terms such as *essence, ontological dependence, the fundamental, the part-of-relation, possible world, sum, proposition, existence, property, object, group.* Likewise what is excluded when drawing on natural language is technical uses of expressions. This holds not only for metaphysics, but also when appealing to natural language for clarifying intuitions in any philosophical domain

The exclusion of certain parts of language or uses of languages is a matter of a general observation about the way philosophers draw on linguistic expressions or uses of expressions in support of philosophical intuitions. The parts of language or its use that are avoided when clarifying philosophical intuitions can be called the core of language and the other parts its periphery. Besides being a matter of metaphilosophical observation, the core-periphery distinction will ultimately have to be explained, but this is a task separate from the empirical observation itself.

A few clarifications are needed regarding the core-periphery distinction. What is peripheral is not meant to be statistically rare or less important. Rather the core-periphery distinction is simply means to capture the distinction between implicit acceptance and reflective acceptance, in first approximation. Uses of expressions in the periphery require some degree of philosophical reflection, but not so uses of expressions in the core.

How exactly is the core-periphery distinction to be drawn? Technical expressions obviously belong to the periphery, as do sortals, whose content does constitute a degree of philosophical reflection. Furthermore non-ordinary, philosophical uses of language belong to the periphery. Not all of language, though can be used in a no-ordinary way. Non-ordinary use in fact seem to be limited to nouns by themselves.

In addition certain constructions by themselves belong to the periphery. In particular these are what I call reifying terms, certain sorts of close appositions, as below:

(19) a. the truth value true

b. the number eight

c. the proposition that it might rain

d. the event of raining

e. the sum of John and Mary

The exclusion of reifying terms from the data that can be used in support of philosophical is quite clear when looking at some of the relevant literature. For example, the existence of the term *the truth value* true was not used by Frege (1918/9) to motivate truth values as objects. Rather Frege’s motivation was distinguishing sense and reference for clauses in a way that parallels the distinction for referential NPs. Frege (1884), moreover, did not motivate numbers as objects on the basis of terms like *the number eight*, but on the basis of *the number of planets* and *eight.* His argument for numbers as objects could in principle have been much easier: *the number eight* is a referential term and it can hardly refer to anything but a number. But Frege knew that a term like *the number eight* could not make the argument. Instead he used sentences like *the number of planets* *is eight*, which involves only terms from the core of language, *eight* and *the number of planets*, terms that won’t involve reflection.

Another example concerns the linguistic motivations for propositions. Many philosophers have appealed to natural language to motivate propositions, which have become an important notion for philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and ontology. However, philosophers, hardly ever motivate propositions on the basis of the existence of NPs like *the proposition that it is raining* in natural language.[[3]](#footnote-3) Rather propositions are motivated by the apparent function of *that*-clauses as referential terms and the apparent role *that-*clauses of providing arguments for attitude verbs like *believe*, generally considered two-place predicates expressing relations between agents and propositions.

Davidson (1967) linguistic motivations for an ontology did not come from terms like *the event of raining*, but on the basis of inference patterns with adverbials. In fact, it is the semantics of verbs and adverbial modifications that is generally considered grounds for considering events an important part of the ontology of natural language, not event sortals.

Link (1983) and many other semanticists following him have argued that (unrestricted) sums of individuals form part of the ontology of natural language. But they did not motivate sums of individuals on the basis of terms like *the sum of John and Mary*, but rather on the basis of the semantic behavior of plurals and conjunctions (*the students, John and Mary*).

What these observations indicate is that philosophers and semanticists have always made tacit use of a distinction between core and periphery of language (or language use): only the core, not the periphery, reflects the ontology of natural language. Reifying terms, like technical terms and technical uses of terms, belong to the periphery, not the core of language.

**7. The ‘content’ of the core-periphery distinction**

What characterizes expressions or uses of expressions that make up the periphery of language? In a first characterization, expressions or uses of expressions in the periphery of language involve some degree of philosophical *reflection*, whereas the core of language is tied to implicit acceptance. That is, the kind of contrast involved is that between implicit ‘acceptance’ as opposed inferential acceptance, reasoning, or reflection. Reflection appears to go along with the structure of reifying terms themselves, that is, with their compositional semantics. Let us assume that the general structure of reifying terms is as below (Moltmann 2013 chap. 7):

(20) *the* - sortal noun – non-referential material

Nonreferential material will include *that*-clauses, number words, plural terms,

Reifying terms then involve an operation of abstraction based on the content of non-referential material, which amounts to a form of reflection.

The core-periphery distinction is not based on a distinction in the nature of the ontology or philosophical concepts themselves. A philosophical notion that serves as the intended meaning of a peripheral (use of an) expression (based on reasoning) may turn out to be part of the core as well. Rather what matters is a distinction between a form of implicit acceptance and reflective acceptance. Making use of such a distinction, for the time being, the ontology of natural language, that is, the ontology reflected in the core language, can be characterized as follows:

(21) The ontology implicit in natural language is the ontology a speaker *implicitly accepts*

by way of using the *core* of the language.

Noun, it seems, always permit a peripheral use. The noun *event* is used by philosophers and semanticists as conveying a concept that is considerably broader than that conveyed by the noun *event* on an ordinary use (where it restricted to telic events and distinguished from actions and states). Likewise a noun like *property* on its own can be used by different philosophers to convey different conceptions of a property. Non-ordinary uses have been subject to attack by ordinary language philosophers (Ayer, Wittgenstein, Ryle), who argued that philosophical problems arise precisely from a non-ordinary use of language. However, non-ordinary uses are not all illegitimate linguistically: language is designed so as to permit non-ordinary uses: extension of meaning, introduction of technical uses, and ‘conceptual engineering’.

That said, there are limits of non-ordinary uses of language. In contrast to nouns, verbs generally do not permit a non-ordinary use. This contrast between nouns and verbs is apparent from the way the verb *exist* and the noun *existence* can be used. Many philosophers take existence to be a univocal notion applying to anything there is, and they can use the noun *existence* to convey the univocal notion. Other philosophers may restrict existence to the mode of being of material and abstract objects and can use *existence* accordingly.[[4]](#footnote-4) The *exist,* however, cannot be used to convey the univocal notion of *exist*: it strictly resists an application to events,

(22) a. ??? The rain still exists now.

b. ??? The protest existed yesterday.

When using the verb *exist* rejection of the non-univocal notion of existence (as endurance) conveyed by *exists* in favor of a univocal notion of existence is impossible.

In addition to the distinction between verbs and nouns, the distinction between lexical words and functional elements plays a role for the core-periphery distinction as well. Tense, aspect, plural etc. can hardly be used in a non-ordinary way. The core of natural language certainly includes the functional part of grammar. But of course further work needs to be done on how the core-periphery distinction is anchored grammar, and an explanation would need to be developed why the distinction obtains in the why it does.

There is also an interesting issue how the core-periphery distinction relates elation to Chomsky’s (1981, 1986) distinction in syntax with the same name. Given Chomsky’s distinction in syntax, very roughly, the core of the syntactic system of a language represents universal grammar and the periphery exceptions and outside influences. Chomsky’s distinction obviously has completely different motivations than the present core-periphery distinction. Let us just note that on that distinction the syntactic structure of reifying terms should belong to the core and thus a coincidence of the two distinctions is at least not obvious. Yet, for both distinctions the lexical-functional divide plays a role (Yang 2016).

**8. The status of the core of language (use)**

Only the core, not the periphery of language (or language use) reflects philosophical intuitions, in the sense that the core is associated with a form of implicit acceptance of notions in a particular philosophical domain, rather than acceptance arrived at through reasoning or reflection. How should this notion of implicit acceptance be understood? One observation that is important is that the kind of implicit acceptance associated with the core of language does not permit rejection: Even when a speaker rejects upon reflection a philosophically relevant notion or category conveyed by an expression or element that is of the core of language, she will automatically be committed to it when she uses the language. The core of language does not permit non-ordinary, ‘philosophical’ uses.

The impossibility of rejection is not tied to the *implicitness* of the relevant form of acceptance of philosophical notions or views. Implicit acceptance when understood as a weak form of belief (or disposition to believe) does allow for rejection, for example implicit acceptance in the form of bias in ethics does allow for rejection. Linguistic intuitions, of course, provided they are correct, do not allow for rejection. Linguistic intuitions come with the knowledge of the language in question. This means that the form of implicit acceptance that is involved in the philosophical domains implicit in natural language do not involve a belief or acceptance as a weak form of belief. Rather it is on a par with knowledge of language. Knowledge of the language goes along with the possession of philosophically relevant intuitions that are reflected in the core of language.

The fact that philosophically relevant intuitions reflected in natural language fail to have the status of belief or even any form of acceptance concurs with the more general insight that intuitions are distinct from beliefs. For having an intuition that P it is neither necessary or sufficient to believe that p or even be disposed to believe that P (Pust 2019).

As with philosophically relevant intuitions in general, this raises the question whether intuitions reflected in natural language could be mistaken or could be compatible with alternative notions or views. The answer will of course depend on to what extent and how philosophy should be guided by intuition. It may also depend on the level of language that manifests the intuition (the grammatical-conceptual divide). It may also depend on whether one would adopt a permissive conception of the relevant philosophical domain, on which, for example, the ontology that is reflected in natural language could be just one ontology beside others, which may have be accepted through reasoning.

**9. Conclusions**

Throughout history philosophers have drawn on language to clarify or uncover philosophically relevant intuitions. They did so while making use of an implicit distinction between the core and the periphery of natural language: only the core, not the periphery, can be used to clarify or uncover philosophically relevant philosophical intuitions. Philosophically relevant intuitions that are reflected in the core of a natural language do not have the status of beliefs or even weaker forms of acceptance. Rather they have the same status as linguistic intuitions: the possession of both comes with the knowledge and use of the core of the language in question. By contrast, only words and reifying terms in the periphery are suited to convey philosophical notions based on reflective acceptance. The contrast intuition – acceptance thus has a correlate in the architecture of language itself.

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1. Note that correctness conditions for beliefs are not of this sort, given what is reflected in the use of *correct* or *right* in application to belief. Beliefs are correct just in case they are true. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Moltmann (2013) for discussion and further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are some exceptions, for example Schiffer (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This holds only for *existence* when used without a complement. *The existence of the rain / the protest* is still bad. Nominalizations with overt complements seem to be subject to the same constraints as verbs from which they are derived. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)