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Reddish Green

Imagine an autumn leaf changing its color between green and red. The color of some of your garden's roses is advertised as bluish white, so you describe the color of the autumn leaf as reddish green. (The pattern is familiar from referring to a music style as "bluegrass", i.e. a mix of blues and country music.) You are surprised when someone tells you that there is no reddish green on account of the fact that those are (according to common doctrine) complementary colors. They cannot blend into each other, just like you cannot simultaneously take the directions right and left at an intersection. Calling something reddish green violates received opinion, disregarding the color scheme governing much of ordinary discourse and hence losing control as far as color terms are concerned.

The first approach is *ad hoc* pragmatic, the second one seems to impose a pattern upon the episodes just mentioned. This paper will trace Ludwig Wittgenstein's development from a distinctly normative view to the pragmatic leanings of his later work. It will, however, refine the usual account of Wittgenstein's eventual rejection of his *Tractatus* views. It can be shown that empiricism is built into the framework of the *Tractatus*' ontology. And the conceptual concerns of this early book can, on the other hand, still be detected in Wittgenstein's seemingly open ended later writings. These claims cannot be defended as a general thesis here. They will be introduced by following the philosopher's struggle with the issue of reddish green, which turns up at various places in his *Nachlass*. It is well known that closer attention to the grammar of color terms has played a crucial role in Wittgenstein's rejection of essential *Tractatus* doctrines. What are the relevant propositions and why have they been put into question?

1

In an entry in his diary from 22nd January 1915 Wittgenstein is setting forward an ambitious agenda. He describes his overall task as explaining the essence of *the* sentence, i.e. of all facts that can be pictured. "Das Wesen allen Seins angeben."¹ Or, viewed from a slightly different angle:

1 "In giving the nature of all being."

“Das große Problem, um welches sich alles dreht, was ich schreibe, ist: Ist, a priori, eine Ordnung in der Welt, und wenn ja, worin besteht sie? (NB, 1st June 1915)”²

The attempt to delineate an ordered view of the world achievable prior to actually taking empirical investigations into account is faced with considerable difficulties, many of which can be traced back to Wittgenstein’s notebooks. A crucial component of a world, orderly conceived, are “Gegenstände” (things) and surely their availability as building blocks has to be presupposed in advance of their *de facto* occurrence (cf. NB, 16th June 1915). But a characteristic dilemma arises here. Things, according to ordinary parlance, can be quite complex. A well-founded world, however, has to be built up from *basic* givens, simple things that cannot be further analyzed. It does not seem feasible to a *apriori* predict what these simples are going to be.

Wittgenstein spends considerable time to become clear about this point. The upshot is that things enter into states of affairs by virtue of their logical form. “‘Die Uhr sitzt auf dem Tisch’ ist sinnlos.”³ Names are conditioned by what Wittgenstein calls the “logical kind of the object” (NB, 22nd June 1915) and this includes complex as well as simple things:

“Und das ist klar, daß der Gegenstand eine bestimmte logische Art haben muß, er ist so zusammengesetzt oder so einfach als er eben ist.”⁴ (NB, 22nd June 1915)

In view of the quest for the essence of being this account is generalized in the notebooks on 11th July 1916 and finds its way into the *Tractatus*:

“Wenn die Gegenstände gegeben sind, so sind uns damit auch schon *alle* Gegenstände gegeben. Wenn die Elementarsätze gegeben sind, so sind damit auch *alle* Elementarsätze gegeben.”⁵ (TLP, 5.524)

The big if is, obviously, how we could come to know the internal shape of things concatenated in elementary propositions as a matter of logical insight – a task mandated by Wittgenstein’s metaphysical ambitions. He is juxtaposing two conflicting intuitions:

1. Matters of logic have to be settled independently of experience. (TLP, 5.551ff.)
2. Empirical reality manifests itself within the totality of elementary propositions. (TLP, 5.5561)

² “The great problem round which everything that I write turns is: Is there an order in the world a priori, and if so what does it consist in?”

³ “The watch is sitting on the table’ is senseless!” (NB, 22nd June 1915)

⁴ “And it is clear that the object must be of a particular logical kind, it just is as complex, or as simple, as it is.”

⁵ “If the objects are given, therewith are *all* objects also given. If the elementary propositions are given, then therewith *all* elementary propositions are also given.”

It is by no means clear how a “logical form” of things determining their fit in states of affairs could be dependent on empirical circumstances. Wittgenstein summarizes the problem in a remarkable aphorism:

“Es soll sich a priori angeben lassen, ob ich z. B. in die Lage kommen kann, etwas mit dem Zeichen einer 27-stelligen Relation bezeichnen zu müssen.”⁶ (TLP, 5.541)

In order to capture the underlying structure of the world we need a logical syntax pre-arranged to fulfil the task of expressing facts that can, precisely, *not* be foreseen by logic. Wittgenstein’s attempted resolution of this issue cannot be discussed here. The point is rather that already in his *Tractatus* period he faces the problem of the *provence* of (knowledge about) logical forms designed to govern empirical descriptions. The question whether a 27-ary term should be a meaningful expression has to be settled *a priori*. If we apply this *dictum* to colour terms the difficulty becomes obvious. The logic of pronouncing a patch as possessing one colour does not simply consist in this patch either exhibiting or not exhibiting said colour. Given the colour spectrum the affirmation of a colour sentence immediately implies a multitude of negative assertions not included in a two-valued approach. This observation led Wittgenstein to drop the requirement of mutual independence of elementary propositions.⁷ Returning to our initial scenario of describing an autumn leave we can recognize the impasse between pragmatic and normative forms of discourse as being an instance of a more general tension. What are the rules governing the use of “reddish green”? Can we combine expressions referring to these colours to indicate a *mixtum compositum*, or are we obliged to reject this option by arguments referring to the conceptual incompatibility of those respective predicates?

⁶ “It should be possible to decide a priori whether, for example, I can get into a situation in which I need to symbolize with a sign of a 27-termed relation.”

⁷ Cf. MS 112, p. 134r:

“Man kann den Satz ‘dieser Ort ist jetzt rot’ (oder ‘dieser Kreis ist jetzt rot’ etc.) einen Elementarsatz nennen, wenn man damit sagen will daß er weder eine Wahrheitsfunktion anderer Sätze ist noch als solche definiert ist. [...] Aus ‘a ist jetzt rot’ folgt aber ‘a ist jetzt nicht grün’ und die Elementarsätze in diesem Sinn sind also nicht voneinander unabhängig, wie die Elementarsätze in meinem seinerzeit beschriebenen Kalkül von dem ich annahm, der ganze Gebrauch der Sätze müsse sich auf ihn zurückführen lassen; – verleiht durch einen falschen Begriff von diesem ‘Zurückführen’.”

2

The complementary character of red and green plays an important role in challenging the *Tractatus*' atomism.

“From ‘a is not red now’ it can be followed that ‘a is not green now’ and elementary propositions are therefore not independent from each other like elementary propositions within my erstwhile constructed calculus [...].”⁸ (MS 112, p. 134r)

Wittgenstein takes up the point much later, in 1946, still in the normative voice implied by his reference to a calculus.

“‘Ein rötliches Grün gibt es nicht’ ist den Sätzen verwandt, die wir als Axiome in der Mathematik gebrauchen.”⁹ (MS 133, p. 25r)

One similarity consists in both mathematical axioms and the given proposition not being derived from observation. They are stipulations and their validity rests on construction rather than empirical evidence. Yet, Wittgenstein's comparison is somewhat surprising in view of the fact that colours are, supposedly, sense impressions external to our cognitive machinery. The *Tractatus* does not provide the reader with any means to understand how an axiomatic stipulation may match with empirical validation. This is where Wittgenstein tentatively enters into the realm of grammatical explorations which are reminiscent of the style of transcendental arguments.

It is not just, in fact, the case that red and green do not mix at any given location. The force of this statement might be considered equal to an assertion like “Mahatma Gandhi never met Dwight Eisenhower in their entire lifetime.” The mix is *impossible* in a certain system. Wittgenstein's claim points back to the *Tractatus* pronouncement that a definitive language will by itself rule out nonsensical expressions. This (kind of) postulate cannot, however, easily survive the impact of Wittgenstein's rejection of elementary propositions. Determining the logic of the colour spectrum is, remember Wittgenstein's remark, like knowing in advance whether there will be any need for an expression referring to a 27-ary relation. Wittgenstein seems to be aware of the difficulty and continues his entry with the following, somewhat precarious, reflections:

“Wir sagen nun: ‘wir gebrauchen die Wörter ‘rot’ und ‘grün’ in solcher Weise, daß es als sinnlos gilt (kontradiktorisch ist) zu sagen, am selben Ort sei zu gleicher Zeit rot und grün’. Und dies ist natürlich ein Satz.”¹⁰

⁸ MS 112, p. 134r; German original in previous footnote. All translations from Wittgenstein's manuscripts are by H. H.

⁹ “‘There is no reddish green’ is related to those sentences we use as axioms in mathematics.”

¹⁰ “And now we say: we use the words red and green in such a way that it counts as meaningless (as contradictory) to assert that red and green are at the same place at the same time.” (MS 113, p. 29v)

This quote mixes several conflicting approaches. Contradiction is easily defined in formal logic. It is, however, by no means obvious that it can be equated with lack of meaning, as Wittgenstein seems to suggest. No reference to meaning is necessary to recognize a contradiction holding between a sentence and its negation. The kind of “contradiction” Wittgenstein is invoking seems to rest on semantic incompatibility. Model theory can formalize the permitted scope of predicates and consequently reconstruct e.g. exclusions within a colour scheme. But this is not the kind of regiment Wittgenstein is looking for.

Wittgenstein is, in fact, not just positing the semantic incompatibility between red and green, he additionally introduces the pragmatics of this setup. Our *use* of those colour expressions blocks us from asserting certain sentences. The meaning of terms is derived from the overall behaviour of the language community. The said contradiction is, according to this account, the self-imposed rule of a language game. The inconspicuous quote under consideration contains, as it turns out, the whole range of Wittgensteinian options in dealing with the issue of philosophical grammar. One way to read it is to emphasize its “deconstructive” character. A forbidding array of prohibitions has been assembled in the *Tractatus* – they can now be seen as metaphysical superstructure erected on the foundation of certain social practices. The issue of red-green incompatibility seems to collapse into a discrepancy between various linguistic attitudes. But there is an alternative reading, *preserving* the tension between *apriori* motives and empirical outlook that we started with. This reading registers the nuances between a logical calculus, accounts of meaning and theories of use, while at the same time remaining aware of their systematic peculiarities. It can be shown that Wittgenstein was struggling with those peculiarities up well into his late writings on colour.¹¹

A non-technical way to summarize the bundle of intuitions surrounding “reddish green” is:

“Man kann aber auch so sagen: Wenn ich das Produkt zweier Sätze bilden kann, so können sie nicht die Sinne haben ‘a ist rot’ und ‘a ist grün’. [...] Die beiden Sätze kollidieren im Gegenstand.”¹² (MS 106, p. 87f.)

Taken at face value the last sentence *does not* defuse the collision by introducing negotiable rules but rather pins down the logico-ontological challenge: the incompatibility of sentences is grounded in real world things. This insight can, using a more traditional philosophical vocabulary, be described as synthetic knowledge *apriori*. The compatibility in question is outruled in advance. We know that it cannot *occur* since

¹¹ The issue of *apriori* knowledge with regard to colour incompatibilities has, among others, been discussed by Jacques Bouveresse in his “Wittgenstein’s Answer to ‘What is Colour?’”.

¹² “One can also put it this way: If I can form the product of two sentences they cannot have the meanings ‘a is red’ and ‘a is green’. [...] Those two sentences collide with respect to their object.” (Literally: “collide in the object”)

we cannot even (legitimately) *conceptualize* it. It has, by now, become clear that one-sentence pronouncements merely serve to highlight the underlying problem, as another quote from a 1932 manuscript demonstrates.

Wittgenstein draws a distinction between (1) “No book is lying here” and (2) “The colours red and green can simultaneously occupy one spatial position”. A book could be found at this (currently empty) spot; red, on the other hand, *cannot* occur at green patches. The latter option is, as discussed earlier, excluded by logical semantics, i.e. philosophical grammar. But difficulties are just starting here.

“Aber, wenn der Satz dadurch sinnvoll wird, daß er mit den grammatischen Regeln in Einklang ist, so machen wir eben die Regel, die den Satz ‘rot und grün sind zugleich an diesem Fleck’ zuläßt. Gut; aber damit ist nun die Grammatik dieses Ausdrucks noch nicht festgelegt. Es müssen erst noch weitere Bestimmungen darüber getroffen werden, wie ein solcher Satz zu gebrauchen ist; wie er z.B. verifiziert wird.”¹³

If the red-green incompatibility were closely similar to mathematical axioms we would be free to lay down alternative rules and to allow co-occurrence of those colours. This would put Wittgenstein on the side of pragmatism, providing methodological cover for multiple discursive contexts that exhibit probably mutually exclusive points of departure. Wittgenstein *does not* hold this position in the above quote. He demands an additional move to fix the expression’s grammar and introduces its *use*, in particular its method of verification, as determining factor. Now, this move can only support the categorical incompatibility when this very incompatibility is written into the language we use to articulate verifiable statements. There is no point in trying to verify a statement according to which a co-occurrence of red and green is the case (or not the case), as long as it remains undecided whether we are even allowed to entertain this (Fregean) thought.

One way to go from here is to drop the strong suggestion of a pre-determination of meaning and this is, indeed, what Wittgenstein’s later writings are often taken to do. But this is by no means what his remarks show. On closer inspection Wittgenstein can be seen to tentatively switch sides on a number of occasions. He never completely abandons his initial in principle rejection of a red-green mix, yet, on the other hand, is characteristically inventive in coming up with scenarios contradicting this orthodoxy. One of his favourite examples in discussing the issue actually is autumn leaves. He mentions them as early as 1936 (MS 115) and as late as 1949 (MS 171). One may imagine a group of men perceiving their surroundings as a continuous transition between red

¹³ “But, if a sentence becomes meaningful by corresponding to the grammatical rules we can just lay down the rule which allows the sentence claiming that red and green are simultaneously at this patch. Fine; but the grammar of this expression is not yet fixed by this move. Additional provisions about the use of such a sentence have to be made; e.g. how it is to be verified.” (MS 114, p. 118)

and green “und zwar so wie wir es im Herbst an manchen Blättern sehen”¹⁴ (MS 115, p. 238):

“Ich stelle mir vor, es gibt nur einen Ton von Rot und von Grün. Die beiden gehen in der Natur (wie im Herbst in gewissen Blättern) immer ineinander über.”¹⁵ (MS 137, p. 100b)

“Nichts ist so gewöhnlich wie die Farbe rötlichgrün; denn nichts ist gewöhnlicher als der Übergang vom Grün des Blattes in's Rote.”¹⁶ (MS 171, p. 14)

Wittgenstein's remarks make a strong case for discarding attempts to develop a constitutive account of colour space in general. They are, however, counterbalanced by attempts to avoid relativistic conclusions that might be drawn from thought experiments imagining various possible forms of life.

3

The contentious issue of reddish green is not resolved in Wittgenstein's oeuvre. Rather than offering a solution Wittgenstein involves himself in pointed dialogues, switching sides more than once. An instructive series of remarks appears in manuscript 137, selected parts of which he chose to include in typescript 232. This dictation was published as second volume of “Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie” by G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman in 1980. It contains a multi-faceted discussion of the issue at hand. Characteristically, Wittgenstein is cross-examining himself. One voice, let us call it the normativist, points out that concepts are accompanied with certain sentences that are incontestably part of their meaning. “There cannot be a regular digon” (MS 137, p. 5a). Someone who claims otherwise does literally not know what he is talking about. This example from mathematics is taken as a guide for considerations of the colour spectrum. Significant similarities *and* dissimilarities can be observed. There is, on the one hand, a strong intuition that someone who attempts to mix complementary colours is missing a crucial point of our common use of colour terms. Yet, colour sensations are not on a par with formal constructions. We cannot infer exclusion of alternatives from sense data. Colours are qualitative givens over and above the conceptual structures we impose upon them.

At this turn the opposing party, the pragmatist, is making her point. An assertion about numbers or geometry might be obvious to a mathematician, but perceptions

¹⁴ “the way we see some leaves in autumn”

¹⁵ “I imagine that there is just one tint of red and of green. In nature they always shade into each other (like certain leaves in autumn).”

¹⁶ “There is nothing more common than the color reddish green; because nothing is more common than the transition from a leave's green into red.”

are different. Normative structure is wedded to a conceptual framework which is not inherent in sense impressions and of which more than one version is permissible.

“Aber haben denn Farben eine Struktur? Die Anwendung des Farbworts hat eine. Und insofern hat der Begriff eine.”¹⁷ (MS 137, p. 5b).

The pragmatist’s position does, however, not satisfy Wittgenstein. Its constructivism seems too easy. “Zu sagen Es liegt an den Begriffen klingt wie: Nichts leichter, als andere Begriffe zu schmieden.”¹⁸ (MS 137, p. 5b) The pendulum swings back. “Zwischen grün und rot, will ich sagen, sei eine geometrische Leere, nicht eine physikalische.”¹⁹ (MS 137, p. 5b) Can one have it both ways? Is it possible to reconcile two apparently conflicting intuitions, namely the extra-empirical cogency of categories constitutive of our world view and, on the other hand, the ultimate role of empirical evidence as an arbiter of epistemological claims? Wittgenstein’s move, when pushed into such corners, often is to step sideways, i.e. to introduce a comparable case in order to compare and differentiate. At this particular juncture it is human nourishment.

Our handling of the red-green dichotomy is neither a matter of logic nor of arbitrariness.

“Ist denn, daß wir die Dinge in dieser Weise (miteinander) vergleichen, sie so im Gebrauch zusammennehmen, ist dies denn willkürlich? Nicht mehr, als daß wir uns von diesem und nicht von jenem nähren.”²⁰ (MS 137, p. 5b)

The opposing “voices” can easily be recognized in this scenario. A pragmatist might claim victory since, obviously, humans eat and reject to eat, quite different stuff. But this does not hold for, e.g. poisonous mushrooms the normativist is likely to reply. Some seemingly edible substances destroy the recipient biological system. While this certainly is an empirical fact, more importantly it serves as a kind of definition of this very system. We are back at “begriffsbestimmende Sätze” and their precarious relation to experience. Wittgenstein’s considerations are, in fact, a sequence of variations on this overarching theme.

Is our system of colour terms arbitrary? One of Wittgenstein’s responses is awkwardly evasive. “Ja und nein. Es ist mit Willkürlichem verwandt und mit Nicht-Willkürlichem.”²¹ (MS 137, p. 6a; also TS 232, p. 426) The crucial question, unanswered by this conjunction, concerns the specifics of this arbitrariness. The natural history

17 “But do colors, then, possess structure? The use of the color word has one. And the concept, in this respect, has one.”

18 “To say it is a matter of concepts sounds like: nothing is easier than forging different concepts.”

19 “Between green and red, I want to say, there is a geometrical void, not a physical one.”

20 “Is the fact, then, that we compare things (to each other) in this way, summon them up in use, is this, then, arbitrary? Not more so than we nourish ourselves from this and not from that.”

21 “Yes and no. It is related to the arbitrary and to the non-arbitrary.”

of colours is invoked as supporting the pre-established harmony of the colour octahedron with his real life employment (MS 137, p. 7b). But Wittgenstein recognizes that the binding quality of the scheme cannot be claimed to represent a natural phenomenon. Painting in ancient Egypt is not an arbitrary style, but neither is it given *a priori* (MS 137, p. 8a). One more variation: a room's furniture is designed to fit human needs, pragmatism is right about this. Yet, its purpose could not be fulfilled unless this equipment exhibited certain characteristics of robustness and convenience (MS 137, p.8b). A realist thread runs through the dialectic we are discussing:

“Ja aber hat denn die Natur hier gar nichts mitzureden?! Doch – Nur macht sie sich auf andere Weise hörbar. ‘Irgendwo wirst Du doch an Existenz und Nichtexistenz anrennen!’ – Das heißt aber doch an Tatsachen, nicht an Begriffe.”²² (MS 137, p. 7b)

An editorial detail sheds some light upon the character of these exertions. Wittgenstein inserts an aside into the sequence of remarks dealing with reddish green. Just one sentence, partly exasperation and partly self-consolation.

“Wenn die Türe nach innen aufgeht, und ich nicht daran denke, sie könnte so aufgehn, so bin ich eingesperrt.”²³ (MS 137, p.8a)

This echoes the better known variation of the same idea at MS 125, p. 57v and raises the question whether there is a Wittgensteinian way out of the impasse.

Wittgenstein's discussion remains inconclusive. The following attempt to push the matter one step further turns to one more *Nachlass* entry which appears in a notebook from 1950 and might help finding an escape exit. Wittgenstein has, for the most part of MS 137, p. 5a-9a weighed the difference between *a priori* and empirical intuitions. Another approach is only mentioned in passing, namely a no-nonsense “ethnocentric” stance.

“Die Leute kennen ein Rötlichgrün. Aber es *gibt* doch gar keins! – Welcher sonderbare Satz. – (Wie weißt Du's nur?)”²⁴ (MS 137, p. 7a)

Rather than try and trace the legitimacy of talk about reddish green to axioms and/or evidence this quote draws the line between established language use and dissidents. Reddish green is simply ruled out. Our tool-set does not provide a handle to deal with this so-called colour. Constitutive categories and supporting experience are conve-

²² “Yes, but does Nature have no say at all here?! Yes. It is just that she makes herself heard in a different way. Somewhere you will be running up against existence and non-existence! Which means against facts, not concepts.”

²³ “If the door opens to the inside and I do not think that it might open this way I am locked in.”

²⁴ “People know of a reddish green. But there is none! What a peculiar sentence. (How could you know?)”

niently matched in everyday procedures. Wittgenstein is, of course, far too sophisticated to let the matter rest here. Given those circumstances the pronouncement denying the existence of reddish green is not comparable to statements asserting or denying the presence of some colour at a certain place. We cannot deny the presence of “colour” within our color spectrum while failing to consider it a colour at all. This line of argument abandons the struggle with the form-content distinction looming behind the manifest problem and rather stages a conflict between an operative synthesis of dealing-with-the-world and moments of stress, when this synthesis’ internal expressive resources are overexposed in attempts to cross a boundary they are not developed to trespass.

Wittgenstein discusses this unilateral account at the limit of language mastery. If meaning is (closely linked to) use one must be able to teach an expression’s use in order to convey its meaning. Familiarity with a concept has to amount to being able to introduce and apply it in suitable ways, i.e. in circumstances validated by the appropriate language games. But we are working under the assumption that, from the point of view of a certain community, there is no access to this kind of explanation.

“Aber kann ich doch die Praxis von Leuten beschreiben, die einen Begriff haben, z.B. ‘rötlich-grün’, den wir nicht besitzen? – Ich kann diese Praxis doch jedenfalls niemand lehren.”²⁵ (MS 173, p. 28r)

The world of black and white photography, for example, does not offer any help in approaching the issue of reddish green. Speakers are at a loss trying to use the resources of their language in order to introduce terms violating the patterns of this very language. One cannot have it both ways, sharing a determinate linguistic environment with a “like-minded” group *and* referring to outside phenomena excluded by the group’s consensus.

“Kann ich denn auch nur sagen: ‘Diese Leute nennen dies (ein Braun etwa) rötlichgrün? Wäre es dann eben nur ein andres Wort für etwas, wofür auch ich eins habe?’”²⁶ (MS 173, p. 28r)

The unilateralist’s dilemma is different from the give and take between the normativist and the pragmatist. She finds herself attempting to adjudicate questions she lacks, by definition, the means to adequately handle. The discussion in section 2 of this paper involved conflicting claims about the source of validity of a given cognitive setup. The present quote, in contrast, deals with the difficulty of understanding something distinctly different from an established language game.

²⁵ “But can I describe the practice of people who have a concept, for instance of ‘reddish green’, which we do not have? – In any case, I cannot teach this practice to anyone.”

²⁶ “Could I even say: These people call this (e.g. some Brown) reddish green? Wouldn’t this be just another word for something I myself have a word for?”

Wittgenstein is drawing a sharp line between the rules governing a linguistic community and outside interference. A touch of *Tractarian* once-and-forever brinkmanship can be detected in his phrasing (“Could I even say: ...”). Meaningful sentences have to comply to logical form. But, as we have seen, this presupposition cannot be upheld in the light of Wittgenstein’s subsequent deliberations. The understanding inherent in a group’s communication cannot be atemporal and *a priori*. Learning crucially depends on one’s abilities to enlarge the scope of given verbal and behavioral patterns, hence the popular view that Wittgenstein turned to pragmatism once he began to reject his rigorous early demarcations. The short quote under consideration here reveals a more complicated picture. Wittgenstein starts in the assertive mood. We refer to colours by means of our vocabulary. Assume a coloured patch is brown and this very patch is called “reddish green” in a different idiom. There are, if we stick to strict unilateralism, two options. Either the foreign term translates to “brown”, or we do not know what the strangers are talking about.

This is not the end of the story for Wittgenstein in 1950, though. He adds a seemingly uncontroversial, but nevertheless far-reaching remark.

“Wenn sie wirklich einen andern Begriff haben als ich, so muß sich das darin zeigen, daß ich mich in ihrem Wortgebrauch nicht ganz auskenne.”²⁷ (MS 173, p. 28r-28v)

The tiebreaker in the standoff between ethnocentricity and relativism is *partial* confusion concerning the interlocutor’s use of terms. Certain parts of any existing colour-related discourse have to be recognizably similar to a deviant use of terms for understanding to even begin going beyond its initial borders. It seems that a shared concept of red can be universally discerned wherever colour is at stake.²⁸ Now, this homogeneity can break apart in more complicated cases. As a shorthand description we might describe this as “Our colour concepts fail to apply” and start to worry about incommensurability. But, given the circumstances, this response is deceptively superficial. Ordinary cases of discursive misunderstandings between cultures arise at certain junctures *recognizable as such* with respect to common background assumptions. The unilateral stance turns into an universalist outlook as far as those commonalities are concerned. And it reaches its limits at particular critical checkpoints. It is not a dialectic between form and content, but a superposition of “business as usual” and linguistic disturbance.

According to these considerations the appropriate point of departure is neither the all-pervasive power of (one?) form of life²⁹, nor the realm of practical expediency constantly shifting. Human interaction is based on occasional, fragile consensus. This

²⁷ “If they really have a concept different from me it has to show in that I cannot completely know my way around their use of words.”

²⁸ Cf. Berlin & Kay 1969. For an introduction in recent research see Kay & Maffi 2011.

²⁹ Cf. Hrachovec 2009

turns into a unison of voices or a communication breakdown in limiting cases. A resolution of the problem of incommensurable language games is implied by this. Partial confusion concerning a concept is not always a harmless event. A small deviation between language use may, at times, make all the difference, including acceptance or rejection of an entire discursive formation. Think of theological controversies about transubstantiation resulting in religious wars, or, more down to earth, the operation of a password to access an internet site. Mistyping a single letter is all it needs to exclude a person from participation. The lesson to be learned for “reddish green” is the following one: the worry about prevailing conceptual or, alternatively, empirical determination of “the nature of colour” (MS 137, p. 7b) is an infelicitous starting point.

A better way to look at the controversy is to begin from within a language game disclosing the world in one characteristic way and prepare for eventual irritations. Disturbing situations are not to be explained by reference to unconceptualized “things in themselves”, but by closer examination of the discrepancies between the entire linguistico-behavioral contexts. There will be occasions when the term “reddish green” can serve perfectly well as the description of a composite colour, yet everything might occasionally hinge on the need to emphasize the difference between complex terms like “bluish white” and “reddish green”. One concluding caveat against the temptation to regard this as an essentially relativistic advice: Wittgenstein concludes his remark MS 173, p. 28v on a note of self-doubt. His later writings contain many cases of Wittgenstein imagining unexpected scenarios, stretching the meaning of formerly well-understood terms. One might get the impression that his concern with philosophical grammar gets lost amongst the micro-management of subtle linguistic nuances. But consider this quote, reigning in his imagination:

“Ich habe aber doch immer wieder gesagt, man könne sich denken, daß unsre Begriffe anders wären, als sie sind. War das alles Unsinn?”³⁰ (MS 173, p. 28v)

Wittgenstein is too severe in judging himself, as usual. But there *are* limits to changing concepts. Sometimes we lose our grip on the use of presumed signifiers, leaving us tongue-tied.

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³⁰ “But I said again and again that one could imagine our concepts to be different from how they are. Was all of this nonsense?”

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