Introduction

Philosophers and linguists alike commonly associate the idea of family resemblance\textsuperscript{1} with Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, the notion of family resemblance has been known long before Wittgenstein. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask why it is Wittgenstein to whom this idea has been ascribed.

This paper argues a thesis that there is no single one-strand answer to this puzzle. Rather, there are a number of multifarious factors which have contributed to the

\textsuperscript{1} The \textit{locus classicus} of the exposition of the idea of family resemblance (\textit{Familienähnlichkeit}) is the \textit{Philosophical Investigations} §§ 65-67 (Wittgenstein 1958a: 32-33). Other passages where the idea is referred to are: \textit{The Blue Book} (Wittgenstein 1958b: 17); \textit{Culture and Value} (Wittgenstein 1980a: 14); \textit{Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology} vol. I § 694 (Wittgenstein 1980b: 169) and vol. II §§ 551-556 (Wittgenstein 1980b: 97-98). Cf. also the second part of the \textit{Philosophical Investigations} pp. 191, 193, 195, 196, 210-211 (Wittgenstein 1958a) and § 923 (Wittgenstein 1980b); \textit{Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932-1935} (Ambrose and MacDonald 1982: 95-96). Wittgenstein is reported to have used the term \textit{Familienähnlichkeit} first in ‘Big Typescript’ § 58 (Glock 1996: 120).
ascription of the idea of family resemblance to Wittgenstein. In addition, I claim that these different factors are in a dynamic relationship with each other and attempting to discover the most decisive factor conceals more than it illuminates. Below I shall attempt to draw the various strands of the story together.

The article has four parts. First, we shall look at how Wittgenstein is credited as the ‘author’ of the concept of family resemblance by philosophers and linguists. The second section delineates a brief history of the concept of family resemblance. Part three sketches a variety of possible solutions to our puzzle. Section four recapitulates the strands of part three and elaborates on them. It is at the end of this section where I suggest that our vision of the reply to our question needs to be broadened if we are to account for the glory that Wittgenstein wins.

1. “Wittgenstein’s family resemblances” in philosophy and linguistics

Below are presented excerpts from philosophical literature. They will serve as the best exemplars of how the idea of family resemblance has been, often unwittingly, ascribed to Wittgenstein. The entries are ordered chronologically from the 1950s right on up until the most current philosophical writings. Linguistics excerpts, which closely follow the philosophical one, are arranged in a likewise fashion.

“In this paper we propose to give, first, a brief analysis of Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances.” (Khatchadourian 1958: 841).

“In this article I intend to give an exposition and an analysis of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances which is introduced in The Blue & Brown Books ... as well as in Philosophical Investigations.” (Wennerberg 1967: 107).

“WITTGENSTEIN’S theory of ‘family resemblances’ is his theory of the nature of a concept.” (Gupta 1970: 283).

“The notion of family resemblance is both one of the ideas most commonly associated with Wittgenstein as one of the most widely used tools of contemporary philosophers.” (Backer and Hacker 1983: 185).

“Wittgenstein is well-known for having argued against the assumption that all concepts are analyzable ...into necessary and sufficient conditions; and the notion of family resemblance is thought to provide a cornerstone for this argument.” (Gert 1995: 177).

"Skepticism about family resemblance account of concepts has been widespread among philosophers ever since first advanced by Wittgenstein.” (Andersen 2000: 313).

“The other extreme approach within the Western tradition is best represented by the ‘late’ Wittgenstein ...It holds that, first, categories are not discrete and absolute but rather fuzzy-edged and contingent ... and second, that a family resemblance relation may often hold between the various members of the same category.” (Givón 1986: 78).
“The first major crack in the classical theory is generally acknowledged to have been noticed by Wittgenstein … Though there is no single collection of properties that all games share the category of games is united by what Wittgenstein calls *family resemblances.*” (Lakoff 1987: 16).

“As a natural category every word consists of a certain number of senses related through the concept of family resemblance rather than through a set of necessary and sufficient conditions (Wittgenstein 1953).” (Krzeszowski 1990: 137).

“Cognitive Linguistics … incorporates (i) ideas from the philosophy of language on family resemblance (cf. Wittgenstein’s 1953 discussion of the various uses of the word *game*) and (ii) results from psychological research on categorization.” (Cuyckens and Zawada 1997: xii)

“The inspiration for this way of viewing lexical meaning comes from Wittgenstein’s ideas of “meaning as use” and “family resemblance.” (Allwood 2003: 42).

“Wittgenstein didn’t appeal to the concept of prototype, but he appealed to—and indeed introduced—the related concept of ‘family resemblance’ between concepts.” (Wierzbicka 2004: 468).

In summary, I hope to have shown hard evidence that the notion of family resemblance is indeed commonly associated with Wittgenstein both in serious philosophical writings and weighty linguistic literature. 2 What happens now if we (perversely) ask if the so called ‘Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances’ is a completely original idea? Had anything like it been suggested before? This query brings us to the second section of this paper.

---

2 This same attitude can be observed in a wide range of other academic disciplines. In psychology: “The purpose of the present research was to explore one of the major structural principles which, we believe, may govern the formation of the prototype structure of semantic categories. This principle was first suggested in philosophy: Wittgenstein (1953) argued that…” (Rosch and Mervis 1975: 574). In technology: “My claim … is that the broad use to which we put the term ‘technology’ is better understood on the model of ‘family resemblance,’ a model put forward by Ludwig Wittgenstein.” (Cogan 2002: 93). In economics: “A related notion can be found in Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance.” (Davis 1996: 442). In music: “Ludwig Wittgenstein’s conception of family resemblances is applied to related version of…” (Etzion and Weich-Shahak 1993: from the abstract) or “Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances can help us assume a positive rather than a negative attitude in this important venture [defining music] (Raffman 1976: 123). In art: “Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family likenesses’ forms the basis for a smaller but more powerful installation at the Institute of Visual Culture.” (Wilsher 2003/04: 27). In anthropology: “While the Aristotelian tradition saw categories as container-like entities with elements in them, which defined a set with necessary and sufficient membership attributes, Wittgenstein’s … discovery that everyday categories may be held together by a chain of so-called ‘family resemblances’ shattered this view (Kimmel 2003). In social studies: “Maybe, citizenship education is not a term that can be defined at all. Rather, it is like one of Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblance’ terms in which the term can be used in a number of different ways and there are no necessary and sufficient conditions that apply in all examples of its use.” (Wright 2003). In methodology of science: “The concept of a meaning family [Zytkow means here family resemblance concepts] was introduced by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations.*” (Zytkow 1984: 485). Incidentally, I find the expression ‘a meaning family’ somewhat odd. For one thing, Wittgenstein never used it (cf. Wittgenstein 1958a: §77, p. 36). For another thing, the Englishness of the phrase itself is rather dubious. Cf. also Koj (1969: 141-149) and Pawłowski (1984: 181-223).
2. On the history of family resemblances

Now it transpires that the idea of family resemblance is hoary with age and we happen upon it in the writings of many a distinguished philosopher. According to Cohen (1973), the doctrine of family resemblance can be traced back to medieval times or even to the antiquity. Tessin (1996) makes a mention of Hobbes and Lock in connection with his discussion of universals and family resemblances (cf. also Butchvarov 1966). As stated by Lyons (1969), the conception of family likeness is ‘clearly explained’ by Stewart in 1818. Mill expresses a very similar idea to Stewart twenty five years later, whereas his contemporary, W. Whewell, elaborates on the relation between natural classifications, essential characteristics and resemblance to paradigms (Baker and Hacker 1983b: 188). In 1886 Nietzsche makes use of the term *Familien-Ähnlichkeit* to explicate an affinity between different philosophical concepts as well as an affinity of a variety of diverse ways of philosophizing. The idea of family resemblance shows also a strong likeness to the view of religion and government that James made known in 1902 (Pitcher 1964: 218). Ogden and Richards’s (1972: 128-129, 146-147) insights into the theory of definition and the meaning of beauty are very suggestive of Wittgenstein’s investigations into the quest for the common property, meaning as use and, most notably, overlapping similarities. According to Glock (1996), a possible source of the idea under consideration could be traced to the French logician Nicod who, in his *La gomtri dans le monde* of 1924, discusses various kinds of geometries and various kinds of similarities. Ginzburg (2004) mentions Galton as the one that may have encouraged Wittgenstein’s reflections on family resemblances. Griffin (1974) informs us that it was probably J. F. Moulton who, in a lecture delivered to the Royal Institution in 1877, was the first to employ the expression ‘family likeness.’

Let us quote relevant passages from several of the aforementioned scholars at length.

“I shall begin with supposing that the letters A, B, C, D, E, denote a series of objects; that A possesses some one quality in common with B; B a quality in common with C; C a quality in common with D; D a quality in common with E: - while, at the same time, no quality can be found which belongs in common to any three objects in the series. Is it not conceivable, that the affinity between A and B may produce a transference of the name of the first to the second; and that, in consequence of the other affinities which connect the remaining objects together, the same name may pass in succession from B to C; from C to D; and from D to E? In this manner, a common appellation will arise between A and E, although the two objects may in their nature and properties, be so widely distant from each other, that no stretch of imagination can conceive how the thoughts were led from the former to the latter. The transitions nevertheless, may have been all so easy and gradual, that, were they successfully detected by the fortunate ingenuity of a theorist, we should instantly recognize, not only the verisimilitude, but the truth of the conjecture…” (Stewart 1818: 262).

“Language, as Sir James Mackintosh used to say of governments, ‘is not made, but grows.’ A name is not imposed at once and by previous purpose upon a class of objects, but is first applied to one thing, and then extended by a series of transitions to another and another. By this process

---

3 Cf. also Baker and Hacker 1983a: 133.
… a name not unfrequently passes by successive links of resemblance from one object to another, until it becomes applied to things having nothing in common with the first things to which the name was given; which, however, do not, for that reason, drop the name; so that it at last denotes a confused huddle of objects, having nothing whatever in common; and connotes nothing, not even a vague and general resemblance” (Mill 1843: 107).

“The separate philosophical ideas (die philosophischen Begriffe) are not anything optional (nichts Beliebiges) or autonomously evolving (nichts Für-sich-Wachsendes), but grow up in connection and relationship with each other (in Beziehung und Verwandtschaft zu einander empowachsen), that, however suddenly and arbitrarily they seem to appear in the history of thought, they nevertheless belong just as much to a system as the collective members of the fauna of a Continent ... The wonderful family resemblance (die Familien-Ähnlichkeit) of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is easily enough explained. In fact, where there is affinity of language (die Sprach-Verwandtschaft), owing to the common philosophy of grammar (die gemeinsamen Philosophie der Grammatik)... it cannot but be that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development (eine gleichartige Entwicklung) and succession of philosophical systems, just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation. It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altaic languages ... look otherwise “into the world,” and will be found on paths of thought different from those of the Indo-Germans and Mussulmans” (Nietzsche 2003).

“Most books on the philosophy of religion try to begin with a precise definition of what its essence consists of. ... The very fact that they are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word ‘religion’ cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name. The theorizing mind tends always to the oversimplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested. Let us not fall immediately into a one sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely ... that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion. If we should enquire for the essence of ‘government,’ for example, one man might tell us it was authority, another submission, another police, another an army, another an assembly, another a system of laws; yet all the while it would be true that no concrete government can exist without all these things, one of which is more important at one moment and others at another. ... And why may not religion be a conception equally complex?” (James 1958: 39).

“The slightest study of the way in which words in ordinary speech gain occasional derivative and supernumerary uses through metaphorical shifts of all degrees of subtlety, and through what can be called linguistic accidents, is enough to show that for a common element of any interest or importance to run through all the respectable uses of a words most unlikely. Each single metaphorical shift does, of course, depend upon some common element which is shared by the original reference and by the reference which borrows the symbol. Some part of the two contexts of the references must be the same. But the possible overlaps between contexts are innumerable, and there is no reason to expect that any word at all rich in context will always be borrowed on the strength of the same similarity or overlap. Thus, BeautifulA and BeautifulB may symbolize references with something in common; so may BeautifulB and BeautifulC, but it by no means follows that these common elements will be the same or that the three symbols will stand for referents which share anything whatever of interest. Yet few writers who concern themselves with such wandering words resist the temptation to begin their inquiry with a search for essential or irreducible meanings” (Ogden and Richards 1972: 128-129).
As evidenced by the above extracts, it should be abundantly clear by now that the conception of family resemblance does not originate with Wittgenstein. The pertinent question at this point is not “Who does it originate with then?” but “Why is it standardly attributed to Wittgenstein?” In the following section, an attempt will be made to uncover the reasons behind this state of affairs.

3. Why Wittgenstein?

Where are we to seek a solution to our problem? Let us first look at the locus classicus of the exposition of the conception in question: *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 65-67. It is best to quote it verbatim:

“65. Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations.—For someone might object against me: “You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language.”

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

66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?— Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all ‘amusing’? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.” (Wittgenstein 1958a: 31-32).

Is Wittgenstein’s account simply more interesting? Indeed, it is. First, let us notice that Wittgenstein attaches high importance to examples. Let us also notice that, as each
and every child knows when asked for the meaning of a word, it is far easier and far more natural to give real life examples than to provide the definition of the meaning of a word. It is far more interesting and much less muddy, too. Not quite incidentally, it is worth noting at this juncture that Wittgenstein (1958a: 83) sees example as clearly superior to classical definition: “If a person has not yet got the concepts, I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples and by practice … Imagine witnessing such teaching. None of the words would be explained by means of itself; there would be no logical circle.” Wittgenstein repudiates the power of Merkmal-definition extolled by Aristotle: no definition (definiens: that which defines the definiendum) can ultimately give the essence of the item subsumed under the definiendum (that which is to be defined). One reason for this is that defining words necessitates further defining of the words in the definiens and thus hopelessly relapses into regressus ad infinitum. On the classical account then, exemplification is optional because a characteristic feature of a concept that can be found in one example can be found in any other example. Newly discovered cases alter only the extension of the concept, not its intension. On Wittgenstein’s account however examples are constituents of a concept (cf. Bensch and Keutner 1978: 146-148)\(^4\). Ergo, Wittgenstein’s examples are not something fortuitous, but something that forms a central part of his idea of family resemblance, which itself constitutes the centre of much of his mature philosophy (cf. Pelczar 2000: 483). This philosophy overrides theories and points towards philosophy as practice: philosophy is not a theory but an activity. Examples happen to be an attractive, yet necessary offshoot of this activity.

Of course, not every example is attractive. Still, there is something extremely compelling about the example of games. Wittgenstein, in discussing the idea of family resemblance, proffers numerous other straightforward examples: description (§ 24 of \(PI\)), number (§ 67 of \(PI\)), good (§ 77 of \(PI\)), language (§ 108 of \(PI\)), reading (§ 156 of \(PI\)), deriving (§ 164 of \(PI\)), to be able to (p. 117 of \(BBB\)), to be guided (p. 119 of \(BBB\)), wishing (p. 19 of \(BBB\)), expecting (p. 20 of \(BBB\)) to name but a few. Scarcely anyone avails themselves of these illustrations. Why? The persuasive game illustration grips masses by virtue of its everyday appeal. It is no specialist knowledge. It is ordinary knowledge that anyone can attempt to test, challenge, verify or falsify. (cf. Stone 1994: 436).\(^5\)

By the same token, the metaphor of family resemblance itself is immediately appealing. Wittgenstein (1958a) made frequent use of analogies, similes, metonymies and metaphors: the metaphor of tools, the building site, the game, chess, holiday, the broom, the family, the thread and fibres, the boundary, the sign-post, the battle, the picture, the artichoke, the labyrinth of paths, the ancient city, the rails, the private diary, the right and left hand, pain, the beetle in the box, boiling water in a pot, the fly-bottle, the vehicle, the symptom, the duck-rabbit, the portrait, the photograph, the cloud and the

\(^4\) Thanks to M. Mierzejewska for her help with the German text.

\(^5\) This is a prime example of Wittgenstein’s (19558a: §116) strategy of bringing “words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” This is not to say that what is ordinary is defective. Far from it. The ordinary, as opposed to the metaphysical, should hold a high position in any enquiry for “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity … The real foundation of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck him” (Wittgenstein 19558a: §129).
drop, again, to name but a few. Why is figurative language interesting? Before we answer this question let us first closely inspect metaphor. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1990), the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one aspect of a thing (usually abstract: target domain) in terms of another (usually concrete: source domain). Let us now examine the following sentences: 1. You’re wasting my time. 2. How do you spend your time? 3. He’s living on borrowed time. 4. Put aside some time for tennis. All of these expressions are examples of the metaphorical concept TIME IS MONEY. This is how we conceive of time in our daily practices, our thoughts and, consequently, in our language: as if it were a valuable commodity. We often find that what we can say about money (something concrete) we can also say about time (something abstract). We understand and experience time as if it were money, something that can be wasted, spent, borrowed or put aside. We say then that one domain, the source domain, is mapped onto another domain, the target domain.

Let us now weigh up the metaphor of family resemblance, where the situation is very much the same. Wittgenstein observed that what can be said about various resemblances between members of a family can also be said about the concept of a game. Here we deal with mappings of what we know about the more tangible source domain (family) and about the more abstract target domain (concept of game or concept of number). It appears that CONCEPTS ARE FAMILIES OF MEANINGS, CONCEPTS ARE FAMILY OF USAGES, CONCEPTS ARE FAMILY OF CASES, CONCEPTS ARE FAMILY LIKENESSES are all metaphorical concepts. They are grounded in our everyday physical and cultural experience. This is clearly seen in the chase for family resemblances when a new baby is born. “Who does he look like?” is one of the first questions the mother is asked. And when a family reunion is organized, the photo albums appear: “the curve of a brow is traced through three generations, caroling calls of ‘You are the image of your Aunt Betty’ circle the hall” (Calvert 1996). We are less or more knowingly using such experiences to conceptualize concepts. Metaphor thus is a type of comparison that obtains between two different domains (cf. Janicki 1999: 98-110). Splicing different domains together generates a magnetic concoction of similarity and difference that exerts a pull on people. Similarity and difference orient us at sensing the unnoticed and at showing disregard for established boundaries. (cf. Brand 2000).

One relevant question needs to be addressed here. Wittgenstein (1958a: 32) used another metaphor to illustrate the same phenomenon; the thread metaphor. “And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.” Why then, one may well ask, the metaphor of family resemblances takes the crown and not the other metaphor? The reason probably lies in the fact that the thread metaphor is not as well experientially grounded as the metaphor of family resemblances; we simply do

---

6 There are also other, more conventional means of explaining why metaphors are interesting. They are not unilateral, but diverse; they do not bring death to words but breathe life into them; they do not present an answer on a platter for us but are like miniature puzzles to solve, they are not black and white but colourful; they do not leave us cold but tickle our senses, they do not need to be highly structured to express intricate thoughts in a succinct way; they excite imagination by pairing two different domains together, and so forth.
not deal with threads and fibres on a daily basis. This may explain why the thread metaphor effects misunderstanding or why this passage is deceptively easy to construe.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{7}} Even Prof. G. Radden admits that the thread metaphor is difficult to understand (personal communication).}

Another factor that can be identified to explain why the idea of family resemblances is popularly associated with Wittgenstein is, banal as it may sound, the fact that he was a great philosopher. For Russell, Wittgenstein was a brilliant successor whose ‘avalanches made his seem mere snowballs’. Others have called him a philosophical battering ram; a man at war with himself; a shining star in the firmament of philosophy; a rabbi; a resource for thinking; a literary patron; an \\textit{éperon} of philosophical thinking; a fountain head of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century English and American philosophy or, last but not least, a charismatic genius, often named alongside Aristotle, Plato, Kant and Nietzsche (Edmonds and Eidinow 2002: 326). A related contributory factor to the ascription of the idea of family resemblance to Wittgenstein has been pointed out by G. Radden (personal communication): Wittgenstein is one of the few European scholars that is known to American scholars. Unfair as it might sound, Wittgenstein is better known in America and Europe than, say, W. James or D. Stewart. At this point one may note that Wittgenstein himself was a terribly interesting figure. His close friend and former student, Norman Malcolm, wrote about him (Edwards 1967: 329): “Wittgenstein’s lectures made a powerful impression on his auditors. They were given without notes or preparation. Each lecture was a new philosophical work … His hearers knew that they were in the presence of extreme seriousness, absorption, and force of intellect.” Wittgenstein’s then hearers were to serve as his future mouthpieces, spreading his ideas and views. Malcolm’s keen observations on Wittgenstein square well with observations made by Pears (1971) who puts down peculiar fascination with Wittgenstein to the highly personal engagement of Wittgenstein in his work. This engagement was zoomed in on ordinary language. It transpired that there was a great deal of inscrutability in the ordinary. Perhaps the brew of the ordinary and the inscrutable is what is so abnormally potent and enthralling about Wittgenstein and thereby his idea of family resemblance, as delivered in the famous passage from \textit{Philosophical Investigations}. It may be worthwhile to emphasize that §§ 66-67 of the \textit{PI} are so incredibly riveting passages that many authors succumb to the temptation to quote them in full,\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{8}} I owe this observation to dr V. Starko (personal communication).} despite the fact that some of these authors consider them a cliché to quote (Jackendoff 1993: 118).

A further factor may be the argument that, to put it crudely, there is often plenty of truth in clichés. The idea of family resemblance has been remarkably productive in science and has inspired work, inter alia\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{9}} Cf. footnote no. 2 in the present paper.}, in the field of philosophy and cognitive linguistics. One of the most recent applications of the conception of family resemblance in philosophy is Glock (2004: 419-444), who employs the family resemblance idea as an auspicious means of analyzing Wittgenstein’s relation to analytic philosophy. Glock holds, however, that rather than using the family resemblance method on its own, we should conflate it with the historical method: “If the family resemblance approach has a shortcoming, it is rather that it cannot stand on its own. For it requires a list of core examples to start out from. And that list must be established either historically or by
reference to universally agreed-on-examples.” With the foregoing caveat, Glock proceeds to apply a tabulated family resemblance technique to demonstrate that Wittgenstein indeed was an analytic philosopher throughout his whole career, against some ‘irrationalist’ interpretations. One of the latest applications of family resemblance idea in linguistics is to provide a quasi theoretical cornerstone for a non-Aristotelian theory of categorization: the prototype theory (Taylor 1990; Kleiber 2003; Cuyckens, Dirven, Taylor (2003); Aarts, Denison, Keizer and Popova 2004). The moral of this paragraph seems palpable now: the nature of things is that truth always finds its advocates.

There is one significant difference between how philosophy and how linguistics embarked on their family resemblance journey. A careful reader will have noticed a gross disparity between the philosophical passages and the linguistic passages in section two. The former are dated 1958, 1967, 1970, 1983, 1995, 2000. The latter are dated 1986, 1987, 1990, 1997, 2003, 2004. It was easy enough to find relevant philosophical literature on family resemblance from the 1950s to the present. Not so with linguistics. There is a good reason for this. The fifties, sixties and seventies were an intense growth period for the generative paradigm in linguistics. This paradigm, often associated with one of its leading proponents, N. Chomsky, views language in terms of “a particular type of a logical system” (Dixon 1963: 71); “an algorithmic system” (Langacker 1988: 4) or “systems of combinatorial mathematics” (Lakoff 1990: 43). With such an assumption, it is no small wonder that recourse should have been taken to highly sophisticated formalism. This approach is not new. It is based upon a line of philosophical thought found in such fine minds as G.W. Leibniz, G. Frege, B. Russell, R. Carnap, D. Hilbert, O. Neurath or L. Wittgenstein as well as linguistic thought found in F. de Saussure, L. Bloomfield, Z. Harris and L. Hjelmslev. (cf. Mizak 2000). Ultimately, this paradigm has its roots in the classical (alias Aristotelian) model of categorization (Taylor 1990). Cognitive grammar, as a viable alternative to the generative model, has been propounded since the end of the seventies by such eminent academics as R. Langacker, Ch. Fillmore, W. Chafe, G. Lakoff, L. Talmy (Geeraerts 1988). The central tenets of cognitive linguistics break the hold on the Aristotelian model and, not least, are entirely consonant with the thought of the later Wittgenstein; cognitive approach “considers discrete categorization based on necessary and sufficient conditions to be cognitively unrealistic, and emphasizes instead a prototype or ‘central tendencies’ model ... It also rejects the distinction between literal and figurative language ... and the adequacy of formal logic to model either thought in general or semantic structure in particular; more specifically, it holds that imagery and metaphor are not peripheral aspects of our mental life, but are in large measure constitutive of it ... Finally, its emphasis on language use and its view of lexical meaning show many parallels to the later Wittgenstein” (Langacker 1987: 5).

At this point, let us pose the question of whether one can envisage the idea of family resemblance within the framework of generative linguistics. To give an answer in the affirmative would be just as misguided, as it would be to claim that Rosch’s cue validity processing model of categorization is conceivable in the times of Aristotle. To put it differently, generative linguists could not have applied the idea of family resemblance to the study of language, as it would have gone against the grain for them. Their central theses (Taylor 1990): defining categories in terms of a conjunction of
Why Wittgenstein?

necessary and sufficient conditions, viewing categories as discrete, well defined entities, making a distinction between essence and accident, an equal degree of salience for all members of the category, importance of precision, literal language and scientific rigour all identify a particular commitment to doing science, which, of necessity, presupposes a particular course of action. Whatever goes against the grain of such course of action is either claimed to lie outside the scope of this science (cf. Kuhn 1996) or, if it does not fit the criteria of the theory, is discarded on the grounds of its being unmanageable, irrelevant or unilluminating (Katz 1966: 68-96). We cannot but agree with Katz that ‘the technical construct’ family resemblance should belong in the basket of what is unmanageable, irrelevant or unilluminating. On the orthodox view then another option was unfeasible. In another paradigm, whose main themes are prototypicality; family resemblances; membership gradience; centrality gradience; conceptual embodiment; functional embodiment; polysemy; metonymic reasoning; absence of literal meaning; basic level primacy; appreciation of the flexibility and creativity in language use (cf. Lakoff 1987), Wittgenstein’s conception of family resemblance occupies a crucial role. In view of the above, two related questions need to be addressed. Why did Wittgenstein’s work begin to be recognized so late in linguistic science? And how did the situation in linguistics help associate Wittgenstein with the concept of family resemblance? An answer to the first question is, as I hope I have shown, connected with the Chomskyan era: the failure of this era with Wittgenstein is linked to the fact that the generative turn was the tradition that was internally consistent with the classical tradition, the very tradition Wittgenstein censured. Small wonder then that there had to be a change of tide in the linguistic climate for Wittgenstein to be appreciated. The favourable climate arrived with the advent of cognitive sciences which share with Wittgenstein their animosity toward anti-essentialism (Rosch and Mervis 1975).

Attention should now be drawn to the fact that Wittgenstein’s attack on essentialism is another important factor which contributes to the fame of his family resemblances (Backer and Hacker 1983). This factor, like all the others, is a multifaceted phenomenon. I begin by saying that Wittgenstein was not the first to mount an assault on essentialism. Popper (1963: 9) strongly criticizes Aristotle for his essentialist theory of definition which plunged the development of thought into confusion and verbiage: “Every discipline, as long as it used the Aristotelian method of definition, has remained arrested in a state of empty verbiage and barren scholasticism, and that the degree to which the various sciences have been able to make any progress depended on the degree to which they have been able to get rid of this essentialist method.” Before Popper, general semanticists wrote in an anti-essentialist vein. In 1933 A. Korzybski published his famous Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics; in 1939 S.J. Hayakawa published his bestseller Language in Thought and Action, where he followed Korzybski in repudiating one of the critical elements of the Aristotelian heritage, that is to say, the confusion of words with things: “The first of the principles governing symbols is this: The symbol is NOT the thing symbolized; the

10 An interesting point of divergence to be noticed between Wittgenstein and cognitive linguistics is that the point of departure for Wittgenstein is an attack on essentialism with the concept of family resemblance as its ramification, whereas the starting point for at least part of cognitive linguistics is the concept of family resemblance followed by anti-essentialism as a consequence.
word is NOT the thing; the map is NOT the territory it stands for.”

Several years later A. Rapaport in an article which appeared in The Use and Misuse of Language (ed. by Hayakawa), wrote: “‘Man is a featherless biped’ is an aristotelian definition. It places man in a class of two-legged animals ... and distinguishes him from other members of that class such as birds (by the qualification featherless). Aside from the fact that plucked chickens and kangaroos are also featherless bipeds ..., such definitions have even more serious pitfalls. Anything can be formally defined whether it exists or not. Furthermore, the class and the distinguishing characteristics, in terms of which aristotelian definitions are made, may be no clearer than the thing defined. If the purpose of definition is to make meaning clear, then many aristotelian definitions fail to do so.” Wittgenstein distinguishes himself from this circle in that he makes use of the notion of family resemblance, to which he opposes the notion of essence.

An intriguing ingredient of Wittgenstein’s attack on essentialism is the fact that it is launched on his earlier philosophy, the philosophy of the Tractatus. In this connection, let us give voice to Wittgenstein’s mouthpiece, Norman Malcolm (Edwards 1967: 335):

“The Tractatus assumes that there is a universal form of language, just as it assumes (6.022) that there is a universal form of number – that which is common to all numbers. The Investigations rejects this assumption. There is nothing common to the various forms of language that makes them language. There is not something common to all language games, just as there is not something common to all games.”

Malcolm maintains that a situation when the same, startlingly original philosopher, having long and painstakingly worked to create two highly influential systems, one of which disclaims the other is “probably unique in the history of philosophy” (Edwards 1967: 334). Pari passu, uniqueness may be another contributory factor to Wittgenstein’s success.

I wish now to ask a question which, prima facie, appears to be irrelevant to the present argument: what are we to say of this uniqueness? Many things, no doubt, but let me limit myself to one point at issue: given the fact that the both systems reject each other, should we look at the Investigations as a self-sufficient work or should we handle it against the background of the Tractatus? It is my contention to say, alongside Glock, albeit for entirely different reasons, that, in light of family resemblances, the Investigations ought to be read against the background of the Tractatus. Furthermore,

13 In doing so, he does not, however, sharply distinguish himself from J. Dewey, who in his Art as Experience (1934) used a related notion of family names to disparage essentialism in aesthetics (cf. Diffey 1973). Neither does he clearly distinguish himself from the already mentioned D. Stewart: “As long ago as 1810, Dugald Stewart argued that there was no common denominator to the things we call beautiful. Professor Brunius sees Stewart as a precursor of Wittgenstein” (Diffey 1973: 105). The dissimilarity of profound consequences between Wittgenstein and, for example, Stewart, Dewey, James comes with the fact that Wittgenstein may have thought all concepts to be family resemblance concepts, whereas the others seem to have applied the idea only to a few general concepts (cf. Bambrough 1961: 214; Lyon 1969: 409 and Woźniak 1990: 20-21).
14 The question is a modest reminiscence of the discussion on the magnitude of the Nachlass for the understanding of the Investigations which took place between H.J. Glock and E. von Savigny (cf. Tomczyk 1998).
Why Wittgenstein?

I would wish to maintain that if one saw all the points we have been examining so far against a certain background, then the celebrity of ‘Wittgenstein’s family resemblances’ would be better understood. Let me explain what I mean in the final section of this paper.

4. Final remarks

There are a number of factors or circumstances that occasioned Wittgenstein’s success: the compelling example of game, ordinary use of language, the appealing metaphor of family resemblance, his being a great and intriguing philosopher, his being better known, his friends, the brew of the ordinary and the inscrutable in his philosophy, riveting passages, productivity of the idea of family resemblance in philosophy and linguistics, the emergence of the cognitive paradigm in linguistics, attack on essentialism, an attack on his own essentialism in the *Tractatus*, uniqueness of this attack. I can go on enumerating other factors or circumstances: Wittgenstein’s oblique style of presentation allows a multiplicity of interpretations; the many ways of interpretation of the concept of family resemblance: cf. Bambrough (1961) with Beardsmore (1992); his influence on Oxford analytical philosophy; the right place: Cambridge in England; the right time: disillusionment with positivism; the right people around him: for example B. Russell; the style of the *Investigations*: bearing a close affinity to Plato’s dialogues or, in one way, to the Bible; the (alleged) resolution of the problem of universals; the application of the idea to *all* concepts; the right languages: English and German.

Which of these contributing factors is the critical factor? None of them. An attempt to discover the critical factor is a wild goose chase. Baker and Hacker (1983b: 185) see the celebrity of the concept of family resemblance in that it “is a forceful challenge to one of the main ingredients of the pervasive Augustinian picture.” This suggestion is however simplistic and itself smacks exactly of what Wittgenstein was hostile towards: essentialism.

Wittgenstein’s condemnation of essentialism, momentous as it is, cannot, on its own, explain the celebrity of family resemblance. Korzybski, Rapaport, Hayakawa, Popper, amongst others, had already attacked the tenets of essentialism. The difference between them and Wittgenstein is that only Wittgenstein offered something in lieu of the venerable *Merkmal*-definition: the notion of family resemblance. However, the notion itself is not sufficient either being prior to Wittgenstein.

So, are *all* of the contributing factors mentioned above critical factors? Definitely not in the conjunctive sense of the word ‘all’. That is to say, none of the factors mentioned above are necessary in the sense that if one of them vanishes, Wittgenstein’s success

---

15 Wittgenstein’s aim, in contradistinction to for example Whewell or James, is, according to Baker and Hacker (1983:185) criticism of a certain dogma, rather than general considerations on categorization, explanation and defining.

16 Thanks to Prof. K. Janicki for a discussion on Popper and Wittgenstein.
vanishes too. That would be a form of essentialism. Rather, I should like to opt for a family resemblance answer to our puzzle. All these factors and circumstances are significant. But, they are significant to varying degrees. Some may be more salient under some circumstances and some may even drop out under some circumstances, without causing Wittgenstein’s success to evaporate. For example, Wittgenstein’s attack on his own essentialism in the *Tractatus* will be of greater consequence to a philosopher than to a linguist. Conversely, the compelling example of game will probably be more appreciated by a linguist than by a philosopher and the factor of the disillusionment with the *Wiener Kreis* may be of no import to a cognitive psychologist whatsoever. In the tabular display below it is clear that there is not one peculiar factor which decides in favour of Wittgenstein’s success. Another thing to be noticed is the fact that it is notoriously difficult to specify to what extent a given factor is significant. Rather than showing whether a factor should be present or absent from a given slot (either-or attitude), I have suggested a degree to which a factor should be present or absent (fuzzy borders attitude).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS - THINKERS</th>
<th>LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN</th>
<th>DUGALD STEWART</th>
<th>JAMES S. MILL</th>
<th>FREDERIC NIETZSCHE</th>
<th>WILLIAM JAMES</th>
<th>OGDEN &amp; RICHARDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>idea of family resemblance</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>to a great extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appealing metaphor</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compelling example of “game”</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>great and intriguing philosopher</td>
<td>definitely yes</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>probably yes</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>riveting passages</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>to a large extent</td>
<td>probably no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>application of the idea to all concepts</td>
<td>probably yes</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably inapplicable</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being widely known</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>probably yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends who helped spread the news</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brew of the ordinary and the inscrutable</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
<td>probably no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>productivity of the idea</td>
<td>definitely yes</td>
<td>difficult to specify</td>
<td>difficult to specify</td>
<td>difficult to specify</td>
<td>difficult to specify</td>
<td>difficult to specify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emergence of the cognitive paradigm</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attack on essentialism</td>
<td>definitely yes</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>difficult to specify</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
<td>to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attack on his own essentialism</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above tabulated list is incapable of showing relationships. It is, however, crucial to draw attention to relationships: it is widely recognized that a thing exerts a greater impact upon us when we compare it with something that is simultaneously similar and different to the thing compared. To spell out exactly what I mean let us imagine two situations. In the first one I look at a face of someone who I see every day. In the second one I look at a face of someone who I last saw 20 years before. The second situation affects us to a far greater extent than the first one. This is probably caused by a complex interplay of similarity and contrast between the face from now and the face from then. As often as not, we do not reflect upon faces we routinely see day after day. The reflection comes upon a comparison between two different states. The more different the states are the more affected we are by them. I daresay that we observe a similar interplay in the points we have reviewed above. There are many of them: the *Tractatus* vis-à-vis the *Investigations*, the generative paradigm vis-à-vis the cognitive paradigm, the demand for ‘essentialist’ Merkmal-definitions vis-à-vis explanation by examples, the determination of concepts by Merkmale vis-à-vis the imprecision of relationships, application of the idea to all concepts vis-à-vis application of the idea to some concepts, the literal vis-à-vis the metaphorical, the ordinary vis-à-vis the metaphysical, multiplicity of interpretations vis-à-vis one interpretation, grasping the Wesen of the thing vis-à-vis family resemblances. In this respect, it seems to me that if the notion of family resemblance stood completely on its own (the face from the first situation), without, for

---

17 This situation is very common in every household. Let a photo album appear and the pictures we get affected by most are the ones which are the photographs of the same person from two very different periods. In like manner, we are greatly affected by the appearance of our favourite actor in a film made 20 years before we came to know him. Barely are we affected by our star’s appearance in two or three moving pictures produced in the same year.
instance, the backdrop of essentialism (the face from the second situation), it would not have affected us to so great an extent. Similarly, it seems to me that the productivity of family resemblance in cognitive linguistics strikes us more once we map it, for example, onto the backdrop of generative linguistics. Accordingly, it appears reasonable to me to conjecture that we are affected by phenomena more if we perceive them in relation to something different and, at the same time, similar. Stewart’s “photograph” indeed managed to capture a valuable thought, if nothing else: there was nothing much to juxtapose it with; there was no background against which the thought stood out. It just stood there. In Wittgenstein’s case, the thought stood out from the contrastive backgrounds against which it was gathering momentum. One noteworthy element of these contrastive backgrounds were the opponents of the thought under consideration, who, by criticizing it, unwittingly did it a great service. The idea was attacked so it had to be defended. If it was found wholly faulty, it would have died a natural death. This has not occurred. Thanks to a combination of multifarious factors and their relations to one another, the idea gained impetus and began to live its own life. Today it is not merely a concept, a conception, a notion, an idea or a metaphor. It has been dubbed into a theory, a doctrine, a guiding hypothesis, an organizing principle, a model, a framework, a paradigm, a methodology, a research tool, a working method and a general rule; we deal with family resemblance (FR) views, FR scores, FR measures, FR terms, FR analyses, FR predicates, FR theorists, FR criteria, FR treatments or FR definitions. Family resemblance can be computed, displayed, misconstrued, generated, applied, exemplified, exhibited and discovered. It has been employed in philosophy, linguistics, psychology, music, art, sociology, religion, anthropology, you name it. Finally, it has grown to be something that Wittgenstein may or may not have envisaged: a fully-fledged family resemblance concept itself.

In closing, I should like to state that those philosophers (e.g. Andersen 2000) and linguists (e.g. Wierzbicka 2004) who maintain that Wittgenstein was the first to either introduce or advance the concept of family resemblance are wide of the mark: the concept of family resemblance is prior to Wittgenstein. Nonetheless, it is certainly accurate to associate *Wittgenstein* with the concept under investigation. I hope to have shown that this is deservedly so. There is, however, no single one-strand factor for why this should be so. Rather, there are a host of multifarious family resemblance factors that interplay to contribute to what I have labeled Wittgenstein’s success.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{18}\) Not quite incidentally, beginning with 1980s, the notion of family resemblance seems to have been acquiring a “public domain status”. In coming to be employed in philosophical literature not only as a well-established-in-tradition concept, but also as a research tool, it has, prima facie, less and less been connected with Wittgenstein. The “broken connection” is only nominal. The concept has obtained, to use a linguistic category, a zero derivation. This *status quo* is a matter of course.
References


