

# Semantic Analysis in J. L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*

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The work of the philosopher John Langshaw Austin (1911–1960) has strongly influenced pragmatics in applied linguistics. The use of his work in this field is usually concerned with his lecture series ‘How to Do Things with Words,’ converted into a book of the same name by Urmson and Sbisà from his original lecture notes after his early death. A similar process was undertaken by G. J. Warnock with Austin’s lecture series ‘Sense and Sensibilia.’ However, the latter is seldom cited in applied linguistics due to its focus on the philosophy of perception rather than the philosophy of language.

In this paper, I analyse the book *Sense and Sensibilia* and its position from an applied linguistics perspective. The reason is that although Austin’s two lecture series superficially appear in sequence, given their history, they influence each other. The first series is ‘Sense and Sensibilia,’ primarily a critique of A. J. Ayer’s *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, a book first published in 1940. This series is then followed by Austin’s lectures on the philosophy of language, culminating in ‘How to Do Things with Words.’ While the initial lectures that Austin gave on the philosophy of perception pre-date those that he gave on the philosophy of language, he developed his ideas in both areas over many years. As Warnock (1964) observes, Austin revised and re-wrote his notes on ‘Sense and Sensibilia.’ Warnock (1991) also states that there is no way of knowing whether Austin ever intended to publish them. The first notes date back to 1947, followed by sets in 1948 and 1949. Austin then made insertions and corrections to the last of these in 1955, and a final set was written in 1958. Regarding the notes for ‘How to Do Things with Words,’ Urmson (1975) reports that “Austin gave a course of lectures called ‘Words and Deeds’ from 1952 to 1954, partially re-writing the notes as he repeated the course.” He then prepared notes for his famous lecture series at Harvard University ‘How to Do Things with Words’ in 1955. There is an overlap in the period that Austin lectured on the philosophy of perception and the philosophy of language. Austin’s ideas on language and his thoughts on perception intertwine.

One of the reasons that analytic philosophy has had an effect on applied linguistics is the focus on language; the two schools of thought relevant to this paper are logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy. The former is briefly described in the background, while the latter is illustrated in the main body through an analysis of seven chapters of *Sense and Sensibilia*.

In the final sections of the paper, the link to applied linguistics is considered. While *How to Do Things with Words* is associated with pragmatics, due to its focus on speech acts, *Sense and Sensibilia* links strongly to semantics because of Austin’s close examination of common usage. What also emerges from the latter is Austin’s focus on the process of analysis rather than a final product.

## BACKGROUND

### Austin's Publications

Although he was one of the preeminent philosophers of his time, during his life, Austin published very few articles on philosophy. These are contained in *Philosophical Papers*, alongside some article manuscripts that were published after his death. The posthumous books based on his lecture series are *Sense and Sensibilia* and *How to Do Things with Words*. In addition, Austin's lecture notes for the two latter works are held in Oxford University's Bodleian Library. Strum (2000) divides Austin's works into two groups: "The first consists of a meticulous examination of four profound problems: other minds, freedom of the will, our knowledge of the external world and the nature of truth" (p. 166). The second group is directed towards "speech acts." *Sense and Sensibilia* is listed in the first group,

It is also important to note that in creating the book *Sense and Sensibilia*, Warnock (1964, p. vii) states that "it must be carefully borne in mind that the text which follows, while based on Austin's notes, contains hardly any sentence which is a direct transcription from his own manuscript." Warnock knew Austin and had attended his lectures. The book is an imaginative re-creation, from the notes, of the lecture content and style.

### Logical Positivism

The main target of Austin's chapters in *Sense and Sensibilia* is Ayer's *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, published in 1940. Ayer is best known for the development of logical positivism at Oxford University, with his most famous book being *Language, Truth and Logic*, published in 1936. Ayer had travelled to Austria and met members of the Vienna Circle, writing his book after returning to Oxford. Drawing on the ideas of the Circle, he was interested in separating language into meaningful and meaningless statements. To do this, he focused on statements that can be found true or false. These he considered meaningful, and Ayer (1971, p. 9) separated his definition of such statements into two types: analytic propositions and empirical propositions. Analytic propositions are true by virtue of their own internal properties (Chapman, 2009) while empirical propositions can be found true or false through a process of verification. An example of an analytic proposition is "All sharks are fish" (a shark is, by definition, a type of fish). In contrast, examples of empirical propositions are "There are sharks in the Dead Sea" (false) and "There are sharks in the Mediterranean" (true). These propositions can be found true or false through empirical research. Ayer's subsequent book *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* has a focus on empirical propositions and is oriented towards the philosophy of perception. Regarding the 'Sense and Sensibilia' lectures, Rowe (2023) notes Austin's view of Ayer's book:

At the beginning of the initial session, he would sometimes hold up a book at arm's length, between thumb and forefinger, and announce: "This is the Foundations of Empirical Knowledge by Professor Alfred Ayer – I'm not going to criticize it, I'm going to shred it." (p. 445)

The book *Sense and Sensibilia* has 11 chapters. The first chapter is primarily an introduction, with the body of arguments being produced in the following ten chapters. The main focus of my paper is on chapters two to seven, which primarily cover *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge's* Part I (The Argument from Illusion), chapter 1 (Exposition of the Argument), which consists of 11 pages.

In Chapter 1 of his book, Ayer (1964) argues that we never directly perceive material things such as chairs, tables, pictures, and books. To support this position, he cites a variety of ways in which we can be “deceived by our senses,” calling this the argument from illusion:

This argument, as it is ordinarily stated, is based on the fact that material things may present different appearances to different observers, or to the same observer in different conditions, and that the character of these appearances is to some extent causally determined by the state of the conditions and the observer. For instance, it is remarked that a coin which looks circular from one point of view may look elliptical from another; or that a stick which normally appears straight looks bent when seen in water; or that to people who take drugs such as mescal, things appear to change their colours. The familiar cases of mirror images, and double vision, and complete hallucinations, such as the mirage, provide further examples. Nor is this a peculiarity of visual experiences. The same thing occurs in the domain of the other senses, including the sense of touch. It may be pointed out, for example, that the taste that a thing appears to have may vary with the content of the palate; or that a liquid will seem to have a different temperature according as the hand is feeling it is itself hot or cold; or that a coin seems larger when it is placed on the tongue than when it is held in the palm of the hand; or, to take a case of complete hallucination, that people who have had limbs amputated may still continue to feel pain in them. (p. 3)

Ayer (1964) then gives the example of a straight stick looking bent in water, stating that one of the appearances of the stick is “delusive” (p. 4) because it cannot be both straight and crooked. He then notes that the observer is nevertheless seeing something and this he calls a “sense datum” (p. 4). He gives two further examples: seeing a mirage and seeing his image in a mirror. He argues that sense data may be “veridical” (p. 5) or “delusive” (p. 5), and that there is no qualitative difference between the two. He notes that objects appear smaller from a distance and, if an observer is walking towards an object (p. 8), assuming the sequence of perceptions end in one that is veridical, there will be a set of delusive perceptions as the object gets larger and larger. He similarly cites the way an object changes colour with the change in light (p. 8).

## ANALYSIS

In this paper, the main aim is to establish Austin’s linguistic method of analysis and its link to applied linguistics. Austin’s semantic analysis emerges through his critique of *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* in chapters 2 to 7 of *Sense and Sensibilia*. His method also appears in his articles, and I cite from these where they help illustrate the method.

### Broad Approach

Austin’s (1964) linguistic approach is outlined in chapter 7 of *Sense and Sensibilia*, in which he states the care with which we should approach ordinary words, even if they need a little bit of tidying up:

But still, it is advisable always to bear in mind (a) that the distinctions embodied in our vast and for the most part, relatively ancient stock of ordinary words are neither few nor always obvious, and almost never arbitrary; (b) that in any case, before indulging in any tampering of our own account, we need to

find out what it is that we have to deal with; and (c) that tampering with words is what we take to be one little corner of the field that is always *liable* to have unforeseen repercussions in the adjoining territory. (p. 63)

This respect for ordinary language usage, similarly argued in Austin's (1979) 'A plea for excuses,' is a major reason why he is described as an ordinary language philosopher. Ayer has chosen perception as the area of study, which is tied up with a particular discourse. For Austin, commonly used terms relating to perception need to be gathered, compared, and analysed, particularly in relation to the situations they describe.

### Specific Analysis

A further point to be kept in mind is Austin's wariness about moving from the particular to the general. Chapters 2 to 7 in many ways reflect Austin's criticism that Ayer has jumped from a few specific instances of perception to a generalization in the form of "sense data." As Hampshire (1969, p. 36) notes, the "naïve dichotomy of sense datum and material language... is inadequate to the complexity of experience" with a similar point being made by Berlin (1973). Warnock (1969) reports that "Austin's own view was that nothing but particular problems was seriously worth discussing at all." Austin considers that specific problems need to be carefully examined along with the language in which they are described. Most of the first seven chapters of *Sense and Sensibilia* involve careful analysis of the examples and the key terms that are used in Ayer's book.

### Chapters 2 to 7

In chapter 2, Austin argues that Ayer sets up the term "material thing" as a foil for "sense datum." He cites Ayer's use of chairs, tables, pictures, books, flowers, pens, and cigarettes, which he describes as "moderate-sized specimens of dry goods." A second issue is Ayer's (1964) use of being "deceived by our senses":

I recognize indeed that people are sometimes deceived by their senses, but this does not lead me to suspect that my sense-perceptions cannot be trusted, or even that they may be deceiving me now. (p. 1)

Austin (1964) argues that "being deceived by your senses" is a metaphor and that Ayer follows this with the term "sense-perceptions," implying that "there is an *intermediate* entity *always* present and informing us about something *else*" (p. 11). In ordinary language, Austin notes that the use of "being deceived by our senses" is rarely used. He then contrasts "Our petrol gauge sometimes deceives us" with "Our crystal ball sometimes deceives us," arguing that the use of the metaphor is appropriate in the former but inappropriate in the latter. This imagining of different situations to illustrate meanings is often used in *Sense and Sensibilia*, and it is best described by Austin (1979) in his article 'The meaning of a word' in relation to the term "racy":

... I might do what we may call 'demonstrating the semantics' of the word, by getting the questioner to *imagine*, or even to actually experience, situations which we should describe correctly by means of

sentences containing the words ‘racy’, ‘raciness’, &c., and again other situations where we should not use those words. (p. 57)

The use of imaginary situations is one of Austin’s most used techniques and the way in which he tends to settle the hash of a word by finding distinctions. His most famous example is the contrast between “by mistake” and “by accident” (see appendix).

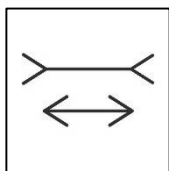
Regarding deception, Austin (1964) further notes that it takes place against a background of non-deception. A case of deception can be identified by checking it against normal cases, and he makes the distinction between unusual experiences and ordinary perception, noting that cases of ordinary perspective and reflections in mirrors are not considered deception. Further, he notes that “even the plainest man” would want to distinguish between the following:

(a) cases where the sense organ is deranged or abnormal in some way, (b) cases where the *medium* – or more generally, the conditions – of perception are in some way abnormal or off-colour, and (c) cases where the wrong inference is made or a wrong construction put upon things. (p. 13)

Austin observes that things may go wrong in lots of different ways. He then cites Ayer’s (1964) contrast between the plain man and philosophers, who “are not for the most part prepared to admit that such objects as pens or cigarettes are ever directly perceived.” Austin then considers what it means to perceive something directly or indirectly in everyday language and discusses periscopes and dots on radar screens.

Austin’s (1964) analysis continues in chapter 3, in which he considers the difference between illusion and delusion. He notes three of Ayer’s examples that are picked out for detailed discussion: the refraction of a stick in water, mirages, and mirror reflections. Regarding refraction, Ayer (1964) states that “at least one of the visual appearances of the stick must be delusive.” Austin focuses on the term “delusive” and the use of the term “delusion” in contrast to “illusion,” noting that the latter term is often used with “optical illusions” such as the Müller-Lyer diagram, in which two lines of equal length look unequal (Figure 1), or an illusionist’s tricks such as a headless woman on stage. He contrasts this to cases of delusion, which he considers in many cases to be about disordered beliefs, such as delusions of persecution, but in cases of perception, he gives the example of seeing pink rats due to alcoholism.

The linguistic analysis continues in chapter 4, in which Austin considers the difference between “looks, appears, and seems,” then in chapter 5 he analyses “veridical” and “delusive” perceptions. In chapter 6, he considers the meaning of “sense data” and in chapter 7, he considers the variety of ways in which “real” is used.



**FIGURE 1. Müller-Lyer Diagram**

## THE RELEVANCE OF AUSTIN'S APPROACH TO APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Although *Sense and Sensibilia* is primarily a critique of Ayer's *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* and is concerned with the philosophy of perception, in many ways it offers a better insight into Austin's linguistic approach to a field of study than *How to Do Things with Words*, and it also acts as a complement to it. While *How to Do Things with Words* is used to develop the concept of the speech act, composed of locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions, parts of *Sense and Sensibilia* have a strong focus on usage and how to select words. As noted above, Austin's work, along with Searle's (1969; 1979), is usually cited in relation to pragmatics, and Huang (2014: p. 2) gives a working definition of this as "the systematic study of meaning by virtue of, or dependent on, the use of language," with its central topics including "implicature, presupposition, speech acts, deixis, and reference." *How to Do Things with Words*, with its focus on speech acts, is clearly linked to this field, and it has influenced the focus on language as communication (Widdowson 1978; Widdowson, 1996; Howatt with Widdowson, 2004). Yule (1996) and Thomas (1995) dedicate whole chapters to speech acts, drawing heavily on Austin's terminology.

Semantics is described by Huang (2014: p. 4) as "the study of meaning in abstraction from the speakers' intentions, their psychological states and the cultural and social aspects of the context in which a linguistic expression is used." *Sense and Sensibilia*, with its concern for accuracy of language is linked to semantics, and this can be seen through an analysis of Austin's method. In chapters 2 to 7 of *Sense and Sensibilia*, three key points emerge:

### 1. Clearly identify your field of discourse for investigation

One of Austin's criticisms of Ayer is that his field is too broad, so that the overall analysis masks the variations in the situations under study. The situations that Ayer cites are very varied, including mirages, the effects of drugs such as mescal, perspective, refraction, and mirror images. In contrast, Austin's article 'A plea for excuses' in *Philosophical Papers* is a careful exploration of a tight area of study. Urmson (1969) describes this as choosing an area of discourse.

### 2. Ordinary language and technical language

Austin's approach to a field is to carefully explore terms that are part of general usage, and to distinguish those as accurately as possible in the situations and contexts in which they are used. This also includes multiword terms; in Austin's analysis, "sense data" and "sense perception" are technical terms that are highly ambiguous and difficult to define. In the field of perception, ordinary language would relate to taste, touch, sound, sight, and smell. Once the focus is on these more everyday terms, the problems of analysis begin to emerge. To add to Austin's argument, it should also be noted that perception may go beyond the traditional five senses. For example, Sachs (1986: p. 47) discusses proprioception, awareness of one's own body, and describes a patient who lost this sense.

Urmson (1969) notes that Austin's way of collecting key terms could be achieved in three ways: (1) by free association through the use of one's own language competence, (2) by the reading of relevant documents, and (3) through the use of a dictionary. With (1), Austin tended to work with others and discuss the word possibilities. For (3), Austin (1979) describes his process in 'A plea for excuses':

First we may use a dictionary – quite a concise one will do, but the use must be *thorough*. Two methods suggest themselves, both a little tedious, but repaying. One is to read the book through, listing all the words that seem relevant; this does not take as long as many suppose. The other is to start with a widish selection of obviously relevant terms, and to consult the dictionary made under each; it will be found that, in the explanations of the various meanings of each, a surprising number of other terms occur, which are germane though of course not often synonymous.... It will generally be found that the family circle begins to close, until ultimately we come only on repetitions. (p. 187)

### 3. Ordinary language and fine distinctions

Austin (1964) is particularly critical of using ordinary language in technical ways that do not connect well with their ordinary usage. This runs throughout his critique of the *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*. Linked with this is a careful discussion of situations and how words might be appropriately used to describe them; Pitcher (1973) reports that Austin felt we “ignore usage at our peril.” Austin (1964, p. 63) argues that our common stock of words contains many distinctions which are not very obvious but are “never just arbitrary.” As Urmson (1969) notes, once a set of words has been established, a team can then create circumstantial stories and dialogues to decide in which situation a term can or cannot be used.

*Sense and Sensibilia* and *How to Do Things with Words* are both slightly unusual because they are effectively lecture series that reveal processes of analysis; Austin’s interest was in helping students to think clearly about a topic. One of the challenges of *Sense and Sensibilia* is that it is mainly a critique of another work. However, the clarity of the writing and the use of situations relating to sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste can provide rich opportunities for encouraging students to think through the words relevant to a focus of study and analyse usage. Particularly with advances in technology, terms can be gathered through the creation of corpora and corpus analysis software, but the terms still need to be analysed carefully, and developing a process of making fine distinctions can help provide insight into a field of study. While teachers often do illustrate words through imaginary situations, the contrasting of similar terms to make fine distinctions may be less regularly used.

It should also be noted that Austin’s method is not without weaknesses, and in *Sense and Sensibilia*, his focus tends to be at the sentence level, working with very fine distinctions in the philosophy of perception. In applied linguistics, consideration is usually given to the negotiation of meaning (Widdowson, 1990), and for everyday interaction, such fine-tuning may not be necessary. For language classroom use, careful consideration needs to be given on how Austin’s semantic analysis can be used.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE ARTICLE

The analysis presented here only concerns chapters 2 to 7 of Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia*. They cover the first ten pages of Ayer’s *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* and clearly illustrate Austin’s process of semantic analysis. The article does not cover Chapter 10, which provides an interesting critique of Ayer’s distinction between “sense-datum language” and “material object language,” and offers interesting possibilities in considering the limits of language. However, it has not been possible to consider the chapter in an article of this length.



This paper has been written from an applied linguistics perspective, but the content inevitably lies in its border areas with analytic philosophy. While *How to Do Things with Words* clearly links to pragmatics, particularly through the work of Widdowson (1978), it is harder to show the relevance in semantics of *Sense and Sensibilia* without considering the argument from illusion. Although this requires outlining a philosophical argument, I hope the clarity of Austin and Ayer's English and the examples involved have not been an impediment to readers of the paper.

Although *Sense and Sensibilia* provides an imaginary recreation of Austin's lecturing style and analytical process, it is also worth noting that in many ways the words of *Sense and Sensibilia* are Warnock's, not Austin's. An examination of the original notes would have given an indication of the scale of the recreation, but it has not been done for the article.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that in relation to applied linguistics, *Sense and Sensibilia* is a useful complement to *How to Do Things with Words*. While the latter has been used in the field of pragmatics, the former connects to semantics and reveals important aspects of Austin's approach to a field of discourse. The advantage of looking at both books is that they are essentially series of lectures that reveal the way to approach problems in philosophy, revealing a linguistic method that is useful for applied linguistics.

Perhaps the most important part of the first seven chapters of *Sense and Sensibilia* is the seeking of fine distinctions in ordinary language that help to reveal the complexity of human experience. Gathering important terms in an area of discourse is the initial starting point of Austin's linguistic approach. In our twenty-first century age, the resources for gathering words in an area are much more extensive than simply scanning a dictionary and can range from corpus construction to the use of term gathering through Artificial Intelligence such as ChatGPT. Having done this, the next stage is to make clear the fine distinctions between terms through imaginary situations and dialogues.

One issue with *Sense and Sensibilia* is that it is a critique of Ayer's *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* and this makes it challenging for a reader, who needs to gain some feeling for both books. However, it is written in a clear English and is full of examples of the way distinctions are made in relation to clear examples. The terms that are discussed in the first seven chapters all appear in the first 10 pages of Ayer's book, which outlines "the argument from illusion." From an applied linguistics and language teaching perspective, these could easily be turned into pedagogical tasks that illustrate Austin's approach to language.

Finally, it should be noted that both *Sense and Sensibilia* and *How to Do Things with Words* were published posthumously by philosophers who felt that Austin's work should be disseminated. Austin's lectures were designed to get students to think; he wanted to stop them from being "chuckle-headed," and in many ways, the books reveal more about the process of analysis than a finished product. They reveal steps in a developing exploration and illuminate how to approach an area of discourse. Tasks that can be used pedagogically to make Austin's linguistic approach more accessible in a classroom setting will be considered in a subsequent article.

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**APPENDIX. Austin's (1961) imaginary situation to distinguish between "by accident" and "by mistake"**

You have a donkey and so have I, and they graze in the same field. The day comes when I conceive a dislike for mine. I go to shoot it, draw a bead on it, fire: The brute falls in its tracks. I inspect the victim, and find to my horror that it is *your* donkey. I appear on your doorstep with the remains and say – what? 'I say, old sport, I'm awfully sorry, &c., I've shot your donkey *by accident*'? Or 'by mistake'? Then again, I go to shoot my donkey as before, draw a bead on it, fire – but as I do so, the beasts move, and to my horror yours falls. Again the scene on the doorstep – what do I say? 'By mistake'? Or 'by accident'? (p. 133)

## ABSTRACT

### Semantic Analysis in J. L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*

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While J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* has had an important effect on applied linguistics in the field of pragmatics, his *Sense and Sensibilia* has been less utilised. While this is partly because its focus is on the philosophy of perception rather than the philosophy of language, in many ways it reveals more of Austin's linguistic approach. In addition, the two works are based on lecture series by Austin that overlapped in terms of the time they were given, and ideas in one area interlink with ideas in the other.

*Sense and Sensibilia* is a work of analytic philosophy and is essentially a critique of A. J. Ayer's *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*. In this article, Austin's linguistic approach is considered through an analysis of chapters two to seven, in which he examines key terms that Ayer uses in relation to 'the argument from illusion.' Austin's stress on the importance of linguistic accuracy and fine distinctions that exist in ordinary language are highlighted in these chapters, as well as his wariness of technical terms and generalisation that may mask important distinctions.

Regarding applied linguistics, chapters 2 to 7 of *Sense and Sensibilia* provide insight into Austin's stress on the importance of semantics in ordinary language and act as a complement to his work on speech acts in *How to Do Things with Words*, an important component of pragmatics in applied linguistics. In the final sections of the article, Austin's linguistic approach is summarised in relation to the gathering of key terms in an area of discourse, and the discussion of fine differences between those terms.

## 要 旨

### J. L. オースティン『知覚の言語－センスとセンシビリアー』の意味論的分析

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J. L. オースティンの『言語と行為』が語用論の分野で応用言語学に重要な影響を与えたのに対し、『知覚の言語』はあまり活用されてこなかった。これは本書が言語哲学よりも知覚哲学に焦点を当てているためでもあるが、本書は多くの点でオースティンの言語学的アプローチをより明らかにしている。加えて、この2つの著作はオースティンの講義シリーズを基にしており、その講義が行われた時期が重なっているため、一方の領域の思想と他方の領域の思想が相互にリンクしている。

『知覚の言語』は分析哲学の著作であり、基本的には A. J. エイヤーの『経験的知識の基礎』に対する批判である。本論文では、第2章から第7章までの分析を通してオースティンの言語学的アプローチを考察し、その中で「幻想からの議論」に関連してエイヤーが使用する主要な用語を検証する。これらの章では、オースティンの言語的正確さの重要性と、通常の言語に存在する微細な区別が強調されており、また重要な区別を覆い隠す可能性のある専門用語や一般化に対する警戒心も強調されている。

応用言語学に関しては、『知覚の言語』の第2章から第7章までが、オースティンが普通言語における意味論の重要性を強調していたことを洞察し、応用言語学における語用論の重要な構成要素である『言語と行為』における発話行為に関するオースティンの研究を補完する役割を果たす。本論文の最終セクションでは、オースティンの言語学的アプローチが、ある談話領域における重要な用語の収集と、それらの用語間の微細な差異についての議論に関連して要約されている。