Chapter 4

The Castle and the Paradox of Ostensive Definition

Just as most criticism of The Trial addresses Josef K.’s guilt, and the majority of examinations of The Metamorphosis and “The Judgment” concentrate on Gregor’s metaphorical meaning and the reasons for Georg’s jump respectively, the scholarly canon of Das Schloß (The Castle) often returns to variations on two basic themes: Why is the community of the Castle so closed off, and why is the character of K. so obtuse? Why, as John Zilcosky asks, “does Kafka choose to make the faceless hero of his most mysterious novel a land surveyor,” given that “K. never actually does any surveying in the novel (he doesn’t even possess surveying equipment)”?

Why, asks Mark Harman, did Kafka write K. as flatly and opaquely as possible—deliberately, through a series of relentless deletions of K.’s inner monologue, effectively “stripping” K. of “‘interesting’ traits that a more conventional novelist would choose to emphasize”?

Indeed, as Elizabeth Boa has aptly pointed out, the variations on these themes are multitudinous, and equally plausible, for “just as the castle buildings present different aspects depending on who is looking at them, so the reader . . . will find different meanings depending on choices of interpretive strategy.”

As I have discussed previously in light of the Tractatus, I believe that these questions about The Castle, while they have inspired some truly spectacular insights into the text and Kafka’s “late” oeuvre, also obscure another question that has been largely ignored. Instead of asking why the Castle village is so closed to outsiders and why K. is a land surveyor who surveys no land, why not ask how? To some extent, Sussman has done this already in his exegesis of Kafka’s “aesthetics of fragmentation,” arguing that a fragmentary aesthetic is present “when The Castle surveys the gaps and misprisions in the bureaucratic approaches linking the power-nexus to the village below it.”

I would like to take Sussman’s idea a step further, and the following exploration uses the earliest passages of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations to do just that. In the Investigations’ introduction, Wittgenstein insists once again that anyone who reads his volume as a philosophical text is misguided. While the Tractatus is allegedly for entertainment purposes only, the Investigations are to be leafed through as “an album,” a collection of “landscape
The following chapter serves as both an introduction to the form and early content of Wittgenstein’s major late work, and a demonstration that Wittgenstein’s challenging collection of landscape sketches will help us to chart the plight of Kafka’s strangely embroiled land surveyor (Landvermesser; due to this chapter’s focus on the ability of this single word to mean, I will refer to K.’s job title primarily in German).

**Reconceiving the Central “Problem” of The Castle: Is He or Isn’t He?**

A strange man arrives in a remote village late one night and goes to sleep on a straw mattress in the bar of a dingy inn; upon being roused and asked to leave because he lacks the proper permissions, he insists he is there for a reason, and does so by naming himself official land surveyor (Landvermesser) hired by the Count: “Sonst aber lassen Sie es sich gesagt sein, daß ich der Landvermesser bin, den der Graf hat kommen lassen” (“Otherwise let it be said that I am the land surveyor for whom the Count has sent”) (GW 4:11). This claim is first disputed: “Ich habe es ja gesagt,” says one of his interrogators, “keine Spur von Landvermesser, ein gemeiner lügnerischer Landstreicher, wahrscheinlich aber ärgeres” (“I told you . . . no trace of ‘land surveyor,’ a common lying vagrant, probably worse”) (4:12). But immediately thereafter, the telephone rings and K.’s self-identification is confirmed: “Ein Irrtum also? Das ist mir recht unangenehm. Der Bureauchef selbst hat telefoniert? Sonderbar, sonderbar. Wie soll ich aber jetzt dem Herrn Landvermesser erklären?” (“A mistake? But this is quite awkward for me. The Chief telephoned himself? Remarkable, remarkable. How should I explain this to Herr Land-Surveyor?”) (4:13). And yet, when Kafka’s final novel cuts off mid-sentence after nearly 400 pages, its protagonist has failed to survey a single square meter of land. Thus, it should be unsurprising that one of the most enduring and oft-cited interpretations of The Castle is that of Walter Sokel nearly half a century ago, who suggests that K. is an impostor:

K’s reaction allowed two possible interpretations. The first was that he was not called at all, and his claim to have been called would
simply be seen as a bold attempt to force himself into the job, as attempted blackmail. Or he was indeed called for the job, but under such dubious circumstances and so tied up in contradictions that he [had unwittingly just put himself up for a tremendous struggle going forward]. In both cases, one thing was clear. He was a clueless victim of a miscarriage of justice, of the Castle’s sudden change of mind.

Sokel effectively turns the entire basis of interpretation of this novel on its head—for if K. is not an innocent victim of an untenable bureaucracy, what is he? In collecting and processing the vast array of critical turns encompassing even Kafka’s least-studied works, Stephen Dowden pays particular attention to Sokel’s argument, positing that in this view “K. is not so much a rebel as a fraud,” and thus “the novel’s basic theme is K.’s attempt to make everyone, including the reader, believe that justice is the problem and that the injustice inflicted upon him is his motive in his struggle with the castle.”

And yet:

One of the few things we can know for certain is that K. is a liar. He claims to have left behind a wife and child. He also says he is going to marry Frieda. He has to be lying about one or the other, unless he is a remorseless bigamist. Sokel somewhat arbitrarily decides that K. is lying about the wife and child, arguing that it is a part of K.’s need to invent a past for himself.7

There are indeed many ways for K. to be an impostor—he may be, as Sokel suggests, an opportunistic stranger with no land-surveying experience, one who merely claims (behauptet) to be the Landvermesser, as K. himself seems to acknowledge in attempting to see his rude initial treatment through the eyes of the villagers: “Das Geweckt-werden, das Verhör, die pflichtgemäße Androhung der Verweisung aus dem Grafschaft habe K. sehr ungnädig aufgenommen, übrigens wie sich schließlich gezeigt hat vielleicht mit Reicht, denn er behaupte ein vom Herrn Grafen bestellter Landvermesser zu sein” (“Being awoken, the interrogation, the compulsory threat of double-checking his credentials from the Count’s people—all this had put K. in a very ungracious mood, possibly justifiably so, as he claimed to be the land surveyor ordered by the count”) (4:12).

K. may also indeed be some sort of Landvermesser, but not the “real” Landvermesser, actually sent for by the actual Count Westwest, to survey this particular castle. Sokel’s suggestion remains so compelling because, as Dowden has shown us, K. certainly does act like an impostor: he does not recognize his “assistants” Artur and Jeremias, he neither possesses any surveying equipment nor seems to know what to do with it, and agrees somewhat incomprehensibly to take a position as unpaid school janitor after taking up with Frieda.8 And thus, for Dowden “Sokel is certainly right that K.’s claim to
be a surveyor summoned by the castle is untrustworthy.” However, as much as I reluctantly admit the “impostor thesis” is quite likely the strongest one, Dowden makes the excellent point that “it undermines the novel’s fundamental hovering between possibilities,” instead positing the impostor thesis as fact, and thus discounting “Kafka’s cunning ambiguity.”

To resist this “cunning ambiguity” is to resist what may be the most important element of Kafka’s last novel. What I mean is that K. is probably an impostor, but this is actually the wrong focus to be granting The Castle. To show why, I would like to introduce in earnest Wittgenstein’s later work, which, not unlike The Castle, is quite a bit longer than its author’s previous work, as well as more sweeping, more intricate, and quite a bit more unreliable, all also qualities we might correctly attribute to The Castle. I do of course see the clever companionship between the Investigations and The Castle because of the similarity between Kafka’s Landvermesser and Wittgenstein’s Landschaftsskizze, both of which appear in off-kilter contexts: the former surveys no land, the latter contains no land. But beyond this clever connection, the Investigations also highlight another aspect of Kafka’s place in the modernist canon, one that is decidedly more radical than the skepticism we have seen so far. For the Investigations’ first major issue, the paradox of ostensive definition (§§1–28), is played out clearly and with remarkable repercussions in the fictional world of Kafka’s Castle.

Ostensive definition (hinweisende Definition) is the action of pointing to something and/or using a particular sort of word—“this” or “that,” for example—in order to name it, and in order for others to understand its name in a consistent manner. Wittgenstein insists this entire concept is an illusion. The initial conflict of The Castle is also, when we think about it, one of purported ostensive definition. That is: is K. or isn’t he the “real” Landvermesser? But with the help of the Investigations we can dissolve this apparent problem and reveal the real problem it obscures. That is: it is not whether or not K. is the “real” Landvermesser that is truly at issue even if he is probably not.

The New Problem: (What) Does Landvermesser Mean?

Our first step is to discuss the progression of the paradox of ostensive definition itself, which begins with the Investigations’ opening remark, which Wittgenstein takes from Augustine’s Confessions. Allegedly, when humans invented language, they gave every word a meaning:

Die Wörter der Sprache benennen Gegenstände—Sätze sind Verbindungen von solchen Benennungen.—In diesem Bild von der Sprache finden wir die Wurzeln der Idee: Jedes Wort hat eine Bedeutung. Diese Bedeutung ist dem Wort zugeordnet. Sie ist der Gegenstand, für welchen das Wort steht. (§1)
The words of language signify objects—propositions are relationships between such significations.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the idea that every word has a meaning. This meaning is allocated to the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

In this view, the primitive human language is one of pure ostension: “This . . .” (person points to something) “is called a [name]” (says something). Thus the “given” view of language development is one of successful semiotic acts—semiotic acts such as, to use a random example, the verbal indication of oneself, ich, the conjugated verb that designates self-identification, bin, and the predicate noun Landvermesser.

Speaking of which, let us now finally begin to see how problematic this ostensive act comes across in Kafka’s text. Of the 117 times this word appears in the 1994 Pasley edition of *Das Schloß*, five appear in acts of direct naming of K., the first being the aforementioned endeavors not to be ejected from the inn (“daß ich der Landvermesser bin, den der Graf hat kommen lassen”). Another important instance also occurs early on, as Schwarzer asks, “Wie soll ich das dem Herrn Landvermesser erklären?” This is a question that causes K.’s attention to pique: “K. horchte auf. Das Schloß hatte ihn also zum Landvermesser ernannt” (“K.’s ears pricked up. So the Castle had referred to him as the land surveyor”) (4:13). With some help from a mysterious voice on the telephone K. appears to have named himself, and then been named, with success. This pattern repeats moments later, when K. walks himself to exhaustion in the snow and seeks shelter in one of the overcrowded village houses: “‘Ich bin der gräfliche Landvermesser,’ sagte K., und suchte sich so vor den noch immer Unsichtbaren zu verantworten. ‘Ach, es ist der Landvermesser,’ sagte eine weibliche Stimme und noch folgte eine vollkommene Stille’” (“‘I am the official land surveyor,’ said K., and searched for the person to whom he was answering, though that person remained invisible. ‘Ah, it’s the land surveyor,’ said a female voice, which was followed by total silence”) (4:20). So what can be the problem with the ostensive gesture here? It seems to have worked fine.

But according to Wittgenstein, that is exactly the problem—just because everyone seems to understand that K. is the Landvermesser now doesn’t mean that they actually know what he is supposed to be doing. In fact, soon it becomes obvious that this act didn’t work at all the way K. hoped. Interestingly, the onslaught of changes in parameters that occur as K. gets to know the village better contain the same structure as what in his text Wittgenstein calls a Sprachspiel, or language-game, a method repeated throughout the Investigations.

It is certainly important to examine the Sprachspiel phenomenon in greater detail before we progress, although I also return to it in the following chapter when discussing “In the Penal Colony.” For now, it is necessary to know that Wittgenstein dismantles (his version of) the Augustinian theory piece by piece, until we are left with a paradox, and calls this a “game.” He also calls the “game” the “method of §2,” so named after the second remark, which sets
forth a “primitive language” between a builder and his assistant that contains only the words for cube, pillar, slab, and beam: “Würfel,” “Säule,” “Platte,” and “Balken.” The builder, named A, calls out each word when he needs the correspondingly shaped block; the assistant, B, “bringt den Stein, den er gelernt hat, auf diesen Ruf zu bringen” (“brings the stone that he has learned to bring at this particular call”) (§2). In the remarks that follow, Wittgenstein reveals that the assistant is not learning the four-word “language” of the builder, but rather simply being trained—and, he continues, the way a child learns a first language is indeed through this kind of training (“Abrichten,” §5).

As Wittgenstein demonstrates here, a “language-game” (“Sprachspiel,” §7) presents a scenario with clearly defined parameters and context; the game’s creator uses it to offer a “thesis” about how language works, and bases this apparent thesis on the evidence in this particular scenario. The “game” takes off when the creator then alters either the parameters or context little by little until the thesis is no longer valid—in §§2–5, Wittgenstein does this by reminding us that we are mistaken in conceiving of the four-word “language” as a complete model for a system of how language is acquired, as this “model” is rather simply a description of a single case (“Ja, brauchbar, aber nur für diese eng beschriebene Gebiet, nicht für das Ganze, daß du darzustellen vorgabst” [“Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe”] [§3]).

Now we can address the question of how this echoes the form of Kafka’s text. In The Castle, after that first fateful night in the inn, by the time K. engages again in pure self-identification it is over 300 pages later, when he is deeply embroiled in local drama—and thus his parameters have changed dramatically. K. has been hired (and fired) as school janitor; his engagement with Frieda has stagnated; he has become a player in the drama of the shunned Barnabas family. It seems like an afterthought at this point that he has not surveyed a single hectare of land as he narrates his own Castle history to the marginally sympathetic Olga: “Ich war hier zwar als Landvermesser aufgenommen, aber das war nur scheinbar, man spielte mit mir, man trieb mich aus jedem Haus, man spielt auch heute mit mir, aber wie viel umständlicher ist das” (“I was taken on here as land surveyor, but that was only appearance. They toyed with me, they drove me out of every house, they’re playing with me still, but how much more intricate it’s become”) (4:289). K. seems here to be under the misguided impression that the word Landvermesser as he was originally named when he was “taken on” has a meaning with consistent and wide applicability, rather than the narrowly circumscribed case of his first night in the village. Further, in addition to K.’s initial instance of self-naming and the morphing it undergoes, there are numerous other instances in which K. refers to himself as a Landvermesser casually, and others do so, and the meaning of the word seems wildly inconsistent at best and utterly opaque at worst. For example, early on, in response to the landlady (Wirtin, also sometimes translated as “innkeeper’s wife”), who makes the first of many claims
that the Castle folk do not have use for outsiders, K. insists self-referentially that sometimes they do: “zum Beispiel mich, den Landvermesser” (“for example, me, the Land Surveyor”) (4:15).

From Wittgenstein’s point of view, something like this should come as no surprise. To see why this is, let us return to the original Sprachspiel of §2, which takes the parameters “language with four words” and thesis “we define things in a first language by pointing to things and assigning meaning to them.” Wittgenstein then widens the scope of the idea of “ostensive language learning” just enough to demonstrate its inherent weakness: in order to define something ostensively, we have to have ostensive words, words such as “this” and “that one”—and how do we ostensively define those (or, for that matter, “those”)?

Wird auch “dorthin” und “dieses” hinweisend gelernt?—Stell dir vor, wie man ihren Gebrauch etwa lehren könnte! Es wird dabei auf Örter und Dinge gezeigt werden,—aber hier geschieht ja dieses Zeigen auch im Gebrauch der Wörter und nicht nur beim Lernen des Gebrauchs.— (§9b)

Are “there” and “this” also learned ostensively?—Imagine how one might perhaps teach their use! It would be by pointing to things and places—but here the pointing occurs in the use of the words and not only in learning the use.—

In the case of the Landvermesser problem, the ostensive phrase is ich bin—but how do we know that the villagers and K. both conceive of that phrase in the same way? One of Wittgenstein’s interlocutory voices argues that we could just narrow the parameters of the game again and argue that ostensive language only works for nouns or certain other parts of speech that are not themselves ostensive in purpose—but, counters the voice most critics attribute to Wittgenstein’s straw man, how does that explain a child understanding the meaning of “these”? Wittgenstein ends up with the idea that there is no such thing as pure ostension, and that all of what we misleadingly call ostensive definition is actually, in its own way, explanation:

Was bezeichnen nun die Wörter dieser Sprache?—Was sie bezeichnen, wie soll sich das zeigen, es sei denn in der Art ihres Gebrauchs? Und den haben wir ja beschrieben. Der Ausdruck „dieses Wort bezeichnet das” müßte also ein Teil dieser Beschreibung werden. (§10a)

What do the words of this language mean?—What they mean. What is that supposed to show, if not the kind of use they have? And that we’ve already described. The expression “this word means that” would also have to become part of this description.
When we are pointing to something or otherwise signaling that “this is called a [that],” or “I am called a land surveyor,” the target of our explanation has to know already the logical form of an ostensive gesture and that, further, the use of this logical form is itself an act of description, explanation, and not pure ostension.

And indeed, the chief problem in K.’s case is that while “Herr Landvermesser” effectively becomes his name, at no point does anyone in the novel do what must be done to clarify what a Landvermesser actually is: explain it. Instead, we have one instance of so-called pure ostension after another, bare naming with no context. Unsurprisingly, these instances do not help clarify K.’s place in the village in the least—even when, as at the beginning, they are supposed to vindicate K. This original instance would seem to offer sufficient proof that (1) a land surveyor was ordered to this village, and (2) K. is that land surveyor, by honest or dishonest means—and yet, it fails to. Yet another way K. is “legitimized” (and yet not explained) as Landvermesser comes through Frieda, who names him upon first meeting him (“so weiß ich doch alles, Sie sind der Landvermesser” [“everybody knows, you’re the land surveyor”] [4:51]), and whose fall from grace stems directly from her involvement with K.—her public utterance—twice, for emphasis—of “Ich bin beim Landvermesser! Ich bin beim Landvermesser!” (“I’m with the land surveyor!”) (4:56). It is almost like that sex act is the final seal of his name—but this name refers only to “the man who committed this act with Frieda”—because that is all reference can do; contrary to Frege, but in the later Wittgenstein, reference no longer works.

Here instead is how reference “works,” according to the Investigations’ §28, which contains a three-stage language game that culminates in the sentence to which most philosophers point as the paradox of ostensive definition in its pithiest form. The first stage in the game brings us a voice attesting the thesis that will eventually be dismantled:

Man kann nur einen Personennamen, ein Farbwort, einen Stoffnamen, ein Zahlwort, den Namen einer Himmelsrichtung etc. hinweisend definieren. Die Definition der Zahl Zwei “das heißt ‘zwei’ ”—wobei man auf zwei Nüsse zeigt—is Vollkommen exakt.

One can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a color, the name of a material, a number, the name of a geographic direction, etc. The definition of the number two, “that is called ‘two’”—at which point one points to two nuts—is entirely exact.

But is that really so? A second voice begs to differ by expanding the parameters set out by the first voice. How, the second voice begs to differ, is the person receiving the assertion “this is two nuts” supposed to know that the quantifier “two” applies to all groups of two things, and not just nuts?
—Aber wie kann man denn die Zwei so definieren? Der, dem man die Definition gibt, weiß ja dann nicht, was man mit “zwei” benennen will; er wird annehmen, daß du diese Gruppe von Nüssen “zwei” nennst!

—But how, then, can “two” be so defined? The person to whom one gives the definition doesn’t know what one wants to call “two;” he will suppose that “two” names this group of nuts!

There is no reason the word “two” can’t be misunderstood to apply only to nuts—to understand that it should quantify everything, one must first understand what quantification is. Thus ends the game, with the paradox of ostensive definition: “Die hinweisende Definition kann in jedem Fall so und anders gedeutet werden” (“Ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in every case”). This leaves us back where we started, wondering how—or if—ostension works.

Also back where he started, interestingly enough, is K. in his own bizarre journey of ostension. Let us rejoin him in his final instance of self-identification as Landvermesser, which takes place just before the novel cuts off in mid-sentence: the landlady, at once K.’s biggest detractor and greatest purveyor of information, asks him, equally existentially as factually: “Was bist du denn eigentlich?” (“What are you really?”). To which K. answers: “Landvermesser.” The landlady’s rebuttal to this is one many of us have been leveling silently since the novel’s opening: “Was ist denn das?” (“What is that?”) (4:455). And it is Kafka’s narration hereafter that marks one of the finest examples of the “cunning ambiguity” Dowden attributes to him. The landlady, it seems, finds K. to be the same sort of impostor Sokel does—but the choice as to whether or not to accept K.’s version of events is cleverly left out on Kafka’s part, forcing us to put all of our still-feeble understanding into the word Landvermesser, which, in all these instances, K. has done a spectacularly poor job of defining. As Wittgenstein has said, what we mistake for ostension is really explanation; explanation, not the repeated acts of naming, is what could allow us to know what exactly K. conceives of as a Landvermesser. And this explanation fails to satisfy the landlady regardless, for reasons we can and will never know. It is as if the word Landvermesser meant something different in every case.

Wittgenstein clarifies the paradox of ostensive definition in §30, when he explains that its problem is that it only “works” when its target already knows what role the word or expression being “shown” takes in a language:

Man könnte also sagen: Die hinweisende Definition erklärt den Gebrauch—die Bedeutung—des Wortes, wenn es schon klar ist, welche Rolle das Wort in der Sprache überhaupt spielen soll.

... Man muß schon etwas wissen (oder können), um nach der Benennung fragen zu können. (§30a, b)
One could also say: ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word, when it is already clear what role in the language overall the word should play.

... One must already know something (or know how to do it), in order to be able to ask about what it’s called.

Now that this game has been played in full, we can see that (Wittgenstein’s version of) Augustine’s “Lernen der menschlichen Sprache” presents not a disputable philosophical thesis about how first-language learning proceeds, but rather an illusion about what first-language learning is:

And now I believe we can say: Augustine describes learning human language as if a child were to come to a foreign land and not understand its language, as if it had a language already, just not this one. Or we could also say: as if the child could already think, just not speak. And “to think” means here to talk to oneself.¹²

Therefore, the problem with ostensive language learning is that in order to “learn” a language you already have to know enough about how it works that you can correctly figure out its constituent grammatical parts. It seems, then, as if Wittgenstein’s first paradox has actually offered a solution to the problem of why K.’s self-naming has not worked in the way we (or he) have hoped or expected: K., who already ostensibly speaks his own language and thus understands how language works, simply needed to have treated communication in the village like second-language learning. He should have understood, after the tenth misunderstanding, that his interpretation of the ostensive phrase “Ich bin der gräfliche Landvermesser” did not mean in the same way their understanding of the same phrase meant. He should have made an effort to learn their language, which, though it sounded and seemed to be the same as his, was actually foreign.

And this is where the exploration of Kafka and the Investigations becomes truly remarkable, and far more than an unconventional explicative tool for literature: we have thus far seen how Wittgenstein’s paradox helps us to see why K. has so many problems understanding his new community—but what we might not expect is that we can also use The Castle to illuminate Wittgenstein’s issues with ostensive definition. That is: in creating the exclusive,
preclusive, deliberately misunderstanding-provoking world of the Castle village, Kafka has unwittingly added a remarkable dimension to Wittgenstein’s *Sprachspiel*: if one can learn a foreign language ostensively, that would mean that the foreign language *itself* contained the concept of ostension. Remarkably, the system of communication in the Castle village does not—or at least not in any conventional way. What we will now see, then, is that not only does the Wittgenstein text offer a novel interpretation of the Kafka text, but also that the Kafka text actually illuminates the Wittgenstein text.

### The Reverse-Ostensive Systems of the Castle

The obtuseness of the Castle’s communicative system is a common and rich focus of Kafka criticism, including some interesting work from outside German studies, such as that of historian Mark E. Blum, who frames K.’s troubles with the villagers in terms of Max Weber’s distinction between *Gemeinschaft*, “community,” and *Gesellschaft*, “society,” with a *Gemeinschaft* being an organic collective made up of people who have substantive commonalities, and a *Gesellschaft* an artificial construct. For Blum, the onus is at least partially on K., who fails to “commit himself fully to be a member of this community.”

But there is a direct relationship between the presence of a community, or in this case the alleged commitment to that community, and how that community is also what Wittgenstein would call a “language community,” or *Sprachgesellschaft*.

As an outsider, K. has no possible way to understand how anything in the Castle village means, because the Castle’s system of meaning does not itself mean in anything resembling the way K.’s own language does. In fact, he has no potential to understand what anything there means without somehow learning the village’s own backward system of ostension. And this proves near impossible, both because K. understandably does not seem to be aware of the paradox of ostensive definition on his own, and because, more simply, the Castle “system” is deliberately obtuse. A closer examination of why and how the Castle “system” rejects established assumptions about how communication works will adequately round out our survey of the paradox of ostensive definition as it appears in *The Castle*.

Kafka has already brought to life Wittgenstein’s revelation that we cannot understand what a word means through pure ostension. If K.’s self-identification as *Landvermesser* is one thing, it is pure ostension devoid of context, and it fails spectacularly. What remains to be seen is Kafka’s depiction of a culture in which the *very concept* of ostension itself is undermined—a depiction that in many ways serves to make Wittgenstein’s point better than he himself did. For the village effectively demonstrates the most extreme case of this paradox of ostensive definition—that is, when ostension has been demystified and use made purposefully inscrutable, language is all
but meaningless and communication with outsiders who depend upon the illusion of ostension thus impossible.

This is most certainly the case in K.’s dealings with every single person in the village—he simply cannot communicate with anyone, even when he believes he can. Furthermore, this delusion is his real problem, not the perceived bureaucratic injustice (for to claim injustice one would have to understand what was just). Wittgenstein addresses this issue in §31 with the example of an attempt to explain the pieces of chess—if a person simply points to the king and says, “That is the king,” this will make sense only to a person who understands all the rules of chess except what the king looks like or what he does. Or take the case of someone who doesn’t understand chess at all—the only way she would be able to understand an explanation of the king (“Das ist der König. Er kann so und so ziehen, etc. Etc.” [“That is the king; he can move like such and such, etc.”]) would be if she already knew what a board game of this sort was, and had observed previous games with rules with understanding (“mit Verständnis”). Now it is easy to see that, as Wittgenstein has put it, “Nach der Benennung fragt nur der sinnvoll, der schon etwas mit ihr anzufangen weiß” (“Only someone who already knows what to do with it can significantly ask a name”) (§31). Now imagine attempting to explain a king to someone who comes from a culture where the entire concept of representative board games has never existed: where would one even begin? And now imagine refusing to explain a king to that same person, whose understanding of a king, it turns out, is necessary for her survival. This takes Wittgenstein’s game to a fascinating new extent, and it would be the closest possible scenario to the one in which K. finds himself. Thus it is impossible for K. to parse any of the regulatory minutiae in the village because that would be like giving a king to the person above and forcing him to play.

And while K. never manages to survey a single piece of land, readers have much to gain from a survey of the anti-communicative landscape of the village. Through a systematic failure to parse the unparsable signals K. encounters—from a Castle that isn’t one, to helpers that hinder, to scrambled telephone lines and roads that refuse to lead anywhere—we can see the full might of the ostension-challenging language community of the village.

Case Study 1: Schloß, Dorf, Gehilfe

No study of The Castle and ostensive definition can exclude the odd way in which both the word Schloss (in Kafka’s spelling, Schloß) first appears in the text—leaving aside even the fact that in German it means both castle and lock, a double denotation of barricading exclusivity. What I would like to concentrate on here is the triumphant lack of pictorial fulfillment our first “picture” of the Castle brings: there is, in fact, no discernible castle in this castle: “es war weder eine alte Ritterburg, noch ein neuer Prunkbau, sondern eine ausge-dehnte Anlage, die aus wenigen zweistöckigen, aber aus vielen eng aneinander
stehenden niedrigen Bauten bestand” (“it was neither an old knight’s castle nor a newer opulent building, but rather an expansive compound composed of two-story buildings all built very close to one another”) (4:16). Initially, K. thinks, mistakenly, that a traditional castle is present, only impossible to make out because it is obscured by fog: “Vom Schloßberg war nichts zu sehn, Nebel und Finsternis umgaben ihn, auch nicht der schwächste Lichtschein deutete das große Schloß an” (“Of the castle hill one couldn’t make anything out; it was surrounded in fog and darkness, and indeed the large castle failed to be illuminated by even the weakest flare of light”) (4:9). Instead, this fog and darkness merely obscure an alleged castle that is itself impossible to see as a castle; instead it is only the peculiar little buildings, so that to a stranger no castle appears whatsoever: “hätte man nicht gewußt das es ein Schloß ist, hätte man es für ein Städtchen halten können” (“were one not to know it was a castle, one could easily have taken it for a small city”) (4:6). In fact, the only way to know what the word Schloß means in this context is to be part of the Castle apparatus itself, to “come from the Castle,” as so many villagers seem to do. What’s more, as we and K. both learn—in the novel’s most important sentence—and as the schoolteacher explains: “zwischen den Bauern und dem Schloß ist kein Unterschied” (“there is no difference between the peasants and the Castle”) (4:19).

How can the castle equal the village? This is an unexpected referential equation indeed, one that seems to defy the act of reference itself; this is an act echoed formally in K.’s fruitless attempt to find the castle using the village roads that never actually lead to it:

Die Straße nämlich, diese Hauptstraße des Dorfes führte nicht zum Schloßberg, die führte nur nahe heran, dann aber wie absichtlich bog sie ab und wenn sie sich auch vom Schoß nicht entfernte, so kam sie ihm doch auch nicht näher. Immer erwartete K., daß nun endlich die Straße zum Schloß nicht entfernte, so kam sie ihm doch auch nicht näher. (19)

This street in fact, this main street of the village, did not lead to the Castle hill; it led only in its general direction, but then as if on purpose turned away, and if this did not necessarily lead away from the Castle, it didn’t lead any nearer to it either. K. always expected that the street, in the end, wouldn’t separate him from the Castle entirely, and yet on it he did not draw any closer.

Instead of leading to the castle, these roads lead elsewhere and nowhere—this is not unlike K.’s (and our) expectation that the word Schloß point to something approximating a traditional picture of a castle. But a traditional system of reference is nowhere to be found. It seems instead to have been deliberately and categorically rejected, leaving both K. and the reader bereft
and at the mercy of the actions of a system that nobody from outside it is allowed to understand.

And yet, that does not stop us from trying. This system, as best we can tell, seems to encompass a three-part structure of anti-ostension, meaning that the triad works in place of the ostensive gesture in the way that the villagers communicate, and further that none of its three parts functions in a correctly ostensive fashion. First: as we have seen, neither the physical castle nor the word Schloß points to any traditional castle structure in K.’s expected sense of the word; just as the physical castle is indiscernible from the physical village, the word points only to the word Dorf, which itself points rather tautologically back to the word Schloß, and thus expresses only the collection of ramshackle buildings and the insistent insularity of the inhabitants. This defiance of the act of picturing returns at a pivotal moment in the narrative, as the landlady reveals to K. her previous affair with Klamm and shows him a photograph that does not depict what it appears to depict:


“A young man,” said K. “Correct,” said the landlady, “and what is he doing?” “I believe he is lying on a plank, stretching himself out and yawning.” The innkeeper’s wife laughed. “That is quite incorrect,” she said. “But here is the plank and here he lies,” K. insisted. “Look closer,” said the innkeeper’s wife, annoyed, “is he really lying down?” “No,” said K. now, “he’s not lying, he’s floating and now I see that it’s not a plank at all, but rather probably a cord, and the young man is doing the high jump.”

The landlady is kind enough here to force K. through an interpretive act that could greatly help him understand the systems of the community he seeks to join, if only he would pay more attention. For in the looping discovery of what the picture “really” shows—a high jumper rather than a man reclining, effectively the opposite of its original impression—perhaps the landlady is showing K. how to understand not just the castle’s photographs, but its people. Perhaps the act of referential ostension works here after all—just in an opposite sort of way.

Opposite ostension is a theory that seems to be fully supported, in fact, by the peculiar way the Castle inhabitants demonstrate the use of the word
Gehilfe. In German, as in English, the word for “assistant” contains the word for “help” inside it; any German speaker would assume that an assistant assists, **ein Gehilfe hilft**. In *The Castle* this will turn out very much not to be the case. This leaving aside the phrase “meine alten Gehilfen,” which signifies only the lie that it is (again lending credence to the K.-as-impostor theory), as K. has quite obviously never seen either Artur or Jeremias before:


> “Who are you,” he asked and looked from one to the other. “Your assistants,” they answered. “These are the assistants,” the innkeeper confirmed quietly. “How?” asked K. “You are my old assistants, whom I sent for and whom I expect?” They nodded.

K.’s reaction to this is, again, this sort of pure-ostension-by-the-seat-of-its-pants that we have seen in Kafka before: specifically, we have seen it in a *Dienstmädchen* with no name who becomes “Rosa” after the narrator defines her, Goethe-style, as a rose about to be plucked (“A Country Doctor”). In a slightly different way—K. seeks, unsuccessfully, to exploit Artur and Jeremias, whereas the country doctor was at least passively concerned with Rosa’s virtue—the Kafkan protagonist is very much making things up as he goes along, allowing his prior use (which he mistakes for a universal rule) of the gesture of ostension to create, ever so briefly, a reality where there is none: with “real” assistants, K. must then be the “real” *Landvermesser*, and his designation of Artur and Jeremias as “my old assistants” gestures weakly and shakily in that direction.15 This impulse makes sense in a way—as nothing in the castle village has made sense to K. up until this point, he seems to see no reason why he can’t just fudge his way into some assistants—but, in the end, his act of what J. L. Austin might call “illocutionary” ostension fails—Artur and Jeremias come from the Castle, and accomplish precisely the opposite of their name: “aber die Gehilfen . . . hinderten ihn daran durch ihre bloße aufdringliche Gegenwart” (“but the assistants . . . hindered him in this, simply by way of their meddlesome presence”) (4:58).

Interestingly enough, it is not simply because the assistants are impish man-children that they fail to assist K. in the way he believes he needs to be legitimized in the village—it is, again, because K. himself fails to understand the upside-down way in which the word *Hilfe* in the village actually works. Like *Schloß*, it points not to the definition with which the average German speaker is familiar, but instead to another, haphazard and undermining form of “assistance,” one that appears in K.’s meaning system to be hindrance, but that may very well according to Castle doctrine be helping.
But, despite the clues K. receives, it is necessarily impossible for him to understand this particular Castle doctrine—because, in effect, the cardinal rule of this doctrine is that it distrusts outsiders to the point of subverting their assumptions about how language works. We might now say that K. must simply connect the opposite signification of the Klamm figure to the opposite signification of the word *Gehilfe* and conclude that things in the village simply mean the opposite of his original referential expectation. But Wittgenstein would caution us severely, and remind us that what we have here is not a blueprint for a general form of Castle reverse ostension, but two particular cases that bear a “family resemblance” (“Familienähnlichkeit”) to each other (§§65–81). To assume that a causal connection between them could solve the puzzle of the Castle’s system would be to make a grievous error, as for every instance of opposite ostension he encounters, there is at least one competing instance in which the Castle culture undermines the act of reference in a completely new way.

**Case Study 2: Telephones, Letters, Explanations**

Several of exactly these instances occur when K. encounters three separate modes of communication in the village—the telephone, the written dispatch, and the act of explanation (which Wittgenstein has said all purported acts of “ostension” actually are). Unsurprisingly, each of these acts of purported communication actually undermines it rather than enabling it. As we have seen, a telephone conversation is the basis of K.’s first interaction—and altercation—with the officials of the Castle: Schwarzer makes a call to check out K.’s story; that story is at first roundly dismissed (hearing the laughter over the line, etc.), and then, in a separate call, unexpectedly confirmed (4:12). An unsuspecting outsider would assume, first, that the phone call was directed at the Castle itself; and, thereafter, that the second phone call came from the recipient of the first phone call. But these would be substantial misapprehensions based on a false understanding of how communication in the village works—just like roads that do not lead to the expected destination, and words that do not point to the expected definition, telephone lines again do not lead in a direct or expected fashion, providing another fascinating structural echo of the village’s inscrutable system.

Instead of a “direct line” to the Castle, telephone “communication” there goes into a confusing void that seems designed specifically not to reach anyone directly. This Sussman attributes to Kafka’s “aesthetics of confusion,”16 an apt designation when attempting to parse the scene in which the mayor “clarifies” how the telephone works:

“Und was das Telefon betrifft . . . Es gibt keine bestimmte telefonische Verbindung mit dem Schloß, keine Zentralstelle, welche unsere Anrufe weiterleitet; wenn man von hier aus jemanden im Schloß
anruft, läutet es dort bei allen Apparaten der untersten Abteilungen oder vielmehr es würde bei allen läuten, wenn nicht, wie ich bestimmt weiß, bei fast allen dieses Läutwerk abgestellt wäre. Hie und da aber hat ein übermüdeter Beamter das Bedürfnis sich ein wenig zu zerstreuen—besonders am Abend oder bei Nacht—und schaltet das Läutwerk ein, dann bekommen wir Antwort, allerdings eine Antwort, die nichts ist als Scherz.” (4:91)

“And as to the telephone . . . there is no direct telephone connection with the Castle, no central location where our calls go. If we want to call someone in the Castle, all of the telephones in the lowest departments ring, or rather they should ring, but the ringer has been disabled on most of them. But now and then an overtired official will let his work go a bit—especially in the evening or late at night—and the ringer goes off, and we get an answer. However, this answer is usually nothing more than a joke.”

Effectively, the initial call “proving” K.’s job was little more than a prank—which, because of its structural signals and the assumptions created by the existence of a telephone altogether, K. (and we) assumed instead was a sincere acknowledgment of credentials. Once again, K. is precluded from knowing this; whether the purpose of this preclusion is deserved punishment for his impostorish derring-do or undeserved punishment for a mild-mannered “actual” Landvermesser does not matter. What matters instead is: there is no way for K. to understand what it means to telephone somebody if, to echo the words of Wittgenstein, he does not understand what the gesture of telephoning actually entails.

Further, explains the mayor, not unlike the photo where Klamm originally appears to lie prone on a bench, “Alle diese Berührung sind nur scheinbar” (“All these contacts are only apparent”) and, further, “Alle diese Äußerungen haben keine amtliche Bedeutung” (“All these appearances have no official meaning”) (4:90, 92). And, further still, in what is tantamount to the mayor outright admitting that the village rejects the act of ostension: “Sie haben darin recht, daß man die Äußerungen des Schlosses nicht wortwörtlich nehmen darf” (“You are correct that one should not take the appearances regarding the Castle literally”) (4:92).

The telephone was a rather newfangled device at the time Kafka wrote The Castle, and thus the idea that its lines reach arbitrary destinations is not terribly far-fetched even to a reader who still expects shades of realism in Kafka’s work. The same cannot be said for the paper letter, at this time by far still the most popular and relied-upon means of distance communication, one that any Kafka enthusiast knows played a role in his life whose importance cannot be exaggerated (he sometimes sent two letters to Milena Jesenská in one day). And yet, we see once again that letters—especially official letters,
the currency of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy—do not seem to serve their expected purpose, instead working once again to muddle communication rather than enhance it.

One major example of this in *The Castle* is K.’s peculiar “communication” with Klamm, the highest-ranking Castle official that anyone in the village knows. One might wonder why K. simply doesn’t just give up, given how many words and gestures do refuse to mean what he expects them to—but remember, the reason he is so tempted to view these modes the way he wants to is that they use so many words and conventions he believes to be universally referential within his language (presumably German). Thus, because K. speaks German and the innkeepers also speak German, there is no discernible reason for him not to expect to be able to speak directly to Klamm. Instead, Klamm is and remains unavailable, even with K.’s various entreaties to him, and the “responses” they provoke. And further, from the content of these “responses,” it is actually impossible to determine whether they are indeed responses or simply prewritten letters to anyone who happens by claiming to be a *Landvermessener*, as they begin “Herr!” and contain neither K.’s name (initial) nor any identifying details of his predicament as cuckold and school janitor. Take for example, K.’s first letter from Klamm, which he takes to be official confirmation of his position. Klamm writes:


“You have, as you know, been hired into the Count’s service. Your nearest superior is the superintendent of the village, who will explain to you the conditions and particulars of your position, and to whom you will also be responsible for reporting. Nevertheless, I will also not lose sight of you. Barnabas, the bearer of this letter, will report to you now and then learn of your wishes and communicate them back to me. You will find that I am always ready to be of assistance to you, as much as this is possible. I endeavor to have satisfied workers.”

Despite the letter’s confusing lack of specificity (“in die herrschaftlichen Dienste”), K. takes it for official Castle correspondence—another mistake, as according to the mayor that letter is more of a personal letter, which carries both more and less significance than would an official one. Explains the mayor:
“Dieser Brief ist überhaupt keine amtliche Zuschrift, sondern ein Privatbrief. Das ist schon an der Überschrift ‘Sehr geehrter Herr!’ deutlich erkennbar. Außerdem ist darin mit keinem Worte gesagt, daß Sie als Landvermesser aufgenommen sind, es ist vielmehr nur im allgemeinen von herrschaftlichen Diensten die Rede und auch das ist nicht bindend ausgesprochen, sondern Sie sind nur aufgenommen ‘wie Sie wissen,’ d.h. die Beweis lasst dafür daß Sie aufgenommen sind, ist Ihnen auferlegt. . . . daß Sie, ein Fremder, das nicht erkennen wundert mich nicht. Im ganzen bedeutet der Brief nichts anderes als daß Klamm persönlich sich um Sie zu kümmern beabsichtigt für den Fall, daß Sie in herrschaftliche Dienste aufgenommen werden.” (4:89–90)

“But this letter is not at all official correspondence, but rather a private letter. That is apparent in the salutation ‘My dear Sir!’ Besides this, it doesn’t say anywhere that you have been taken on as land surveyor, the language in it is much more general about ‘the Count’s service.’ And even this isn’t binding language; rather, it says you’ve been taken on ‘as you know’; that is, the proof that you’ve been taken on at all lies with you. . . . That you, a stranger, don’t recognize this is no wonder. On the whole this whole letter means nothing other than that Klamm has the intention of looking out for you, should you be taken into official service.”

Here the mayor outright says that K. as an outsider has no way of seeing how, and thus also what, the letter means— it turns out that the letter actually “means” quite a bit as a personal letter, but there is no way K. would have known that: “Ein Privatbrief Klamms hat natürlich viel mehr Bedeutung als eine amtliche Zuschrift, nur gerade die Bedeutung die Sie ihm beilegen hat er nicht” (“A private letter from Klamm has, of course, far more meaning than an official correspondence, just not the meaning that you think it has”) (4:90). Thus the phrases for “official letter” and “personal letter” join the growing cohort of words and gestures that defy K.’s expected meaning—that, again, seem to be, as Wittgenstein would put it, variously interpretable in every case (and most definitely differently interpreted in this specific one).

Speaking of the mayor, let us not forget the curious set of letters that seem to have brought about K.’s predicament in the first place: there was the letter claiming the village did have need of a land surveyor, even though the village professes no need for one: “Vor langer Zeit, ich war damals erst einige Monate Vorsteher, kam ein Erlaß . . . daß ein Landvermesser berufen werden solle. . . . Dieser Erlaß kann natürlich nicht Sie betroffen haben” (“Long ago, I had only been mayor for a month, a notice came . . . that we should hire a land surveyor. . . . This notice could obviously not have been the one you got”) (4:76). Then there was the subsequent letter claiming they were
mistaken—which apparently reached the wrong department (“B,” rather than the originating department, which the mayor calls “A” [4:79]).

As neither letter seemed to have reached its destination, this results in the final and most intimate instance of anti-communication in *The Castle*: the act of face-to-face direct explanation, which instead actually works to obscure the act of explanation. Not unlike the painter Titorelli’s “explanation” of the modes of acquittal in *The Trial*, the mayor most certainly fails to explain to K.’s satisfaction the predicament in which he finds himself (if, indeed, he is an actual land surveyor who was actually summoned to the Castle; this scene provides the most convincing evidence of Kafka’s masterful ambiguity). The mayor professes to tell K. the “unangenehme Wahrheit” (“uncomfortable truth”) of his situation, which is this:

> “Sie sind als Landvermesser aufgenommen, wie Sie sagen, aber, leider, wir brauchen keinen Landvermesser. Es wäre nicht die geringste Arbeit für ihn da. Die Grenzen unserer kleinen Wirtschaften sind abgesteckt, alles ist ordentlich eingetragen, Besitzwechsel kommt kaum vor und kleine Grenzstreitigkeiten regeln wir selbst. Was soll uns also ein Landvermesser?” (75)

“You are hired as land surveyor, as you say, but unfortunately we don’t need one. There wouldn’t be the least bit of work for one here. The borders of our little businesses are well defined, everything has been recorded in an orderly manner, changes in possession happen almost never, and we regulate all small border disputes ourselves. What good would a land surveyor be for us?”

K. replies that he can only hope there has been some sort of misunderstanding; “Leider nicht,” replies the mayor, “es ist so, wie ich sage” (“it’s exactly how I say it is”) (4:75). This situation, now so convoluted as to have made a full circle back to the first page of the novel while affecting no substantial change to the situation, brings us back through the closed-off system of “communication” in the village and once again to the designator *Landvermesser*, whose fate is now more clearly sealed. That is, not only does the designation *Landvermesser* not at all mean in the way K. thinks it should or wants it to, but it turns out it does not point to anything or anybody, since the Castle never wanted someone to actually survey their land in the first place.

And yet, the problem here isn’t how all these things point or fail to point, as Wittgenstein has shown that to be necessarily impossible to determine, as that would involve charting out a system of ostension that would be universally applicable in this community. However, the only certainty available to an outsider of the community’s system seems instead to be the acknowledgment of a rejection of that very applicability, and nothing beyond that. Thus the real problem is that as an outsider who cannot parse what the later
Wittgenstein would call the “family resemblances” or join the “forms of life” in the village (see chapter 6 for further discussion of these two terms), K. lacks the ability even to understand why it is that he doesn’t understand anything there. He chooses instead, mistakenly, to blame a vast and untenable bureaucracy that he believes he could navigate if only he were allowed. But it is not a question of being allowed, it is a question of understanding how. And this, K. never manages to figure out.

**Conclusion**

One of the most important later developments in Wittgenstein’s career was the rejection of the notion of “progress” altogether. In the particular case of *The Castle*, this also very much seems to include the “progression” through the act of figuring out how an unfamiliar system works—at every step of K.’s navigation of the system, his progress certainly appeared greater than it actually was. The act of progress itself was perhaps the greatest illusion of all, one brought to life in K.’s initial failed and exhausting walk through the snowy village. For Wittgenstein, all that is left to do, all that can be done, is—ironically enough—to survey the landscape. For K., even that is too much to ask.

Let us return for a moment to the scene wherein K. is discussing the mysterious photograph of a young Klamm with the landlady. During their conversation, she scolds K. in a way that actually reveals more about the structure and modes of communication in the village than it does scold—if only K. would listen correctly. What she tells him is this: “Sie mißdeuten alles, auch das Schweigen” (“You misunderstand everything, even silence”) (4:101). The landlady’s use of *deuten* (to interpret) here, taken together with Wittgenstein’s assertion that “hinweisende Definition kann in jedem Fall so und anders *gedeutet* werden” (emphasis mine), sums up perfectly the hopelessness of K. as an outsider ever understanding the trick signifiers of the village: even (and especially) silence, the lack of language, can be—and is—interpreted variously in every case. And the landlady is not wrong: K. has in fact already misunderstood (and then misused) silence at least once prior to this event: early on in his time in the village, he sets off with Barnabas under the mistaken impression that Barnabas is about to deliver K.’s message directly to the Castle, and instead ends up at Barnabas’s home, thereby also putting him in cahoots with one of the village’s most shunned families. Frustrated, K. chides Barnabas: “‘So,’ sagte K., ‘Du wolltest nicht ins Schloß gehen, nur hierher . . . warum hast Du mir das nicht gesagt?’” To which Barnabas replies simply, “‘Du hast mich nicht gefragt’” (“‘So,’ said K., ‘you didn’t want to go to the Castle, only to here. Why didn’t you tell me?’ . . . ‘You didn’t ask’”) (4:42).

Yes, K. misinterprets everything, silence and words; this happens too many times in the novel to count, but arguably the most glaring instance comes in
K.’s revelations during the mayor’s convoluted “explanation:” “Ein Mißver-ständnis war es also gewesen, ein gemeines, niedriges Mißverständnis und K. hatte sich ihm gar hingegben” (“So it had all been a misunderstanding, a common, vulgar misunderstanding, and K. had bought it completely”) (4:42). Again, there was no way for K. to have known that the village had previously both requested and canceled a request for a land surveyor with no prior experience with the Castle culture. For, of course, to know what anything means there, one must first know how meaning there works; effectively, to know how anything works there one must first already know how everything works there. The Castle is, in short, among other things (a curious depiction of female sexuality, a frustrating sketch of the act of exclusivity itself), a tremendously successful dramatization of the paradox of ostensive definition: a word or phrase can be variously interpreted in every case if one does not already understand the system to which that gesture belongs, and K.’s plight shows just how dire our deluded belief in successful ostension can be.

Thus, the “moral” to The Castle, if there is one, is more than simply to beware untenable bureaucracies if one is an outsider, or to beware the wishes to assimilate oneself in a foreign society as an impostor, lest one get one’s wish. Above all these, I believe, is a different moral: there is no way to learn the ways of a place like the Castle village—or, if we extend our understanding of exclusivity to other Kafka works as a trope, of a place like the Court. Instead, either one knows them innately or inherently, or one is forever destined to be on the outside even when one is so fully enmeshed there seems no hope for extrication. In the end, Kafka has provided a more compelling language game to illustrate Wittgenstein’s paradox of ostensive definition than Wittgenstein himself did.

So what remains? If language doesn’t “work” ostensively, then (how) does it work? In a word: use. That is, language “works” through use in a particular case that its users feel they understand or don’t:

Man kann für eine große Klasse von Fällen der Benützung des Wortes „Bedeutung”—Wenn auch nicht für alle Fälle seiner Benützung—dieses Wort so erklären: Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache. (§43)

For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

In the particular case of The Castle, Kafka’s triumphantly vacuous use of the word Landvermesser, as well as his intricate structure of a language community whose language is on the surface identical to that of the outsider K., but which in reality demands a priori understanding of its (completely
different) systems as a prerequisite for ever understanding any of its systems, demonstrate the paradox of ostensive definition with astonishing might—for what better way to grasp the full uselessness of an ostensive gesture than with a vast network of miscommunication between people who ostensibly speak the same language? The only feasible solution to this paradox, according to Wittgenstein, is the above discovery, the hallmark of what is now called “ordinary language philosophy,” the idea that language takes meaning not from an a priori or universal system of logic, but from repeated and agreed-upon use. We may be unsurprised to discover that Wittgenstein ultimately rejects the meaning-in-use “solution” as well—what may be surprising is that this very rejection also appears in one of Kafka’s best-known works.