Distinction between *Say* and *Show*

An important theme throughout Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is the distinction between *say* and *show*. This distinction is especially highlighted and applied when Wittgenstein provides his elucidations of the problems of philosophy.

In the first three sections of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein depicts his three-level view of the world, the thought, and the proposition, in which there exhibits an isomorphism between the three levels. Therefore, the limit of the world, the *logical space* determined by the internal structures of objects, is also the limits of the thought and of the proposition. It follows that what can be said is also what is thinkable and what is possible in the world. Beyond this limit is the unspeakable, i.e. that cannot be said in significant propositions. Hence, what is said by a significant proposition is simply that things do so stand in the relation specified by the proposition. This, however, may or may not be true, depending on whether the thought expressed by the proposition aligns with the reality.

There are things that cannot be *said* by a proposition, but that are rather *shown* by it. Firstly, a proposition *shows* the ontological statuses of its constituent parts. For instance, the proposition “Socrates is mortal” *shows* that “being mortal” is a property. This cannot be said by a proposition; for there exists no such thing as “property” in the world. Nevertheless, if one understands the proposition, the ontological statuses of the constituent parts must also be understood simultaneously.

Secondly, a proposition *shows* its sense, i.e. how its constituent parts stand *if the proposition is true*. One may note that the sense of a proposition is different from what the proposition says. A proposition *says* a possible state of affairs in the world whose truth or falsehood depends on the reality. In contrast, the sense of a proposition illustrates that the world will *indeed* contain the state of affairs represented by the proposition under the assumption that the proposition is true. This again cannot be said because a proposition cannot “say anything about itself”, as Wittgenstein argues in 3.332 in the *Tractatus*. That is, a proposition cannot say anything about whether itself is aligned with the world or not.

Thirdly, a proposition *shows* its *logical form*, i.e. the possibilities in which things can be combined. For instance, as soon as one understands the property “Socrates is mortal,” it is immediately understood that “Motality is Socrates” is not false but merely senseless. For one understands that “being mortal” is a property, and “Socrates” is an object, whereas a property cannot be an object. Therefore, “Mortality is Socrates” violates the logical form of logically well-formed propositions and is hence not permissible by the logical form, although this is grammatically permissible by the grammar of the English language. This answers Wittgenstein’s objection to Russell’s “Multiple Relation Theory” of judgments.

Fourthly, a proposition *shows* what follows from the proposition. Unlike the traditional Russellian view that inference is *justified* by the laws of inference (*Principia Mathematica*), Wittgenstein holds that one understands what follows a proposition once one understands that proposition. For instance, if one understands the proposition “Anders is happy,” then he or she also understands that there exists a person in the world who is happy, without knowing anything about the law of inference . For Wittgenstein, the laws of inference are merely some “superfluous” second-hand afterthoughts of what is happening (5.132 of the *Tractatus*). Inference is not, as the Russellian view maintains, *justified* by these superfluous laws of inference, but rather is *shown* and *justified* by the proposition itself, from the sense presented in the proposition. For what follows the proposition is determined by the internal structures of the signs in the proposition, which mirror the internal structure of the objects in the coordinated state of affairs represented by the proposition.