

Relativism and Wrap-up

1 Predicates of personal taste

Lasnik (2006): What are A and B disagreeing about when A says (1a) and B says (1b), or when I say (2a) and my 4-year old son says (2b)?

- (1) a. That roller coaster was fun!
b. No, it wasn't (fun).

- (2) a. These oysters are delicious!
b. No, they're not! They're yucky!

- *The problem*: How do we account for the apparently conflicting intuitions that the (b) sentences are denials of the (a) sentences, and yet both can be true at the same time!
- *What we need*: A way of relativizing truth to an individual (or group), while keeping content (what is asserted or denied) constant.

Some relevant background: the *character* vs. *content* distinction.

- (3) I am Spartacus.
a. CHARACTER: the speaker is Spartacus
b. CONTENT: the proposition expressed by an utterance of *I am Spartacus* in a particular context of utterance

The standard view of denial is that it operates on contents, not characters (which is expected if negation is a propositional operator). This is why (4a/b) is a weird dialogue, and (4a/c) is a coherent one.

- (4) a. I am Spartacus.
b. #No, I'm not Spartacus!
c. No, you're not Spartacus!

These facts eliminate what would otherwise be a plausible analysis of the PPT Puzzle: treat *fun*, *delicious*, etc. as containing a hidden indexical expression.

- (5) a. That roller coaster was fun *for me*!
b. #No, it wasn't fun for me.
c. But it wasn't fun for me.
d. #No, it wasn't fun for you.

Lasnik's proposal: Relativize the assignment of truth values to contents (propositions expressed) so that the same content may be assigned different truth values relative to different individuals. So just as the truth value of (6a) depends in part on the world (and time) with respect to which is evaluated, the truth value of sentences with PPTs like (6b) also depends on the *judge* with respect to which they are evaluated (and the world and time).

- (6) a. The White Sox won the last World Series.
b. The Giant Dipper is fun.

This idea is similar to (or the same as) MacFarlane's (2005) notion of *relative truth*.

- (7) A proposition is true at a context of use C_U and a context of assessment C_A just in case it is true at the circumstance of evaluation determined by C_U and C_A .

MacFarlane suggests that the best way to determine whether we need relative truth is by looking at the way it impacts the nature of assertion (and denial); Lasersohn's paper constitutes a purely semantic argument for relativism.

2 Interactions with vagueness

Is vagueness a special case of relative truth? Or is the apparent relativity displayed by PPTs a byproduct of vagueness? Lasersohn considers and rejects the second possibility.

- (8) a. That roller coaster was fun.
b. No it wasn't!

The idea is that the disagreement here is metalinguistic: are we in a context in which *that roller coaster* is in the extension of *fun* or not? This is reminiscent of Barker's (2002) observations about dialogues like (9).

- (9) a. What counts as tall around here?
b. Well, Feynman is tall.

Lasersohn criticizes this idea because he says it can't account for examples like (10).

- (10) John thinks that roller coaster was fun and Mary thinks it wasn't fun.

According to PL, (10) is an assertion that John and Mary have contradictory beliefs, so we need to be accessing the propositional content of the embedded clauses, not just their contextual effects on the meanings of vague terms.

However, we seem to also be able to embed Barker examples:

- (11) a. What counts as tall around here?
b. Well, John says that Feynman is tall.

But perhaps there is a difference between (12a-b). There's a sense in which 'both are right' in (12a), while in (12b) there's a sense that 'only one is right' — or that if they are disagreeing, it is because they have in mind different standards of comparison.

- (12) a. John thinks that the oysters are tasty and Mary thinks it isn't/it is yucky.
b. John thinks that the oysters are big and Mary thinks that they aren't/they are small.

This difference comes out even stronger when we look at comparatives. Assume that John says (13a) and Mary says (13b).

- (13) a. The oysters were tastier than the clams.
b. No, the clams were tastier than the oysters.

It really seems that both can be right — how could we prove one wrong? — yet they can disagree. Now consider the following pair:

- (14) a. The oysters were more expensive than the clams.
 b. No, the clams were more expensive than the oysters.

Here it is clear that only one can be right, and we could in principle verify which one it is (by looking at the receipt, checking the credit card records, etc.)

When we embed the comparatives under *think*, we get more noticeably different effects:

- (15) a. John thinks that the oysters were tastier than the clams and Mary thinks that the clams were tastier than the oysters.
 b. John thinks that the oysters were more expensive than the clams and Mary thinks that the clams were more expensive than the oysters.

(15b) is clearly a report about contradictory beliefs. Put in this light, it seems that (15a) is different — that it is rather (merely) a claim that John and Mary have *different tastes*. But what does this mean, and how does it bear on relative truth?

First, the comparatives show that a Barker-style version of the metalinguistic account cannot be right: the disagreement in (8) cannot be only about what the standard(s) of fun is (are), because there are no such standards involved in a comparative like (12).

However, there is another way that speakers might disagree about the meaning of a scalar expression: *they could disagree about the ordering it imposes*. This appears to be what we have to say if we want an insightful explanation of (12), and ought to generalize straightforwardly to the basic cases like (8).

In particular, it seems that it should be enough to merely relativize the denotations of *fun*, *tasty*, etc. to ‘judges’ — perhaps using precisely the formalism Lasersohn introduces — without going ‘all the way up’ to a theory of relative truth. This strategy has the potential to give us a much better handle on which expressions will show this kind of variability, namely those that express ‘subjective’ rather than ‘objective’ measurements. That’s why we don’t get similar effects with more purely ‘dimensional’ predicates.

Or do we? The examples in (16) clearly have judge-dependent interpretations, but do the examples in (17) also have them?

- (16) a. The exam was harder the first time I took it.
 b. Blue Öyster Cult’s music was more moving when I was 16 than it is now.
 c. The chili was tastier before I found out what it was made out of.

(17a-c) clearly have time-dependent interpretations where the actual sizes, durations, and depths are different at different times, but do they also have meanings where these stay the same in some objective sense, and vary instead only in a subjective sense? Or are we just adding an implicit *seem*?

- (17) a. The buildings were bigger when I was three than they are now.
 b. The flight to Rome was longer when we first started visiting than it is now.
 c. The deep end of the pool isn’t as deep as it was when I was a boy.

Is this a gradient or a categorical distinction? How extensive is this across the lexicon? Is this vagueness, ambiguity, or a completely different kind of semantic uncertainty?

3 Concluding thoughts

- There is more than one type of uncertainty about the application of a predicate: we seem to need to distinguish at least vagueness and imprecision, and maybe also ‘judgment’ as well. Can we justify these distinctions? Or can we instead collapse/unify them?

- Vagueness and gradability/comparison need to be distinguished: although we can build a semantics of comparison on top of an account of vagueness (this is what the supervaluationists show us), there are empirical reasons for keeping them distinct ('crisp judgments', the absolute/relative distinction, cross-categorial extendability, etc.).
- This doesn't mean that we shouldn't also have 'higher order comparisons', but we should be able to detect the difference between such cases of IMPLICIT COMPARISON and the simple ordering statements involved in EXPLICIT COMPARISON (e.g., through the crisp judgment test).
- In the case of gradable predicates, we see that the properties of vagueness are associated with a particular form (the positive form), suggesting that these features arise in some way from the semantics of the positive form/morphology.
- An open question is whether all terms that show the canonical properties of vagueness contain some shared bit of meaning, which we can for the moment identify as an occurrence of *pos*. We might consider the possibility, for example, that (vague) noun meanings contain lexicalized occurrences of *pos* plus term that measures degree of approximation of a prototype/stereotype/exemplar/whatever. If this were right, then comparisons involving this aspect of noun meaning should always have the features of implicit comparison.
- What precisely is the link between vagueness and context-dependence?

References

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