The Multiplicity of Meaning
Lecture 1: The Thesis of Plural Signification
Cian Dorr
(*New York University:* `cian.dorr@nyu.edu`)
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1 Introduction

> *Plural Signification* Almost always, when x bears a semantic relation[1] to y, x bears that relation to many other entities similar to y.

2 Intuitions

Some plausible cases where words express several fairly similar properties:

Are Jaffa Cakes *biscuits*?[2]	Are hamburgers *sandwiches*?
Is chilli *soup*?[3]	Are muffins *cakes*?
Is herbal tea *tea*?	Is a cheese course *dessert*?
Are cucumbers *fruit*?	Are cucumbers *vegetables*?
Is oat milk *milk*?	Are plants *creatures*?
Are lynxes *cats*?	Are human beings *animals*?
Do octopuses have *legs*?	Are sporks *spoons*?
Are cardigans *sweaters*?	Is paddling a canoe *rowing* it?
Are watercolours *drawings*?	Is cardboard *paper*?
Are iPads *computers*?	Are most philosophers *writers*?
Are APA comments *talks*?	Are glasses *cups*?[4]
Are building societies *banks*?[5]	Are lake-edges *banks*?

In each case, there are some "specialized" uses that assume a 'yes' answer, some that assume a 'no' answer, and some "indifferent" uses where the speaker isn't disposed towards either.

- The different "specialized" uses refer to different properties; "indifferent" uses refer to all of them.

- Such examples suggests that many words express sufficiently many properties than it would make sense to try to list in a dictionary.

- Hard to resist saying that, e.g., 'heap' expresses a whole spectrum of properties—enough that any number between the minimal grain-counts for two of them is the minimal grain-count for a third.

[1] 'Semantic relations' include speech act relations (*saying, asserting, telling, claiming, suggesting, whispering, . . .*); mental relations (*knowing, believing, judging, hoping, being confident in, consciously entertaining*) and narrowly semantic relations (*expressing, meaning, denoting, referring to. . .*). Relations like *being the conjunction of everything asserted by* had better not count!

[2] The UK's VAT tribunal says Jaffa Cakes aren't biscuits: `https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/vat-food/vfood6260`. [3] For a thorough investigation of the question 'What makes soup soup?', see `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1HVTNxwt7w`. [4] See Manley 2009. [5] See Kearns and Magidor 2008.

- *Claim: being vague* is expressing multiple things; or, sufficiently many sufficiently similar things.

3 Objections

Objection One

Pluralism about *expressing* conflicts with the Unique Disquotational Meaning Schema:

UDE '*A*' uniquely expresses *A*.

Response: (i) The schema is inconsistent. (ii) It rules out the least controversial cases of ambiguity like that of 'tank'.

Objection Two

Pluralism about *expressing* conflicts with the Disquotational Truth Schema:

DT '*P*' is true if and only if *P*.

Gloss: Whether a sentence is true depends on what it expresses, so if a sentence and its negation both express a mixture of truths and falsehoods, both or neither are true. DT rules this out.

Response: (i) The schema is inconsistent. (ii) The practice of applying 'true' to sentences is an unfortunate philosopher's invention.

Objection Three[6]

[6] See Andjelkovic and Williamson 2000.

Pluralism about *saying* conflicts with the following principles about truth and falsity for utterances:

TDEF1 An utterance is true iff it says something true.

FDEF1 An utterance is false iff it says something false.

Gloss: No utterance is both true or false. So by TDEF1 and FDEF1, no utterance both says something true and says something false. But on the pluralist picture where utterances often say many things, that should be common.

[7] See Strawson 1950.

Response: Ordinary 'true' and 'false' don't apply to utterances either.[7]

But if one wants to introduce them as terms of art, it's fine to break the symmetry between truth and falsity.[8] Saying nothing false is a common, reasonable goal; saying nothing true is no-one's goal.

Objection Four

Pluralism requires positing pervasive error in ordinary speeches[9] involving counting the relata of semantic relations.

Response: Such speeches generally involve drastic contextual quantifier-domain restriction.

4   Some not-entirely-successful arguments

Argument One[10]

When y is one of many entities that are extremely similar (in themselves and in their relations to x), it would require extraordinary powers of discrimination for x to bear any ordinary relation to y without bearing that relation to any of those similar entities.

Response: While this is right for some relations like *touching*, it is completely wrong for many others. For example, the *advising* relation can only hold between people, although wherever there is a person there are innumerably many extremely similar non-people.[11]

Argument Two

Since a single indifferent use can be correctly indirectly reported using several different non-indifferent uses of the speaker's words[12], indifferent uses involve saying multiple things.

Unpromising response: We're taking liberties; the speech reports aren't literally true.

Workable response: Speech act verbs like 'say' vary with the other words: indifferent uses of 'There are cups' uniquely say_1 that there are $cups_1$ and uniquely say_2 that there are $cups_2$.

Argument Three

Pluralism is needed to explain forced-choice variability.

[8] For example, by adopting

TDEF2 An utterance is true iff everything it says is true.

or, better:

TDEF3 An utterance is true iff it says something and everything it says is true.

[9] 'The only thing I said was that it was raining'; 'I only told her three of the four things you told me'.

[10] See Unger 1980.

[11] The arguments against this claim rely on premises that are no better than 'Everything extremely similar to a heap is a heap', which is refuted by the Sorites paradox.

[12] There are clean cups in the dishwasher.
 . . . — You said there were clean cups in the dishwasher, but you were wrong: in fact every cup in the house was dirty, so I decided to put have a glass of orange juice instead.
 . . . — You said there were clean cups in the dishwasher, but you were wrong, so I took this one from the cupboard, and put orange juice in it.

Gloss: Sometimes even well-informed speakers are averse to giving flat 'yes' and 'no' answers to a yes-no question. The prefer to *hedge*, often by offering more detail.[13] But when for some reason saying 'yes' and saying 'no' are the only acceptable options, different speakers break different ways. This *forced-choice variability* persists even when the speakers are very well-informed and co-operative (motivated just by a desire to inform rather than mislead).

This is mysterious if there only one proposition *p* expressed, shouldn't the policy *say 'yes' if p and 'no' if not-p* be the best way for co-operative speakers to achieve their goals, so if the speakers are all relevantly well-informed, they would all follow it and thus all say the same thing?

"Epistemicist" response:[14] There is a single proposition expressed (asserted, meant...), but no ordinary speakers, even well-informed ones, can know whether it's true.

– This seems deeply implausible![15]

Alternative response: There is only one proposition expressed; but speakers don't *care* any more about avoiding sentences that *express* falsehoods than about avoiding sentences that bear any of many other one-one relations to falsehoods.

– This is workable; but it concedes pluralism in the case of relations like *caring about*.

[13] Are most philosophy professors writers? — Well, most of them write papers and books aimed at other philosophers, but only a few write for a general audience.
Is your brother bald? —He does have a pretty big bald spot.
Are you in a relationship? – It's complicated.

[14] See Williamson 1994, Bacon 2018. Williamson: 'We have no idea how to conceive borderline cases in such a way that nothing in them lies hidden from ordinary speakers'.

[15] Two points against the epistemicist account: (i) 'Yes' often seems the right answer to 'Do you know whether *P*?' even when '*P*?' would prompt hedging. (ii) The epistemicist explanation conflicts with what seemed the best response to Argument Two.

References

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