1 Introduction

*Plural Signification*  Almost always, when \( x \) bears a semantic relation 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](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=eY1HWNKw7w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY1HWNKw7w).  \(^4\) 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:

\[
\text{UDE} \quad \text{‘} A \text{’ uniquely expresses } A.
\]

**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:

\[
\text{DT} \quad \text{‘} P \text{’ is true if and only if } P.
\]

**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**

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{TDEF}_1 \quad \text{An utterance is true iff it says something true.} \\
\text{FDEF}_1 \quad \text{An utterance is false iff it says something false.}
\end{align*}
\]

**Gloss:** No utterance is both true or false. So by TDEF$_1$ and FDEF$_1$, 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.

**Response:** Ordinary ‘true’ and ‘false’ don’t apply to utterances either.\(^7\)

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\( ^6 \) See Andjelkovic and Williamson 2000.

\( ^7 \) See Strawson 1950.
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 innumerable 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.
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. 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: 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!

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.

References


