

Semantic Defect in Context

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I'd like to stave off a worry for the view that some grammatically well-formed sentences of a language, in some but not all contexts, fail to express truth-evaluable propositions. The worry is that this view has implausible implications for the beliefs and intentions of speakers who sometimes make these allegedly defective utterances, especially when speakers *think* they are in circumstances where their utterances would be indisputably meaningful. In these cases, speakers apparently seem to have coherent beliefs, to take reasonable measures to express those beliefs, and to be easily interpretable. But if there is no proposition for the speaker to express with their utterance in that context, aren't we forced to deny the coherence of the beliefs and interpretative processes in question? Or if not, aren't we implausibly forced to sever most systematic connections between these attitudes and interpretations and the semantics for the sentence uttered? I think it is clear that the answer to both questions is "no". Before saying why, let me begin by presenting a little more clearly the view about expression failure I have in mind, and the challenge as I see it. Then I'll conclude by giving an example of how understanding the actual commitments of those allowing semantically defective, well-formed sentences is important for philosophical applications of their views.

The view about semantic defect I want to exonerate involves the following claim.

- (T) Some grammatically well-formed sentences in at least some contexts fail to express truth-evaluable propositions.

Propositions, as I'm conceiving of them, are a kind of abstract theoretical entity used to represent the information carried by utterances of whole sentences. An important kind of hypothesized defect an uttered sentence can bear is either to fail to express any proposition at all, or to express one which is not truth-evaluable in the circumstances in which it is produced. (T) asserts some utterances bear that defect. Some theorists might endorse (T) on a different

conception of a proposition than the one I'm working with, but a common feature of many such views—those I will defend—is that they take semantic failure to involve a failure of truth-evaluability, at least in the circumstances in which the utterance is produced.

Some have defended (T) for semantically anomalous sentences like (1),¹ certain kinds of presupposition failure like (2),² and complex demonstratives with unsatisfied nominals as might occur for (3) when uttered by someone pointing into thin air.³

- (1) My desk lamp ate your confidence.
- (2) The individual who recently brought about lasting world peace is Irish.
- (3) That fruit is indigenous to Brazil.

The proposals have obvious intuitive merit as ways of explaining infelicities in the relevant utterances which must be accounted for *somehow*. Importantly, the position given by (T) does not entail that in *other* contexts propositions cannot be expressed by the utterance in question. This is, of course, essential for accounts of definites and complex demonstratives, and arguably for anomaly as well.

The worries I have in mind for views like (T) arise by considering cases where a speaker (say, Jones) produces an utterance of an allegedly defective utterance (say, (2) in a world like ours) while the speaker reasonably believes they have expressed a proposition with their utterance (say, Jones thinks he is in a world where Bono recently brought about lasting world peace). It is sometimes claimed that it is clear that such a person *believes* what they have said, and took adequate means to express that belief. Moreover, it is possible for us, in some sense, to *interpret* what they said. All this proceeds in connection with standard modes of interpretation of the semantics for the uttered sentence. As propositions are the objects of belief and the sort of thing to be said with an utterance of a whole sentence, there is a standard, intelligible proposition correlated with the utterance. Defenders of (T), the worry continues, have a hard time explaining how this is so.

For convenience, I'll call persons in the envisaged problematic circumstances, like Jones, *bunglers*. Why might defenders of (T) face difficulties from bunglers? Here are four specific worries.

¹I, in Shaw (2009a), am among them.

²Strawson (1950) probably held such a view.

³Braun (1993), Borg (2000), and Glanzberg & Siegel (2006) take this line.

- (a) Defenders of (T) must suppose bunglers have incoherent beliefs, or mistakenly believe that they believe some proposition (one they take to be expressed by their utterance), when they do not believe any such proposition.
- (b) They must suppose bunglers have incoherent intentions, or believe they intend to communicate some proposition with their utterance, which they do not in fact intend to communicate.
- (c) They must suppose bunglers do not or cannot believe what they have said.
- (d) They cannot account for the ease of interpreting bunglers, or learning their beliefs, based on what they have said (even by those knowing the bunglers to have bungled).

(a) and (b) are non-sequiturs. Defenders of (T) are only committed to the claim that *in the context in which they're produced*, bunglers' utterances don't express propositions. Relative to the context which the bungler thinks they are in—call it *c*—the defender of (T) will grant that the bungler's utterance would express a certain proposition—call it *p*. *That* proposition, *p*, is the one that the bungler believes and intends to communicate (without contradiction or confusion in their beliefs or intentions). The defectiveness of the bungler's current utterance is no bar to his believing he is in *c*, believing *p*, or believing he has expressed *p*.

(c) trades on an ambiguity in “what is said”. That expression might pick out something like the proposition someone expresses with an utterance, or it might pick out something closer to the words that individual spoke. If there is an uncontroversial sense in which bunglers believe what they say, it can be adequately captured by adverting to something like the second reading: bunglers believe in the truth of the utterance they produced in the context in which they think it was made—they believe the truth of what they take that utterance to express. This is just to say, which no reasonable defender of (T) will deny, that bunglers are not necessarily liars. But to mount (c) as an objection to (T) on a more robust reading of “what is said” not only begs the question by presuming there *is* something the bungler said, but asserts something which should be highly controversial: by equating intended meaning with literal meaning it takes for granted the truth of something like Donnellan's position in the classic Donnellan/Kripke debate.⁴

⁴Indeed, it seems common when challenges of the sort I'm reviewing for (T) are presented

Perhaps the only reasonable challenge above is presented by (d)—that endorsing (T) severs obvious systematic connections between the coherent beliefs of bunglers and interlocutors’ modes of interpreting them on the one hand, and the semantics of the utterance the bungler produces on the other. This challenge is best met through appeal to theoretical tools developed by Stalnaker.

Suppose we are on a trip through the jungle and our guide turns to us pointing directly behind herself and utters (3).

(3) That fruit is indigenous to Brazil.

It is obvious that if the guide is pointing into thin air, something has gone wrong with this utterance, but as usual this need not immediately show that there is anything problematic about the guide’s belief state other than that she believes certain falsehoods. If we are to suppose she is not, for example, stricken with a debilitating and maddening fever which causes her to babble incoherently, we can learn things about her belief state and what she is trying to communicate by considering the alternative possibilities we believe the guide thinks she might be in.

To see a simplified version of how this works, consider five scenarios:

i: The guide pointed at a pineapple. Pineapples, but not pomegranates are indigenous to Brazil.

j: The guide pointed at a pineapple. Pineapples and pomegranates are not indigenous to Brazil.

k: The guide pointed at a pomegranate. Pineapples and pomegranates are indigenous to Brazil.

l: The guide pointed into thin air. Pineapples but not pomegranates are indigenous to Brazil.

m: The guide pointed into thin air. Pineapples and pomegranates are not indigenous to Brazil.

We can form what Stalnaker (1978) calls the *propositional concept* of the guide’s utterance of (3) relative to this set of scenarios. This is a chart which factors out two ways the circumstances of the guide’s utterance are involved in the determination of that utterance’s truth-value. On the one hand, a circumstance like *i*

that there is a striking and perplexing unexplained presumption that what a person believes they express is always what they in fact *do* express.

can help determine which proposition the guide expressed in that circumstance. For example, in i the guide’s utterance expresses the claim that pineapples are indigenous to Brazil. In k it expresses the claim that pomegranates are indigenous to Brazil.

But there is a second way the utterance can interact with circumstance: *given* the proposition expressed, the proposition can be evaluated for truth and falsity relative to that circumstance. So, for example, the claim that pineapples are indigenous to Brazil is true relative to i but false relative to j . The propositional concept of an utterance factors out these two involvements for circumstance to play. Each horizontal row of the propositional concept represents the proposition that would be expressed by the utterance if the context in which it were made were that labelled on the left of that row. Then each of those rows contains information about when that claim would be true at each of the scenarios listed above that row. The propositional concept \mathcal{C} of the guide’s utterance looks like this:

\mathcal{C}	i	j	k	l	m
i	T	F	T	T	F
j	T	F	T	T	F
k	F	F	T	F	F
l	Defective				
m	Defective				

The chart shows, for example, that if the guide’s utterance is interpreted in circumstance k , she has claimed that pomegranates are native to Brazil. This is a claim which is false at every scenario but k . Hence every truth-value to the right of the leftmost k is F , except for that below the topmost k . I am assuming, as an advocate of (T) for the guide’s utterance might, that the utterance fails to express a proposition if she is pointing into thin air, as she is in l and m . This is reflected by the marker “Defective” which spans all columns next to those scenarios.

The propositional concept for the guide’s utterance of (3) helps reveal how we, as interpreters, make systematic sense of the beliefs and intentions of the guide. As competent users of English, we are familiar with the propositional concept associated with the guide’s utterance and we can, from this concept and various pragmatic principles, make reasonable inferences about the beliefs and intentions of the guide. Let’s see how this works by looking at the inter-

action between the propositional concept \mathcal{C} and two basic principles of rational communication.

First, we know that guide thinks she is *expressing a truth-evaluable proposition*. She wouldn't be addressing us by issuing such a meticulously arranged series of sounds unless she were out to engage in a felicitous communicative act. Not only do we know that the guide *thinks* she is expressing something truth-valued, but she is *presupposing it* and presupposing that we are presupposing it—otherwise its success as an assertion might be threatened. This is a first piece of information we learn from the assertion: the speaker presupposes what I will call the *rectification of \mathcal{C}* —the proposition that is true of a circumstance if the utterance of which \mathcal{C} is the propositional concept expresses a truth-evaluable proposition in that circumstance. In other words, it is the proposition, which I'll denote $\boxed{\mathcal{C}}$, that is true whenever there a “*T*” or “*F*” occurs along the diagonal of \mathcal{C} and that is false elsewhere.

	<i>i</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>m</i>
$\boxed{\mathcal{C}}$	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>

In our particular example, we learn that the guide presupposes that we are not in *l* or *m*. A more generalized propositional concept for her utterance would reveal that she presupposes (roughly) the proposition that she is pointing at a piece of fruit.

We also learn something more specific about what the guide *believes* but does *not* presuppose. The guide would not be producing her utterance unless she thought it expressed a *true* proposition. This is something she (at least in the envisaged circumstances) is not presupposing, but is connected with her intentions to provide us, as listeners, with new information. So we can infer this second piece of information from the assertion: the speaker believes what I will call the *adjusted diagonal* of the propositional concept of their utterance. This is the proposition, which I'll note $\ddagger\mathcal{C}$ which is true wherever there is a “*T*” along the diagonal of \mathcal{C} and false elsewhere.

	<i>i</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>m</i>
$\ddagger\mathcal{C}$	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>

In our particular example, we learn that the guide believes she is in *i* or *k*. A more generalized propositional concept for her utterance would reveal that she

believes (roughly) the proposition that she is pointing at a piece of fruit native to Brazil.

In this way we learn that the guide believes something like what Stalnaker calls the *diagonal proposition* $\dagger\mathcal{C}$: the proposition which inherits its values directly from the diagonal of the propositional concept \mathcal{C} . There are, however, important differences. The adjusted diagonal transforms defective slots on the diagonal into false ones. But depending on what one considers a ‘legitimate’ proposition to be, $\dagger\mathcal{C}$ for the guide’s particular utterance is either undefined, or something like the following.

	<i>i</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>m</i>
$\dagger\mathcal{C}$	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>T</i>	?	?

There are also differences in the theoretical genesis of the two propositions $\dagger\mathcal{C}$ and $\ddagger\mathcal{C}$. The former arises for Stalnaker in scenarios characterized by speakers with shared presuppositions and beliefs trying to ‘repair’ an otherwise defective utterance collectively to stabilize communication. The latter arises for a more asymmetric kind of problem: when interlocutors believe the speaker has mistaken beliefs about the interpretation of their utterance, or when those interlocutors believe or believe it possible that the speaker has mistaken beliefs about the common ground of the conversation. There are of course similarities in the theoretical geneses of $\dagger\mathcal{C}$ and $\ddagger\mathcal{C}$ responsible for the similarities in their structure: both are the product of a kind of interaction between a basic metalinguistic awareness and rational principles communication.

And of course further kinds of reasoning can be carried out in the above way. For example, we can learn disjunctive information coordinating the belief state of the guide with the proposition she takes herself to express: she either thinks she is in *i*, believes that pineapples are indigenous to Brazil, and has reported that belief, or she thinks she is in *j*, believes that pomegranates are indigenous to Brazil, and has expressed *that* belief. This is a way of cashing out the claim that the guide ‘believed what she said’ in the loose sense discussed above.⁵

In the story I told, we can learn that the guide presupposes $\boxed{\mathcal{C}}$ and believes $\ddagger\mathcal{C}$ just by reasoning about what she must have thought in order to issue in the utterance she did, with the meaning it *might* have or *might have had*. None of that reasoning presupposes that the utterance *actually* expressed a proposition,

⁵Things might get a little more complicated if the guide thinks she is expressing the diagonal content of her utterance, but the basic idea remains the same.

or was truth-evaluable. The guide could, for all I have said, actually have been in scenario m —a world where the guide’s utterance arguably falters. And we, in reasoning about the guide’s utterance, could *know* this.

The points I’ve been making might seem obvious. But they bear elaboration because they are often overlooked when philosophical applications of views relying (T) are made. To see this, let me briefly consider applications of (T) to the semantic paradoxes.

Sometimes in a resolution of the problems generated by paradoxical sentences like (L) below, theorists have claimed utterances of such sentences fail to express propositions or are otherwise semantically defective.

(L) The sentence labelled “(L)” in this paper is false.

Others have argued in reply that this view comes under strain from ‘empirical liars’ of the sort raised by Kripke (1975). Such a case might arise, for example, if I were to utter “what Jones just said is true”, while Jones unbeknownst to me just said “the next thing James will say will be false”. How can we take there to be something defective about my utterance, when it was *so close* to being uncontroversially meaningful?

Field has recently pressed objections like that I’ve just mentioned, and those I’ve been canvassing throughout this paper (which Field claims, I suspect truthfully, are widely accepted) against those weakening their logics on the grounds that Liar sentences fail to express propositions. After raising a standard case of an ‘empirical liar’ he has the following to say.

[Some philosophers] try to defuse objections to their theory by saying that the Liar sentence doesn’t express a proposition. . . . I would like to point out (what is widely known but still deserves emphasis) that [the proposal] simply won’t work on any ordinary notion of a proposition. Consider my remark that what the least intelligent man in the room was saying isn’t true. When I said that, I firmly believed it, and had good evidence for believing it: I firmly believed that Joe Schmoe was the least intelligent man in the room, that he had uttered ‘Maine is bigger than Colorado’, and that Maine is not bigger than Colorado; and I had good evidence for all these claims. What I said wasn’t nonsense. Indeed, had the facts been different—if I hadn’t overestimated my own intelligence or underestimated his—what I said would have been clearly true. So if we’re going to talk of propositions at all, and talk of sentences and belief-states as expressing

propositions, then this would seem to be a clear example: I stood in the belief relation to a perfectly coherent proposition which (like many propositions that are believed) is “conditionally paradoxical” in classical logic.⁶

Defenders of the view that Liar sentences are semantically defective will clearly want to allow that in favorable contexts, Field’s hypothetical utterance expresses a proposition Field would believe.⁷ These theorists obviously only wish to claim that *in unfavorable contexts* contingent Liar sentences fail to express propositions. That is, highly radical theorists aside, proponents of the view I’m considering endorse (T) for ‘empirical liars’ like the one Field is discussing.

And insofar as these theorists merely endorse (T), they escape Field’s criticisms for now familiar reasons. Field reports in the envisaged circumstances he ‘believes what he said’. But there is no uncontroversial sense in which this is true which cannot be accounted for by Field’s targets. Ironically, in describing the coherence of his beliefs, Field mentions only propositions these theorists can clearly accommodate, and which collectively begin to characterize the adjusted diagonal proposition for the propositional concept correlated with his utterance.

Field’s claims that one can’t account for his beliefs and attitudes while denying that he expressed a proposition on the ordinary notion of a proposition are untrue. What is especially striking is the claim, tacit in much work on the liar paradox but explicitly made here, that the ordinary notion of a proposition is one on which a *single* abstract, mind-independent, necessarily existing proposition can sometimes be perfectly coherent, and sometimes paradoxical. On the contrary, propositions with these features (if they could even be called “propositions”) are quite unfamiliar and I suspect we should avoid positing them unless the need genuinely arises.

References

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D. Braun (1993). ‘Empty names’. *Nous* pp. 449–469.

⁶Field (2008) pp.132–133.

⁷Which proposition this is, and more generally what the propositional concept for Field’s hypothetical utterance is, will in the end depend on the semantics one provides for truth locutions in one’s theory of truth. Often theories of truth fail to supply such propositions by focusing exclusively on extensional semantic properties. See Shaw (2009b) for the outlines of a generalized semantics for semantic vocabulary.

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