

VALUE DISAGREEMENT AND MEANING

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Overview

Quick Summary

The Traditional Picture

Unsatisfying Approaches

A Dual Aspect Theory

Forms of Linguistic Context-Dependence

Here is a non-exhaustive list of approaches:

- Truth-determinative, Semantic Context
 - traditional contextualism (e.g. indexicals)
 - nonindexical contextualism
 - relativism
- Semantic Underdetermination, Pragmatic Context
 - open argument places (e.g. quantifier domain restriction)
 - pragmatic context modeling (e.g. Common Ground, DRT)
 - propositional skeletons (K. Bach)
 - contextuials (e.g. the place of 'here')
 - no shared, truth-conditional meaning

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Semantic Underdetermination of Value Terms

Central Thesis

From the perspective of truth-conditional semantics, value terms are semantically underdetermined in the sense that there is no shared, lexicon entry for their meaning upon which speakers, including experts, implicitly or explicitly agree.

1. Core meaning: lowest common denominator, truth-conditionally incomplete (if it is modeled in this way at all)
2. Noumenal meaning: supposed to more adequately 'capture reality' in the sense of contributing to semantically complete truth-conditions, but speakers persistently disagree about it in case of value terms

The Problem of Value Disagreement

Example

- (1) a. Alice: Capitalism is good.
 b. Bob: No, it isn't.

- Alice: $good_1$ - a logical combination of criteria A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n ?
- Bob: $good_2$ - a logical combination of criteria B_1, B_2, \dots, B_m ?

⇒ Are Alice and Bob talking past each other?

Direct Value Disagreement

Not problematic is *content-based direct disagreement*:

Example

- (2)
- a. Alice: Capitalism is good.
 - b. Bob: No, it isn't.

Suppose Alice's criteria for goodness in this case are A_1, \dots, A_n and Bob agrees with these but believes that capitalism does not satisfy A_1, \dots, A_n . Then they directly contradict each other, i.e., the semantic content of Bob utterance is the negation of the semantic content of Alice's utterance.

⇒ Bob and Alice are in direct, content-based disagreement.

Sometimes Disagreement Is Not Direct

Examples due to Plunkett & Sundell (2013):

- (3) That chilly is spicy.
- (4) Tomato is a fruit.
- (5) Secretariat is an athlete. (Ludlow 2008)
- (6) Lying with the aim of promoting human happiness is sometimes morally right. In fact it often is!
- (7) Waterboarding is torture.

⇒ How does this non-content based, indirect disagreement work?

Relativist Semantics

Faultless disagreement:

Assessor	Sentence	Content in c	Extension in c , CEs
Alice	Capitalism is good.	p	true
	Capitalism is not good.	$\neg p$	false
Bob	Capitalism is good.	p	false
	Capitalism is not good.	$\neg p$	true

⇒ Only makes sense for expressions like predicates of personal taste for which a relativist semantics is justifiable. Many value predicates are not like this.

Moore / Semantic Primitivism

- Primitivism states that once ambiguities and other obvious contextual factors are resolved, no further lexical decomposition is possible.
- Value terms stand for primitive concepts.
- In *Capitalism is good*, 'good' stands for a primitive concept of goodness that cannot be further analyzed.
- Moore (1903): the Many Questions Argument, the Paradox of Analysis.

I reject this position as a *general* solution in the paper, because it (a) is empirically inadequate, and (b) there are many philosophical counter-arguments (cf. also Geach).

Social Externalism As The Only Response

- Social externalism: There is a linguistic labor division. Experts 'fix' the meaning of many expressions.
 - So maybe Bob's and Alice's criteria to not represent the meaning of their utterances? What their particular use of 'good' means according to experts on goodness determines the truth-conditional contribution.
- ⇒ This stipulation might sometimes be justified, but as a general error theory this approach seems wholly implausible. There may be no experts on 'good' at all, there is disagreement about who counts as expert, and purported 'experts' on goodness disagree about the concept among each other.

Not Pinning Disagreement on Content at All

- The disagreement could be about presupposed content, implicated content or other types of pragmatic speech act content.
- For example, de Sa (2008) argues that relativist intuitions about PPTs can be explained pragmatically as disagreement about the presupposed degree of commonality.
- There might be other 'philosophical workarounds': Stipulating types of disagreement as an attitude that need not even be rational, e.g. talking about appropriate or fitting belief, attitudes towards utterance+content or towards the speaker, etc.

⇒ Perhaps many forms of disagreement are indeed not based on semantic content. However, it seems that 'going pragmatic' is more like an attempt to explain away a phenomenon rather than addressing the philosophical worry.

Metalinguistic Negotiation

Burgess, Plunkett, and Sundell have argued that the dialogues discussed so far are examples of *metalinguistic negotiation*.

- The disagreement may be about the terms involved.
- This does not indicate that the dispute is insubstantial or not worth having.
- The MN analysis also passes Chalmer's test for not involving 'merely verbal' disputes, because it survives paraphrasing.
- The discourse participants negotiate the appropriate use of a term or concept which must fit existing social and linguistic practices associated with this term.
- They negotiate which meaning fits the existing functional role, because there is something '... substantive at stake in how the relevant terms are used in the context [...] and the speakers recognize this fact.' [P&S: 25]

Critique of Conceptual Ethics (1)

There is a problem with the *negotiation* aspect of Conceptual Ethics.

Descriptive Metalinguistic Disputes (Plunkett 2015)

Existing social practices determine the correctness of a given MN interpretation.

- This may solve the *Tomato* example but not genuine metalinguistic value disputes.
- The descriptive account could rest on the wrong kind of facts.
- Example: In a society in which waterboarding is normal and generally not considered torture, waterboarding is not torture.

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Critique of Conceptual Ethics (2)

Normative Metalinguistic Disputes (Plunkett 2015)

Discourse participants negotiate the best use of terms or concepts on the basis of their existing social function.

- ML negotiations are partly factual, based on the existing social role, partly value disputes, and the latter makes them substantial.
- But this does still not explain what is negotiated. Negotiation is too arbitrary and too close to bargaining.
- Bob could reply to Alice: Fine, waterboarding is torture₂. But it is still not torture₁.
- The MN “negotiation” view explains metalinguistic value disputes as a merely persuasive business.

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The Crucial Question

Question: Why do we usually assume that a general term denotes *one* concept when people persistently disagree about its lexical decomposition?

Answer: Because we believe that the concept adequately captures an important aspect of reality.

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The Dual Aspect Approach

Three components:

Core meaning: Shared meaning on which speakers of a linguistic community loosely converge ('bundle view', truth-conditionally incomplete) by virtue of being competent speakers. It is the common denominator.

Noumenal meaning: What individual speakers (ideolects) and groups of speakers (jargon, sociolect) consider the *real* meaning of an expression. What 'X' really means. / What really is X.

The noumenon: That actual or imaginary aspect of reality that an expression is supposed to capture.

The noumenon is not a meaning-constituting entity and it may or may not exist, may or may not be real. Hence the term '**dual aspect semantics**'. N.B. a superficial similarity to DATs for propositional attitudes from the 70s, but this one has almost the opposite purpose.

The Roles of the Aspects

- Core meaning serves for successful communication when agents need to cooperate. It need not be truth-conditionally complete and only 'match' reality insofar as reality is relevant for successful cooperation. Example: Water is a transparent colorless drinkable liquid essential to all life on earth.
- Noumenal meaning represents what speakers and groups of speakers consider the 'real' meaning of an expression, how they *intend* to capture an aspect of reality. Example: Water is H₂O, plus sometimes a few minerals and other impurities.
- A noumenon is that purported aspect of reality that a given noumenal meaning is supposed to capture. Example: H₂O (or XYZ, or whatever water *really* is)

Putnam's Meaning Vectors

Putnam made similar suggestions in *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* and *Is Semantics Possible?* A meaning vector contains:

Internalist Components:

- Semantic and syntactic markers: e.g. proper noun with a given gender, mass term
- Stereotype: e.g. transparent colorless drinkable liquid

Externalist Component:

- Extension: H₂O (or a correct description thereof?); fixed indexically; investigated by experts

N.B.: According to Putnam (1975), a competent speaker does *not* need to have implicit knowledge of the extension!

How DAT Applies to Value Disputes

- We use *every* expression *as if* it captured an aspect of reality that goes beyond a mere need to cooperate, unless it is explicitly marked as standing for something that doesn't exist or is not real.
- Example: We use 'good' as if there was something in reality like an absolute value or a social fact to which the use corresponds in the given conversational context.
- Compare: We used 'Vulcan' as if there was something in reality to which it corresponds in the given conversational context – until we found out that the planet does not exist.
- Competent speakers agree about the core meaning and disagree about the noumenal meaning.
- The dispute is metalinguistic insofar as noumenal meaning is concerned but based on a prior shared agreement about the core meaning that determines existing social practices.

Summary

- The above value disputes are not substantially different from other disputes about the noumenal meaning of terms.
- Disputing the noumenal meaning of an expression on the basis of its core meaning is a normal function of natural language.
- Such a dispute may be substantial because it affects the core meaning (e.g. prior social role), but it may also be substantial because it concerns whatever speakers believe about reality.
- Noumenal meaning is based on a constant strife to adjust our conceptual network to reality, going beyond of what is required for the coordination of behavior.
- The existence of noumenal meaning and the assumption of a corresponding noumenon does *principally not* imply that such a noumenal entity exists or is real in any other sense.
- Any reductionist position is compatible with DAT.

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