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Philosophical Paradoxes and Semantics

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is possible thanks in part to Semantics, the linguistic rules that people have agreed on to give meaning to certain symbols and words. Semantic misunderstandings occur when speakers give different meaning to words or phrases. Learning to understand these linguistic misinterpretations can help us build effective communication in all of our relationships.

Semantics deals with communication using precise wording in a variety of ways. For this exercise, I will focus on three types of word usage: Equivocation, using those with two or more meanings that can be misunderstood; Deixis, the fiction or use of deictic words, those where their semantic meaning is fixed but require contextual information to convey any meaning; and Abstraction, general or vague language that represents ideas or concepts but have no physical reference. I have long had issues speaking in semantics, though it's an ideological choice I made long ago to combat my self-perceived linguistic deficiencies. In practice, for most my adult life, I have found a need to be quite careful when choosing words or phrases to get a robust message across. What inevitably occurs is a paradoxical disassociation with those to whom I seek to speak clearly. What I have recently discovered is that the disconnect results from my own misunderstandings with the more philosophical form of communication: pragmatics.

In evaluating several philosophical paradoxes linguistically, I have come to a newly formed conclusion: adhering to semantics could in fact be what has been leading me down these dangerous roads. Using three popular paradoxes, I will examine whether pragmatic conversation makes more sense in the daily practice of effective communication.

PARADOXES, REASONS AND RATIONALITY

I have chosen three philosophical paradoxes to examine thoughts on semantics. Certain rational lessons can only be understood by disclosing, or making sense of, their linguistically irrational nature. Thus, a discussion on the best way to work through each can then occur.

The well known paradox of Buridan's Ass is simple yet effective in the discussion of free will:

A hungry donkey is confronted by two bales of hay, one to the right and one to the left. The two bales are equal in size, look and distance; the donkey always chooses whichever bale is closest to him so, lacking further reason to choose one over the other, the poor ass dies, starving.

The donkey, as it stands, needs to decide which to eat yet cannot due to the animal's lack of reason. For humans to act, do they not need a reason? Paradoxically, in seems, one bale too many is the cause of his woe.

The paradox of the barber is attributed to the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. With it, he asks us to consider the following situation:

A barber shaves everyone who does not shave himself, but no one else..

So, does he shave himself? If he is someone who shaves himself, then he is not shaved by a barber, but that means he does not shave himself. If he is someone who does not shave himself, then the barber shaves him, but that means that he shaves himself (Joyce 3). What does he do?

From Peter Cave's This Sentence Is False, we get the following paradox on Preference, which is a perfect example of transitivity:

*I prefer dancing with Clarice to dancing with Beatrice,
and I prefer dancing with Beatrice to dancing with Alice;
however, I will dance with Alice instead of Clarice.*

In the explanation that follows, the writer delights in Clarice's company; is pretty neutral about Beatrice; and when it comes to Alice, he finds her so awkward that he prefers blandness with Beatrice. Hence, rationality suggests that he should prefer dancing with Clarice than with Alice. But does it? Paradox arises because, from the context, 'No' could be the answer (11).

EQUIVOCATION

The use of ambiguous language is the easiest way to describe equivocation. This definition is certainly a more malicious way to describe it than some might want to use; therein lies a first example of semantics. People use equivocation to conceal the truth or to avoid committing oneself. According to a paper published by Dr. Craig Hanks, Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Texas State University, "the fallacy of equivocation occurs when a key term or phrase in an argument is used in an ambiguous way, with one meaning in one portion of the argument and then another meaning in another portion of the argument" (1).

This ambiguity is clear in the paradox of the barber. Does he shave himself or not? Either answer leads to a contradiction, perhaps even an argument, because once there is a contradiction, you can actually prove anything you like just by using the rules of logical deduction (Joyce 3 and 7). Deciphering what is meant, by solely using the words verbatim, causes a contradiction because we cannot determine whether the barber should be in or out of the equation. While this type of ambiguity can be seen as Machiavellian, the writer ends on a flippant note: “There is an easy solution to the Barber's Paradox, which doesn't require the opening of any nasty cans of set-theoretic worms. Just make the barber a woman” (Joyce 12).

DEIXIS

Deixis refers to the words or phrases that cannot be fully understood without contextual information. In Psychology, logic and reason play a large part in deciphering context. Deictic words, however, have been singled out in the study of linguistics to force the details in order to avoid misunderstanding. Transitivity is a philosophical term regarding relations; i.e. if it applies between successive members of a sequence, it must also apply between any two members taken in order. The paradox of Preference is a simple one: If A is to B and B is to C, then A must be to C. However, this does not necessarily hold true in the real world given so many possible circumstances. Below is Cave's further explanation of his paradox:

“Alice is fragile, easily upset and feels undermined by Clarice, though not by Beatrice. Clarice is confident and sociable; so I may prefer dancing with Alice rather than causing her distress by my dancing with Clarice” (12).

There is so much backstory involved here, it would be impossible, without it, to know that his reasoning was, in fact, quite rational. Determining the conditions for rationality is far from easy. Transitivity is used to understand deictic words but it cannot be the only source.

ABSTRACTION

According to Linguist Daniel Kayser, in his paper for The Royal Society entitled, 'Abstraction and natural language semantics', general or vague language used to explain or detect common properties in perceived entities is known as Abstraction. Making decisions on the basis of perceptions or acquired similarities is how humans consider the use of abstraction (Kayser 1 and 3). Words, however, can vary in their level of abstraction because meaning is often ambiguous. Buridan's paradox is fundamental in philosophy because it helps to explain the instability behind the human mind when confronted with a decision he or she cannot make, for

whatever reason. To make things more complicated, there is the further difference between believing one decision over another is wrong and not knowing what to believe. This “instability is akin to Buridan’s ass’s, when switching repeatedly between hay-bales” (Cave 21).

I have always been struck with the assumption that, after investigation, answers to questions can be found using the basis of research. If you believe in pure determinism, the donkey’s only option is to lack free will and, in turn, starve. While this seems like a gross misinterpretation of choice, to me it seems that the inaction is itself an action. With that in mind, there would actually be three possible actions: choosing the left bale, choosing the right bale and choosing neither bale due to lack of information, presupposition, implicature or any other possible reason to act such as to avoid starvation. What has been difficult for me is understanding why the donkey’s inability to choose between either bale would lead him to the worse option of all? To solve this, I have had to dive deeper into the idea of randomness, an additional can of worms larger than what is being discussed here. Still, it is possible that randomness is simply based on the limited viewpoint of the person perceiving it. Therefore, abstraction helps to undermine randomness by filling in the blanks using what we know - or perceive to know at the time - in order to make logical or rational decisions.

THE PRAGMATIC COUNTER-ARGUMENT

Semantics is rule-governed. Pragmatics, in contrast, states that the meaning of words or phrases is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, that unpractical ideas are to be rejected. It deals with logic and reason as the basis for effective communication. In Burden’s ass, the animal has given up his free will to an ideology, “*always chooses whichever bale is closest.*” Ideologies and dogma are perfect rational agents but their inherent flaws remain: illogical action remains possible. Pragmatics seeks to correct this open wound. In ‘The Meaning of the Sentence in its Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects’, by P. Sgall, Eva Hajcová and Jarmila Panenová, the authors eloquently state:

“Truth conditions are often understood as proper to sentences, or (if we want to account for their ambiguity) to one of the meanings of a sentence. The truth conditions of assertions cannot be described within semantics, i.e. without taking non-semantic pragmatic phenomena into account” (48).

Speaking in semantics may make things clear to the speaker but if the listener is not prepared to listen in that way, clear communication could seem futile. This is where pragmatics can help. Pragmatic communication is concerned with more than the process of communication: it helps us understand the world around us and can have an affect on the behavior of others. Deixis is a little

more complicated because of the inherent need to contextualize but in the same manner. Practicing pragmatic communication seems to also offer help.

As for abstraction, someone can use its powerful connotations by practicing with intension. Function, structure, process and environmental interaction are all systems used to effectively function in conversation (Sgall, Hajcová and Panenová 89). These systems are not to be taken lightly but they do require practice from the understanding that meaning draws attention to each. Thinking of words in these systems, using structured sentence as attributes (ways of thought) and organizing them in a way that carries out the function of communication is an art form everyone can use. If pragmatic behavior is concerned with getting things done, pragmatics in communication is concerned with getting the message across.

CONCLUSION

Effective communication is built on the formal use of semantics as well as its counterpart, pragmatics. Distinguishing one object from another is difficult but so is expecting that everyone speak in semantics. Fortunately, people seem to respect the complexities of pragmatics and understand that not everyone can relate it to everyday practice. There are many, including myself, who find it not comprehensive enough and difficult to understand. It's not as simple as the donkey's paradox because clearly semantics and pragmatics are not at all identical. In the same way, one cannot simply make a choice. To effectively communicate in our complex society, one must be willing to listen intently, focus one's own words, and learn to hear meaning behind the words of others.

References

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