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SENTENCE REALIZATION AGAIN: REPLY TO REY

Alex Barber

Abstract

Against criticism from Georges Rey I defend both my earlier account of sentence realization and my objection to his own '*folie-à-deux*' account. The latter has two components, one sceptical (sentences and other standard linguistic entities are rarely if ever realized ['produced', 'tokened', 'uttered']) and the other optimistic (this is a benign outcome result since communication is unaffected by our being mistaken in assuming that they are realized). Both components are flawed, notwithstanding Rey's defence. My non-sceptical account of sentence realization avoids the difficulties he faces, as well as those he raises for it.

Keywords

sentence realization; SLEs; philosophy of linguistics; folieism; no false lemmas

In a recent paper in this journal I argued in favour of an intention-based view of sentence realization. I used Georges Rey's sceptical '*folie-à-deux*' view as a foil (Barber 2006; Rey 2005a, 2005b). The latter has two components, one sceptical and the other optimistic:

- (i) Sentences and other standard linguistic entities (SLEs) are rarely if ever realized ('produced', 'tokened', 'uttered');
- (ii) This is a harmless result since communication is unaffected by our being mistaken in assuming that SLEs are realized.

I argued against (ii) on the grounds that it is at odds with a basic principle of epistemology, the no false lemmas principle (in its more plausible direction). Moreover, I claimed, the intention-based account of sentence realization is invulnerable to charges Rey makes against other non-sceptical views. I took this together with the rejection of (ii) to count against (i). Rey has since responded. In Rey 2008 he defends his *folie-à-deux* view against mine and others' criticisms and, in the process, casts doubt on my intention-based view.¹

In this reply I take issue once again with both (i) and (ii). I argue in Section I that my account of SLE realization, which is non-sceptical and hence incompatible with (i), survives Rey's criticisms of it. In Section II I show how, quite independently of the adequacy of my account, Rey's argument for the non-realization of SLEs manifests a dogged but misguided commitment to what I call acoustic reductionism,

¹ I will summarize earlier exchanges, but familiarity with Barber 2006 and Rey 2008 plus either Rey 2005a or Rey 2005b would be an advantage.

the view that SLE realization is a matter of the acoustic (or graphic, etc.) properties of the purportedly realizing event. He differs from other acoustic reductionists merely in denying that the acoustic conditions supposedly necessary for SLE realization are ever met. I close in Section III by resurrecting my earlier criticism of (ii). Rey's superficially innocent scepticism about SLE realization generates genuinely alarming scepticism about testimonial knowledge, notwithstanding remarks in his 2008 paper.

I. Rey on intention-based accounts of sentence realization

I begin with Rey's surprising charge that, barring a verbal quibble, he and I are in agreement (2008: ##). On the face of it this is wrong. I think that sentences and other SLEs are regularly realized, while he maintains that they are rarely if ever realized. My view therefore respects the no false lemmas principle while his does not, so this is a difference of substance if respecting the no false lemmas principle matters. (I argued that it does, and defend this claim shortly). So what is going on?

Rey's superficially agreeable claim that ours is a merely verbal disagreement is, I think, offered as a closeted criticism. He is charging me with what Russell would have called high redefinition: scoring an empty victory by using a familiar word howsoever one likes. He says that on my view an acoustic event realizes a sentence '*honorifically*' (p. ##), which is to say that the realization of a particular sentence by a particular event – an event that can also be described acoustically – is a matter of dubbing the event as, or else of willing or intending it to be, the realization of that sentence. My supposedly empty – or explanatorily vacuous – victory, here, is in achieving SLEs realization by *fiat*.

The likely source of this charge, assuming it is properly diagnosed, is a misinterpretation of my view. I hold that producing ('realizing', etc.) a sentence is a

matter of acting on the intention of being recognized as having produced it (2006: ##).

After quoting my view, Rey glosses it as the claim that...

...a particular utterance of a sentence enjoys a certain phonological and syntactic structure simply *because it is produced by the intention that it do so.*

(2008: ##, italics in the original)

This is the view Rey criticizes. It is not my view. Rather, it is Humpty Dumpty's philosophy of meaning transposed into a philosophy of SLEs. It is a false view, too. No intention is ever performed successfully simply by virtue of being acted on; *a fortiori*, a linguistic act's resulting in the production of a particular sentence cannot be a matter simply of the utterer's intending that it do so. (I make this point in 2006: 49.) Still, given that Rey glosses mine as a Humpty view (or as a Blanche Dubois "I do declare" view, to borrow a quip made by Barry Smith), it is no surprise that he should feel that I am stipulating my way to victory.

I will set aside Rey's suggestion that he and I agree as a product of this misreading.² He also makes a number of substantial charges against what he calls

² Several misrepresentations of where I stand play an organizational rather than a logical role in his paper, so I will merely note them here. First, I explicitly criticise dispositionalism on pp. ##, so Rey's headings on p. ## are misnomers. He also suggests that my theory is a response dependence theory (p. ##), which it is not. Finally, and in reaction to my account, Rey says that even if it is accepted, it cannot help a strong externalist. Since I am not committed to defending strong externalism (see 2006: ## for why I am, like him, sceptical of it in this context), this is not a locus of disagreement between us. Our quarrel is, rather, over what SLEs realization consists in and whether it ever occurs. Related to this, and contrary to the drift of the final sentence of his Section 2, my effort to salvage SLE realization is not driven by any commitment to treating SLE realization as a matter of the realizing event having certain

dispositionalist theories. The most serious of these (setting aside those criticisms that clearly do not apply to my account, which is not in fact dispositionalist – see note 2) is that there is no serious explanatory gain to be had from typing individual acoustic events according to the SLE each realizes. I agree with Rey on this point if he is denying that the identity of the SLE an event realizes must directly reflect, wholly or even partially, that event’s acoustic profile. But Rey could be interpreted as making a stronger denial, one which I must and do reject. He could be denying that there is any explanatory gain to be had from describing linguistic events as realizing SLEs *irrespective* of whether their doing so is wholly or partially a direct reflection of their acoustic profile (for those that have one). This stronger position challenges anyone who is committed to the thought that SLEs are realized by events that are sometimes, *inter alia*, acoustic or graphic – as many linguistic acts surely are.

I hold that there is theoretical advantage to be had from allowing that linguistic acts, including acoustic ones, realize SLEs (though – agreed – not by virtue of realizing specific acoustic or graphical properties). Specifically, doing so circumvents the sceptical catastrophe that Rey’s *folie-à-deux* view generates in light of the no false lemmas principle. Scepticism about SLE realization generalizes into scepticism about testimony. (See section III below for more on this). One could quibble over whether avoiding the consequence that nothing anyone utters ever succeeds in communicating knowledge is an ‘explanatory’ gain, but it is surely a gain.³

external (e.g. acoustic) properties. I think quite the opposite (see 2006: ##). In fact, as should become clear in Section II below, of the two of us it is Rey who is closer to this view.

³ A different way with this objection would be to award the intentions themselves causal/explanatory significance. There are signs that Rey would be concessive on this point (see 2008: ##).

Actually, Rey seeks to elevate this last consideration into more than a quibble. He writes: ‘I must confess that I’m not convinced that attributions of *knowledge* have any serious explanatory role to play in any science.’ (2008: ##). He does not attempt to convert this confession into a decisive refutation. He does, however, back it up with several considerations that bear on my claim that there is gain to be had in avoiding testimonial scepticism.

[A]s Barber's own discussion (pp. 415-8) of the ‘no false lemmas’ condition reminds us, the ordinary non-theoretical use of ‘knowledge’ is notoriously unstable, heavily influenced by the changing interests of speakers and hearers in a way that seems to me to undermine its having any genuine explanatory significance. (2008: ##).

I touched on this matter in my earlier paper (p. ##), and will not repeat what I said there save to reiterate that the knowledge attributions Rey is at risk of jeopardizing lie at the *explanans* end of the explanatory process, not at the *explanandum* end. That is, I am not engaging in the familiar debate over whether or not to describe as knowledge those cognitive states that purportedly enter somehow into the partial explanation of, among other things, linguistic behaviour. Instead, I am interested in whether explanations in linguistics, if construed as Rey construes them, could ever culminate in the testimonial knowledge we readily take ourselves to benefit from – and without which the impossibility of science would be among the least of our troubles. While it is debatable that we should even aspire to explain the acquisition of knowledge scientifically, it would be reckless to deny that testimonial knowledge is possible, explicably or not. But this is what Rey’s dismissal of the no false lemmas principle’s

relevance risks doing. Notice, too, that the no-false-lemmas constraint on knowledge is fairly robust. It is not challenged by the recent upsurge of interest in the purported context-sensitivity of knowledge attributions Rey alludes to in the quotation above; and it would be pernicious to let mere complexity in the application of a principle count as a reason to doubt its cogency.

To help Rey warm to my stance, I ask him to consider whether the instability involved in knowledge attributions is any greater than that involved in content attributions. My sense is that it is not. Yet Rey has been a standard bearer for the cause of embedding a relatively rich notion of representation within a scientific approach to the mind.⁴ Representation, replete with intentionality, is allowed under the wire as a naturalistically important notion (2008: ##), but knowledge that respects the no-false-lemmas principle is not. What is the methodological maxim at work here?

Rey could insist that intentionality is ‘presupposed by the talk of “representation of *x*” that is ubiquitous in cognitive science’ (2008: ##), whereas...

...‘[k]nowledge’ as its used in cognitive science is really just a convenient term for the set of cognitive states and/or abilities that are the focus of some domain of research, e.g., the infant's understanding of objects, language, folk biology, the theory of mind, quite independently of any issues of *truth*, *justification*, or even *belief* that have concerned philosophers. (2008: ##)

⁴ Rey 2003a, 2003b, for example, as well as 2008: ##.

But while Rey is surely correct that this is *a* use cognitive scientists make of the word ‘knowledge’, the term can also be used to capture an aspect of our cognitive states that renders our being in them (when we are) highly attractive, and an explanation of how we manage to be in them as often as we are so tantalizing – and difficult if not ultimately impossible. It is an open question whether knowledge in this role must respect the no-false-lemmas principle. I gave some reason to think it should (2006: ##) and dismissed some apparent reasons to think otherwise (2006: ##; see also section III below). But Rey has offered no convincing reason for not taking the principle seriously.

II. Rey’s acoustic reductionism

Rey’s argument for scepticism presupposes acoustic reductionism, the view that realization of SLEs is a matter of certain events – call them linguistic acts – having certain acoustic (or graphic) properties. That this is Rey’s view is not always obvious. His tone sometimes seems hostile towards acoustic reductionism (see the passage quoted in my earlier paper from Rey 2005: 234 & 245). But we should distinguish acoustic reductionism from the stronger thesis that emerges by combining it with the view that SLEs *are in fact frequently realized*. Rey certainly denies this conjunctive thesis. But in using this denial to argue for the sceptical part of his *folie-à-deux* view (i.e. (i) above, or C in the argument below) he also assumes acoustic reductionism in my strict sense, a thesis dealing with the conditions on *what it would take* for an SLE to be realized. That is, he is committed to both premises⁵ and to the conclusion of the following valid argument:

⁵ I defend the attribution to him of acoustic reductionism shortly. But I concede that Rey may be conflicted over its truth, as for example when he asks, rhetorically, ‘if the noises speaker produce aren’t

- P1. Acoustic reductionism is the correct theory of SLE realization.
- P2. If acoustic reductionism is the correct theory of SLE realization, then SLEs are never in fact realized.
- C. SLEs are never in fact realized.

P1, the view that acoustic conditions, even if never met, are the conditions for sentence realization, is evident in the following passage:

Of course, the inaudible material *could* be there – that was the point of imagining a Rube-Goldberg realization of the... structure... of a sentence. [This contraption illustrates] *a way* that the... structure of a sentence... could turn out to be as real as the causal structure of a car. One can also imagine that there really existed a causally efficacious inaudible element in some kind of acoustic (i.e. wave) disturbance in the air, *in which case, fine, there would be no illusion...* . (2008: ##, incorporating n. 18; stress in final line added. See also 2006: 246.)

He is also clearly committed to denying that the conditions for realization imposed by acoustic reductionism are ever in fact met, and hence to P2. He quotes, approvingly, Alvin Liberman's view that...

and needn't be genuine SLEs, why think SLEs should be identified as noises?' (2008: ##) This looks like a denial of acoustic reductionism, not merely of the stronger conjunctive thesis. Rey's label, 'physical tokenism', seems to equate to the stronger view he certainly rejects rather than to the weaker view I diagnose him as accepting.

...were the segmental phonological structure actually to be entirely physically realized, it “would strain the resolving power of the ear ... and exceed its ability to perceive the order in which the segments had been laid down” [Lieberman 1996: 33] (Rey 2008: ##)

Having clarified what acoustic reductionism is, and that Rey endorses it, and what role it appears to play in his case for (i), let us turn to why it is implausible.

Linguistic Rube Goldberg contraptions, if they in fact existed, would not as such convert the representations underpinning linguistic competence from misrepresentations to veridical ones. One (partisan) reason for thinking this is that the representations are already correct. Their content is captured by my intention-based account of SLE realization. But a more neutral case can be made for the same conclusion. Clearly Rey does not mean, literally, that it is part of the content of our representations that metal, string, and wooden items are floating about in the environment of the speaker’s head.⁶ After all, if Rube Goldberg had a twin who specialized in cartoons of over-complex devices made out of plastic, we would not want to say that Rube rather than twin Rube would do a better or worse job of capturing the content of our actual linguistic representations (or rather, misrepresentations, since all are agreed there is no physical device of either kind). It strikes me as arbitrary to say, too, that the contraption would need to be shaped out of acoustic (or graphic) material. This much Rey presumably accepts. SLEs, he appears

⁶ Rube Goldberg’s cartoons tend to depict devices made out of these materials.

to be saying, are multiply realizable: any physical instantiation with an appropriate structure would do – hence the stress on ‘*a way*’ in the last-but-one quotation.

But why suppose that an external material – and so causally efficacious – presence of some kind is such that the illusoriness would vanish? It is hardly plausible that a commitment to metaphysical naturalism is built into the content of our linguistic representations. Looked at in this way, the arbitrariness in the requirement (for non-illusoriness) of one rather than some other physical implementation extends to the requirement of a physical implementation of no matter what kind.⁷

III. The extent of Rey’s sceptical commitments

In 2006 I criticized the optimistic component of Rey’s *folie-à-deux* view ((ii) above), arguing that his scepticism about SLE realization generates scepticism about testimony. In response, Rey questions my use of the no false lemmas principle, or indeed any principle about knowledge. I replied to this aspect of his paper above. But he makes two further comments intended to block my criticism.

First, he writes that I...

...will need to deal with at least *some* Folieist cases. As I pointed out, advertisers routinely exploit Kanizsa and many other illusions in imparting information about their products. The burden would pretty clearly fall to epistemology to explain how knowledge could nevertheless be perfectly well

⁷ If Rey held that a causally efficacious external object was necessary for content, his position in the present context would be rationally motivated. But he does not think this (see 2005a: ## and 2008: ##), and I think he is right not to do so (see note 2).

imported in those cases. And if in them, why not the more general one I proposes?

It is worth recalling that advertisers routinely exploit illusions to impart *disinformation*. Since I am concerned with the generation of knowledge through testimony, this is a salient consideration. More generally, we need a clearly described case of the kind Rey has in mind, in which the Kanizsa triangle – or some other illusion – is used to generate knowledge based on a false (essential) lemma. Illusions are certainly prone to get us to believe falsehoods. But truths, where the believed truth is knowledge... ?

As it happens, I conceded that knowledge *can* in some circumstances be generated by illusions. But in all these cases, appearance alone suffices for that generation. That is, the subject infers from the existence of an appearance (of a triangle, a bent stick, or whatever) to the known fact *without relying essentially on the appearance being veridical*. Just such a case is what I had in mind with the scenario in which two lovers exploit the bent-stick illusion to arrange a tryst. These cases therefore involve no violation of the no essential false lemmas principle (2006: ##).

The concession may seem to help Rey. After all, if we can use illusions to generate knowledge, why can we not use the illusion of SLE realization to generate testimonial knowledge? Since it is the illusoriness of SLE realization that he and I differ on, not whether language users rely on its veridicality, Rey would have all he needs. In the original paper I couched my attempt to close of this response in terms of the lack of a distinction between ‘appearance and reality’ for SLE realization, a distinction that is quite straightforward for bent-stick realization and triangle realization (though for the latter see 2006: ##, n. #, for a complication relating to the

Kanizsa example). In his response, Rey takes issue with my (and with Barry Smith's) appeal to the appearance/reality distinction. But his concern – the conscious availability requirement built into the notion of appearance – is tangential to my objection, which can be stated in terms of representation rather than appearance (cf. Rey 2008: ##), as follows.

Rey needs to establish an analogy with the use of other illusions to transmit knowledge. For these other illusions, we can only talk of their representing, even erroneously, if we allow that there is a way the world could have been such that the illusions would not have been illusions but, rather, veridical representations. So what is the equivalent way the world would need to have been for the misrepresentations of SLE realization that according to Rey we all suffer from to have been veridical? If I have him right, it is this: the environment would have needed to contain some physical realization of the structure of the SLE; and since there is no such physical realization, the representation is merely illusory. That is, he is an acoustic reductionist in the sense of Section II above. But acoustic reductionism is implausible, for reasons also given there. So that option is unavailable. Of course, I'd be happy for Rey to borrow the account I would give of what it would take for the representation of an SLE's realization to be veridical rather than illusory. This would be pitched in terms of the existence or otherwise of mental structures – the intentions describe in Section I. Once the Humptyesque interpretation is removed, these intentions are entirely capable of being present or absent and so of being correctly or incorrectly represented. But for Rey to follow me in this account of the representation/misrepresentation distinction he would of course have to abandon his scepticism about SLE realization.

It has emerged that acoustic reductionism is doing double duty for Rey. It figures as Premise 1 in his argument (as construed by me in Section II) for clause (i)

of his *folie-à-deux* view; and we can see now that it must figure in Rey's defence of clause (ii) as well. This is the underlying thesis that stands in need of greater defence – or else of abandonment.

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