A pragmatic treatment of simple sentences

Journal Item

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1. Substitution failure in simple sentences

Semanticists face substitution challenges even outside of contexts commonly recognised as opaque. Jennifer M. Saul (1997a) has drawn attention to pairs of *simple sentences* – her term for sentences lacking a *that*-clause operator – of which the following are typical:

(1) Clark Kent went into the phone booth, and Superman came out.
(1*) Clark Kent went into the phone booth, and Clark Kent came out.
(2) Superman is more successful with women than Clark Kent.
(2*) Superman is more successful with women than Superman.

She challenges us to explain why the upper and lower sentences in each pair differ, or at least appear to differ, in their truth-values and hence truth-conditions.

This appearance of substitution failure is inherently puzzling. Moreover, it is taken by Saul to generate a dilemma for anyone hostile to direct reference accounts of *that*-clause constructions. Direct reference theorists regard the appearance of substitution failure in *that*-clause contexts as *mere* appearance, to be dealt with pragmatically rather than semantically. Critics of such accounts need to say something about simple-sentence cases. If they choose to allow that intuitions of substitution failure can be over-ridden and explained away pragmatically in simple-sentence cases but not in *that*-clause cases, they lay themselves open to the charge of operating a double standard.[1] But if they do not choose this option, they must offer a semantic explanation of apparent substitution failure in simple-sentence cases – no easy task, it turns out.

Other respondents to Saul's challenge have sought to provide elaborate semantic treatments (§4, below). In contrast, this paper proposes a far simpler pragmatic explanation of intuitions of substitution failure in simple

[1] Stefano Predelli rejects this horn of Saul's dilemma by suggesting that Salmon's pragmatic treatment of *that*-clauses could 'not parallel [a pragmatic treatment of simple sentences …] given that no expression in [a typical simple sentence] may plausibly be interpreted as the existential closure of a three-place-relation' (1999: 115). This is too quick. Predelli is handicapped by the fact that, like Saul, he does not actually advance any pragmatic account of simple sentences. Salmon's pragmatic account could conceivably make available a number of devices for use in a pragmatic treatment of simple sentences. One such device is what I later call *ersatz* substitution failure. Showing that this device cannot help in a pragmatic treatment of simple sentences turns out to be a subtle task, one I undertake in §5.

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sentences (§3), an explanation that deploys no more resources than are to be found in Grice 1975. Ironically, this proposal turns out to be *incompatible* with a direct reference perspective (§5). So if it is, as I maintain, the most plausible treatment of simple-sentence cases available, Saul's initial thought gets turned around 180 degrees: the phenomenon she has drawn attention to ends up representing a challenge to *supporters* of direct reference theories.

2. *A preliminary: semantic knowledge*

Before outlining this pragmatic treatment of simple sentence cases, I need to be explicit about what I take to be the status of the clauses in a referential semantic theory, and to introduce a key distinction. At its heart a semantic theory is a theory of a designated speaker's knowledge. More exactly it is, or ought to be, an explicit statement of knowledge the deployment of which by that speaker in part accounts for her knowledge of the truth-conditions of sentences in her language, where this latter knowledge is itself a central aspect of her linguistic competence.[2] To treat:

> The semantic value of 'Superman' is Superman.
> The semantic value of 'Clark Kent' is Clark Kent.

as clauses in a semantic theory is to treat them as items of some designated individual's knowledge. Let Lois Lane be this designated individual. In spite of her knowing the two clauses above, neither of the following could serve as clauses of a semantic theory applicable to her:

> The semantic value of 'Superman' is Clark Kent.
> The semantic value of 'Clark Kent' is Superman.

even though each is true. This is because she does not know or even believe them. By contrast, her more knowledgeable brother Louis Lane knows all four clauses, in virtue of appreciating the identity of Clark Kent with Superman.

At the level of whole sentences, the object language sentences:

> Superman is successful with women.
> Clark Kent is successful with women.

both have the same truth-conditions and hence the same truth-value (roughly 1/2), though only Louis knows this. His sister's semantic theory generates the following truth-conditions for the pair:

> 'Superman is successful with women' is true iff Superman is successful with women.

[2] Readers are asked to set aside any *independent* anxieties they may have concerning this familiar construal of the status of semantic theories. It will not be defended here save to the extent of being shown to cope well with simple-sentence cases.

'Clark Kent is successful with women' is true iff Clark Kent is successful with women.

Failing to realise that Superman is Clark Kent, Lois does not know that Superman is successful with women iff Clark Kent is successful with women. Hence she fails to realise that the two object language sentences have identical truth-conditions. We can express this by distinguishing between a *difference in the cognitive significance to a person* of a pair of sentences of their language, and a *difference in the truth-conditions* of that same pair. Sentences S_1 and S_2 differ in cognitive significance for A iff$_{df}$ A does not believe S_1 and S_2 to have identical truth-conditions. This distinction allows the main source of the anti-substitution intuitions to be identified.

3. *A pragmatic treatment of simple sentence cases*

Focusing on (2) and (2*), consider an imagined conversation between two ignoramuses, that is, two people unaware of the identity:

Ignoramus A: Superman is more successful with women than Clark Kent (i.e. (2)).
Ignoramus B: I know. And it's not as though Clark lacks the physique, either.

A and *B* both mistakenly believe that (2) and (2*) differ in truth-conditions. Given this mistaken belief, a word-for-word substitution within this discourse would generate an infelicity. It would result in *A*'s having uttered, without irony or any intention to deceive, and *B*'s having similarly agreed to the truth of, a sentence each recognised to be false. None of this requires that the two sentences *in fact* differ in truth-conditions or truth-value. It requires merely that they differ in cognitive significance for ignoramuses, in the defined sense of the previous section.

As Saul points out (1997a: 107 fn.), this cannot be the whole story. We can very easily imagine the above exchange taking place between two cognoscenti, that is, people appreciative of the identity. In such a discourse-context substitution would still be infelicitous, but this infelicity could not be dismissed as mere difference in cognitive significance for the conversational participants, unaccompanied by any genuine difference in truth-conditions. Why not? Because ignorance of the identity is no longer available to generate a dissociation between sameness in cognitive significance for the participants and sameness in truth-conditions.

Fortunately, a pragmatic explanation is available for the difference in felicity that substitution can make in cognoscenti contexts. This explanation stands on the shoulders of the simple account suited to ignoramus contexts. Consider a different conversation between two cognoscenti:

Cognoscente A: Superman is more successful with women than Clark Kent (i.e. (2)).

Cognoscente B: That can't be right, since Superman just *is* Clark Kent. What you presumably meant to say is that he is more successful *when* he is Superman than *when* he is Clark Kent.

Cognoscente A: Agreed. That is what I meant to say.

The plausibility of this fictional exchange suggests that an utterance of (2) can be used to successfully convey something other than its semantic (literal, truth-conditional) meaning. 'Successfully', because most interlocutors would not derail the exchange as *B* has here. What *A* is trying to convey is close to what is spelt out by *B*. Yet *A*'s original utterance is, literally speaking, false.

B's literal paraphrase has problems of its own, however, and is improved upon by *A* in this alternative, less conciliatory response:

Cognoscente A: If you are going to be exacting then no, that is not what I meant to say. The attributes *being Clark Kent* and *being Superman* are not attributes one can alternate between, since to be Clark Kent *is* to be Superman.[3] Really, the attributes must be something like *Supermanizes* and *Clark Kentizes*, where these are attributes one can possess just one of.

The main conclusion I want to draw is that (2) is semantically false but can be used to convey a truth, namely, that Clark Kent (i.e. Superman) is more of a woman-magnet when he is Supermanizing than when he is Clark Kentizing. This conclusion saves us from the puzzling consequence that simple sentences can undergo substitution failure at the semantic level, the level of truth-conditions; it manages this by allowing that substitution failure is possible at the pragmatic level, the level of what is conveyed or implicated.

Before this conclusion can be accepted, two obligations must be discharged: that of describing the pragmatic mechanism at work, and that of elaborating on the nature of the two attributes, Supermanizing and Clark Kentizing. Here in rough outline is how *Cognoscente B* could figure out the intended implicature of *A*'s utterance of (2), couched for familiarity's sake in the framework of Grice 1975:

> *A* just said something false, knowing that I know this, and knowing that I know that she knows, etc. This amounts to a violation of the

[3] Daniel Stoljar's contrary claim (1996), that 'being …' is an intensional context, has to be mistaken. 'Being thought to be', by contrast, is intensional, but unsurprisingly so.

> first maxim of quality. What can *A* be up to, short of deliberately violating the Co-operative Principle? Perhaps it is this. Some are unaware that Superman is Clark Kent. They would, under foreseeable epistemic conditions, utter what *A* just uttered. *A* must be implicating that just those epistemic conditions obtain that would prompt an ignoramus to utter (2) (though not (2*)). In other words, *A* is trying to convey to me that Superman/Clark Kent is more successful with women when appearing as Superman – or, as we might say, is Supermanizing – than when appearing as Clark Kent.

This imagined inner dialogue also tells us how to think of the attributes *Supermanize* and *Clark Kentize*, the issue of the second obligation. These amount to the attributes of appearing such that an actual or imagined ignoramus would refer to one as ‘Superman’ or ‘Clark Kent’ respectively. We might say that to Supermanize is to appear wearing a red cape, no spectacles, and so on, whereas to Clark Kentize is to behave awkwardly in social settings and to wear one’s underwear beneath one’s trousers. (An objection by Saul, to be examined below, will turn out to require refinements to this account of the two attributes.)

It is also possible to account for the difference in felicity conditions between (1) and (1*) in the mouth of a cognoscente. The combined effect of violating the maxims of manner (Why switch names like that in (1)? Why not use a pronoun in the second conjunct of both (1) and (1*)?) and of quantity (Why say something so uninformative as that someone went into a phone booth and came out again?) will prompt the search for a proper co-operative intention. This search will result in (1) and (1*) differing in their respective implicatures, though the details of the search will not differ interestingly from those for (2).

4. *Semantic treatments*

In §5 I seek to anticipate some objections Saul could bring to bear on this account. First I will say why I think the pragmatic story is to be preferred over semantic treatments such as that offered by Graeme Forbes (1997, 1999).[4]

Forbes’s approach to cases like (2) and (2*) involves hypothesizing a *hidden logophor*, ‘so (attired)’, in (2). A logophor is like an anaphor save that where an anaphor refers to the referent of an antecedent expression, a logophor refers to the expression itself. Substituting a different expression will change the semantic value of the logophor, and hence the truth

[4] The considerations that tell against Forbes – in effect, parsimony – would also work against Joseph Moore’s (1999) inventive contextualist, reference-shifting account, in which the reference of Superman is sometimes the individual, at other times an aspect of that individual.

conditions of the sentence. The infelicity of the substitution is thus genuinely semantic. Sometimes there will be no logophor at all, not even hidden. This is obvious from the fact that the 'so-attired' reading is not always implied – think about when an ignoramus utters the sentence or about how a cognoscente could reasonably deny its truth. In other words, (2) is semantically ambiguous according to whether the logophor is absent or present-but-hidden; the truth-conditions of (2) and (2*) will differ only given the presence of logophors.

The difference between Forbes's suggestion and my own turns in large part on the linguistic level at which the explanation is pitched. Forbes posits a syntactic vehicle, a hidden logophor; I keep the syntax and semantics simple but appeal to a pragmatic supplement to deal with the odd circumstance of (2) being uttered by a cognoscente to convey a truth.

That there is sometimes a hidden logophor generating a genuine difference in truth-conditions between (2) and (2*) is implausible. After all, the phenomenon hidden logophors are meant to explain would occur even among a population of speakers of a simple logophorless language.[5] Imagine if one member of such a population makes, or thinks she makes, the startling astronomical discovery that Venus is 10°C hotter when it is dusk in North America than when it is dawn in North America. She reports her findings in a paper entitled 'Hesperus is hotter than Phosphorus'. In spite of its manifest falsity, this title seems apposite to the audience of speakers of logophorless English. More apposite, certainly, than 'Hesperus is hotter than Hesperus'.

Forbes insists against any pragmatic account that, given the *possibility* that his semantic account is true, 'the burden shifts to those who would reject a [substitution-failure] semantics' for these cases (1999: 88). To my mind the opposite is true. Given a choice between (on the one hand) a complex semantic theory that relies on hidden logophors, where in view of the ambiguity of the surface form these must often be taken to be entirely absent and not merely hidden, and (on the other) a straightforward pragmatic treatment, the burden seems to be quite clearly the other way around.

5. *Anticipating two responses by Saul*

Saul's (1997b, 1999) replies to Forbes can be converted into a challenge to the proposal of §3. She notices that there is no *unique* way of appearing as Superman. This means that there is no unique way of Supermanizing. And this is a concern because it puts the notion *Supermanizing* at risk of collapsing back into that of *being Superman*, eliminating the required differ-

[5] The methodology tacitly assumed here is explicit in Saul Kripke 1977, §3c.

ence between Supermanizing and Clark Kentizing. *Mode of attire* will not do, she notes, because our man can still (so to speak) 'be' Clark at a fancy dress party dressed as Superman, and 'be' Superman when in bed with Lois, de-suited. Equally, the state of mind of Superman/Kent cannot be determinative of his being in 'Superman'-mode, since he could 'be' Superman even though knocked temporarily unconscious. Nor is his being called 'Superman' by normal ignoramus observers the key, she insists, since there may be no such observer; and, even if there were, normal ignoramus observers could be mistaken – witness the fancy dress party scenario again.

These and other imagined situations fail to undermine the claim that to Supermanize is to appear as Superman. They show only that who it is to whom the Supermanizer is taken to be so appearing can vary according to context, often with subtle twists. If Superman were knocked unconscious by a plane he would still appear as Superman to a counterfactual normal observer, which is why we can continue to say that he 'is' Superman. When lying de-suited in bed with Lois after having seduced her with his superhuman charms, he still counts as Supermanizing rather than Clark Kentizing because, though no counterfactual normal observer would be able to tell, he is in the course of appearing *to Lois* as Superman and not as Clark Kent. Numerous other cases are imaginable, but there will always be some tacit subject (assuming our intuitions that he 'is' Superman rather than Clark Kent are sharp enough in the first place).

This contextual variability is still more evident in the Venus case. The same astronomer is delivering her 'Hesperus is hotter than Phosphorus' talk in New Zealand when a member of the audience insists, not unreasonably, that her title should be reversed. When Venus 'is' (i.e. is appearing as) Hesperus in North America, it 'is' (appearing as) Phosphorus in New Zealand, and vice versa. This fails to show that the notion of *Hesperusizing* is a corrupt one; rather, it shows its application conditions to be infected with contextual factors that can be harmlessly dealt with on an ad hoc basis. In particular, the implicit subject to whom we appeal in interpreting 'Hesperusizing' can vary according to context.

The second response I wish to anticipate was outlined in §1. How could someone reasonably expect or defend a pragmatic explanation of intuitions about simple-sentence cases without following direct reference theorists in taking a pragmatic stance towards the parallel intuitions about *that*-clause cases (Saul 1997a: 106–8)? An answer to this question is easy to find. The proposal for dealing with simple sentences offered in §3 is in fact incompatible with a direct reference theory, since it presupposes that substitution within a *that*-clause can generate a genuine change of truth-value. At the core of the proposal is a distinction between a difference in the cognitive significance for an ignoramus of a pair of sentences, and a difference in respect of the truth-conditions of that same pair of sentences. This distinction required that, for example, (3) could be true without (3*) being true:

(3) Lois believes that Superman is the semantic value of 'Superman'.
(3*) Lois believes that Clark Kent is the semantic value of 'Superman'.

Perhaps this claim of incompatibility is too hasty. A direct reference theorist may be able to introduce a notion of *ersatz* substitution failure and then replicate my account of the appearance of substitution failure in simple sentences. Where my account appeals to genuine substitution failure, the replica would appeal to ersatz substitution failure. Within the framework of Salmon (1986), ersatz substitution failure would be understood as follows.

Salmon treats belief as a two-place relation ranging over people and extensionally individuated propositions, obtained by existential generalisation on a three-place relation, *BEL*, ranging over people, extensionally individuated propositions, and guises under which individuals can apprehend such propositions. Since guises are abstracted away from in the existential generalisation, belief reports are not subject to genuine substitution failure. But they are subject to ersatz substitution failure. A belief report carries a pragmatic implicature, *viz.*, that the putative believer apprehends the proposition under a guise 'determined' by the words used in the *that*-clause (1986: 117). Different words, different implicature. With 'Lois believes that Superman hit the evil dictator' and 'Lois believes that Clark Kent hit the evil dictator', we could explain the pragmatic infelicity of the substitution by supposing there to be different ways for Lois to linguistically encode the same proposition (1986: 113), generating different guises. This pragmatic infelicity could play the role assigned to ersatz substitution failure in the previous paragraph. The only difference would be that the belief in (3)/(3*) concerns being a semantic value of the expression 'Superman' rather than being a hitter of the evil dictator.

This attempt to salvage the proposal of §3 on behalf of a direct reference theorist comes apart when we come to ask how there could be different ways for Lois to linguistically encode the supposedly identical propositions expressed by the complement clauses of (3) and (3*). The most plausible way, I suggest, would be to take the difference to consist in a difference between (3) and (3*) in respect of whether there is a preservation of truth under the following operation: replace the subject-expression of the complement clause with 'the semantic value of "[*insert subject-expression*]"'. This seems to separate the evil dictator pair in the right way. And at first sight, (3), though not (3*), continues to be true. Lois believes that the semantic value of 'Superman' is the semantic value of 'Superman'; she appears not to believe that the semantic value of 'Clark Kent' is the semantic value of 'Superman'. But on reflection, since Lois manifestly *does* believe that the semantic value of 'Superman' is Superman, to deny that she believes that the semantic value of 'Clark Kent' is the semantic value of 'Superman' would be to deny that she believes that the semantic value of 'Clark Kent' is Superman. And if (3) is true, Lois *will* hold this latter belief according to direct reference theorists.

Perhaps there is an account of linguistic encoding that can adequately separate (3) from (3*). In the meantime, direct reference theorists lack a surrogate notion of substitution failure that would allow them to avail themselves of the straightforward pragmatic treatment outlined in §3. As a result, the phenomenon Saul held up as a challenge to *critics* of the direct reference perspective has become a challenge facing *supporters* of that perspective.[6]

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