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LEARNING "BIG"

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Abstract: I argue that we are wrong in thinking that all assertive sentences reflect reality. My argument is grounded on the semantics of comparative sentences. I also contend that utterances are designed to fit reality. My view relies on the idea that the notion of truth fit for sentences – a metalinguistic notion – is not metaphysical in nature, while a notion of truth capturing our intuitions concerning utterances of comparative sentences is. In that respect, intuitions concerning utterances of comparative sentences have a metaphysical aspect.

Keywords: Sentence. Utterances. Truth. Comparatives. Metaphysics.

APRENDENDO 'GRANDE'

Resumo: Argumento que estamos equivocados ao pensar que toda sentença assertiva reflete a realidade. Meu argumento está fundamentado na semântica de sentenças comparativas. Também defendo que proferimentos são feitos para se encaixar na realidade. Minha visão está baseada na idéia de que a noção de verdade adequada para sentenças – uma noção metalingüística – não é de natureza metafísica, enquanto que uma noção de verdade que capture nossas intuições sobre proferimentos de sentenças comparativas é desta natureza. Neste aspecto, intuições sobre proferimentos de sentenças comparativas têm um aspecto metafísico.

Palavras chave: Proferimentos. Verdade. Comparativos. Metafísica.

> Victor, for example, uses the word "big" in certain contexts, but does not seem to have a grasp of what big is. (Chateaubriand, 2005)

INTRODUCTION

Chateaubriand is acutely aware of the important and complex relationship between language and reality. According to him, sense is learned and community bound, and in some cases it determines meaning, i.e. properties (p. 27). Senses are also compositional (p. 30). In the present paper, I will not use "sense" but "lexical meaning", and I will talk about properties. The notion of truth is a keystone in *Logical Forms*. Following Chateaubriand, truth is a feature of sentences and is a metaphysical notion (p. 116). Semantics and logic share the notion of truth. I will address problems raised by properties and truth. I want to suggest that some one-place predicates are not echoed in the world by properties, and that the truth of sentences does not always reveal the structure of reality. Truth is a multifaced notion, and what is metaphysical about it may build a wall between language and the world.

My contribution is not designed as a criticism of Chateaubriand's views, but addresses the picture of language underlying them. That picture, found in the first chapters of Chateaubriand's book, is inherited from a long tradition covering the 1890's to the 1980's, the so-called logical tradition in the philosophy of language. The latter has been rightly questioned by the ordinary language tradition. Philosophy of language recently took, for better or worse, a new turn and the ordinary language tradition is making a come back under a new guise. It is also returning with new criticisms. My preoccupations echo Chateaubriand's concerns about the relationship between semantics of natural languages and the world.

I want to examine three assumptions here

(a) One-place predicates are echoed in the world by properties

(b) Semantics focuses on sentences type.

(c) Semantics is articulated around the semantic notion of truth.

Consider the comparative adjective "big". What does Victor grasp when he grasps what big is? I will focus on the ontology connected to comparative predicates, like "is big", and on the notion of truth. I will ponder on (a) and (b), and draw some conclusions concerning (c). I want to suggest that if semantics follows (a) / (c), then it is not fit to tell the whole story about natural languages. I will argue that the assumption of a straighforward connection between truth of sentences and the world is mistaken.

COMPARATIVES

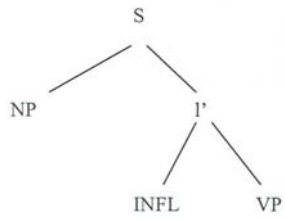
The tradition in philosophy of language assumes that one-place predicates, like "is square" and "is blue", are echoed in the ontology by properties, like *being square* and *being blue*, and generalizes that assumption to all *prima facie* one-place predicates. On that picture, grasping the meaning of "is square" is plausibly mastering a function made true by a class of objects, and/or learning what the property of being square is. Following that model, "is tall" is a one-place predicate, and it determines a property, *being tall*. "Is tall" is *prima facie* a context insensitive expression since, as distinct from "I", its linguistic meaning does not make it react to aspects of context. "Is tall", hence, determines the same property for all tokens and in all utterances. Call it the Syntactic intuition.

SENTENCES

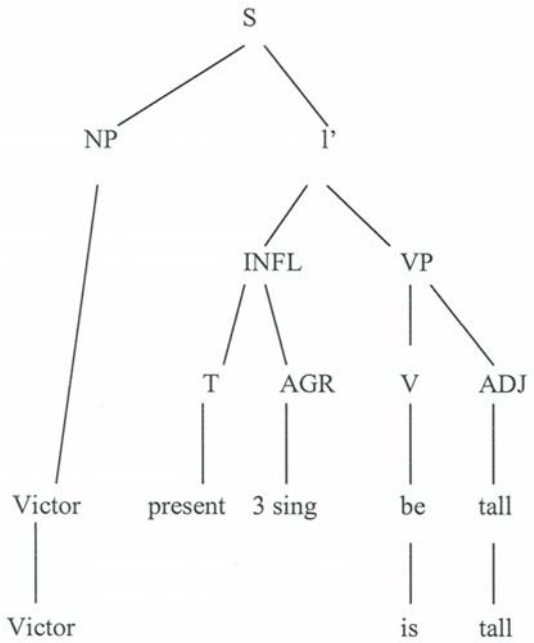
Consider now the sentence type:

(1) Victor is tall.

(1) has the form:



Knowing the syntactic categories of the lexical items as type, we have, for (1):



Now, on my view types are abstracted from tokens and utterances, and the syntactic categories invoked are part of the theoretical vocabulary used to make theories of language. I will not discuss the issue of whether or not these categories – especially the category of sentence – are immanent or transcendent. So, (1) is a sentence in the syntactic sense.

There is also a semantic sense of "sentence": an expression with a truth valuable content (Stainton, 2006). (1) is, *prima facie*, a sentence in the semantic sense: "Victor is tall" is true if and only if Victor, the object referred to by the name, is tall, that is, exemplifies the property of being tall. Call it the Semantic intuition. So, (1) is a sentence in both the syntactic and the semantic sense. The Syntactic and the Semantic intuitions dovetail.

COMPARATIVE SENTENCES

What is the problem with comparatives sentences? On the one hand, (1) does not contain any context sensitive term and, following the Semantic intuition, it is true (or false). On the other hand, comparatives are apparently context sensitive lexical items in that sentences containing them have truth values and truth conditions varying from utterance to utterance. It is widely acknowledged, *contra* the Syntactic and the Semantic intuitions, that nothing is tall *simpliciter*, and that comparative sentences call for a comparison class for truth valuation. Call it the Pragmatic intuition. According to the Pragmatic intuition, a token or an utterance of (1) is *true* in a context in which, say, the size of Victor is compared to the size of teenagers, and *false* in a context in which the size of Victor is compared to the size of basketball players. If two tokens or utterances of (1) differ in truth value, then they differ in truth conditions. If the meaning of a sentence is identified with its truth conditions, or determines the truth conditions of tokens or

utterances, then either the sentence differs in meaning in these utterances, or the meaning of the sentence does not fully determine the truth conditions of tokens and utterances. Now, clearly, the sentence has the same linguistic meaning in all utterances. If different tokens or utterances of (1) have different truth conditions, then these differences in truth conditions cannot be accounted for by the linguistic meaning of the sentence.

Let me add one final, ontological, puzzle. "Is tall" and "is short" determine *prima facie* incompatible properties. However, an object can be both tall and short at the same time. Victor is tall, say, when compared to average teenagers, and short, say, when compared to basketball players. The problem of exemplifying incompatible properties spreads to sentences and truth. Victor can be tall and not tall, i.e. short. The sentences "Victor is tall" and "Victor is not tall" can be both true, when the size of Victor is compared to the size of average teenager and when the size of Victor is compared to the size of basketball players. The sentence "Victor is not tall" can also be both true and false, depending on the selected comparison class. Despite all that, speakers uttering "Victor is tall" and "Victor is not tall" may well disagree! Do the predicates, "is tall" and "is short", then really determine properties? Is the Syntactic Intuition sound? One does not want an ontology in which objects exemplify incompatible properties at the same time: being tall and being short for instance. Call it the Ontological puzzle.

Still, the Semantic intuition is strong. Sentence (1) does have truth conditions: "Victor is tall" is true if and only if Victor is tall. One may not want to sever the link between meaning and truth conditions, or contend that (1) does not fit T sentences, and say that conventional meaning does not provide the truth conditions of the sentence (1), even if different tokens and utterances of (1) vary in truth conditions. The Syntactic intuition is also strong: "is tall" is

arguably a one-place predicate, and like any one-place predicate, it determines a property – the one incompatible with the property determined by another comparative predicate, "is short". The Syntactic and the Semantic intuitions pull in one direction and the Pragmatic intuition pulls in another. Unfortunately, the Pragmatic intuition is not accompanied by a clear picture of the syntactic category and ontological scope of "is tall" – except for the ontological view that nothing is tall *simpliciter*.

TENTATIVE SOLUTIONS

A natural move to solve the problems raised by comparative sentences is first to assume that the Pragmatic intuition is correct, to turn to syntax, to argue that "is tall" is not a one-place predicate and to suggest that comparatives are relational terms taking a comparison class as a second argument. Call it the Pragmatic Strategy. Thus, (1) would then be an elliptical, incomplete sentence, and turns out to be, for example

(2) Victor is tall for a teenager.

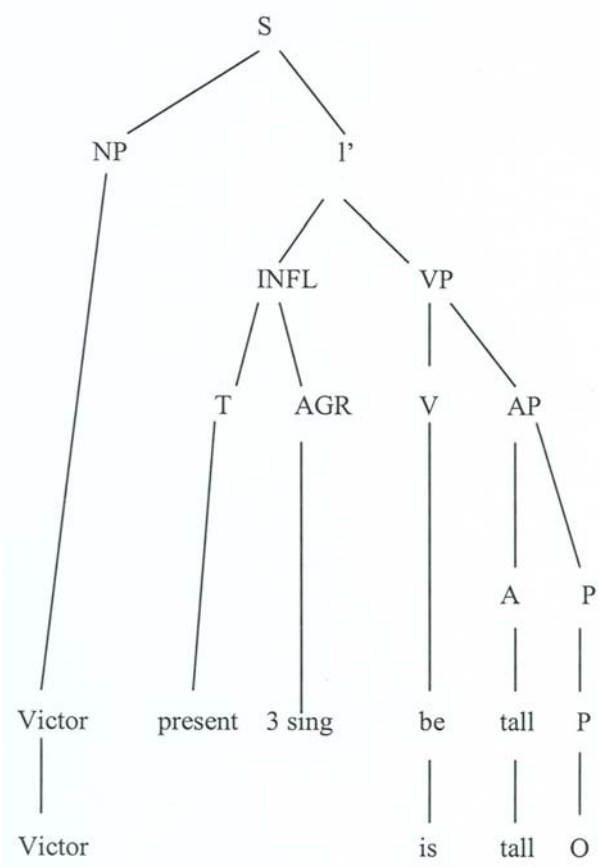
Klein (1980) rejects that version of the Pragmatic Strategy on ground that in a VP ellipsis the elliptical material should be recovered from the antecedent. Consider

(3) Victor is tall and the Eiffel tower is too.

(3) becomes

(4) Victor is tall for a teenager and the Eiffel tower is tall for a teenager.

(4) is not a plausible reading of (3). Ludlow (1989) suggests introducing an empty operator in the lexical item. (1)'s structure is then



We obtain

(5) Victor is tall *O*.

We can introduce different empty operators and obtain, for (3)

(6) Victor is tall *Oi* and the Eiffel tower is tall *Oj*.

(6) can deal with problems with comparatives (See Ludlow, 1989). I do not need to enter into the details of Ludlow's view. The latter, however, introduces "tall *O*" and loses both the one-place predicate and the property of being tall.

The Pragmatic Strategy fails to solve the problem of semantically providing the truth conditions of (1) or utterances of (1). Following Clapp (2002), the truth conditions of (1), and tokens/utterances of (1), are then not given compositionally: the meaning of the sentence does not provide adequate truth conditions for (1) or tokens/utterances of (1). The latter goes well beyond the linguistic meaning of the sentence. On that picture, the truth conditions of (1), and tokens/utterances of (1), cannot be accounted for semantically. Clapp (2002) also argues, correctly, that different candidates can fill the null class for different utterances, and that there is no reason to select one over another, and even no reason to believe that the speaker of the utterances has a specific comparison class in mind. We are back to square one: different tokens/ utterances of (1) will differ in truth values and truth conditions, with no way of tracking this difference to the meaning of the sentence. There is also a dramatic conclusion. Following Clapp's argument, accounting for the truth conditions of comparative sentences, or tokens/utterances, is out of the reach of semantics. If Clapp's suggestion is correct, we can make no generalization concerning the truth conditions of (1), and utterances of (1), and semantics reaches its limitations. Unfortunately, the Pragmatic Strategy cannot account for the Semantic Intuition.

Some, like Ludlow, read "is tall" as only superficially a one-place predicate, while being in fact a two-place predicate. If "is tall" does not determine a property, then it can determine a relation, something like *being tall 0*. On that view, an object is not tall, but tall for an F, and not short, but short for a G. The Pragmatic

Strategy, focusing on "tall", makes disappear the property of *being tall* and all issues connected to incompatible properties, like the opposition between *being tall* and *being short*. "Tall" is also made context sensitive, because the operator can take different comparison classes for different tokens or utterances[1]. This picture does not honor, or explain, the Syntactic intuition: *being tall* is, intuitively, a one-place predicate expressing a property – the one Victor is supposed to grasp – incompatible with another property expressed by "is short".

CONTEXTUALISM, MINIMALISM AND NEW TRENDS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Various reactions to these problems can be found in the literature. Let me mention two. Contextualists (Récanati, Travis, Searle) give comparatives a very heavy weight, focus on the Pragmatic intuition and contend, on that ground, that semantics is just a misconceived project. Such a dramatic conclusion prompts scepticism. More interestingly, Contextualists reject the Semantic Intuition. Minimalists (Lepore /Cappelen) reject these criticisms, accept the Syntactic intuition, and take (1) to be true or false. Minimalists fully accept both the Syntactic and the Semantic intuitions. They conclude that the problems raised by (1) are not semantical, but metaphysical in nature. They also decline connecting semantic and metaphysical issues. Chateaubriand would probably express strong disagreement here. I think that both the Semantic and the Pragmatic intuitions can be explained.

[1] I will not discuss recent variations on that strategy (Stanley 2005).

TRUTH, SENTENCES AND UTTERANCES

According to Chateaubriand, sentences are true or false (p. 111). I take him to mean sentences as type – not tokens or utterances. As we saw, using a notion of truth fit for sentences as type does not account for the Pragmatic intuition. There is no way of explaining that intuition in terms of linguistic meaning of sentence type. Some sentences as type differ in truth conditions from utterance to utterance: the same sentence can be used to make different utterances having different truth conditions and different truth values: "I am sick". However, indexical sentences do not threaten truth conditional semantics. When non indexical sentences, like (1), are concerned, we apparently lack justification for explaining the differences in truth conditions and truth values between tokens or utterances of the same sentence. What is so special about "tall" and "is tall"? I want to argue that the Semantic and the Pragmatic intuitions are perfectly coherent, and that "is tall" does not have the expected ontological weight.

TRUTH OF SENTENCES

Let us go back to (1). The schema T applies to the sentence

"Victor is tall" is true if and only if Victor is tall

The part following "if and only if", "Victor is tall", gives the semantically determined truth conditions of the sentence as type. The latter reflects the Semantic intuition. It is also insensitive to utterances. If one accepts the idea that "is tall" has the form "is tall Oi", and is context sensitive, one cannot apply the Schema T.

Now, schema T tells us nothing about what in the world corresponds to these truth conditions. Schema T connects a quoted sentence in an object language to a sentence in a metalanguage. The

notion of truth that the Semantic intuition relies on is metalinguistic, and not metaphysical in nature, and it cannot fuel ontological views. The semantic notion of truth is not our intuitive notion of truth, and is not intended to fit intuitions concerning utterances. If semantics is articulated around the semantic notion of truth, then semantics cannot explain intuitions concerning utterances of (1) and linguistic communication, where an intuitive notion of truth is at work. T sentences also fit Syntactic intuition: "is tall" is a one-place predicate and it contributes to the truth conditions of the sentence. But to give an ontological weight to "is tall" on that basis is mistaken. The semantic notion of truth connects neither the sentence nor the predicate to the world.

TRUTH OF UTTERANCES

What about utterances? Utterances are particular events, located in space and time. Perry's (2001) semantic approach is utterance, rather than sentence oriented, and adds new semantic values to our semantic toolbox. It can also give some help here. In that view, linguistic meaning is a property of linguistic expressions, including sentences, as type. In turn, the linguistic meaning of sentences as type determines propositions. Propositions are expressed by utterances and are truth valuable entities. On that picture

role or linguistic meaning	sentence type
determines	
content M of utterance	proposition extracted from linguistic meaning
determines	
content C of utterance	official truth conditions of the utterance

In the case of singular indexicals, linguistic meaning determines a category of objects, and selects, in the context, a specific object of that category fit to be introduced into the content of the utterance. Consider an utterance of "I like Sponge Bob", and assume the linguistic meaning of "I" is *the speaker of the utterance*. It determines

Content M: the speaker of **u** likes Sponge Bob

u stands for a specific utterance. The utterance is true if and only if the speaker of the utterance likes Sponge Bob. From content M, focusing on the specific utterance **u**, and knowing more about the utterance, you obtain Content M with contextual factors taken into account. Perry calls it an implemented content:

Implemented Content: RICHARD, *likes*, Sponge Bob

From the implemented Content, and identifying the name – it is the name of the famous cartoon character –, you obtain the referent of that name: Sponge Bob.

Content C: RICHARD, likes, SPONGE BOB

SPONGE BOB stands for Sponge Bob. Content C gives the official truth conditions of the utterance.

What about applying this model to non indexical, comparatives sentences? Given the linguistic meaning of "Victor is tall", we obtain,

content M of utterance: Victor is tall

Content M does not take into account contextual facts. Content M determines, once the name and its referent are identified,

content C of utterance: VICTOR, *being tall*

If truth is a property of a sentence, on Perry's view, the closest we can go to the truth of (1) is Content M. The latter echoes each and every lexical element of the sentence, and follows compositionality of senses. In addition, all utterances of (1) have the same Content M. It fits the Semantic intuition. However, Content M does not fit the Pragmatic intuition: (1) has a truth value varying from utterance to utterance. The Pragmatic intuition is connected to the official truth conditions of utterances: Content C. Content C takes into account contextual facts. The actual Content C does not follow our intuitions concerning the truth conditions of that utterance. Our model makes clear, however, that there is a minor but significant move in the argument.

I will say that "is tall" determines a full truth conditional component in Content M. Content M fits the semantic notion of truth. Our Pragmatic intuition is concerned with utterances. The sentence (1) misses a component to account for our intuitions concerning the truth conditions of utterances. It prompts a search for a comparison class for Content C.

Content C of utterance: VICTOR, *being tall for a teenager*

I underline *for a teenager* to indicate that it is non semantically provided material. If you are interested in sentences as type, (1) raises difficulties semantics can apparently not solve. The comparative does not semantically determine, in any intuitive sense, a property in Content C and it intuitively finds no echo in reality. If you focus

on utterances, rather than sentences, and use an intuitive notion of truth, "is tall" does not have the expected ontological weight of a one-place predicate, and calls for a comparison class.

Disagreements with the Syntactic and the Semantic intuitions are connected to intuitions concerning the official truth conditions of utterances of sentences like (1). This is a step away from the logical tradition in the Philosophy of language. The truth conditions of an utterance of (1) are non compositional, since the intuitively missing ingredient, concerning what in the world makes the utterance true, is not provided by linguistic meaning of the sentence or the Content M of the utterance. In addition, the notion of truth backing this intuition is not metalinguistic. The Pragmatic intuition goes beyond sentences, and it is grounded on a non-semantic notion of truth. It also takes into account the idea that "is tall" needs a non lexically determined comparison class: Nothing is tall *simpliciter*. It takes into account an ontological, non-semantic view. These truth conditions go beyond language and systematicity and are a step away from sentences, semantically determined truth conditions, the semantic notion of truth and "the structure of reality" allegedly found in sentences. What about that non-semantic, metaphysical notion of truth invoked when addressing comparative utterances? Exploring that notion is the topic of a different paper. However, that notion of truth has no impact on semantics, *stricto sensu,* since semantics is concerned with sentences as type, and not with utterances.

NOTIONS OF TRUTH

Intuitions concerning comparatives overlap two fields: sentences as type and a metalinguistic notion of truth: "Victor is tall" is true if and only if and only if Victor is tall; and utterances and a non-semantic, metaphysical notion of truth: the utterance **u** of

"Victor is tall" is true if and only if Victor is tall *for a teenager*. Sentences and utterances require different notions of truth.

In the first field, "is tall" is a one-place predicate. The idea that such a one-place predicate finds no echo in the world, and must be supplemented, is tied to utterances and a non semantic, metaphysical notion of truth.

Now, you can take truth to be metalinguistic notion, a property of sentence, and deprive it from its metaphysical appeal; or you can take truth to be a property of utterances, and keep it philosophically interesting. However, there is no reason to exclude one of these notions of truth: they do not compete, and they explain different phenomenon. I accept both notions and explain apparently opposite intuitions: the semantic intuition, which is sentence-bound, and the Pragmatic intuition, which is utterance-bound. By the same token, the ontological scope of the predicate "is tall" is deemed questionable. It has no ontological weight in T-Sentences, or in Content M, because Content M does not give the official truth conditions of the utterance, and not the expected ontological weight in the official truth conditions of an utterance, or content C, because something is missing – nothing is tall *simpliciter*.

CONCLUSION

We have lost the idea that sentences and reality correspond, because correspondance does not hold between some *bona fidae* sentences and reality. In addition, truth does not make clear the connection between sentences and reality, because the relevant notion of truth, truth of utterances, does not establish any direct correspondence between some sentences and reality. I do not think that the structure of language reflects, or depends on, the structure of reality, whatever that means. We all realize that some perfectly fine sentences are not in step with reality: sentences containing

comparatives. Two notions of truth back two opposing intuitions concerning comparatives – a semantic notion backs comparatives as one-place predicates; a metaphysical notion backs comparatives as relational. Those intuitions are not competing, but just reflect different notions of truth. I close the paper on a negative conclusion: the metaphysical notion of truth divorces the structure of sentences and the structure of the world. If I am right, we should be careful when facing strong metaphysical conclusions reached from semantic arguments, and vice versa. Interestingly enough, the relevant problematic intuitions concerning comparatives are not grounded on the linguistic meaning of the adjectives, or on the truth conditions of comparative sentences. They start from *truth* of utterances, and then move to sentences: there is something missing in the sentence. Intuitions concerning truth of utterances are exactly what should be explained.

What about machines? Suppose that you have a robot, equipped with a sophisticated computer. It can be a purely syntactic device, if you want. You can go one step further and give it a semantics. You show the Eiffel Tower to your electronic friend: "This is big!". It will not react unless it can get a comparison class. And this seems to be going beyond syntax and semantics. This is something Victor can get. What does Victor grasp, exactly, when he grasps what big is? What does that predicate tells him about the world? That question remains unanswered. And semantics, as traditionally conceived, is of no help in finding an answer.

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