

A semantic defense of subjectivism*

Sara Packalén – Stockholm University

sara.packalen@philosophy.su.se

1 Introduction

By *subjectivism* in this paper I have in mind the following semantic thesis concerning normative language. Let c be the context of utterance and let s_c be the speaker of the context of utterance. Furthermore, let F be a predicate of action. According to subjectivism, the semantic clauses for normative sentences then have roughly the following general form.

- (1) $\llbracket F\text{-ing is wrong} \rrbracket^c = 1$ iff s_c disapproves of F -ing
- (2) $\llbracket F\text{-ing is right} \rrbracket^c = 1$ iff s_c approves of F -ing

‘Disapproval’ and ‘approval’ are supposed to be placeholder terms for some suitable “pro-” and “con-” attitudes, characterizable in non-normative terms.

The subjectivist semantic clauses have three characteristics. First, assuming that approval and disapproval in themselves are non-normative properties, the right hand sides of the equivalences contain only non-normative terms. Hence, subjectivism is a naturalist position in that the truth-conditions for normative sentences are given in non-normative terms. This sets subjectivism apart from non-naturalist semantic frameworks, according to which the truth-conditions of normative sentences contain irreducibly normative terms that, if they refer at all, pick out *sui generis* non-natural properties. Second, according to subjectivism, normative sentences have

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truth-conditions in the same way as descriptive, non-normative sentences. This sets the position apart from expressivist positions, according to which normative sentences do not primarily state facts about the world or the speaker's views but rather express an attitude or a state of mind of the speaker. Subjectivism on the other hand holds that normative language functions like descriptive language in that normative statements have propositional content and can be true or false in precisely the same way as descriptive statements. Third and finally, normative sentences are indexical according to subjectivism in that the truth value of normative sentences vary with the context of utterance and in particular with the speaker. This final feature is the source of the semantic problems that are the focus of this paper.

If subjectivism is true it allows us to give a uniform naturalist and truth-conditional semantics for normative and non-normative language alike. (I'm here making the uncontroversial assumption that such a semantics can be given for non-normative language.) Arguably, this feature is virtuous enough to take the position seriously, and attempt to solve the problems arising from the indexicality.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin by presenting the two problems, the modal problem and the problem of genuine disagreement, and explain why they arise. I go on to present a two-dimensional solution to the modal problem, suggested by Davies and Humberstone (1980). That solution is based on a distinction between two kinds of meaning: assertoric content and compositional semantic value. I argue that Davies and Humberstone's solution is successful and that subjectivism is a viable theory of assertoric content. I end by noting that a bonus feature of their suggested semantics, which is not mentioned by Davies and Humberstone, is that it allows for a solution to the problem of genuine disagreement.

The main goal of this paper is not to suggest an original account, but to discuss an account that to my (limited) knowledge has not received enough attention, and to connect the debate on subjectivism in meta-ethics to more general issues in contemporary philosophy of language.

2 The problem

In his book on expressivist semantics, Mark Schroeder states what he takes to be the two most pressing problems for subjectivism as a semantic thesis: The *modal problem* and the *problem of disagreement*. (Schroeder, 2008: 16-17).

Briefly, the problem of disagreement is the following. Intuitively, there are instances

of genuine moral disagreement. That the disagreement is genuine means that the two speakers who disagree have incompatible moral beliefs or make incompatible moral assertions. However, if all we do when we assert a moral sentence is to make a claim about our own attitudes towards actions, how is such genuine disagreement possible? I will come back to this problem towards the end of this paper. My main concern, however, is the so-called modal problem. As the name suggest, the modal problem is the alleged problem that subjectivism fails to give the correct truth-conditions for modal embeddings of normative sentences. Let us spell out the problem in some more detail, in order to see where exactly the problem arises.

A compositional semantics for a fragment of, say, English should do two things. First, it should assign the correct truth-conditions to the simple sentences of the fragment. Second, it should specify how the meanings of less complex expressions compositionally contributes to the meanings of more complex expressions. Assume that subjectivism succeeds with the first task. Even so, it fails to do the latter. Consider the following sentence.

(3) If it were wrong F , then F -ing would be wrong.

(3) is trivially and necessarily true. Now, as before, let c be the context of utterance and let s_c be the speaker of the context of utterance. Then, according to subjectivism semantics

(4) $\llbracket F\text{-ing is wrong} \rrbracket^c = \llbracket \text{I disapprove of } F\text{-ing.} \rrbracket^c$

That is, for any context of utterance c the sentence on the left hand side is synonymous with the sentence on the right hand side. And if this is the case, it should be possible to substitute

(5) F -ing is wrong.

for

(6) I disapprove of F -ing.

in a more complex expression e , without changing the truth-value of e . However, this substitution gives the wrong result in (3). While (3) is trivially true, the result of the substituting (5) for (6) in the antecedent of (3) is obviously false:

(7) If I were to disapprove of F -ing, then F -ing would be wrong.

If I, perhaps as a result of a blow to the head, suddenly started disapproving of helping the elderly, surely that would not be enough for it to be wrong to help the

elderly. Something has gone wrong, and we seem to have a clear counter-example to the subjectivist semantics.

The modal problem for subjectivism is an embedding problem: Two expressions that the theory in question predicts to say the same thing nevertheless fail to be substitutable *salva veritate* when embedded in more complex expressions. In the particular case of subjectivism, the problem is that the sentences

(8) *F*-ing is wrong (right).

and

(9) I disapprove (approve) of *F*-ing.

fail to be substitutable for each other *salva veritate* when embedded in complex expressions like (3). Embedding problems are not uncommon. For example, the following pairs of sentences intuitively say the same thing when uttered in the same contexts.

(10) The sun is shining.

(11) The sun is shining now.

(12) The author of *Pride and Prejudice* wrote *Pride and Prejudice*.

(13) The actual author of *Pride and Prejudice* wrote *Pride and Prejudice*.

(14) Licorice is tasty.

(15) Licorice is tasty to me.

The claim that they say the same thing is based on the observation that there seem to be no context of utterance such that it is true to assert (12) but false to assert (13), for instance. However, the sentences in the pairs cannot be exchanged for each other in certain complex expressions. That is, (10) and (11), (12) and (13), and (14) and (15), respectively, embed differently in for instance the following constructions:

(16) It will always be the case that the sun is shining.

(17) It will always be the case that the sun is shining now.

(18) Necessarily, the author of *Pride and Prejudice* wrote *Pride and Prejudice*.

(19) Necessarily, the actual author of *Pride and Prejudice* wrote *Pride and Prejudice*.

(20) Salman insists that licorice is tasty.

(21) Salman insists that licorice is tasty to me.

It is possible that (16) is false, while (17) is true. The same goes for the other two pairs. Just as in the subjectivist case, we here have examples of sentences that intuitively or by assumption have the same meaning but nevertheless make different compositional contributions to certain complex sentences.

That synonymous expressions are substitutable in this way follows from the principle of compositionality.

COMPOSITIONALITY. The meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and their mode of composition.¹

If the meaning of a complex expressions is determined by the meanings of the parts, then substituting a part t for a synonymous part t' cannot change the truth-value of the complex expressions. Now, sentences have parts that determine their meaning, but they also occur as parts in larger sentences, such as conjunctions, belief-sentences or modal sentences. Just as simple expressions with the same meaning should be intersubstitutable, so should sentences that have the same meaning.

Assuming that we want a compositional semantics, there are two possible reactions to embedding problems such as those above. The first option is to simply conclude that the two sentences, despite initial appearances, don't actually have the same meaning. In the particular case of subjectivism, this would amount to rejecting that (8) and (9) have the same meaning and hence to reject subjectivism as a semantics for normative language. The second option is to make a distinction between two kinds of meaning: The meaning that a sentence has when unembedded and the compositional contribution it makes to larger sentences. I will explore the second option.

Let us begin by introducing some terminology, following Lewis (1980). Speakers assert sentences in order to express beliefs. Call the content of our assertions *assertoric content*. Formal semantic theories assign meanings relative to contexts of utterance to the sentences of the language, in accordance with the principle of compositionality. Call the meanings so assigned (compositional) *semantic values*. How are these two notions of meaning related? The traditional view has been that they coincide, in accordance with the following constraint:

¹I will simply assume the compositionality constraint here, as is standard, and not argue for it. For an overview of the principle and a critical survey of the arguments for and against it, cf. Pagin and Westerståhl (2010a) and Pagin and Westerståhl (2010b).

IDENTITY. The assertoric content of a sentence is the proposition p compositionally determined by the meanings of its parts. Furthermore, p is also what the sentence compositionally contributes with to larger linguistic contexts.

A virtue of the traditional view is that it allows a simple and straightforward explanation of successful communication in terms of compositionally determined semantic values: A speaker who wants to communicate her belief that p asserts a sentence whose compositional semantic value is p . The hearer interprets the sentence and thereby come to entertain p . However, faced with cases like those above, where sentences that intuitively express the same belief/have the same assertoric content apparently have different semantic values, an increasingly popular view is that we should distinguish assertoric content from semantic values and simply drop the IDENTITY-requirement. The idea goes back to Michael Dummett (1973) and David Lewis (1980).

In this case, however, we must distinguish, as we have seen, between knowing the meaning of a statement in the sense of grasping the content of an assertion of it, and in the sense of knowing the contribution it makes to determining the content of a complex statement in which it is a constituent: let us refer to the former as simply knowing the *content* of the statement, and the the latter as knowing its *ingredient sense*. (Dummett, 1973: 446)

In Dummett's case, *ingredient sense* corresponds to semantic values, and *content* to assertoric content. Dummett's and Lewis's suggestion has recently been revived, and the need for the distinction has been defended in Stanley (1997, 2003), Ninan (2010), Rabern (2012), and Yalcin (2014). They all argue that the IDENTITY-requirement is unmotivated, and that once the distinction is made, cases like (10)-(21) no longer pose a problem.

Can this distinction be of help to the subjectivist? Towards the end of their classic paper on two-dimensional semantics 'Two Notions of Necessity', Davies and Humberstone (1980) suggest such an account. The next two sections gives some background to two-dimensional semantics and the assertoric content/semantic value distinction, and shows how it can be used to solve the modal problem for subjectivism. Furthermore, I argue that the account also solves the problem of genuine disagreement.

3 Two-dimensional semantics: An illustration

In *two-dimensional* semantic frameworks, the truth-value of a sentence ϕ - and the extension of terms in general - depends on the context/world in two ways: The *context of utterance* - i.e. the world, time, location and speaker of the context of utterance - determines the reference of the terms in ϕ . Given that reference assignment, ϕ is true or false relative to different *circumstances of evaluation*. The circumstance of evaluation may include several parameters (world, time, location etc), but in this paper we will mainly need to include *world*. Let c be the context of utterance and w the world of the circumstance of evaluation. Let s_c be the speaker of the context of utterance, and w_c be the world of the context of utterance. The two-dimensional truth-conditions for ϕ then have the following form.

(22) $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket_w^c = 1$ iff ϕ is true as uttered in c and evaluated at w .

The parameters of the context of utterance and of the circumstance of evaluation normally coincide. However, certain operators require us to evaluate sentences at other worlds, times or locations than those of the context of utterance. Take the following sentence, and embed it under a modal operator:

(23) I'm hungry.

(24) It's possible that I'm hungry.

(25) $\llbracket \text{It's possible, that I'm hungry.} \rrbracket_w^c = 1$ iff s_c is hungry in some w' .

Whether (24) is true depends on whether (23) as uttered in w_c is true in some other world than w_c . Because they shift the relevant circumstance of evaluation for the sentence they embed, modal operators are known as *shifty* operators. (Cf. (Lewis, 1980).)

When sentences are uttered and evaluated in the same context, we talk about truth *simpliciter* or truth-in-a-context.

(26) $\llbracket \text{I'm hungry} \rrbracket^c = 1$ iff s_c is hungry in w_c .

Using both the context of utterance and the circumstance of evaluation we can single out different aspects of the meaning of a sentence or expressions. In the terminology of Chalmers (2006), the *two-dimensional intension* of a sentence is a function that takes pairs of contexts of utterances and circumstances of evaluation as arguments and yields the extension (truth-value) of the sentence at that pair as value. The *primary intension* of a sentence is a function that takes contexts as

arguments and yields the extension of the sentence as evaluated at the same contexts. That is, it is the set of contexts in which the sentence is true when uttered. The *secondary intension* of a sentence relative to a context of utterance c is a function that takes circumstances of evaluation as arguments and yields the extension of the sentence at those worlds, as uttered in c . In the terminology of Kaplan (1989), the two-dimensional intension of an expression is equivalent to its *character*, its primary intension to its *truth-in-a-context* profile, and the secondary intension to its *content*. In the terminology of Stalnaker (1978), the two-dimensional intension is the *propositional concept*, the primary intension is the *diagonal proposition*, and the secondary intension is the *horizontal proposition*.

We can illustrate the suggestion by using Stalnaker's matrices and a simple example. The Kaplanian content can be read of the horizontal, and the truth-in-a-context profile of the sentence can then be read off on the diagonal. Let the time-points on the vertical lines be the times of the context of utterance, and the time-points on the horizontal line be the times of the circumstance of evaluation. Let $t_1 = 11.00$, $t_2 = 12.00$ and $t_3 = 13.00$. Furthermore, let it rain at 11.00 and 12.00, but not at 13.00. The sentences

(27) It's raining.

(28) It's raining now

(29) it's raining at 11.00.

then get the following matrices:

(30) It's raining.

	t_1	t_2	t_3
t_1	T	T	F
t_2	T	T	F
t_3	T	T	F

(31) It's raining now.

	t_1	t_2	t_3
t_1	T	T	T
t_2	T	T	T
t_3	F	F	F

(32) It's raining at 11.00.

	t_1	t_2	t_3
t_1	T	T	T
t_2	T	T	T
t_3	T	T	T

Observe that (27) and (28) have the same diagonal profile, which differs from that of (29). On the other hand, (28) and (29) have the same horizontal profile, which differs from that of (27). Observe further that (28) and (29) as uttered at 11.00 are substitutable *salva veritate* under the temporal operator *it will always be the case that*. The same doesn't hold for (27).

(33) It will always be the case that it's raining now.

(34) It will always be the case that it's raining at 11.00.

(35) it will always be the case that it's raining.

Observe furthermore that the difference in diagonal profile, corresponds to the intuitive informational difference between an assertion of (27) and (28) on the one hand, and of (29) on the other. A person who doesn't know what time it is and hears either (27) or (28) is informed that she is in a context such that it is raining at the time of the context, but not what the time is. A person who hears (29) is informed that it is raining at 11.00, but will not be able to infer that it is raining at the time of the context unless she is also made aware that she is at a context such that the time of the context 11.00.

In line with these observation I think it is reasonable to follow Lewis (1980) and MacFarlane (2003) and identify diagonal proposition of a sentence with its assertoric content. Let C be the set of contexts of utterances c :

Assertoric content. The assertoric content of a sentence ϕ in a context of utterance c is the set of *contexts* such that ϕ is true as both uttered and evaluated c .

Clearly, this amount to a distinction between compositional semantic value and assertoric content, since sentences with the same assertoric content are not substitutable *salva veritate*. (Whether we take the compositional semantic value to be the Kaplanian content or character depends on considerations that are not relevant in the present context.)

4 A solution to the modal problem²

Following Davies and Humberstone (1980: 23ff), I wish to argue that the modal problem can be solved if subjectivism is construed as a theory of assertoric content but not about compositional semantic value/ingredient sense. The details of my suggestion differs somewhat from their original one, but the basic idea is the same. They write:

The bearing of this distinction on the defense of subjectivism against subordinate context objections is that such objections assume the subjectivist to be rendering at ingredient sense; yet the philosophical interest of subjectivism would certainly survive a retreat to the weaker position in which it was only assertive content that was at issue, since if the weaker position were indeed correct, then everything that can be *said* with the aid of moral vocabulary could be *said* in a non-moral vocabulary. (Davies and Humberstone, 1980: 23)

So, what is the assertoric content and semantic value of (36)?

(36) F-ing is wrong.

As before, F is a predicate of action, for instance *murder*. The first crucial step is to take “disapproval” and “approval” to be second order properties. Then we can give the following subjectivist paraphrase of (36).

(37) F-ing has the property P and I disapprove of P .

P could for instance be the property of reducing overall well-being or causing suffering. That will depend on what the correct normative theory is.

The next step is to clearly distinguish between the reference fixing role of the context of utterance and the truth-value assigning role of the circumstance of evaluation (a world). Let c be the context of utterance (world, time, location, speaker), and let w be the circumstance of evaluation. Let s_c be the speaker of the context of utterance and w_c be the world of the context of utterance. Then we can give the following clauses for (36):

²This section requires more work, but the key points are here.

Compositional semantic value:

(38) $\llbracket F\text{-ing is wrong} \rrbracket_w^c = 1$ iff F has the property P in w and s_c disapproves of P in w_c

Assertoric content:

(39) $\llbracket F\text{-ing is wrong} \rrbracket^c = 1$ iff F has the property P in w_c and s_c disapproves of P in w_c

As an illustration of how the assertoric content may differ from the compositional semantic value, let w_1 and w_2 be worlds where F has the property P , and let w_3 be a world where it doesn't. Furthermore, let w_1 and w_3 be worlds where the speaker disapproves of P and w_2 be one where she doesn't. We then get the following matrix, where the assertoric content is read of the diagonal, and the compositional semantic value of the horizontal.

(40) F -ing is wrong.

	w_1	w_2	w_3
c_1	T	T	F
c_2	F	F	F
c_3	T	T	F

[...]

According to this suggestion, to assert that an action is wrong is the same as asserting that the action has a certain property that one disapproves of. I struggle to come up with an example of a context where a speaker could sincerely assert the former but not the latter.

The final step is to show that the suggestion solves the modal problem. Consider the trivially true sentence:

(41) If it were wrong F , then F -ing would be wrong.

Furthermore, consider substituting the antecedent for the new subjectivist paraphrase:

(42) If F had the property P that I disapprove of, then F would be wrong.

This sentence is intuitively true. Since the suggested semantics clearly distinguishes between the reference-fixing role of the context of utterance and the truth-evaluable

role of the circumstance of evaluation, the embedding problem is avoided. As Davies and Humberstone explains:

The suggestion is that it is the non-moral qualities on the basis of which disapproval is actually felt which are the properties relevant to the applicability of moral predicates with respect to counterfactual situations in which other (or no) feelings may be aroused by those properties. (Davies and Humberstone, 1980: 24)

The second problem for subjectivism is the problem of disagreement. Intuitively, speakers disagree about normative matters, such as whether it is right or wrong to enforce a certain legislation or whether one ought to do so and so. Furthermore, disagreement can be *genuine* as opposed to merely apparent. That the disagreement is genuine means that both speakers cannot both be expressing true beliefs when they disagree. For example, consider the following exchange between Anna and Emmy.

(43) A: Murder is wrong.

(44) E: No, murder is not wrong.

Intuitively, Anna and Emmy cannot both be right. But if subjectivism is true, the objection goes, then what Anna and Emmy are doing is only describing their own attitudes. But if so, there is no genuine disagreement since both can report their attitudes truthfully even when Anna disapproves and Emmy approves of murder. That is, they are not disagreeing about the same proposition, but only expressing their different attitudes to murder. The question is then how subjectivism can account for genuine disagreement if normative claims are merely claims about one's approval and disapproval.

An interesting bonus-feature of the solution to the modal problem sketched above is that it does allow for genuine disagreement.

(45) Murder has the property P and I disapprove of P .

Anna and Emmy can namely disagree on whether, say, murder has the property P .

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have presented two problems for subjectivism as a semantic thesis about normative language. I have sketched a two-dimensional solution to both problems. Although many questions remain and the suggested solution is still quite sketchy, my tentative conclusion is that subjectivism is viable as a thesis about assertoric content.

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