

Millian responses to Frege's puzzle

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Jeff Speaks

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1 Two kinds of Millian

Remember our two versions of Frege's puzzle: explaining apparent differences in cognitive significance, and explaining apparent substitution failures involving proper names in propositional attitude ascriptions. Let's focus on the second of these first. (As I argued last time, I think that the second is the more fundamental problem; the most convincing ways of explaining what 'differs in cognitive significance' means involve appealing to propositional attitude ascriptions.)

There are two ways that the Millian can respond to apparent substitution failures involving names: (1) he can try to explain how substitution of coreferential names in attitude ascriptions can genuinely change truth value, even though the meaning of a name is its referent, or (2) he can accept that coreferential names are always substitutable *salvo veritate* in attitude ascriptions, and try to explain away appearances to the contrary. Let's call (1) the *Conciliatory Millian*, and (2) the *Unrepentant Millian*. In the readings on the course web site, Fodor is a Conciliatory Millian, and Soames is an Unrepentant Millian.

So the Unrepentant Millian accepts the following sorts of inferences as valid, in the sense that the proposition expressed by the premise entails the proposition expressed by the conclusion:

Lois believes that Superman flies.

Lois believes that Clark Kent flies.

Lois believes that Superman is stronger than Clark Kent.
 Lois believes that Clark Kent is stronger than Superman.
 Lois believes that Superman is stronger than Superman.
 (?) Lois believes that Superman is stronger than himself.

It is knowable a priori that if Hesperus exists, Hesperus is Hesperus.
 It is knowable a priori that if Hesperus exists, Hesperus is Phosphorus.

The Conciliatory Millian, on the other hand, will want to say that inferences of this sort are not, in general, valid.

2 Conciliatory Millianism

It is easy to see what view of the semantics of propositional attitude ascriptions would make these inferences valid: the view that attitude ascriptions predicate a binary relation of an agent and a proposition, plus the view that, e.g., ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ and ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ express the same proposition, entails that these inferences are valid.

The question, then, is what sort of semantics for belief ascriptions the Conciliatory Millian can supply to block these inferences. Here there are a few options.

2.1 *Hidden indexical theories*

An indexical is an expression whose character delivers a different content in different contexts. The ‘hidden indexical’ theory says that the propositions expressed by attitude ascriptions are as if the sentence contained an indexical which contributes an ‘unarticulated constituent’ to the proposition. (For this reason, these are sometimes called ‘unarticulated constituent’ theories.)

To give an example of how this might work, consider a sentence like

Every bottle is empty.

One might think that this sentence doesn’t require for its truth that every bottle in the universe be empty, but rather that every bottle in some contextually relevant domain D of quantification is empty. On this view, the sentence expresses the proposition

$$\forall x ((x \text{ is a bottle} \ \& \ \underline{x \text{ is in } D}) \rightarrow x \text{ is empty})$$

where the value of ‘ D ’ will depend on the context in which the sentence is uttered (where context might include stuff like the topic of the conversation at the context, the beliefs of the speaker, etc.). Pretty clearly, on this view, the proposition expressed by the sentence has as part of its content the underlined bit, and this corresponds to no element of the

sentence which expresses the proposition. Thus, this is an unarticulated — i.e., not linguistically explicit — constituent of the proposition.

Similarly, consider sentences like ‘It is raining.’ Are these true only if it is raining *some-where*? Surely not; surely for them to be true, it must be raining at the context of utterance. Someone who utters the same sentence in a different location would not believe the same thing as our speaker, and someone who, in England right now, says ‘It is not raining’ is not disagreeing with me. But then the proposition expressed by this sort of sentence must contain some sort of reference to place. But this reference to place does not seem to correspond to any element of the sentences in question; so there must be, again, an unarticulated constituent of the proposition.

Perhaps belief ascriptions are also like this. In that case, an ascription

A believes that *S*

uttered in a context in which *S* expresses the proposition *p*, might have the form

Belief(*A*, *p*, MP)

where ‘MP’ stands for some mode of presentation of the Russellian proposition *p*. The sentence would then be true if and only if *A* stood in the belief relation to *p* via the mode of presentation MP. Which mode of presentation required by the ascription will be a function of context — just as which time, and which domain of quantification gets into the proposition in the above cases is a function of context.

Or we could let the third relatum be a contextually determined belief state. Or we could let there be four relata, and let the last two be a belief state and a functional role, where the latter is something like a mode of presentation. This is Fodor’s view (see p. 171-2).

One might object that this view has become a notational variant of Fregeanism: aren’t we now basically adopting a Fregean semantics in sheep’s clothing? No, for two reasons:

1. This is an account of how the semantics of belief ascriptions work. It is not a general account of how, for example, the semantics of names work. One way in which this comes out is that the present approach is a solution to the second version of Frege’s puzzle, but not the first.
2. To the extent that this account utilizes Fregean resources, it does so by associating Fregean senses with certain contexts of use of a name, rather than with the name itself. This gives the account a few advantages over straight Fregean views. It seems that sometimes when I use the name ‘Cicero’ I want to put restrictions on the sort of Cicero-involving belief I am talking about, as when I say

Bob does not know that Cicero is Tully.

But other times I don’t, as when I say

Antony thought that Cicero was a wimp.

In this sort of case, I don't presume to know much about how Antony conceived of Cicero, so I do not attribute to him a belief about Cicero under some particular mode of presentation, but rather just a belief which predicates wimpiness of the man, Cicero. (We saw that this kind of case led to problems for orthodox Fregeanism.) Because the sort of account we're discussing lets the restriction on modes of presentation

Objections:

- This is not really an evaluable theory without some specification of how the contextually determined restrictions on functional roles and belief states work.
- One of the standard Russellian objections to Fregeanism is that it makes heavy use of hard to understand objects, Fregean senses. But it seems that the present sort of Russellian is doing the same thing. (Reply: the Conciliatory Millian has a better time saying what these senses are; they can just be properties of the objects, which needn't be unique or essential to the object, since, unlike Fregean senses, they do not play the role of determining reference with respect to arbitrary circumstances of evaluation.)
- There seems to be no evidence (other than the substitution failures to be explained) for treating 'believes' as expressing a three-place rather than a two-place relation. (Contrast 'John ate.') To that extent this view seems ad hoc.

The last problem seems to me the worst. There just seems to be no reason, independent of the wish to save Millianism, for thinking that 'believes' expresses a three place or four place relation.

2.2 *The indexicality of that-clauses*

It's possible to recast the view in away which does not have this objectionable feature. On this view, that-clauses in belief ascriptions refer to belief states, and the complement of the ascription puts restrictions on the state which the subject of the ascription must have in order for the ascription to be true. The principal restriction will be that the state must have the same (Russellian context) as the complement sentence in the context of the ascription. But in certain contexts, there may be other restrictions: for example, Fodor might suggest that there has to be some sort of structural isomorphism between the sentence and the state, while others might suggest that modes of presentations, or properties associated with the object, must be preserved.

If this were how belief ascriptions worked, then if you don't believe in belief states — maybe because you are a Rylean behaviorist, or maybe because you are a certain kind of dualist — then you should think that all belief ascriptions are false. Is this an implausible consequence of the view?

A different sort of view is that that-clauses refer to propositions, but that these are not always the propositions which would be expressed by a simple utterance of the that-clause.

Sometimes, they are supplemented by extra descriptive information. For example, when I utter

Lois believes that Superman is strong.

Lois does not believe that Clark Kent is strong.

these can both be true, since in the present context the that clauses refer to descriptively supplemented propositions, as follows:

Superman/CK, the well-known superhero, is strong.

Superman/CK, the geeky news reporter, is strong.

It's possible for Lois to believe the former proposition but not the latter, so we're OK. One way to think of what we're doing when ascribing beliefs to Lois is adopting a role of the following sort: an ascription of a belief which we express using a sentence of the form 'Superman is F ' is true iff Lois believes of superman believes of Superman that he is a superhero and F ;

This sort of account faces a number of problems (see *Beyond Rigidity*, ch. 7). One is the problem of conflicting restrictions. Suppose that I am confused about the identity of the subject of the ascription; for example, imagine Lois Lane attempting to ascribe beliefs to Superman/Clark Kent about some third person, n . The restrictions Lois puts on beliefs ascribed to 'Clark' about n might differ from the restrictions on beliefs ascribed to 'Superman' about n in such a way that there is no belief which could satisfy both restrictions. In such cases, every ascription of a belief to Superman/CK out of Lois' mouth about n will be false; but this is implausible.

A second worry is that, as above, the account seems to solve one version of Frege's puzzle but not the other, which seems odd.

A third worry about this sort of account is just that it does not seem as though that-clauses are indexicals. The extra descriptive information involved in certain attitude ascriptions seems intuitively to be part of what speakers are asserting or conveying by uttering the ascription rather than a part of what the ascription in the context strictly and literally means. This line of thought, if you find it persuasive, might incline you toward Unrepentant Millianism.

3 Unrepentant Millianism

3.1 *Semantics, pragmatics, and conversational implicature*

The Unrepentant Millian accepts all of the arguments listed above as valid, and so has to offer some non-semantic explanation of their validity. Typically, the Millian will appeal to the distinction between what sentences literally mean and what they are used to say in various contexts of utterance. In the cases of the arguments above, we think that they are

invalid because our intuitions are tracking what these sentences might usually be used to assert rather than what they mean; in many conversational settings, the premise would be used to say something true, and the conclusion used to say something false.

The Millian therefore owes an account of the mechanisms for generating propositions which are pragmatically conveyed by an utterance of a sentence in a context. The paradigm of such a mechanism is Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature.' The example of 'He has excellent penmanship.'

Why the Millian cannot explain apparent substitution failures as conversational implicatures.

3.2 Descriptive supplementation

A better route for the Millian is to think of (focusing on the case of singular predication involving names) the propositions pragmatically conveyed as descriptively enriched singular propositions of the sort that would be expressed by

Superman, the well-known superhero, is very strong.

This does not answer the question of what, exactly, determines which descriptive information gets into the proposition conveyed; this is a difficult question, but a plausible starting thought is that it has something to do with the properties that everyone party to the conversation — or, in the case of an attitude ascription, the subject of the ascription — associates with the name.

Could this be extended in a natural way to uses of the name in thought?

An objection to the view: Caplan's argument against 'Millian descriptivism.'