

The Pragmatics of Transparent Belief Reports

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Consider the following possible utterances, made by, say, Alison:

- (1) The keys are in the car.
- (2) The keys might be in the car.
- (3) I believe the keys are in the car.
- (4) Frank believes the keys are in the car.

As many philosophers have noted, (3) functions in many contexts much like (1) or (2). (I will discuss the nature of such contexts below.) That is, it amounts to a *hedged assertion* about how things are in the world, rather than an autobiographical report that would be the first-personal counterpart of (4). One tell-tale sign of this is that in these contexts, it is natural for a hearer, say Barack, who knows that the keys could not possibly be in the car, to respond to (3) with something like

- (5) No, the keys can't be in the car, I had them in my hand when we came in.

Barack intuitively *disagrees* with Alison, even though his utterance is clearly not about her psychological state; hence, her utterance cannot have been about her psychological states either, at least not exclusively. Barack could use just the same utterance to disagree with (1), which is clearly about the world, and (2), which is about an epistemically possible world, however that is ultimately cashed out.¹ Even though, on the surface, Alison talks about

¹ As von Fintel and Gillies (forthcoming) point out, the very fact that (5) disagrees with (2) creates trouble for certain contextualist accounts of epistemic modals. Though I cannot pursue the topic here, I believe the present account provides a potential response strategy for contextualists.

herself when uttering (3), she in fact uses the sentence to convey something about the world – something that is false if the world is not as she thinks it is. Further evidence for this is that she can respond to (5) with a *retraction*:

(6) I guess I was wrong, then.

Since she *did* believe that the keys were in the car, (6) would be infelicitous if (3) hadn't been somehow about the world rather than (or as well as) her psychological states – she was not, we may assume, wrong about her *belief*.

I will call this use of first-personal psychological verbs like 'believe', 'think', or 'suspect' as devices of hedged assertion *the transparent use of belief reports*, and speak of *transparent avowals* for short. It is not in dispute that there are transparent avowals. But what implications they have for the semantics of psychological verbs is less clear. In the Wittgensteinian tradition, some have defended a *disjunctive account*, according to which psychological verbs have two different senses, corresponding to their first-personal and third-personal uses. In the same spirit, some argue that avowals are *expressive* rather than descriptive, or at least expressive in addition to being descriptive (e.g. Bar-On 2004). I reject these both in favour of a straightforward Gricean pragmatic explanation in terms of conversational implicature. First-personal belief reports are just that, reports about one's beliefs, but given certain general conversational principles and facts about their usual contexts of use, they generate implicatures about how things are in the world, and these implicatures can be the object of agreement, disagreement, or retraction. Given the many parallels between transparent avowals and epistemic modals, the explanation has broader ramifications for current debates.

The disjunctive account and its problems

In the second part of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests in several places that the function of first person present tense psychological verb phrases like ‘I believe...’ is not to describe one’s own psychological state but to convey information about the world, much like a straightforward assertion about the world. It is not an assertion about one’s own psychological state, like a corresponding past tense statement would be:

[T]he statement ‘I believe it’s going to rain’ has a meaning like, that is to say a use like, ‘It’s going to rain’, but the meaning of ‘I believed then it was going to rain’, is not like that of ‘It was going to rain then’. (Wittgenstein 1958: 190)

Don’t regard a hesitant assertion as an assertion of hesitancy. (1958: 192)

J. O. Urmson picks up on this, and claims that what he calls ‘parenthetical verbs’ are not psychological descriptions. He gives a syntactic criterion for membership in this class:

A verb which, in the first person present, can be used [...] followed by ‘that’ and an indicative clause, or else can be inserted at the middle or end of the indicative sentence, is a parenthetical verb. (Urmson 1952: 481)

Urmson’s example features the verb *to suppose*. I can say “I suppose your house is very old”, or instead “Your house is very old, I suppose.” In neither case am I describing my own psychological state. His partial list of parenthetical verbs includes *know, believe, deduce, rejoice, regret, conclude, suppose, guess, except, admit, and predict*.² In a Wittgensteinian spirit, Urmson notes that by using parenthetical verbs “we prime the reader to see the emotional significance, the logical relevance, and the reliability of our statements” (Urmson 1952: 484). They “help the understanding and assessment of what is said rather than being part of what is said” (1952: 496).

² The verb that stands out in this list is ‘admit’, since it is an explicit performative. To say ‘I admit that p’ is to say that p and to perform the act of admitting. As Recanati (1988, ch. 2) notes, there are many parallels between explicit performatives like ‘I state’ or ‘I promise’ and propositional attitude verbs like ‘I believe’ and ‘I think’. Neither is a part of the asserted content, but serves to qualify how it is put forward.

Let us return to the case of ‘I believe’, which we will focus on. Wittgenstein doesn’t deny that ‘I believe...’ can convey information about oneself – but in this, it is no different from straightforward assertions:

‘I believe...’ throws light on my state. [...] If, however, ‘I believe it is so’ throws light on my state, so does ‘It is so’. For the sign ‘I believe’ can’t do it, can at most hint at it. (Wittgenstein 1958: 191)

So, avowals convey information about oneself just as indirectly as world-directed assertions. In this respects, they differ from third-personal or past tense uses, which are directly about psychological states. Thus, Wittgenstein is “tempted to look for a different development of the verb in the first person present indicative.” (1958: 191). It is not exactly clear whether Wittgenstein (or Urmson) is committed to it, but these remarks suggest a view that there is a radical dissociation between transparent avowals and other uses of ‘believe’, ‘think’, and related verbs. I will call this the Disjunctive View. In terms that Wittgenstein would certainly not have used, I will say that according to it, ‘believe’ has two distinct lexical entries: in one sense, it contributes the property of having a belief to the truth conditions of the utterance, in another, activated in first person present tense cases, it is truth-conditionally idle and merely serves to qualify the speaker’s commitment to the embedded proposition. A variation of this is the Two Senses View, according to which ‘believe’ again has two lexical entries, but *both* are expressed in the first personal present indicative, and only then.³ In other tenses and persons, only the first is expressed.

The main problem with the Disjunctive View is that it *violates semantic continuity*.⁴ The transformations of ‘I believe that p’ that yield (at a later time) ‘I believed that p’ or (reported by another) ‘N.N. believes that p’ are, on the face of it, licensed by perfectly general grammatical principles. Any competent speaker of the language, guided merely by

³ This was pointed out to me by François Recanati (personal communication).

⁴ Compare Bar-On 2004: 232 and Moran 2001.

general linguistic knowledge about person and tense transformations, can tell that if ‘I believe that p’, as uttered by N.N., is true at t, ‘N.N. believed that p’ will be true at later times. We would need a very good reason to think the basic transformations do not apply to this case. Further, it is a consequence of the Disjunctive View that I simply *cannot* attribute a psychological property to myself by using ‘believe’, which is wildly implausible. And finally, it is a solid methodological principle that, as Grice puts it, ‘senses should not be multiplied beyond necessity’: whenever we can give a pragmatic explanation that preserves univocity while explaining the linguistic phenomena by appeal to general and widely supported conversational principles, we should prefer it to a disjunctive semantic story. The fewer primitive semantic axioms we postulate, the better we can explain the systematicity and productivity of language. If we can provide a pragmatic account of the phenomenon, this counts not only against the Disjunctive View but also the Two Senses View.⁵

The pragmatic story

If the disjunctive account fails and we want to avoid the tangles of expressivism, we are left with a puzzle: assuming that psychological verbs attribute the same property to the referent of the subject term in first-personal and third-personal uses, how can they be used to convey information about the world rather than the speaker?⁶ If (3) is true if and only if Alison believes that the keys are in the car, how can Barack ever disagree with her by talking about the keys, rather than about her beliefs? As so often happens, when semantics runs out of things to say, pragmatics comes to the rescue. In some contexts uttering (3) generates a

⁵ A further view, which I will not discuss here, is suggested in Recanati 1988. There his view is that sentences with transparent verbs are *syntactically ambiguous*. In the transparent reading, ‘I believe’ is only a pseudo-matrix clause at the level of deep structure; it is, in fact, “only a parenthetical clause prefixed to what is in fact an independent indicative clause” (Recanati 1988: 53). Even if this is true, we still need a story about what triggers the transparent reading.

⁶ Recent authors like Moran (2001) who both acknowledge transparent uses and reject discontinuity fail to confront this explanatory task. Moran appears to believe that the mere fact that belief and truth are internally linked suffices to explain the phenomenon (2001: 74).

conversational implicature that the keys are in the car; in other contexts, it does not. With the implicature in place, (3) expresses an additional proposition, which is the one the speaker intends to convey to the audience. This makes it possible to disagree with (3) by denying that additional proposition, as (5) does.

On this view, when Alison utters (3), she always says something that shares literal truth conditions with

(7) Alison believes the keys are in the car.

This conveys to a hearer who knows English and is able to identify the speaker that Alison believes the keys are in the car – a biographical fact about Alison. In certain common circumstances, this piece of information about Alison generates the implicature that the keys are in the car, as far as Alison knows.

How does this work? On the Gricean account (Grice 1989), a conversational implicature to the effect that *p* generated, roughly speaking, whenever the speaker says (or makes as if to say) that *q* and it is mutually known that the hearer needs to assume that the speaker intended to convey that *p* in order to see the speaker as complying with the Cooperative Principle (CP) and its maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. In the case at hand, the hearer can work out the implicature in something like the following manner:

1. The mutually acknowledged purpose of the conversation is to pool information about the location of the keys.
2. By uttering (3), Alison attributes to herself the belief that the keys are in the car.
3. Given the topic of the conversation, Alison's utterance of (3) would be utterly irrelevant unless her psychological state conveyed some information about the location of the keys.

4. Assume that Alison is abiding by the Maxim of Relation.
5. So, in uttering (3), Alison intends to convey information about the location of the keys, namely that they are where she believes they are, in the car. (from steps 2, 3, 4)
6. Given that there is a more direct way for Alison to convey information about the location of the keys, namely a straight assertion like (1), she is violating the Maxim of Quantity by being unnecessary informative in using a psychological verb, unless calling attention to her psychological state plays some role.
7. The most obvious role that calling attention to psychological state is to make salient the possibility of divergence between how things appear to one and how they actually are.⁷
8. Assume that Alison is abiding by the Maxim of Quantity.
9. So, in uttering (3), Alison intends to convey that she is not certain that the keys are in the car. (from steps 6, 7, 8)
10. So, in uttering (3), Alison intends to convey information about the location of the keys, namely that they are in the car, but also that she is not certain that they are there. (from steps 5 and 9)

In brief, the Maxim of Relation explains why an assertion that is literally about the speaker's psychological states can convey information about the world, and the Maxim of Quantity explains why it is hedged.

A tell-tale sign of conversational implicature as opposed to an implication or conventional implicature is that it can be cancelled. This is not trivial in the case of the world-focused implicatures generated by 'I believe...' – saying 'I believe that the keys are in the

⁷ This depends, naturally, on the context of utterance. In other contexts, the function could be to call attention to the existence of disagreement about the topic – *I believe one thing, someone else thinks otherwise*. This implicature is helped along by a stress on the pronoun rather than on the verb. Similarly, the hedging implicature is supported by a stress on the verb, as in '*I believe* the keys are in the car'.

car, but that's just what I believe, they could be anywhere' is not particularly felicitous. But as Grice points out, some implicatures are *contextually* cancellable – that is, we can imagine contexts in which they do not arise (Grice 1989: 44; Blome-Tillmann 2008). This is the case when the mutually accepted purpose of the conversation is not to find out how things stand in the world but how they are with the speaker. A psychologist or a lawyer, for example, might be very interested in what a speaker believes, regardless of how things are. In such a context, the literal, truth-conditional content of 'I believe that the keys are in the car' (imagine a therapy session with a patient who has panic attacks related to a certain set of keys) is both relevant and suitably informative, and there is no need for the hearer to assume that a further proposition is conveyed in order to find the speaker conforming to CP. Consequently, the implicature doesn't arise.

So, a simple pragmatic story suffices to explain how first person present tense belief reports can convey propositions about the world. Since a condition for the presence of an implicature is that both the speaker and the hearer know that the hearer can work it out, the world-focused proposition is available for the hearer's disagreement.⁸ But what about retraction cases? On the pragmatic account, what the speaker said was literally true – how can we make sense of utterances like (6)? It is not clear if there is a straight retraction – taking back what one said – here. Perhaps Alison is engaged in some misguided metalinguistic reasoning to the following effect: I would not now utter (3), and (6) amounts to saying that (3) is inappropriate, so I'll utter (6). (This is misguided, because though (3) would not be appropriate now, it was appropriate then, and (6) says it was inappropriate then.) Alternatively, and more likely, she might be focused on the implicature she generated (and knew she generated), and take *that* back. This makes a lot of sense, for consider the alternative of *literal entrenchment* as a response to (5):

⁸ Notice that the literal content is *also* available for disagreement. Barack could also say 'No, you don't believe that – I saw you frantically looking for the keys in the safe when you thought I couldn't see you'.

(8) I didn't say the keys were in the car, I just said that *I believed* they were there.

Here Alison pretends she did not implicate anything about the world, even though she did. This is disingenuous (and annoying), just as a parallel move would be in the case of a paradigmatic implicature. For example, a driver is looking for petrol, and Jack advises him that

(9) There is a service station around the corner.

A little while later, the driver comes back, agitated, and the following conversation ensues:

(10) You must have known the service station is not open – judging by the weeds, it's been closed for years!

(11) I didn't say the service station was *open*; you just asked me if there was a service station, and I told you the truth.

Jack's literal entrenchment is bad conversational practice. Yet everyone agrees that he did not literally say that the service station was open. To be cooperative, it is not enough to be truthful – one must also avoid misleading. This close parallel further buttresses the case that the pragmatic story is right about how transparent avowals convey information about the world – even though Alison literally only talks about her own beliefs, literal entrenchment would be inappropriate just in the same way and for the same reasons as in Jack's case.

I conclude that we do not need to postulate two senses for psychological verbs like 'believe', 'think', or 'suspect'. The transparent uses can be explained by simple and elegant conversational principles.

Coda: Third Person Transparency

One of Wittgenstein's key claims is that there is a major asymmetry between first person and third person uses of psychological verbs. But in fact, we can use third-personal belief attributions in just the same way as first person ones. If Alison and Barack both know that Frank is generally taken to be an authority on matters economic, Alison may say

(12) Frank believes it is time to sell Nokia stock

to generate the implicature that it is time to sell, and Barack may disagree with it by

(13) That's wrong/I disagree; I have inside information that Nokia is about to post record profits

rather than with

(14) No, he can't believe that, he just bought a million Nokia shares.

(13) is parallel to (5) above – it focuses on the world rather than (in this case) Frank's psychological states. The implicature is generated in much the same way. The mutually accepted purpose of the conversation is to find out whether to sell stock or not. It would be irrelevant for Alison to talk about Frank's beliefs if she didn't think they indicated how things stand with the market, and it would be unnecessarily informative to mention *Frank* if she wholeheartedly embraced his view herself (unless she wanted to emphasize that it comes from an authority on these matters). So, assuming that she aims to be cooperative, Barack can work out the implicature that things are probably as Frank believes. Of course, in other contexts, this implicature is cancelled. They might both know that Nokia is about to post

record profits, in which case Alison might utter (12) just so they can chuckle at Frank's folly.⁹

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