

On Synonymy

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What is a correct analysis of our concept of sentential synonymy (i.e. of sentences having the same meaning)? That is, with what can we truthfully replace ‘p’ in this statement: ‘S and T are synonymous’ means that p? Any conceptually adequate analysis must also be materially adequate, so perhaps we should start with an easier question. With what can we truthfully replace ‘p’ in this statement: S and T are synonymous iff p?

I

One answer might go as follows. We know that ‘Grass is green’ means that grass is green, that ‘Snow is white’ means that snow is white, and that the schema “‘s’ means that s” yields a true instance for any uniform replacement of ‘s’ by a sentence. So given any two sentences S and T we have a way of saying what S means and a way of saying what T means. We can thus give the condition: S and T are synonymous iff what S is said to mean is identical to what T is said to mean. But what S is said to mean is said by using S, and what T is said to mean is said by using T, so the condition amounts to: S and T are synonymous iff what S says is identical to what T says. This may be a correct analysis, but unless the concept of sentential same-saying is better understood than that of sentential synonymy then it won’t be a satisfying one. I don’t think that it is, and that further analysis is needed. It is no help to say that S and T say the same thing iff they are synonymous, because then the proposed analysis would amount to saying that S and T are synonymous iff S and T are synonymous. We would need to analyse same-saying in terms of concepts other than synonymy. This may or may not be more fruitful than trying some other way of analysing synonymy. But I’m guessing not.

The most promising approach I have seen is to analyse synonymy in terms of structured propositions. I’ll lead up to this analysis via a sequence of motivating analyses.

(A1) S and T are synonymous iff S and T have the same truth value

This is a bit loose. Strictly speaking, sentences don’t have truth values. Rather, a sentence can be used in a context to determine a truth value in that context. But for simplicity I’ll ignore sentences that contain obviously indexical terms and take every term in every remaining sentence to be non-indexical. Then I can simply say that a sentence can be used to determine a truth value, and even more simply that a sentence *has* a truth value.

Counterexamples to (A1) are easy to find. ‘Grass is green’ and ‘Snow is white’ have the same truth value but are not synonymous. But they *might* have had different truth values. This suggests two ways to improve the analysis, one for each way of taking this claim. First:

(A2) S and T are synonymous iff for every possible world, w, S and T determine the same truth value, if any, when uttered in w

This appears, at least initially, to solve the problem with ‘Grass is green’ and ‘Snow is white’: there is a possible world in which grass is green and snow is not white, and so in which these two sentences would determine different truth values when uttered. But it is

not clear that in such a world the utterer would mean the same thing as we do by these sentences, and so not clear that this an appropriate test for the sameness of what they mean to *us*. But let's grant that a sentence has the same meaning in every possible world. Then (A2) is counterexemplified by 'The largest city in England is in England' and 'The largest city in France is in France'. These have the same truth value, if any, in any world in which they are uttered: true. But they are not synonymous.

A better approach is to appeal to propositions. When uttered, a sentence determines a proposition – a function from possible worlds to truth values. 'Grass is green' determines the proposition that is true in *w* iff grass is green in *w* (where 'grass is green' is understood in the same way in every world), and 'Snow is white' determines the proposition that is true in *w* iff snow is white in *w*. Because there is a world in which grass is green but snow is not white, the proposition determined by 'Grass is green' is not the proposition determined by 'Snow is white', so they are not counterexamples to:

(A3) S and T are synonymous iff they determine the same proposition

But any two non-synonymous sentences that determine the necessary proposition will serve as counterexamples to (A3). ' $2+3=5$ ' and ' $12-8=4$ ' both determine the proposition that is true in every world. But they are not synonymous.

It is clear that by comparing sentences by comparing propositions we ignore structural features that they have, features which play an important role in our judgements of synonymy. A better analysis will not do that. Enter *structured propositions*. ' $2+3=5$ ' does not just determine a proposition – it determines a structure for that proposition as well. It picks out a sequence of three objects (the numbers 2, 3 and 5), a binary operation (addition), and a relation (identity), and determines the proposition that is true in *w* iff the result of applying the binary operation to the first two objects stands in the relation to the third object. ' $12-8=4$ ' determines the same proposition, but a different structure for it. It too picks out a sequence of three objects, a binary operation, and a relation, and is true in *w* iff the result of applying the binary operation to the first two objects stands in the relation to the third object. But it picks out a different sequence of objects and a different binary operation. If we take a *structured proposition* to be an ordered pair whose first element is a proposition and whose second element is a structure for that proposition (a concept that I won't try to make any more precise), then we can say:

(A4) S and T are synonymous iff they determine the same structured proposition

This analysis fares very well. It correctly deems as non-synonymous the sentences ' $2+3=5$ ' and ' $12-8=4$ ', and sentences involving well-known bugbears like 'trilateral' and 'triangular'. It does seem to capture what it is about sentences that leads us to judge them synonymous. But it is wrong.

II

Yesterday morning I met a man called 'Clark Kent' and judged him to have human strength. Yesterday afternoon I met a man called 'Superman' who I took to be a different man and who I judged to have superhuman strength.

Last night I believed that of the following sentences (1) is false, (2) is false and (3) is true:

- (1) Clark Kent is Superman
- (2) Clark Kent has superhuman strength
- (3) Superman has superhuman strength

I also believed that (2) and (3) are not synonymous. I must have done so because I believed that they determine different truth values and, I will take as uncontroversially true, sentences with the *same* meaning determine the *same* truth value.

This morning I discovered that Clark Kent is Superman and does, despite appearances, have superhuman strength. Now I have changed my mind about (1) and (2) and believe that all three sentences are true. But I have not changed my mind about the non-synonymy of (2) and (3). I still believe that they have different meanings, even though I now believe that (1) is true.

This is not obviously true. Suppose, then, that I come across another speaker who I know met the same man in the same way that I did but under different names, and who I know does not yet realise that he met the same man on each occasion. He uses the names 'Bill' and 'Ben' in the same way that last night I used the names 'Clark Kent' and 'Superman' respectively. Among other things, he says that 'Bill has superhuman strength' is false and that 'Ben has superhuman strength' is true. I come to believe that it would be *wrong* to translate his 'Bill has superhuman strength' as my 'Superman has superhuman strength', and his 'Ben has superhuman strength' as my 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength', because to do so would be to attribute him the belief that the man who was dressed as a reporter has superhuman strength and the belief that the man who was dressed as a superhero does not have superhuman strength. I come to believe that it would be *correct* to translate his 'Bill has superhuman strength' as my 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' and his 'Ben has superhuman strength' as my 'Superman has superhuman strength'. Note in particular: I believe that 'Bill has superhuman strength' is *correctly* translated as 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' and *wrongly* translated as 'Superman has superhuman strength'. But if translation is a matter of matching meanings, then this is to believe that 'Bill has superhuman strength' has the same meaning as 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' but a different meaning from 'Superman has superhuman strength'. I must believe, then, that these last two sentences have different meanings. I must believe, that is, that (2) and (3) are not synonymous.

Let me put this another way. I believe that 'Bill has superhuman strength' can be translated into at least one of (2) or (3). That is, I believe that it has the same meaning as at least one of them. Suppose I believe that (2) and (3) are synonymous. Then I would believe that because 'Bill has superhuman strength' has the same meaning as one of (2) and (3) then it has the same meaning as *both* of them, and therefore that it can be translated into *either*. Similarly, I would believe that 'Ben has superhuman strength' can be translated into either as well. Suppose I chose to translate them both as (2). Then when the speaker tells me that he believes that 'Bill has superhuman strength' is false but that 'Ben has superhuman strength' is true, I would translate him as saying that he believes that 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' is false but that 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' is true. That is, I would translate him as expressing his belief that

the same sentence has different truth values. That is, I would interpret him as holding obviously *irrational* beliefs. But I would be wrong to do so. He does not hold obviously irrational beliefs. He does not realise that his claims are contradictory because he thinks that Clark Kent is not Superman. He is wrong, but not irrational. So I can't translate both sentences into (2), and so I don't believe that (2) and (3) are synonymous.

III

The fact that I believe that (2) and (3) have different meanings while believing that (1) is true is a problem for the structured proposition analysis, (A4). I believe that 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' picks out an object (Clark Kent) and a property (having superhuman strength) and determines the proposition that is true in *w* iff that object has that property in *w*. I believe that 'Superman has superhuman strength' also picks out an object and a property and determines the proposition that is true in *w* iff that object has that property in *w*. Moreover, I believe that it picks out the *same* property and, because I believe that (1) is true, that it picks out the *same* object. So I believe that (2) and (3) determine the *same* structured proposition. But I do not believe that they are synonymous. I believe, that is, that (A4) is false.

But perhaps I shouldn't. The fact that I believe that (2) and (3) are not synonymous depends on the contingent fact that when I met Superman yesterday afternoon I did not recognise him to be Clark Kent. Suppose that I had. Then I would *not* have come to believe that there is a man distinct from Clark Kent who has superhuman strength. Rather, I would have come to believe that Clark Kent is sometimes called 'Superman', and that he does after all have superhuman strength - to continue to believe that Clark Kent does not have superhuman strength after learning that he does would be irrational. And I would think, now, that (2) and (3) have the same meaning. For suppose another speaker doesn't know who I mean by 'Clark Kent' and 'Superman' and so doesn't know what I mean by 'Clark Kent has superhuman strength' and 'Superman has superhuman strength'. Then I might help him find a sentence of his own with which to translate the first by pointing to Clark Kent and saying, 'I mean that that man has superhuman strength'. And I might help him find a sentence of his own with which to translate the second by pointing to the same man and again saying, 'I mean that that man has superhuman strength'. By doing so I must expect the other speaker to translate my two sentences into the very same sentence of his own, because I expect him to perform each translation in exactly the same way. But if I expect it to be done then I must believe that it can be done. So I must believe that a single sentence can be found which has the same meaning as each of my two sentences. So I must believe that my sentences have the same meaning.

These considerations suggest that the concept of synonymy for which I have argued (A4) is an inadequate analysis is not the intended one. For under this concept, I can believe that two sentences are not synonymous and you can believe that they are, and we can both be right. But it is usual to think that sentences either do or do not have the same meaning, simpliciter, and if you and I disagree about the matter then one of us must be wrong. The defender of (A4) need not be troubled if I have found a counterexample to an analysis of a *different* concept.

Let me grant that. But my argument still shows that there at least one concept of synonymy (call it 'relative synonymy') for which (A4) is an inadequate extensional

analysis and therefore an inadequate conceptual analysis. And even if (A4) is extensionally adequate for its intended concept (call that 'absolute synonymy'), my argument may still show that it is *conceptually* inadequate. For suppose that relative synonymy is conceptually more basic than absolute synonymy, as would be the case, for example, if by claiming that two sentences are absolutely synonymous we meant that it is possible for someone to believe that they are relatively synonymous. Then even if (A4) is an extensionally adequate analysis of absolute synonymy, it cannot be a conceptually adequate one, for it is not a conceptually adequate analysis of the conceptually more basic concept of relative synonymy.