

Imagining Contradictions

This paper looks at the behavior of Moore-paradoxical and other “contradictory sounding” sentences when embedded under predicates like *imagine*, with a focus on knowledge reports, epistemic modals, and taste predicates. Using a semantics with Lasersohn’s “judge” parameter helps to explain otherwise puzzling patterns involving these sentences.

The Puzzle

Yalcin (2007) has observed that sentences like (1b) containing epistemic modals behave differently than traditional Moore paradoxical sentences such as (1a), which contains a knowledge report. In particular, while (1a) becomes acceptable when embedded under an attitude predicate like *imagine*, (1b) does not, as seen in (2). (The pronoun is changed from *I* to *you* because of the imperative mood in the embedded cases.)

- (1) (a) # It’s raining but I don’t know that it’s raining.
(b) # It isn’t raining but it might be raining.
- (2) (a) Imagine that it’s raining but you don’t know that it’s raining.
(b) # Imagine that it isn’t raining but it might be raining.

Recently, Lasersohn (2005) and Stephenson (2007) have suggested that the meaning of a taste predicate such as *fun*, *tasty*, or *funny* depends crucially on an individual “judge” parameter which is essentially equivalent to the individual center of a centered world. On this view, a sentence like *That joke is funny* is true at a centered world iff the joke is funny to the individual center.

Given a semantics along these lines, we can also construct sentences with a Moore-paradoxical flavor using taste predicates as in (3). As it turns out, these behave like Yalcin’s examples with epistemic modals rather than like traditional Moore-paradoxical sentences. Specifically, sentences like (3) remain odd when embedded under *imagine*, as seen in (4).

- (3) ?? This joke is funny but it isn’t funny to me.
- (4) ?? Imagine that this joke is funny but it isn’t funny to you.

The Generalization

If we adopt the semantics of epistemic modals and taste predicates proposed by Stephenson (2007), the truth conditions of sentences (1a), (1b) and (3) are predicted to be as shown in (5)–(7), respectively, where $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{c; w, x}$ stands for the extension of α at the world-individual pair (centered world) $\langle w, x \rangle$, as uttered in context c .

- (5) $\llbracket \text{It’s raining but I don’t know that it’s raining} \rrbracket^{c; w, x} = 1$ iff it’s raining in w and the speaker of context c doesn’t know in w that it’s raining. [contains no “ x ”]
- (6) $\llbracket \text{It isn’t raining but it might be raining} \rrbracket^{c; w, x} = 1$ iff it isn’t raining in w and it’s compatible **with x ’s knowledge** in w that it’s raining.
- (7) $\llbracket \text{This joke is funny but it isn’t funny to me} \rrbracket^{c; w, x} = 1$ iff the (intended) joke is **funny to x** in w but the joke isn’t funny to the speaker of context c in w

Note that the examples with an epistemic modal (6) or taste predicate (7) depend crucially on the individual center (“ x ”). In Stephenson’s terms, then, they are judge-dependent propositions. In contrast, the one with an overt knowledge statement (5) does not depend on the individual center.

Proposal

Following Ninan (2007), Recanati (2007), and others, I suggest that attitude predicates with a hypothetical flavor such as *imagine* (when taking a *that*-clause argument) have two distinct uses: one where an event is imagined from an objective, external perspective, and one where it is imagined from the perspective of a participant or experiencer of the event. I will refer to these as objective and subjective uses, respectively.

I suggest that the objective use of *imagine* is similar to the use of *imagine* when it takes a DP complement: if I imagine a cat, for example, I am doing something like building up a mental image of an animal with four legs, a tail, and so on. Similarly, if I imagine – in the objective way – that it's raining, I have to build up a mental image of a rain event. Crucially, I assume that the objective use of *imagine* is only possible with non-judge-dependent propositions, since the thing being imagined is simply an event or a part of a world, and does not have an individual center.

I propose that the second, subjective way of imagining involves putting oneself hypothetically in the position of having direct perceptual evidence for the proposition imagined. For example, if I imagine in the subjective way that it's raining, I have to imagine the kinds of perceptual experiences that would give me direct evidence of rain (for example, the feeling of water on my head, the sound of raindrops on the roof, and so on). This kind of imagining is possible with either judge-dependent or non-judge-propositions, since (for example) the feeling of water falling on one's head can serve as direct perceptual evidence that it's raining (a non-judge-dependent proposition), while having the urge to laugh can serve as direct perceptual evidence that a joke is funny (a judge-dependent proposition).

This view of the two different uses of *imagine* lets us explain the contrast between judge-dependent and non-judge-dependent sentences with a Moore-paradoxical quality. A traditional Moore-paradoxical sentence such as (1a) expresses a non-judge-dependent proposition, so it can be imagined in an objective way. This simply requires the imaginer to build up a mental image of a situation where (for example) it is in fact raining but a particular person doesn't know this. On the other hand, since sentences like (1b) and (3) express judge-dependent propositions, they are only compatible with the subjective use of *imagine*. Thus to imagine that it isn't raining but it might be raining is to imagine having direct perceptual evidence of rain while at the same time having direct perceptual evidence of the fact that it's compatible with one's knowledge that it isn't raining. Since these kinds of evidence would necessarily contradict each other, the embedded sentence (2b) sounds odd. Similarly, to imagine that a joke is funny but isn't funny to oneself would require imagining having direct perceptual evidence that the joke is funny (for example, by feeling the urge to laugh) while at the same time having direct perceptual evidence that the joke isn't funny to oneself, which again creates a contradiction.

This view also correctly predicts that sentences like (4) become acceptable if the imagining is done crucially from another person's perspective (as has been discussed for dream reports). For example, (8) can be understood as telling the addressee to imagine from the perspective of James Dean that the joke is funny to James Dean but not to the addressee themselves.

(8) Imagine that you're James Dean and the joke is funny but it isn't funny to you.

References: Lasersohn (2005). Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste. *L&P* 28.
Ninan (2007). Imagination, Inside and Out. Manuscript, MIT.
Recanati (2007). Imagining de se. Mimesis, Metaphysics, and Make-Believe.
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