Logic, Natural Language and Semantic Paradoxes

How should we respond to semantic paradoxes? I argue that the answer to this question depends on what we take the relation between logic and natural language to be. My argument focuses on solutions to the Liar paradox, but generalizes to all other semantic paradoxes.

I distinguish two approaches to the relation between logic and natural language. The first approach (henceforth 'NL') takes logic to be a model of natural language and our ordinary reasoning practices. On this approach, the meaning of the truth predicate is determined by natural language uses of 'true', and a proper solution must respect our linguistic intuitions with respect to the paradox. The second approach suggests that logic takes priority over natural language (henceforth 'CC'). The meaning of the truth predicate is thus determined by Conceptual Considerations pertaining to truth and formal languages, and a solution would count as a good solution only if it meets the desiderata of these conceptual considerations.

I present a classification of some prominent solutions to the Liar under NL (Kripke, 1975; Priest, 1979) and CC (Zardini, 2011; Tarski, 1936; Sher, 2022; Scharp, 2013), and then focus on contextualist solutions to show that even solutions within the same 'family' take different approaches and are motivated by NL and CC to different extents (Parsons, 1974; Simmons, 1993; Glanzberg, 2001, 2004; Murzi and Rossi, 2018). The distinction might thus not be a binary one: NL and CC might be two extremes of a spectrum, reflecting more nuanced relations between logic and natural language.

Acknowledging this has two significant upshots. First, various objections and evaluations of solutions in the literature are in fact misplaced: they object to NL-solutions based on considerations that are relevant only to CC or vice versa. Second, I argue that any solution that takes one of the two extremes is likely to be implausible. A strict commitment to NL cannot provide the resources to avoid a Revenge paradox, while solutions that are fully committed to CC are likely to be problematically uninformative.

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