

## **Sounds Like Like**

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Abstract: It is argued that the verb sound is ambiguous between one reading where it denotes a two-place relation between individuals and properties, and a second reading where it serves as a one-place predicate of propositions. A corresponding ambiguity is claimed for the adjective like, between one reading roughly paraphrased as “similar to,” and a second reading in which like serves as a semantically empty dummy element.

This paper will discuss an ambiguity in the verb sound and explore some of its consequences, especially regarding its interaction with the adjective like.

1. Don't listen to the fish. Compare the following two short dialogs. The first takes place at a recital, where John and Mary's friend Bill has just been singing:

- (1)a. John:                    So what did you think of Bill's singing?
- b. Mary:                    I think he sounded really good, don't you?

The second takes place in a restaurant, as a customer prepares to order some food:

(2)a. Waiter: Would you like to hear about our specials? Today we have grilled trout. It's delicately seasoned, and served with scalloped potatoes and steamed carrots. We also have a very nice roast lamb with wild rice and porcini mushrooms.

b. Customer: Hm, the fish sounds good.

The verb sound is used in two different ways in these two dialogs. Mary judges Bill to sound good based on listening to Bill himself and assessing the quality of the sounds he produced; but of course the customer does not listen to the fish and will probably not be disappointed even if it makes no sounds at all.

What is the nature of this difference in meaning?

2. Against two pragmatic analyses. Perhaps some readers may be tempted by the idea that sound literally means the same thing in (1) as it does in (2), and that the apparent difference in meaning is due to pragmatic factors rather than anything in the logical semantics of the verb itself. I can see two possible ways to pursue such an analysis, but I think they are both wrong.

The first approach would be to claim that in (2)b., the noun phrase the fish refers metonymically to the utterance in (2)a. which describes the fish, rather than referring to the fish itself. (A variant of this analysis would claim that it refers to the person producing the utterance.) An utterance which offers delicious food can certainly be a welcome sound, and one can imagine the customer saying something like (3) rather than (2)a., to similar effect:

(3) Customer: That sure sounds good, what you said about the fish!

However, there are several easy objections to such an analysis:

1. The quality of the utterance is independent of its portrayal of the fish. The utterance may sound good simply because the waiter has a nice voice, or because he composes his description of the daily specials in careful literary style, or whatever; but this will not make it true that the fish sounds good. Conversely, the utterance may sound awful because of the waiter's ugly voice or terrible diction; but the fish may still sound good.

2. One says the fish sounds good, in present tense, even though the utterance is over. If one were describing the utterance, it would be more normal to say it sounded good, in past tense. (Cf. the tense difference in (1) and (2).)

3. The utterance might be loud or soft, quick or slow, etc.; but with these predicates the supposed metonymy is disallowed:

(4) The fish is loud, and sounds good.

Sentence (4) can only mean that the fish itself produces loud, pleasant sounds, not that the waiter's description is loud and pleasant-sounding. The only predicates which seem to allow the metonymy are those which one might attribute to the fish itself after hearing the utterance, not those which one would attribute to the utterance but not the fish.

4. Conversely, the fish might sound not just good, but good to eat; but we would not want to claim that the utterance sounds good to eat. A fish might also sound like a nutritious meal, like a vertebrate, like John cooked it, etc.; but we would not attribute any of these qualities to the utterance.

A somewhat different analysis would admit that the noun phrase the fish refers to the fish itself, but still maintain that sound is unambiguous by claiming that sounds other than those physically emitted by the fish itself are relevant to determining how it sounds. We might, for example, consider all the sounds caused by the fish, in some suitably loose sense of causation. Something about the fish presumably led the waiter to describe it as he did, and so in some sense the fish caused the utterance. In this way, we can see that sounds caused by the fish (or presumed by the customer to have been caused by the fish) led him to judge the fish favorably; this is why the customer said the fish sounded good, and what he meant when he said it.

Though perhaps not quite so obviously wrong as the first analysis, this one also faces serious difficulties. These come out clearly when we consider quantificational examples, such as (5):

(5) Nothing sounds better than the fish.

This sentence, based on an example from Dowty, Wall and Peters [1] p. 3, is ambiguous: on one reading it means that there is no  $x$  such that  $x$  sounds better than the fish; on another it means that from the sounds of things, it would be better to have nothing than to have the fish.<sup>1</sup> The first reading is not problematic for the analysis under consideration; we claim that on this reading, the sentence just means that there is no  $x$  such that sounds caused by  $x$  lead to the judgment that  $x$  is better than the fish. But what about the second reading? Surely we do not want to say that sounds caused by nothing lead to the judgment that it is better than the fish.

This kind of analysis also faces difficulties in accounting for examples where sound takes an impersonal subject, as in (6):

- (6)a. It sounds like the fish is good.
- b. It sounds unlikely that John is happy.
- c. It sounds crazy that John would order the fish.

Presumably, we have to analyze these sentences as meaning that sounds caused by “it” lead to the conclusions that the fish is good, that John unlikely to be happy, and it would be crazy for John to order the fish. But what does it refer to? It would be nice to treat it as pleonastic, but this seems to be disallowed by the analysis in question.

3. Sound as a raising verb. The ambiguity in (5) and the impersonal subjects in (6) point toward an analysis in which the subject of sound is not a logical argument of sound at all, but instead an argument of the adjective phrase following sound. Sound itself takes the resulting proposition as an argument.

Such an analysis should come as no surprise. Nonetheless we note that it finds additional support from the fact that examples like (5) only show the ambiguity in question when corresponding examples containing is rather than sounds show a similar ambiguity. For example (7) is ambiguous in the same way as (5).

(7) Nothing is better than the fish.

But (8)a. does not show this ambiguity, and as a result, neither does (8)b.:

- (8)a. No one is lonelier than John.
- b. No one sounds lonelier than John.

We analyze examples like (2)b., (5) and (8)b. as having logical structures essentially like the informal formulas in (9):

- (9)a. sound(the fish is good)
- b. sound(nothing is better than the fish)
- c. sound(no one is lonelier than John)

The ambiguity of (7) is preserved in (9)b., which contains it. Since the embedded sentences in (9)a. and (9)c. do not share the same ambiguity, neither do the larger formulas containing them.<sup>2</sup>

Of course this sort of logical structure is assumed only for (readings of) sentences where there is no implication of sounds actually emitted by the subject. Mary's utterance in (1)b., for example, should be treated differently.

3. Like. If we use formulas like those in (9), there is little reason why we should not also use formulas like those in (10):

- (10)a. sound(John knows Mary)
- b. sound(John is a nice guy)
- c. sound(John is with a friend)

However, the English sentences which one would naturally expect to be associated with such formulas are ungrammatical:

- (11)a.\* John sounds to know Mary.
- b.\* John sounds a nice guy.
- c.\* John sounds with a friend.

This is because sound syntactically requires an adjective phrase complement, and disallows verb phrases, noun phrases and most prepositional phrases.<sup>3</sup>

However, one can express the meanings represented by the formulas in (10) through the use of adjective phrases headed by like:

- (12)a. John sounds like he knows Mary.
- b. John sounds like a nice guy.
- c. John sounds like he is with a friend.

This use of like raises an interesting problem for compositional semantics. Suppose we claim that on the relevant reading, a sentence of the form NP sounds AP receives a logical structure of the form  $\text{sound}(\text{AP}(\text{NP}))$ . In this case, we expect the sentences in (12) to receive logical structures like those in (13):

- (13)a.  $\text{sound}(\text{John is like he knows Mary})$
- b.  $\text{sound}(\text{John is like a nice guy})$

c. sound(John is like he is with a friend)

However, these are the wrong interpretations, at least for the most prominent readings of these sentences. If we say that John sounds like he knows Mary, we mean that from the sounds of things, John knows Mary. If, from the sounds of things, he does something like knowing Mary without actually knowing her, this is not enough. Likewise if John sounds like a nice guy, then from the sounds of things, he must be a nice guy; if it sounds as though he is similar to a nice guy, but not a nice guy himself, this is not enough.

I would like to suggest that like in these examples does not mean anything like similar to. It is inserted for syntactic reasons, in order to assure that the complement to sound is an adjective phrase. Semantically, it denotes a simple abstraction operator when its complement is a clause, and is semantically empty when its complement is a noun phrase.

Specifically, let us assume that like may be coindexed with a pronoun it c-commands. We translate pronouns as variables, retaining the indices as usual. Where  $IP'$  is the translation of clause  $IP$ , we then translate  $[_{AP} \text{like}_i \text{ IP}]$  as  $\lambda x_i. IP'$ .

When the complement of like is a noun phrase, no coindexation is necessary. We allow a predicative reading for indefinite noun phrases, so that a nice guy, for example, is translated as a simple predicate of individuals  $\lambda x. \text{nice}'$

(guy')(x). Where NP' is the translation of a predicative noun phrase NP, we translation [<sub>AP</sub>like NP] as NP'; in other words, like is a semantically empty dummy element.

It is a consequence of this analysis that when no predicative reading is available for a noun phrase, it cannot combine with this semantically empty operator like, but only with the familiar like which means "similar to." This is indeed the case: Noun phrases headed by the determiner every, for example, do not normally admit a predicative reading, and we find that examples like those in (14) have legitimate paraphrases using similar to:

- (14)a. John sounds like every linguist I ever knew.
- b. The fish sounds like every meal John cooks.
- c. This analysis sounds like every analysis on that topic.

Sentence (14)a. does not mean that from the sounds of things, John is identical to every linguist I ever knew; only that he is similar. Likewise, (14)b. does not imply that from the sounds of things, the fish is the only meal John cooks; just that it is similar to all the other things he cooks. The same point holds for (14)c.

Definite noun phrases are arguably ambiguous between predicative and non-predicative readings, and indeed we find that like seems to show a corresponding ambiguity when it combines with definites:

(15) John sounds like the last person I interviewed.

Suppose Mary conducted job interviews yesterday. Today, Bill asks her what she thought of John. Unfortunately, she can't remember which of the applicants John was. Bill describes him, and Mary utters (15). In this situation, the likely reading is one where the last person I interviewed is predicative and like is empty; Mary means that from the sounds of things, John was the last person she interviewed. Now suppose Mary remembers everyone she interviewed perfectly. John is not among them, but when Bill describes John, it becomes clear that he is similar in relevant respects to the last person Mary interviewed, so she utters (15). In this case the likely reading is one where the last person I interviewed is referential, and like is the ordinary adjective meaning "similar to."

Of course with the "perceptual" use of sound, where actual sounds emitted by the subject are at issue, like is never semantically empty and always means "similar to":

(14) John sounds like a frog.

In this case, we obtain an accurate paraphrase by adding a second occurrence of sounds after the noun phrase complement of like:

(15) John sounds like a frog sounds.

In this respect, sound is no different from any other verb:

(16)a. John jumps like a frog.

b.≡ John jumps like a frog jumps.

(17)a. John croaks like a frog.

b.≡ John croaks like a frog croaks.

The semantically empty like, however, does not permit such a paraphrase:

(18)a. Mary: Let me tell you about my friend John. He is three inches tall,  
has smooth green skin and a puffy throat, and lives in a pond.

b. Bill: He sounds like a frog!

c. Bill: \* He sounds like a frog sounds!

This is a difference between the two versions of like, and not the two versions of sound. When sound combines with the ordinary like that means “similar to,” this kind of paraphrase is available, even with “raising” sound rather than “perceptual” sound. Suppose the interviews Mary has been conducting are for a position that could be filled by either a linguist or a philosopher. First she tells Bill about the philosophy candidates, but he is not impressed. Then she tells him about the

linguistics candidates, but he is not impressed with them either, and exclaims (19):

(19) Every linguist sounds just like every philosopher sounds: crazy!

4. Conclusion. This paper has argued for an ambiguity in the verb *sound*, and a corresponding ambiguity in the adjective *like*. *Sound* may either be a two-place predicate which takes an individual term and another predicate as its arguments, in which case it expresses something about actual sounds emitted by the subject argument, or it can be a one-place predicate taking an entire proposition as its argument, in which case it indicates what seems likely given “the sounds of things” — things, that is, in general, rather than specifically the thing denoted by the subject. *Like* either may be a contentful predicate roughly synonymous with *similar to*, or may be a dummy element included in a sentence to meet syntactic restrictions imposed on the complement of *sound*. The two versions of *like* carry noticeable differences in truth conditions and paraphrase relations.

## Notes

I would like to thank Chris Barker for helpful comments.

Remaining errors are my own, of course.

1. There is a third reading as well, paraphrased by “From the sounds of things, for no  $x$  is  $x$  better than the fish.” Our main concern at the moment is with the other two readings, however.
2. The ambiguity of (7) can be treated through the usual Montagovian technique, which then carries over to (9)b. on the analysis in question: We let better than the fish take a whole generalized quantifier as its argument rather than an individual variable.
3. For reasons that are not clear to me, some prepositional phrases seem acceptable:
  - (i) John sounds in a good mood.

## Reference

- [1] Dowty, David, Robert Wall and Stanley Peters. 1981. Introduction to Montague Semantics. Dordrecht: Kluwer.