

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN “HERE” AND “WHERE I AM”

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Abstract

This paper argues that Michael Dummett’s proposed distinction between a declarative sentence’s “assertoric content” and “ingredient sense” is not in fact supported by what Dummett presents as paradigmatic evidence in its support.

I. INTRODUCTION

Michael Dummett has claimed that there is an important distinction to be drawn between two “features” of the meaning of a declarative sentence that he proposes to call, respectively, “assertoric content” and “ingredient sense”; and he has contended that certain widely shared philosophical views are erroneous by virtue of failing to recognize that two declarative sentences may have the same ‘assertoric content’ while differing in ‘ingredient sense’. Dummett has recently explicated his proposed distinction as follows:

What is the meaning of a declarative sentence? One answer might be: it is the principle that governs what it serves to convey to a hearer when the sentence is used on its own on any occasion to make an assertion, that is, how the hearer takes things to be if he accepts the assertion as correct. This is indeed an important feature of the meaning of the sentence, and it is how the question what the sentence means is often answered. But it is only one feature of the sentence’s meaning: we may call it the *assertoric content* of the sentence. But it plainly does not constitute the whole of what the sentence means. We need to know, in addition, what contribution the sentence makes to the assertoric content of a more complex sentence of which it is a subsentence, and this is not in general determined by its own assertoric content. We may call this second feature the *ingredient sense* of the sentence. Two sentences may have the same assertoric content, but different ingredient senses. (2004: 32)

My purpose in this paper is to argue that the example that Dummett has given as representative of those that “may most easily be given” (2004: 32) in support of his proposed distinction –and that others, such as Robert Brandom (2009: 213), have accepted as unquestionably supporting it– does not, in fact, support it.

Dummett’s example –which is the only example that Dummett uses to motivate the proposed distinction in his most recent exposition of it (2010: 128-9)– is the following (the numbering of the quoted sentences is my own):

The two sentences

(1) It is raining here.

and

(2) It is raining where I am.

have the same assertoric content: if you believe a friend who, speaking to you on the telephone, utters either sentence, you learn exactly the same as if he had uttered the other sentence of the pair. But the sentences do not have the same ingredient senses, as is shown by the quite different meanings (assertoric contents) of the two sentences that result from inserting the quantifier “always”:

(3) It is always raining here.

and

(4) It is always raining where I am.

The divergence occurs because the adverb “here” is temporally rigid, while the adverbial phrase “where I am” is temporally flexible. (2004: 32-3)

There are, I shall argue, at least three problems suggesting that this example fails to provide evidence in favour of Dummett’s proposed distinction between a sentence’s ‘assertoric content’ and its ‘ingredient sense’.

II. PROBLEM A

Dummett's assumption that, in sentences that are not subsentences of more complex sentences –such as his sentences (1) and (2)–, the adverbial phrase “where I am” makes exactly the same contribution to ‘assertoric content’ as the adverb “here”, is open to the objection that, in simple sentences such as those in (5) and (6),

(5) Where I am, winters are very heavy.

(6) Where I am, it gets very humid.

replacement of the adverbial phrase “where I am” by the adverb “here” does not leave ‘assertoric content’ unaffected, as is shown by the fact that the sentences in (7) and (8) are *not* contradictory (these sentences could, for example, be truthfully uttered by a tourist who, in a conversation with inhabitants of the place he is visiting, compares the climate of his place of permanent residence with the climate of the place of his visit):

(7) Where I am, winters are very heavy –unlike here.

(8) Where I am, it gets very humid –unlike here.

If, however, “where I am” is capable of making a contribution distinct from that of “here” to the ‘assertoric content’ of even *simple* sentences, the fact that it is *also* capable of making a contribution distinct from that of “here” to the ‘assertoric content’ of *complex* sentences, as Dummett's examples (3) and (4) were meant to demonstrate, shows that the evidence Dummett presents cannot support his proposed distinction between the ‘assertoric content’ that a sentence has when it occurs on its own and the ‘ingredient sense’ that it manifests when it occurs as a subsentence of a more complex sentence.

To circumvent the above argument, one might propose that the uses of “where I am” that are relevant to Dummett's discussion are not just any uses of “where I am”, but *only* those in which “where I am” is paraphrasable by “where, *at this very moment*, I am” (notice that if, in (7) and (8), “where I am” is replaced by “where, at this very moment, I am”, the sentences do become contradictory). The problem with this proposal, however, is that if the only uses of “where I am” that are relevant to Dummett's discussion are the ones in which it is paraphrasable by “where, at this very moment, I am” –which, incidentally, would mean that, contrary to what Dummett was supposing, the uses in question are temporally *rigid*, rather than temporally flexible–, Dummett's evidence fails to support his proposed distinction for a different reason –namely, because it now

becomes impossible for the presence of the quantifier “always” to induce *any* relevant contrast, recognizable by Dummett, between simple and complex sentences: Just as there is no difference in ‘assertoric content’ between the *simple* sentences (1) and (2’),

- (1) It is raining here.
- (2’) It is raining where, at this very moment, I am.

there is *also* no difference in ‘assertoric content’ between the *complex* sentences (3) and (4’):

- (3) It is always raining here.
- (4’) It is always raining where, at this very moment, I am.

Rather than offering Dummett an escape route, then, the proposal under consideration forces upon him a dilemma: the interpretation of “where I am” that, on the proposal, would be required for the defence of his claim that his *simple* sentences are identical in ‘assertoric content’ is precisely the interpretation under which he should abandon his claim that his *complex* sentences are *not* identical in ‘assertoric content’; and conversely, the interpretation of “where I am” under which he could maintain the latter claim is precisely the one under which he should abandon the former claim. It would not be unreasonable for someone to maintain, in view of this situation, that it is only by equivocating on the interpretation of “where I am” that Dummett was able to convince himself that this expression does not make a contribution distinct from that of “here” to the ‘assertoric content’ of simple sentences, but does make a contribution distinct from that of “here” to the ‘assertoric content’ of complex sentences.

III. PROBLEM B

Direct evidence against Dummett’s assumption that “here” and “where I am” make exactly the same contribution to the ‘assertoric content’ of the simple sentences where they occur is provided by the fact that the very sentences (1) and (2) that Dummett cites in support of that assumption manifest radically different interpretative profiles when placed in particular types of extra-linguistic and linguistic context.

Regarding the effects of extra-linguistic context, two examples will suffice:

- (a) You are with a friend in your New York office, and want to convey to him the information, which you have just received on your mobile phone, that it is raining in Cairo. Pointing with your finger to Cairo on a map of

Egypt hanging on one of your office walls, you could convey to your friend the information that it is raining in Cairo by saying to him,

(1) It is raining here.

You could convey no such information, however, if you were to say to him,

(2) It is raining where I am.

The reason, of course, is that, upon uttering (1) in the context under consideration, you would be construed as referring to a rainfall in Cairo rather than as referring to a rainfall in your New York office, whereas, upon uttering (2) in the same context, you would be construed as referring to a rainfall in your New York office rather than as referring to a rainfall in Cairo.

(b) You occupy your assigned post in the open-air parking lot where you are currently employed, and it suddenly starts raining heavily. After a while, you are in your boss's office, asking for an umbrella. Your boss, who is quite unaware that a heavy rain has started, looks at you startled, and asks you why you need the umbrella. You could then explain to your boss why you need the umbrella by saying to him,

(2) It is raining where I am.

You could provide no such explanation, however, if you were to say to him,

(1) It is raining here.

The reason, of course, is that, upon uttering (2) in the context under consideration, you would be construed as referring to a rainfall in the open-air parking lot rather than to a rainfall in your boss's office, whereas, upon uttering (1) in the same context, you would be construed as referring to a rainfall in your boss's office rather than to a rainfall in the open-air parking lot.

Regarding the effects of linguistic context, it is sufficient to note that there are discourse environments where the use (2) is coherent because an anaphoric interpretation of "where I am" is possible when its deictic interpretation is blocked, whereas, in the same environments, the use of (1) is incoherent since no anaphoric interpretation of "here" is possible when

its deictic interpretation is blocked. For example, there is a coherent interpretation of (2) when it occurs in discourses such as (9) or (10):

(9) In the worst case scenario, I am left in the middle of nowhere in an unknown country. It is raining where I am. What do I do?

(10) In the beginning of the film we saw today, I am in the garden of a summer house on a winter night. It is raining where I am. What happens then?

There is, however, no coherent interpretation of (1) when it occurs in discourses such as (11) or (12):

(11) In the worst case scenario, I am left in the middle of nowhere in an unknown country. It is raining here. What do I do?

(12) In the beginning of the film we saw today, I am in the garden of a summer house on a winter night. It is raining here. What happens then?

It is simply not true, then, that (1) and (2) have the same ‘assertoric content’, if a sentence’s ‘assertoric content’ is taken to be what Dummett says it is –namely, “what [the sentence] serves to convey to a hearer when [it] is used on its own *on any occasion* to make an assertion” (Dummett 2004: 32; italics added). And if (1) and (2) do not have the same ‘assertoric content’ whenever they occur as free-standing sentences, the fact that, when they occur as subsentences of more complex sentences (as in Dummett’s examples (3) and (4)), they may also have different effects on the ‘assertoric contents’ of the sentences that are their hosts, cannot constitute evidence, as Dummett was supposing, in favour of his distinction between the ‘assertoric content’ that a sentence has when it occurs on its own and the ‘ingredient sense’ that it manifests when it occurs as a subsentence of a more complex sentence.

IV. PROBLEM C

Finally, telling evidence against Dummett’s assumption that “here” and “where I am” make exactly the same contribution to the ‘assertoric content’ of simple sentences in which they occur can be obtained by noticing that that assumption requires taking certain sentences that are unintelligible to be intelligible, and certain sentences that are not contradictory to be contradictory.

Regarding the intelligibility-related cases, two examples will suffice:

(a) Successively pointing with your finger to three different areas of your body, you could intelligibly say to your doctor:

(13) I have pain here, here, and here.

However, you could not intelligibly say to him,

(14) I have pain where I am, where I am, and where I am.

But (13) should have exactly the same ‘assertoric content’ with (14), if Dummett’s assumption was right. And since something unintelligible cannot, presumably, have the same ‘assertoric content’ with something intelligible, it seems that Dummett’s assumption was not right.

(b) Opening your door to a person known to you to have been sincerely wondering about your whereabouts, you could intelligibly say to her:

(15) Here is where I am.

You could not, however, intelligibly say to her:

(16) Here is here.

(15) and (16), however, should have exactly the same ‘assertoric content’, if Dummett’s assumption was right. And since they do not, it is not.

Regarding the contradictoriness-related cases, it is sufficient to note that, although sentences such as (17) or (18) are, on their normal interpretations, not contradictory,

(17) He was indeed here, though several yards away from where I am.

(18) He was definitely here, but certainly not where I am.

sentences such as (19) or (20) are, on their normal interpretations, contradictory:

(19) He was indeed here, though several yards away from here.

(20) He was definitely where I am, but certainly not where I am.

If Dummett’s assumption was right, however, (17) and (18) should have exactly the same ‘assertoric contents’ with (19) and (20), respectively. And since a contradictory sentence cannot, presumably, have the same

‘assertoric content’ with a non-contradictory one, it is once more apparent that Dummett’s assumption was not right.

V. CONCLUSION

Dummett has appealed to his proposed distinction between ‘assertoric content’ and ‘ingredient sense’ for important polemical purposes – specifically, in order to argue that the widely accepted modal argument against descriptivist theories of names is defective (1991: 48), and in order to argue that the even more widely accepted thesis that all (non-paradoxical) substitution instances of the schema “‘p’ is true iff p” are true is false (2004: 36-7; 2007: 179-80). But these arguments would risk to be regarded as unconvincing by his opponents *unless* supplemented by independent evidence in support of the distinction they appeal to – unless, that is, Dummett could produce cases, other than those under consideration in the particular disputes to which the arguments aim to contribute, that would be recognized by everyone as cases where identity of ‘assertoric content’ coexists with non-identity of ‘ingredient sense’. The example discussed in this paper was intended to provide precisely such independent evidence – indeed, the least controvertible such evidence, since it was supposed by Dummett to be representative of those that could “most easily be given” in support of his proposed distinction. So, if I am right that the example *is* controvertible, and that it is controvertible for more than one reason, it seems that, though the possibility of finding independent evidence for Dummett’s distinction cannot be excluded, the difficulty of finding such evidence has been significantly underestimated¹.

APPENDIX: DUMMETT’S OTHER EXAMPLE

Besides his favourite example involving “here” and “where I am”, which is the only one figuring in his most recent defence of the distinction between ‘assertoric content’ and ‘ingredient sense’, Dummett has given another example intended to motivate that distinction. Dummett’s subsidiary example is the following (the numbering of the quoted sentences is again my own):

The sentences

¹ This conclusion is reinforced by the examination of another Dummettian example in the present paper’s Appendix.

(21) I shall give you a D.

and

(22) I intend to give you a D.

have the same assertoric content; but their ingredient senses differ, since the conditionals

(23) If I give you a D, you will forfeit your grant.

and

(24) If I intend to give you a D, you will forfeit your grant.

have different assertoric contents. (Dummett 2004: 33-4; Dummett adds, parenthetically, that “in English, the antecedent of the first conditional is grammatically in the present tense, but its sense is future.”)

Curiously, Dummett does not make any attempt to justify the crucial assumption that he makes in presenting this example –the assumption, namely, that (21) and (22) have exactly the same ‘assertoric content’–, nor does he attempt to specify exactly what the allegedly identical content of (21) and (22) is supposed to be. There are, however, very good reasons for thinking that that crucial assumption is mistaken.

Notice that, since the simple sentences in (25) and (26) below clearly do *not* have the same assertoric content,

(25) You shall give him a D.

(26) You intend to give him a D.

one should assume that the simple sentences in (21) and (22) do not have the same assertoric content, either: it would be strange indeed if the obvious difference in content between (25) and (26) could be made to disappear just by switching the subject pronouns of these sentences from the second to the first person and their indirect object pronouns from the third to the second person.

Now, one clear difference in content between (25) and (26) is the following: (25) is satisfied just in case its hearer goes on to actually *give* a D to a certain person (whether or not he currently *has the intention* of giving

it), whereas (26) is satisfied just in case its hearer currently *has the intention* of giving a D to a certain person (whether or not he goes on to actually *give* it). But then, since semantic differences between verbs cannot be supposed to evaporate under changes in the grammatical person of the pronouns that surround those verbs, an exactly analogous difference should be assumed to exist between (21) and (22):

(21) I shall give you a D.

(22) I intend to give you a D.

(21) is not a statement about its speaker's intentions, and it is satisfied just in case its speaker goes on to actually *give* his hearer a D (whether or not he currently *has the intention* of giving it); (22), on the other hand, *is* a statement about its speaker's intentions, and it is satisfied just in case its speaker currently *has the intention* of giving his hearer a D (whether or not he goes on to actually *give* it).

Not surprisingly, the semantic difference between the first-personal examples (21) and (22) may take longer to notice than the exactly analogous semantic difference between the second-personal examples (25) and (26), since it tends to be obscured by the pragmatic fact that speakers' statements about their future behavior are usually interpreted as evidence about their intentions, and speakers' statements about their intentions are usually treated as evidence about their likely behavior. But this does not make the *contents* of (21) and (22) identical, and their difference in content becomes unmistakable when the pragmatic factors that tend to obscure it are explicitly filtered out. Thus, (27) and (28) make perfect sense:

(27) I intend to give you a D. I will be dead before I manage to do that, however.

(28) I do not intend to give you a D, but they will force me to. So, I shall give you a D.

By contrast, (29) and (30) are clear cases of nonsense:

(29) I shall give you a D. I will be dead before I manage to do that, however.

(30) I do not intend to give you a D, but they will force me to. So, I intend to give you a D.

Contrary to what Dummett assumes, then, there *is* a difference in 'assertoric content' between (21) and (22) even when they occur as sentences that are *not* subsentences of more complex sentences. And if this

so, the fact that the complex sentences in which they may occur as subsentences can also differ in ‘assertoric content’ (as Dummett’s examples (23) and (24) were meant to demonstrate), cannot constitute evidence in favour of a distinction between the ‘assertoric content’ that a sentence has when it occurs on its own and the ‘ingredient sense’ that it can manifest when it occurs as a subsentence of a more complex sentence. Consequently, Dummett’s subsidiary example no more succeeds in motivating his proposed distinction than his favourite example involving “here” and “where I am” does. And since there is little beyond these two examples that Dummett offers as independent evidence in favour of his proposed distinction², the overall case that he has made for it appears to be less than compelling³.

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² The only other example that Dummett presents (all too briefly in Dummett 2004: 34) as independent evidence is, I believe, the weakest of the three, since its admission as evidence requires the unconditional acceptance of certain not widely shared views that he holds in the controversial area of the analysis of presupposition (in particular, the view that presupposition is a semantic rather than a pragmatic phenomenon).

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