The Intrinsic Vagueness of Language

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Abstract   In this paper, we take the approach of the lexicon makers: We contemplate human language instead of trying to resist its forces. Basically, some sigmatoids seem to have been created to be free of boundaries: We fence them as we please when we apply them to our assertions, but they are quite vague in the lexicon. We here identify at least two types of such sigmatoids: The *synthetisers* and the *specifiers*. The former would originate from our capacity of isolating common features of objects that, in principle, have no possible intersection. The latter would originate from our attempt of describing the 3D World by means of 2D entities. We conclude that the intrinsic vagueness of these sigmatoids is something not only acceptable, but either pleasant or necessary.

Keywords   Sigmatoid, Vagueness, Pointers, Lexicon, Language

1. Introduction

Haack (1998) brought the following passage to our attention:

(1) In the case of some proper names at least, one can supply a definite description which denotes the same thing: 'the teacher of Plato' for 'Socrates', for example. To avoid the difficulties which might sometimes be encountered in finding an ordinary predicate reliably true of just the individual denoted by a name, Quine proposes the construction of artificial predicates, and defines '*a*' (as, 'Socrates') as '(*ιx*) *Ax*' (as, 'the *x* which socratises'). One could think of the new predicate, '*A*', Quine suggests, as meaning '= *a*' (so '…socratises' means '…is identical with Socrates'). However, this unofficial comment is not to be thought of as *defining* the new predicates, for the whole point of introducing them is to get rid of names altogether; it is merely an intuitive explanation of predicates which must be taken as primitive.

We then get to know that people like Quine (Hylton, 2014) worried about how to make our audience or readership select exactly the Socrates they have in their Inner Reality (Pinheiro, 2016) when they attempt to communicate with them.

The extract offers two options: The teacher of Plato and Socrates. The problem with the former is that Plato probably had more teachers, like Socrates was not the only one, so that the expression The Teacher of Plato does not make the person who listens to that pick exclusively the Socrates that Quine had in his mind. The problem with saying Socrates is that there are plenty of people called Socrates, so that we are not guaranteeing that the person who listens to us will pick exactly the Socrates we have in our Inner Reality as we say that.

The extract says that the just-mentioned ways to refer to Socrates are definite descriptions. It also says that they both denote the same thing.

Definite would have the sense of *exact* according to the lexicon. See (definite, 2014):

definite

('dɛfɪnɪt)

adj

1. clearly defined; exact; explicit

2. having precise limits or boundaries

3. known for certain; sure: *it is definite that they havewon*.

4. (Botany) *botany*

a. denoting a type of growth in which the mainstem ends in a flower, as in a cymose inflorescence; determinate

b. (esp of flower parts) limited or fixed in numberin a given species

Exact, both of them are not, as we have already pointed out.

We also have already pointed out that they don't point at the same thing, since one could pick a Socrates from 2016, one who is alive, and the other could pick Plato's Mathematics teacher instead.

For us to be able to guarantee that the reader or listener will pick precisely the Socrates we have in our Inner Reality when reading what we wrote, we have to do way more than describing a function of the person we refer to as we produce an assertion involving them.

In this paper, we attempt to discuss this idea.

2. Development

These issues are indeed hard: We want to find completely logical ways of referring to assertions that, on their turn, refer to human beings.

Regardless of which option we choose, our names or our functions, we are pointing at something that is abstract even for ourselves, for human beings are also soul or we conform better, and therefore feel that things are being better explained, when we say that we are body and soul.

We are therefore something a bit blurred even for ourselves: Sometimes we feel as if we are made of only matter, and that happens when, for instance, we feel really cold and even die from that. Sometimes we feel as if we are only spirit, and that happens when we become quadriplegic or when we are suffering atrocities 24/7, perhaps in full slavery.

In not being matter, and in still being something that seems to be superior to it, it would be unlikely that we could refer to what we are by means of using matter in a perfect manner, and our letters are matter.

We are not our names, and, in special, we will never be our first names: We don't have any original identification with those. Our parents, more than likely, are those who chose those names. We learn from them repeating over and over that they mean us when they say that name.

We die and our life becomes that name. Notwithstanding, we are not together with that name anymore when our life becomes it, as ironic as it may seem.

What is in discussion in this passage is therefore more than what our eyes can see: What could perfectly represent our being in a piece of paper?

This is like trying to fit our 3D world in an A4 sheet: We have decided that this attempt does not lead to a perfect expression of the 3D world because it is still 2D. We do a pretty good job with the computer screens, and they seem to be 2D, but reality is that we play a game of lights and everything else to create those effects that seem to change things into 3D. We can then go very close to doing that, but we will always know the difference between a computer or a screen image, say a Hollywoodian movie, and reality, we reckon.

In this case, referring to a human being called Socrates as *the teacher of Plato* or *Socrates* would be pointing at this human being in an imperfect manner. We would need at least a vector, as in the computer or screen image, to make that more palatable, so say (teacher of Plato, Socrates, philosopher, male, son of *X* and *Y*, born in *SSSS*). It is as if our language is 2D, just like our screen, and the way our mind gets to that particular Socrates is multi D instead. We are obviously after an infallible handle here.

Of course, our Science has already solved the problem, like everyone has accepted that DNAs tell exactly who we are, so that we could have (Socrates, number 123 in the NDD, Australia), where NDD is National Database of DNAs.

The only problem is that this is the same as Hyde wanted to do with our language: Oh, the numberphiles [(Pinheiro,

2015) and (Pinheiro, 2016a)], do you remember? Now we could perhaps have the vectorphiles or something like that.

Once more, we have to deal with things and people *as they come to us*, basically, like we don't change them, so that we can refer to them in our discourse. We are obliged to point at the world object at the present moment, not after we finish changing it.

We are not going to spend 10 days breaking every bone of Hyde to make him fit in a box that we can carry if we want to tell Priest about Hyde today, basically, even if we could accept breaking his every bone to make him fit in our box. We need to tell something about Hyde to Priest today, on the 21st of September of 2016, right now, so that we have to deal with that as it is. Once more, language was not made for us to recreate it freely each, and every, time we use it, unless we don't really want to communicate with others, but that seems to be the very purpose of the creation of language: Communication.

What is meant here is that the only way to point at the Socrates we have in our Inner Reality with exclusivity and for eternity is the vector, but our language does not accept it, even because we would have to do a similar thing to counting grains of the bunch we see before uttering *heap (Pinheiro, 2016b)*: We would have to find out what number he got in the NDD before saying any sentence involving his name.

Can you see how things connect?

No, no, and no. In this case, the reasons to adopt *Socrates* or *Plato's Teacher* as a handle are different from those we had to adopt *heap* for both one grain over the table and a huge dune: There the reasons were laziness and some sort of common set of characteristics we can all identify, and therefore our capacity of analysing and then synthesizing things. Here it is because we want to quickly communicate the message that connects to *that Socrates we have in mind* and the message is way more important than guaranteeing that the right Socrates is picked by the other as we try to pass it. If clarifications are needed, it is assumed that the other person will ask questions, so that communication will eventually occur.

In any hypothesis, the main affliction of the individual who speaks is relaying the message, not having Socrates perfectly identified as they say it. It is as if our emotions call for that, basically. With *heap*, the message is not important, what seems to be important is pointing at the object in front of us: That is what is mandatory. That is where our affliction lies when we use the sigmatoid *heap*. Different reasons, same decision: A bit of vagueness is actually acceptable. In this case, the vagueness involved may not come across as a pleasant thing, and that is another difference we have here. Saying *heap* felt good: We are saving speech, we are trying to share that feeling, of being able to put all those characteristics together in a sigmatoid, something like a puzzle we all solved, and we are also trying to share the feeling of reward for having solved it. In the case involving Socrates, we feel pain: It is a shame that we cannot get everyone to select precisely *our Socrates* as we speak, but we are grateful for having a language, and those who we try to

communicate with can simply ask questions to get there. We will relax after they pick the same Socrates or something.

We then either accept the essence of the world objects we try to point at, like they are a bit vague, or we accept our own will, of having things a bit blurred in order to have a lighter life, and therefore in order to have more fun. In one case, we accept the limitations of the tool we created, language, and, in the other, we go as far as we can go with it: Oh, we can stretch it to the point of fitting several items, which may seem to have very distinct nature, in one sigmatoid (one grain over a table, gazillions of grains of sand in the beach, etc.).

3. Conclusions

We end up noticing that our language has specifiers and synthetisers: Expressions that appear because we are trying to guarantee that the person who hears us picks exactly the same image we have in our Inner Reality when trying to communicate with them (specifiers) or because we have solved a sort of puzzle after analysing world objects in order to put common and subtle characteristics together (synthetisers).

Vagueness seems to be an actual feature of some specifiers and also of some synthetisers: When we say heap, we assign a huge set of world objects to our assertion, so that if the person who listens to us ever picks the right world object, they are really good listeners, basically, so perhaps they know us quite well. Heap would be a synthetiser (a concentrator of senses). Socrates would be a specifier (we are trying to specify things as much as we can, we are trying to refer to things that we think are unique in terms of the world object we see in our Inner Reality when trying to communicate with others).

To guarantee that our listener picks exactly the same human being we have in our Inner Reality when we speak, we would probably have to use DNA databases, since we have decided, as a race, that that is the only way to succeed when we are selecting the person we have in our Inner Reality with no mistake.

To transfer that to human discourse, we would have to use a vector in place of a sigmatoid when trying to communicate with others, so that Socrates would be replaced with perhaps (Socrates, database entry number XXX). Doing this would imply finishing with the vagueness of the specifier, no doubts about it, but would also imply that we would have to know the DNA of everyone we refer to as we do that: It seems that we fell into the same trap we fell when trying to count grains of sand (The Sorites, numberphiles).

In the end, what we want is communicating with others in an effective manner. It may be that saying Socrates does not always equate effective communication, but going to a database and finding out his DNA number seems to be something that would complicate things in an even worse, and probably unwanted, way.

It seems that we think that solving puzzles is pleasant, so that using synthetisers is a pleasant thing: We were able to analyse something, extract a list of features, then analyse other items, extract their list of features, and finally put common features together to come up with this sort of expression.

We feel happy when we can use those: Heap is a grain over a table, and it is also a huge dune in the beach.

We write a poem and the readers are left to wonder: Wow, how magical! What they actually meant was a heap of nothing… .

Human beings like arts, so that they feel enchanted with the possibility of playing with the sigmatoids.

We feel pain when our Inner Reality does not point at the same Socrates the person who tries to communicate with us picked in their Inner Reality, but we know we can always ask for clarifications, and then refine our selection based on the answers we get.

Just like with the sigmatoids and the lexicon, we will always have human beings who are not yet enrolled in our databases of DNA samples, and we do need to refer to those in our discourse. If nothing else, human beings from the past, when we did not have such techniques, can never appear in our discourse if we impose a rule that says that we must use a vector when referring to them, and this vector must contain their number in the DNA databases.

We live in a 3D world, but our sigmatoids, when appearing on paper, belong to a 2D world, so that it should be impossible to describe with perfection what we experience in reality by means of our language.

When we speak, our sigmatoids acquire a close-to-3D feeling, so that it should be more likely that we pick the same world object when we are using verbal communication. We can then, for instance, use our knowledge about the person who speaks to get to the right images in our Inner Reality.

Vectors were a solution in what comes to movies and IT, so that they could also be a solution in what comes to communication in general: The best way to translate things from the 3D world into the 2D one.

We would always have to accept and deal with vagueness, however, even if that happens only in what regards human beings who are not yet in our databases or sigmatoids that are still going through the process of having their lexicon entry refined.

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