

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

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Commentary on Andrei Moldovan's "Pragmatic Considerations in the Interpretation of Denying the Antecedent"

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the paper, the author claims that he is concerned with the "analysis of fragments of discourse or text" which "contain deductive arguments suspected of being denials of the antecedent" (1). However, it is not clear how he gets from a fragment of discourse to an argument, eliminating an explanation and description as possibilities. If we accept that this could be done, then we can accept that the initial move is from a fragment of discourse to how to reconstruct a deductive argument, from what is initially an invalid form, denying the antecedent, to a valid structure. This is done by using the Gricean notion of implicature where a speaker infers from (a) "what is said" or literally expressed to (b) "what is meant"-by the speaker of the argument in context. Evaluative use is made of *conventional maxims of rational and cooperative behaviour*. Interpreters of fragments must be "intuitive hypothesis formulators" in order to correctly identify the speaker/arguer's intended meaning. So, the set of propositions that constitute any argument can be structured as (a) *argument-w* or (b) *argument-m*, and (b) can be discovered from a *linguistic phenomena* identified as "conditional perfection" which involves a "pragmatic strengthening of the content of the utterance." So, "if I finish my homework, my dad will let me play basketball" is interpreted not as an "if" conditional but an "iff" conditional.

The main issue is not one of logical structure and how to reconstruct a valid argument from an invalid one but rather the prior critical question of translation from: (i) fragment to argument, (ii) fragment to deductive argument, (iii) fragment to valid argument, and (iv) conditional "if" to the material conditional, "iff," which is central to the reconstruction working.

2. TRANSLATION IS NOT ARGUMENTATION

There is an assumption that if I can provide an adequate translation of your claims, x, into my version, y, then this provides an argument that x is, in some relevant respect(s), equivalent to y. But what is the controversial claim? It isn't about the translation because

Gough, J. (2009). Commentary on Andrei Moldovan's "Pragmatic Considerations in the Interpretation of Denying the Antecedent." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-3), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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the translation is an explanation of how something can be done or accomplished, not a justification. Where is the argument? What is the controversy? Implicit in this context, there must be assumed to be a counter argument, something to the effect that: x is not identical to, synonymous or translatable into y ? What are the premises in support of this counter argument? Is there some claim like P : It is possible *to translate* x into y ? But notice, *to translate* is *not necessarily* to give a *reason or an argument/justification*, but rather an *explanation of how x is identical to or can be converted or reformulated or reconsidered as y* . For example when I translate “dog” into French as “chien” all I hope to do is to capture roughly synonymous meaning in an explanation of how the two terms work, not argue that one must be identified with the other or vice versa. I am merely claiming that the first term in one language works like the second term in another language. There is nothing—on the face of it—controversial here, so nothing to argue about. Hence, this *transfer of x into y* is an explanation, *not an argument* by intention not by accident.

It could only become an argument if one considered, and—for good reasons—the need to *justify* a rejection of the counter claim that: x is not equivalent to or cannot be translated as or re-presented as y , in some relevant respects. If I, for example, demonstrate that x is isomorphic with y , then this demonstration shows something about the relationship between x and y but it is not necessarily an argument. So, the crux of any argument for a translation, like an explanation, comes about in the circumstances when someone denies that the explanation of the relationship between x and y holds. This means that the argument is about the best explanation to account for the best translation.

When there are two domains of expertise or knowledge, practices and procedures, claims made in one domain do not automatically transfer into another domain. So, for example, if I can translate some psychological discoveries into mathematical notation or formal notation, it doesn't follow that I have completely, without any loose ends (of dangling data or homunculi or qualia), left over after the translation of psychology into mathematics. Attempts in the 1960's to formulate the laws of a unified science of physics seemed to have failed because there were such loose ends defying attempts at amorphous completion.

However, the world that psychology considers is necessarily ambiguous between at least two open possibilities; otherwise the process of discovering which of the two holds: women are superior intellectually to men or men are superior intellectually to women, and so on, would be otiose. However, in the case of mathematics, there is no ambiguity assumed, let alone necessary, to get the process of discovery going. Instead there is an assumption about formal or analytic certainty, which is not ambiguous; ambiguities need to be eliminated, not explained or accounted for on the basis of empirical experimentation, as in the case of psychology. This is just a commonplace distinction between an empirical science and a formal science. However, the implication to *conditional perfection*, which looks like something that could be an empirical discovery of science, is not a linguistic phenomena but instead “Gricean accounts of implicatures are not psychological hypothesis, so they are not explanations of all tendencies to perfect conditionals” (p. 8). They are *tendencies* that invite intuitive rational reconstructions, which make it sound like they are logical tendencies implicit in the body of language users who seem to want to avoid “fallacy attribution.” (p. 8)

3. CONCLUSION

Suppose that the general population surveyed by a questionnaire indicates pretty uniformly that they interpret the meaning of the logical operator “if” as “iff” in a stronger sense than some logicians think it should be understood, then what? What questions or issues does this suggest? First, perhaps the ordinary language user cannot understand *the logician’s sense* of “if” and can only understand the logician’s sense of “iff” as “if.” That is, perhaps the ordinary language user cannot make the *logician’s distinction* because the context of his or her understanding is different. So, the ordinary language user doesn’t know that he is translating from one logically meaning of “if” to another meaning of “if” as “iff” since this language user is not aware of any contrasting difference. This is a logician-speaker/hearer-ordinary language user dichotomy of intentional difference. As one writer notes: “Translatability of a sentence requires only that its cognitive meaning be reproducible, if it has one; it does not require that its effects on a hearer or reader be reproducible as well.” (Marhenke, p. 144) The problem is about what the hearer or reader believes about a claim when it is formulated as a conditional and whether this is identical with the intention of the writer or logician. Moldovan claims that either the hearer correctly identifies the “iff” as “if” or she is confused about what the sentence “If I finish my homework, my dad will let me play basketball” means, since if there were any other conditions intended as sufficient conditions then the speaker “is expected to have mentioned them” based on following a “submaxim of Quantity” (p. 7). But this is a different implication based not on what is conditionally implied by the context to what is necessary, following implicature. This is not about speaker intention but logical necessity. Why should we expect an ordinary language user to understand this distinction? What is the psychological research that supports this claim?

Second, perhaps there is no “if” conditional relationship in the reader/hearer’s mind at all and all such instances are really missing a central component that would identify them all as material conditionals. Then the speaker *does not understand* what is “the rational thing to do”? How do we correct this?

Third, the hearer/reader may simply mis-understand the translation of the argument by changing “if” to “iff” while not understanding the *logical significance* of this change, or at least not understand it as the logician does as the conditions a sentence in standard logical form must satisfy. In this case, there is an *ambiguity* between the speaker’s intended meaning and the hearer’s understanding of the speaker’s intended meaning. This ambiguity (or equivocation) is attributable to a difference in context and abilities between the logician and the ordinary language user, a difference that seems not possible on the analysis of fragments in this paper.

[Link to paper](#)

REFERENCE

Marhenke, P. (1952). The criterion of significance. In: L. Linsky (Ed.), *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, University of Illinois Press, IL.