

## Reply to Harman on falsehood attribution:

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Thus, Harman: “Except where [the person who takes his grammatical intuitions to be universal and objective] is specifically making claims about other people who speak different dialects or languages, the best way to assign truth-conditions would seem to be in relation to that person’s language. If a person’s grammatical claims are true of his dialect (or idiolect) they should be counted true.”

Harman is pumping an intuition here: our reluctance to attribute falsity to every single one of a person’s grammatical judgments simply because he apparently believes, and I suppose is willing to say, that these judgments are universal and objectively binding. But there’s a different way to account for such reluctance, one compatible with the falsity of all one’s grammatical judgments.

Advocates of the Russellian theory of definite descriptions ran up against a similar problem with statements like

(1) “The present King of France is bald”.

A (present) utterance of (1) is false according to Russell’s theory, because it asserts the existence of a unique King of France and there is no such person. But when we are presented with a unique utterance of (1), we are hesitant to respond by saying that it’s false. We’re much more likely to say something like “What do you mean? There is no King of France.” But if an utterance of (1) *is* false, why are we reluctant to *call* it false?

The well-worn Russellian answer—thanks due to Grice—is that our reluctance can be explained in a way consistent with the falsity of (1) by reference to implicature. Here’s the rough and ready explanation: When we normally respond to a sincere utterance of the form “x is bald” with “That’s not true” or “That’s false” we normally do so because we believe x has hair. So if we responded to an utterance of (1) with “That’s false” we would most likely mislead our audience. We would imply that our reason for objecting was a disagreement about the amount of hair the present King of France has and not because we disagreed that there was no such person as the present King of France. Thus our hesitance is explained in a natural way. Though (1) is false, saying it is false is liable to mislead. We are hesitant to mislead. Therefore, we are hesitant to say that (1) is false.

A parallel story can be told about Harman’s intuitions about the grammatical case. Normally, when we say that someone’s grammatical intuitions are wrong we do so because his linguistic behavior is a bit off. We do so because he’s going around criticizing perfectly well-formed sentences, uttering sentences without verbs in them, ignoring noun-verb agreement, etc. So when our objection is not to individual judgments of his but to his taking those judgments as universal and objective, it feels odd to call those judgments false. But that’s all it is, oddness. We think it likely to mislead. But as long as we’re clear about why we’re saying his intuitions are wrong, I don’t see any impediment to calling those intuitions false.

Similarly for the moral case? Is there some reason why this is an unattractive tact?