

Semantic and Assertoric Content

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Millians tend to agree that to understand an utterance of a name, it is not enough to know its semantic content. But they disagree about what else is required, and how to accommodate the extra bit of knowledge within a Millian framework. Here, I consider two contrasting proposals, Soames's and Salmon's. Variations of Soames's view are commonly found in the literature, but I argue that they do not fit with Millianism. On the other hand, Salmon's view, while generally ostracized, is on the right track. And I argue that with modifications, it is better than Soames's view.

1 What is 'Understanding'?

The word 'understanding' (and its variants) has several different meanings. So it is important to clarify what I mean. For the purposes of this paper, a hearer *understands* an utterance of a name (in a sentence) if, and only if, she is in a position to achieve the goal of the communicative event. Let me explain it with a simple case. Suppose Alex wants to inform Tony that Brent is sick by uttering the sentence (1) 'Brent is sick'. Tony knows 'Brent' is a name but does not know to what 'Brent' refers. Does Tony understand Alex's utterance of 'Brent' in (1)? There is a sense in which she does, because she can gather from it that *someone or something is sick*. But this is not understanding in

my sense, because this way of understanding Alex's utterance does not put Tony in a position to achieve the goal of the communicative event. Alex wants to get Tony to at least believe, though hopefully to know, that *Brent*, her long-time patient, is sick. But there's no way Tony could have come to believe or know it given that she doesn't know to what person the name refers, or even if it refers to a person.

To understand in my sense, Tony needs to know more than the grammatical category of Alex's utterance of 'Brent'. The question is: what else does Tony need to know?

2 Naïve Approach of Understanding (NAU): Semantic Content

There seems to be an agreement in the literature that if a hearer knows what the speaker said by an utterance, then she understands it; and if a hearer knows the semantic content of the utterance, then she knows what is said by it. Therefore, if a hearer knows the semantic content of the utterance of a name, then she understands it. Call this the 'Naïve Approach to Understanding' (*NAU*). According to *NAU*, Tony does not understand Alex's utterance in the case proposed before, because she does not know its semantic content.

2.1 Problem for Millianism

Millianism is the view that (i) the semantic content of proper names is just their referent, and (ii) that the semantic content of complex expressions is a function of the semantic content of its parts.¹ Thus, according to Millianism, the semantic content of Alex's utterance of 'Brent' is only Brent himself.

Millianism paired with *NAU* entails that if Tony knows that Alex's utterance of

¹What I am calling 'Millianism' is often called 'Standard Millianism' to distinguish from views like Fine (2008); Putnam (1954) that embrace (i) but not (ii).

‘Brent’ refers to Brent, she understands it. However, there are counterexamples to this claim. It is possible for a hearer to know the semantic content of an utterance of a name without understand it, as in the following case.

Hospital Case (HC): Alex and Tony work at a hospital where the staff makes up names to refer to patients who are admitted unconscious and without identification. The made up names they use come from a list of names they got from an online random name generator. When they use a name with a patient, they cross it off, and move to the next name of the list.

Brent was involved in a nasty car crash. Unconscious and without id, he is taken to the hospital Alex and Tony work. At the hospital, they give him the next available name on their list, which, by coincidence, is ‘Brent’. Brent is taken to room 202, and is examined by Alex and Tony, at which point Alex realizes that he is her long-time patient Brent. She turns to Tony and sincerely asserts (1) ‘Brent is sick.’ Tony knows that Alex has an long-time patient called ‘Brent’ but she does not think that the patient in room 202 is him. Seeing that the patient was admitted unconscious and without it, Tony falsely assumes Alex is using the made up name.

In HC, Tony knows the semantic content of Alex’s utterance of ‘Brent’, because she knows that Alex has a long time patient called ‘Brent’. However, Tony does not understand Alex’s utterance, because she is not in a position to satisfy the aim of the communicative event in question. Alex’s aim was to inform Tony (get her to at least believe) that Brent, *her long-time patient*, is sick, but Tony is not in a position to come to believe this. To be in this position, she would need to know that Alex’s is talking about her long-time patient, but she does not know it, because she falsely believes that Alex uttered Brent’s made up name.²

²Heck (2002) used similar cases to argue against Millianism, but I will not discuss it here.

3 Possible Replies On Behalf of Millianism

Overall, there are two ways Millians can reply to HC: argue that it is not a counterexample, or reject NAU. Soames and Salmon reject NAU, but before I talk about their views, I want to briefly consider the first option.

In principle, there are two ways of denying that HC is a counterexample: denying that Tony knows the semantic content of Alex's utterance of 'Brent', or arguing that Tony actually understands it. The second option is not very attractive to me. Something clearly went wrong in HC, and, whatever it is, it prevented Tony from understanding in the sense of being in a position to satisfy the communicative goal. I do not disagree that there is a sense in which Tony "understands" Alex's utterance, but whatever sense it is, it is not in the sense I defined before.

A perhaps more interesting suggestion is to deny that Tony knows the semantic content of Alex's utterance of 'Brent' on the grounds that it is a Gettier case. According to this line of reply, HC is similar to Goldman's (1976) barn-façade case: Tony's grounds to believe that Alex's utterance of the real name 'Brent' refers to Brent is her belief that the fake name, that happens to be phonetically indistinguishable from the real name, refers to Brent. Thus, Tony has a justified true belief that Alex's utterance of 'Brent' refers to Brent, but not knowledge.

While I agree that the reason Tony does not understand Alex's utterance is that she fails to recognize the name, I do not think this makes HC a Gettier case like the barn-façade (or any other case). One relevant difference between the cases is that, in Goldman's case, Henry has only "bad" justifications available for his belief that there are barns in the area – that is, his perception of barn façades –, whereas Tony has a good justification available for her belief that Alex's utterance of 'Brent' refer to Brent, in addition to a bad justification – her knowledge that the real name 'Brent' refers to Brent, which we may suppose she acquired from Alex before Brent was admitted at the

hospital.

As I said before, Soames and Salmon reject NAU, but they do it in different ways. Soames maintains that if a hearer knows what is said by an utterance of a name, then she understands it. But he suggests that she needs to know more than just its semantic content to know what is said by it. Unlike Soames, Salmon maintains that if a hearer knows the semantic content of an utterance of a name, then she knows what is said by it; but he insists that, to understand an utterance of a name, she needs to recognize the referent in addition to knowing its semantic content. Let us start with Soames's view.

3.1 Soames on Assertoric Content

According to Soames (2015), to know what is said by an utterance of a name is to know its assertoric content, which, he argues, is not (only) its semantic content. For Soames, the semantic content of a name is only its referent, just like Millianism says it is. Yet, its assertoric content is a much richer content, that includes its semantic content and also a "right" way of thinking of the referent. For instance, the semantic content of my utterance of 'Barack Obama' is thane impoverished content with only Obama himself in it. But its assertoric content is a much richer content that includes its semantic content and a way of thinking of Obama. According to Soames, because 'Barack Obama' is a name of a well-known person, the way of thinking included in the assertoric content is a way that most people associate with the name, something along the lines of *the 44th president of the United States*. With names of less known people, the way of thinking in the assertoric content depends on what is relevant in the context of the utterance; in HC would be *Alex's long time patient*. To conclude, for Soames, knowledge of the assertoric content of an utterance of name is sufficient to know what is said by it and, consequently, to understand it.

According to Soames's view, the problem with HC, is that Tony only knows the

semantic content of Alex's utterance, which is not enough for understanding. She needs to know its assertoric content. Had she known it, she would have understood it.

In the literature we find that Soames's line of reply is very common among Millians, but I do not think it is a view Millians should endorse. The main objection is that a consequence of Soames's theory is that Millianism is *not* a theory about what ordinary speakers say in ordinary circumstances with ordinary sentences. Rather, it turns out to be a theory about an abstract content, the semantic content, that has a theoretical role in philosophy of a language, but that is neither part of communication nor a content our intuitions are about. But this is not Millianism as many philosophers think of it. Millianism is typically presented as a theory of the content of certain expressions in natural language in ordinary contexts. If this is how one thinks about Millianism, like I do, Soames's reply to HC will not be acceptable.³

3.2 Salmon on Recognition

In Salmon's famous discussion with Fine on semantic coordination problems,⁴ he offers a different set of sufficient conditions for understanding an utterance of a name and knowing what is said by it. Salmon maintains that if a hearer knows the semantic content of an utterance of a name, then she knows what is said by it, but holds that to understand it, she needs to *recognize* its referent, presumably, as one she has heard before (unless she is being introduced by the name), in addition to knowing what is said by the utterance. It is important to note that, for Salmon, recognition is a *know how*, an ability, not knowledge of a content, a *know that*. Following this, in HC Tony does not understand Alex's utterance of 'Brent' because she does not recognize its referent as someone she has heard before. Had she recognized him, she would have understood it.

Salmon's view is certainly an improvement over Soames's. It fits with Millianism,

³Soames's view has other problems, but I will leave it aside for the sake of space.

⁴See Fine (2008, 2014) and Salmon (2012, 2015).

because it preserves it as a theory about what ordinary speakers say with ordinary sentence in ordinary circumstances. It does so mainly by adding a requirement for understanding an utterance that is not a content. However, Salmon's view does not come without problems. The most pressing one being that it does not generalize to other cases, as the following.

Interview Case (IC): Lois Lane and Clark Kent work at the Daily Planet, and Lois does not know that Clark Kent is Superman. The Daily Planet has just hired a new journalist, Louise Line. Shortly thereafter, Louise and Clark started a relationship. Clark believes that long-lasting relationships are based on honesty, so he confesses to Louise that he is Superman, on a day he is wearing regular clothes and glasses. As strange as it might sound, Louise has never heard of Superman before. Upon Clark's confession, she thinks that 'Superman' is his work nickname, and that he told her because he is embarrassed about it.

One day Lois asks Louise if she is close to Superman. Louise giggles, and replies that she is. Surprised, Lois says (2) 'Bring Superman for an interview.' Louise goes to Clark's desk, who is wearing regular clothes, and asks him to go to Lois's office. When they get to Lois's office, Lois looks obviously confused.

Louise does not understand Lois's utterance of 'Superman' in my sense,⁵ because she is not in a position to satisfy the aim of the communicative event in question. Lois wanted her to bring Superman, *the guy who wears red underwear over blue tights*, but Louise did not and could not have carried out her request because of her ignorance of Superman's outfit. However, according to Salmon, Louise knows what Lois said, because she knows the semantic content of Lois's utterance, and she recognizes the referent as the person she has heard before. This suggests that knowledge of what is said and recognition of the referent are not sufficient for understanding.

⁵I do not dispute that she "understands" it in another sense, because even if she does, it is not relevant for the discussion.

4 On Practical Aspects of Names

If the objections are offered here are correct, Millians need a new account of understanding an utterance of a name. My suggestion is that what the hearer needs to know is (a) the semantic content and (b) an (or some) relevant aspect of the utterance itself, that I call *practical* aspect.

The notion of *practical aspect* needs to be refined, but roughly, practical aspects of utterances are non-semantic facts about utterances that speakers can exploit to guide hearers to think of the referent in a particular way. It is easier to grasp what a practical aspect is with examples. In HC, the fact that the name ‘Brent’ is already in Tony’s vocabulary is a practical aspect of Alex’s utterance of ‘Brent’. In IC, the fact that the name ‘Superman’ is typically associated with a cluster of descriptions is a practical aspect of Lois’s utterance of ‘Superman’. Other practical aspects of utterances of names can be simply the fact that they are names.

Notice that different utterances of the same name may have different this practical aspect. For instance, when someone is introduced to the real ‘Brent’, she does not have that name in her vocabulary, so this is not a practical aspect of that utterance. Also, an utterance may have, and typically has, several practical aspects. In HC, Alex’s utterance of ‘Brent’ has two of the examples listed before: it is an utterance of a name and it is already in Tony’s vocabulary. In IC, Lois’s utterance of ‘Superman’ has all three: it is an utterance of a name, that is already in Louise’s vocabulary, and the name is typically associated with a cluster of descriptions.

Not all practical aspects will be relevant for a communicative event. The relevant practical aspects are the ones that the speakers actively exploit to guide their audience to think of the referent of the name in a particular way. And, I submit, the audience needs to know the relevant practical aspect of an utterance of a name to understand it. For this reason, the distinction between relevant and irrelevant practical aspects is

extremely important, because it explains why a hearer can understand an utterance of a name despite not knowing all of its practical aspects.

According to my proposed view, in HC Tony does not meet the sufficient conditions to understand Alex's utterance of 'Brent'. Alex exploited the fact that the name was already in Tony's vocabulary to guide Tony to think of Brent as *Alex's long time patient*. In other words, Alex repeated a name to get Tony to realize that she is currently talking about the same person she talked about before. But Tony does not know this, because she falsely believes that Alex utters a new name. So, Tony does not understand Alex's utterance. In IC, Louise also does not meet the sufficient conditions to understand Lois's utterance of 'Superman'. Lois exploited the fact that 'Superman' is typically associated with a cluster of descriptions to guide Louise to think of Superman in one of those ways, say, as *the guy who wears red underwear over blue tights*. But Louise does not know this fact because of her false beliefs about the name. Thus, Louise does not understand Lois's utterance.

As I mentioned before, not all practical aspects of a name will be relevant for understanding, and the contrast between HC and IC illustrates well this point. In HC, the relevant practical aspect is that the name is already in the audience's vocabulary. Despite this also be a practical aspect of the utterance in IC, it is not relevant, because Lois does not exploit it.

5 Final Remarks

Here I have offered a Millian account of understanding an utterance of a name defined as being in a position to satisfy the goal of the communicative event. As I said, understanding an utterance in this sense often just means knowing what is said by it, though this is not necessarily so, as we can see with Salmon's view. While I have not argued for it, I agree that with the mainstream position, and I take my account to also offer a

set of sufficient conditions for knowing what is said by an utterance of a name. Consequently, in my view, knowing the semantic content of an utterance of a name is not enough to know what is said by it. So my view is like Soames's in this respect. However, like Salmon's view, the extra bit of information necessary to know what is said is not a content, so it fits with Millianism. Finally, unlike both views, I suggest that the extra bit of information is a non-semantic fact about the very utterance of the name.

On a side note, it is important not to confuse practical aspects with implicatures. The fact that Alex uttered a name already in Tony's vocabulary is not something she implies by uttering the name. Rather, it is a fact about her utterance that she uses to get Tony to think of Brent in a certain way. Similarly for Lois's utterance; she does not imply that the name 'Superman' is typically associated with a cluster of descriptions. She merely exploits this fact in communication.

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