

A CRITICISM OF SOMMERS' LANGUAGE TREE

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In "The Ordinary Language Tree"¹ and three later papers, Fred Sommers has made a number of valuable contributions to formal type theory. Anyone familiar with this work of Sommers understands why it is philosophically attractive: the logical ingenuity shown by Sommers is admirable. However, presuming such familiarity I shall argue that Sommers' restriction to ordinary language is a necessary yet counter-formal way of securing mapping applicability for his work, and that it obscures a major obstacle to such application: the fact that genuine doubt about sense-value is systematic in a way rendering it unresolvable by his formal methods. I shall first distinguish between "doubt" in the ordinary sense, and genuine doubt. Next I will show that Sommers' examples of sense arguments are not ones in which genuine doubt is resolved and then define the sense in which genuine doubt is systematic, using his own symbolism. Fourth, I will explain how his restriction to ordinary language tends to obscure this fact, and fifth, in what way the restriction is both necessary and counter-formal.

(1) In the most ordinary sense, to say of a statement "that is rather doubtful" means "that is probably false" and, by extension to the case before us, "that is probably nonsensical." Genuine doubt, on the other hand, would not be prejudiced in favor of truth or falsehood, sense or nonsense. (2) In the Ryle argument to evaluate $D(IM)$ it is assumed that $N(ML)$. But surely anyone who genuinely finds "An itch is a mood" to be doubtful, i.e., perhaps significant, although perhaps not, will also find "A mood is locatable on the body" to be doubtful. And in the Wittgenstein argument anyone who is genuinely doubtful whether "Understanding a word is a mental state" makes sense, will also be doubtful whether "I have understood this word continuously" makes sense. (3) Let the reader attempt the sense evaluation of any sentence of which he is genuinely

1. *Mind*, vol. LXVIII (1959), pp. 160-185.

doubtful. He will find such doubt to be systematic in precisely this sense: if $D(EF)$, then any expression U -related to E will be D -related to F , and any U -related to F will be D -related to E , i.e., $[D(EF)U(EX)U(FY)] \supset [D(EY)D(FX)]$. Sommers says we decide that a sentence is nonsense when we have no stake in keeping a sense for it and if, metaphorically, we wish to speak of an itch as a mood, then we must allow for the sense of any sentence which predicates locatability somewhere on the body of a mood. But whether we have a stake is not decidable by Sommers' formal methods, so restricting ourselves to them alone leaves us with the problem of genuine doubt, which is unresolvable because systematic, rather than the parallel, but soluble one of keeping consistency. (4) The more ordinary the senses of expressions involved in examples like these, the more likely it is that we are not dealing with cases of genuine doubt, but with the sort of spurious doubt grafted by Sommers onto his examples of sense arguments. It would be quite paradoxical if the situation were otherwise. Sommers was not disingenuous in his choice of examples, he merely missed the genuine/spurious distinction, a distinction which may be precisely at issue when he or others charge incoherency in an ontology which violates the "Law of Categorical Inclusion" derived from $R(U)$. Restriction to, and emphasis on ordinary language tends to favor admission of further examples of spurious doubt and to obscure the fact that some cases may be ones of genuine, unresolvable doubt. However, (5) this restriction is necessary since a stipulation of senses involved is required to justify mapping any expressions as N -related, i.e., one must say: "In *this* sense of A , i.e., as embodied in these data sentences, A is misused with B in the sentence (AB) ."² But ordinariness is a matter of degree. Hence the restriction is informal, cannot be made formal, and its presence in such work must be judged counter-formal. Hence also it is a 'degenerative' restriction in the following sense. First, it excludes making a mapping application of his work to those new technical expressions and senses whose creation is of first importance in the advance of philosophy and the sciences. Second, since ordinariness, like baldness, is a matter of degree, one may make further arguments to conclusions that particular expressions are less ordinary than others and so should not be mapped. If one is going to exclude mapping of some expressions, as the term "*ordinary* language tree" implies, one ought, consistently, to map only the most ordinary senses of the most ordinary expressions, but for the production of so limited and valueless a tree any discussion of ambiguity would be pointless except in the unlikely event that some expression to be mapped on it had different uses which were equally common.

It is true that any senses of any expressions which have a use with other expressions of a language can be mapped onto a tree, but this does not entail that one can construct a map of a language as a whole, for one cannot determine formally when to prune or graft, i.e., when an expression

2. "The Ordinary Language Tree," p. 166.

no longer has a use with others or when a new use of an old expression is sufficiently established to be mapped. My point is not that Sommers, by restricting himself to ordinary language, inadvertently limits the application of his work in an avoidable way, but rather that Sommers' tree is dead while language is alive, in a sense, and anything dead is inherently limited in its ability to represent something alive.

To conclude: the complexity of my criticism can perhaps be clarified if the criticism is divided in two, although a remainder is left. First, it seems to me that in restricting itself to ordinary language, and mapping its expressions onto a dyadic tree, Sommers' formalism unavoidably mis-treats language as a whole, in so far as language is a growing, changing reflection of human life in which some expressions and senses fall into disuetude while others are newly created. Second, it seems to me that genuine doubt about sense value is systematic and hence not resolvable by formal methods. Both of these considerations point in the direction of the distant position that even where expressions which are N-related on the ordinary language tree, or current rules of grammar are concerned, it is ultimately the vicissitudes of human life, and not a static formalism, which determines the value in use, sense, necessity, and truth, of any items of language.

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