Real agreements: a pragmatic approach

It is usually assumed that two people can only really agree or disagree with a statement if they represent the same contents with the expressions uttered. Colloquially speaking, they must speak about the same things (e.g., Lepore and Stone, 2017; Davidson, 1986). The Possibility of real agreements is traditionally taken to be a necessary criterion for communicative success (cf. Pagin, 2008). This notion of agreement has many problems. The most critical are, first, that we often seem to communicate well with the possibility of real agreements without necessarily representing the same things. Second, we seem to communicate well without ever knowing whether we are.

Building on Clark (1996) and Geurts (2019), as well as recent progress in social ontology (e.g., Bratman, 2014; Gilbert, 2013), I propose a pragmatic account of real agreements in terms of the notion of a semantic commitment. I argue that we can generate a possibility for real agreements and disagreements without having to represent the same things. All that is needed for the possibility of agreements is that we are committed to *mean* the same things.

*Commitments to mean* are highly intuitive. Imagine you tell your friend that you want to meet at 8 pm in front of the cinema and he agrees. When he comes an hour late you criticize him for this. What if he says that by “8 pm” he meant 9 *pm*? We have the intuition that the speaker is clearly committed to have meant *8 pm*, simply because this is how the terms are generally used. Even if he really does not represent the same meanings with these terms, we would not say we miscommunicated. Instead, your friend made a mistake or has lied. Whether or not he represented the wrong meanings, if he is part of the linguistic community, he is committed to use the same meanings or at least apologize for using language incorrectly.

How are semantic commitments and real agreements determined? Importantly, conventions are not enough. We are often committed to mean something other than the conventional meaning as in the case of implicatures or explicatures. I argue that what is necessary and sufficient to determine when we are agreeing is a shared goal or joint commitment (Gilbert, 2013). The question is what does the expression of agreement contribute to the joint action? I argue that we are only entitled to express agreement if it is sufficiently narrowed down what we are committed to mean by an utterance. If it is sufficiently narrowed down, the other person will agree under a whatever the expression could reasonable mean condition. The expression of agreement is then not different from other contributions to a joint action. We are only entitled to them if they make contributions to a shared goal. What you represent is, under certain circumstances, irrelevant.

References

Bratman M (2014). *Shared agency: a planning theory of acting together*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Clark, H. H. (1996). Using language. Cambridge university press.

Davidson, D. (1986). A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs, in E. Lepore (ed.). Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 89-107.

Geurts, B. (2019). Communication as commitment sharing: speech acts, implicatures, common ground. Theoretical Linguistics. 45: 1-30.

Gilbert M (2013). *Joint commitment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lepore, E., & Stone, M. (2017). Convention before communication. Philosophical Perspectives, 31(1), 245-265.

Pagin, P. (2008). What is communicative success?. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *38*(1), 85-115.