

Chapter 4 – Epistemological conception of analyticity (§§1-3)

The main **question**: What is epistemically available simply on the basis of linguistic and conceptual competence? What we can *assent* to simply on the basis of *understanding* or *grasping*?

The **answer**: Nothing! Because the understanding-assent links fail.

Main **objective**: to show that understanding-assent links fail even for paradigms of “analyticity.”

1 Introduction to understanding-assent links

Two corresponding epistemological **notions of analyticity**:

1. Defined for **sentences**: a sentence *s* is analytic iff, necessarily, whoever understands *s* assents to *s*.
 - For example, if the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” is analytic in this sense, then: [understanding-assent link for language]
 - (UAI) **Necessarily, whoever understands the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” assents to it.**
 - But, if an agent *A* fails to assent it, then *A* fails to understand it. Failure to assent the sentence is constitutive of failure to understand the whole sentence.
 - Three glosses: i. the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” is to be read with its current meaning; ii. assent is dispositional; iii. assent is a mental attitude (not a merely verbal one).
 - What is to *understand* a sentence? It consists of understanding its constituent expressions and syntax (being linguistically competent).
 - What is to *assent* to a sentence? In a context in which the sentence *s* expresses the proposition *p*, assenting to *s*, for someone who understands it, is something like believing *p* under the guise of *s*. For example, assenting to the sentence “Grass is green,” for someone who understand it, is something like believing that grass is green under the guise of that sentence.
2. Defined for **thoughts**: a thought *t* is analytic iff, necessarily, whoever grasps *t* assents to *t*.
 - For example, if the thought *Every vixen is a female fox* is analytic in this sense, then: [understanding-assent link for thought]
 - (UA_t) **Necessarily, whoever grasps the thought *Every vixen is a female fox* assents to it.**
 - What is to *grasp* *t*? The simplest view: thinking *t* with any attitude towards it suffices for grasping it. Grasp of *t* should be a matter of normal conceptual competence.
 - What is to *assent* *t*? In a context in which the thought *t* expresses the proposition *p*, assenting to *t* is something like believing *p* under the guise of *t*. For example, assenting to the thought *grass is green* is something like judging that grass is green under the guise of that thought.
- Applications:
 - Logic: The notion of an understanding-assent link can be generalized from individual sentences or thoughts to arguments (or inference rules) at the level of language and thought.
 - Science: Understanding-assent links are also commonly thought to play a leading role in the understanding of theoretical terms in science.
- This gives rise to a *natural project* of philosophy:

- Trying to explain the armchair methodology of philosophy as based on something like understanding-assent links:
- “Our sheer linguistic and conceptual competence mandates assent to some sentences or thoughts and inferences, which form the starting-point for philosophical inquiry.”
- Tim Williamson's thesis: such a *natural project* fails.

2 Obstacles to extracting epistemological consequences

There are some obstacles to extracting *epistemological consequences* (such as knowledge and justification) from understanding-assent links.

- The most optimistic view: understanding-assent links generate understanding-knowledge links, such as:
 - (UKI) **Necessarily, whoever understands the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” knows “Every vixen is a female fox.”**
 - (UKt) **Necessarily, whoever grasps the thought *Every vixen is a female fox* knows *Every vixen is a female fox*.**
- Since knowing entails asserting, UKI and UKt entail UAI and UAt.
- But assenting does not entail knowing. Problem: how to extract understand-knowledge links from understand-assent links? How can understanding-assent links generate understanding-knowledge links?
- Another problem: Knowledge is factive; thus, UKI and UKt entail: [understanding-true links]
 - (UTI) **Necessarily, someone understands the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” only if it is true.**
 - (UTt) **Necessarily, someone grasps the thought *Every vixen is a female fox* only if it is true.**
- Thus, if UAI and UAt entail (somehow) UKI and UKt, they also entail UTI and UTt. But showing this is not a trivial task.
- Problems – Example of discredited theories:
 - Setup: “We may suppose that a core claim of phlogiston theory is of the form ‘Phlogiston plays role R,’ that a necessary condition of understanding the term ‘phlogiston’ is assenting to that claim, and that the claim is untrue, because nothing plays role R.”
 - In this case, proponents of phlogiston theory can understand (and assent) they own theory, despite its untruth.
- Others examples: “Liar paradox” and “Prior's connective ‘tonk’ ” show that understanding-assent links might even be logically inconsistent sentences or thoughts.

Response 1 [a non-factive justification turn]:

- Trying to link *understanding*, not to knowledge and truth, but instead to *non-factive justification*. So, the idea is that understanding-assent links generate understanding-justification links, such as:
 - (UJI) **Necessarily, whoever understands the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” is justified in assenting to it.**

- (UJt) **Necessarily, whoever grasps the thought *Every vixen is a female fox* is justified in assenting to it.**
- Objection – the previous examples also create problems for UJl and UJt:
 - Imagine a dogmatic proponent of phlogiston theory, who continues to accept it long after the accumulating negative evidence has made this unjustifiable.
 - But such a proponent does not stop understanding the phlogiston theory when he unjustifiably refuses to take seriously the negative evidence. Thus, such a proponent of phlogiston theory understands its core but is unjustified in assenting to it; so, UJl and UJt fail too. And if he has no evidence for the truth of that theory, the proponent is not even *prima facie* justified.
 - This kind of example shows that some understanding-assent links do not have a positive epistemological outcome.

Response 2 [the previous examples do not work]:

- Since the relevant sentences or thoughts in the examples are clearly untrue, the understanding-truth link can hold in them only *vacuously*. In such pathological cases, understanding is impossible (no meaning or concept is there to be grasped).
- Objection – “There does seem to be some sort of difference between understanding the word ‘phlogiston’ and not understanding it. Although speakers cannot know the reference of a term if it has none, they can attain some sort of ordinary linguistic competence with it, and in that attenuated sense understand it.”

Response 3 [restricting understanding-assent links to ‘genuine understanding’]:

- The understanding-assent links in previous examples fail, but that understanding-assent links for other sentences or thoughts hold. In such good cases UAs/t entail UKs/t.
- “Such links hold only for non-defective words or concepts, or for those defective cases they hold only for cautiously circumscribed sentences or thoughts.”
- Example of cautious sentence: we might have a conditional “If phlogiston exists then . . .”
- Objections:
 1. Since “phlogiston” fails to refer, that conditional too fails to express a proposition. Thus, the cautious sentence is not true nor false.
 2. The response 3 treats our practices as if they were able to anticipate from the start all the problems that may arise. It is not likely that such precautions are part of every possible linguistic or conceptual practice.

Response 4 [a more moderate response]

- *Defective practices* give rise to understanding-assent links *without* corresponding links to truth or any positive epistemological status.
- *Non-defective practices* give rise to understanding-assent links *with* corresponding links to truth or positive epistemological status.
 - “For instance, one might try to tell a story on which understanding-assent links for non-defective practices constrain the reference of the relevant words or concepts so that the sentences or thoughts in the links come out true.”
- Problem – Much work would be need to vindicate such a programme.

Response 5 [lazy alternative]

- This response postulates understanding-knowledge/justification links for non-defective practices without attempting to derive them from understanding-assent links.
- Objections/Problems:
 - Such a response has little explanatory value and dismiss questions, like these: How do I know “Every vixen is a female fox?” Why am justified in assenting to it? How does “Every vixen is a female fox” gets its positive epistemic for whoever understands it?
 - The examples of defective practices show that treating a given sentence as having some positive epistemic status for competent speakers of the language does not imply that it really has that epistemic status for them.

Conclusion: if understanding-assent links fail, then understanding-knowledge links and understanding-justification links also fail for similar reasons.

3 Master argument against understanding-assent links

The argument begins with an elementary logical truth:

(1) Every vixen is a vixen. $[\forall x(Vx \rightarrow Vx)]$

Understanding-assent links for (1):

(UAI') Necessarily, whoever understands the sentence “Every vixen is a vixen” assents to it.

(UAt') Necessarily, whoever grasps the thought *Every vixen is a vixen* assents to it.

First example against UAI' and UAt': Peter is convinced that (1) carries existential import (so that it is true only if there exists or has existed a vixen). Thus, (1) logically entails (2):

(2) There is at least one vixen. $[\exists xVx]$

- Further, due to conspiracy theories, Peter has the bizarre belief that there never have been any vixens. Thus, Peter has the belief that (2) is false. “Since he denies (2) and regards it as a logical consequence of (1), he also denies (1), and so does not assent it.”
- Nevertheless, Peter understands (1). After all, he holds no incorrect semantic views about “vixen,” he just has some rather unusual non-semantic views about vixens.

Second example against UAI' and UAt': Stephen has concluded that vagueness demands a three-valued logic that accommodates an “indefinite” truth-value.

- According to such a view, if there is at least one instance of a creature that is neither definitely a vixen nor definitely not a vixen, (1) fails to be true.
- Stephen believes that some clearly female evolutionary ancestors of foxes are borderline cases for “fox” and therefore for “vixen.” Thus, (1) fails to be true and Stephen does not assent it.
- However, Stephen's theory of vagueness does not prevent him from understanding “vixen,” “female,” “fox” or their mode of combination. So, Stephen understands (1).

Objection 1:

- We might think that Peter and Stephen are using “every” in a way that means they do not really understand the sentence or grasp the thought.

Response:

- An odd semantic view makes very little difference in practice.
- Moreover, “Peter and Stephen are emphatic that they intend their words to be understood as words of our common language, with their standard English senses. They are not making unilateral declarations of linguistic independence. They use ‘every’ and the other words in (1) as words of the public language.”
- And, even assuming that Peter and Stephen’s semantics of ‘every’ is false, “giving an incorrect theory of the meaning of a word is not the same as using the word with an idiosyncratic sense.”
- Peter and Stephen are not marginal cases of understanding: their linguistic competence is far more secure than that of young children. “They joined the club of ‘every’-users; since they haven’t resigned or been expelled, they are still members.”
- “The understanding they lack is logical, is not semantic.”
- The argument that Peter and Stephen mean what we mean by their words is related with:
 - (i) *Quine’s epistemological holism* (on which the epistemological status of a belief constitutively depends on its position in the believer’s whole system of beliefs).
 - (ii) *Putnam and Burge’s semantic externalism* (on which the content of a belief constitutively depends on the believer’s position in a society of believers).

Objection 2: We must restrict understanding-assent links to rational agents.

Response: By ordinary standards, Peter and Stephen are rational agents.

Williamson’s argument can be **generalized** to *rules of inference*:

- Boghossian: Assenting to arguments by *modus ponens* of the form “If A then B; A; therefore B” is necessary to understanding the word “if.”
- Counterexample: Vann McGee understands the word “if,” but he does not assent *modus ponens* (because he formulated a counterexample to *modus ponens*).
- Even if *modus ponens* is valid, McGee genuinely rejects a genuine instance of *modus ponens*. Thus, he does not assent it. Moreover, he has linguistic competence with “if” and he is an expert on conditionals. So, by ordinary standards, he understands the English word “if.”

Another example: [formal languages]

- The *modus ponens* for the material conditional (\rightarrow) is equivalent to disjunctive syllogism (by the standard truth-tables).
- Graham Priest reject disjunctive syllogism (based on the liar paradox) and, then, he does not assent it. But he has no lack of linguistic competence with \rightarrow .

A final example: [elimination rule for conjunction: $A \wedge B \vdash A$]

- Consider Simon, whose view of vagueness resembles Stephen’s, except that he conforms to a semantics with Kleene’s weak three-valued tables.
- On these tables, a conjunction is indefinite if at least one conjunct is indefinite. And Simon regard both truth and indefiniteness as designated (acceptable) semantic values.
- Suppose that “A” is simply false while “B” is borderline. Thus, the corresponding instance of conjunction elimination ($A \wedge B \vdash A$) has a designated premise and an undesignated conclusion.
- In such case Simon does not assent conjunction elimination, but this need not reflect incompetence with the English language.

Conclusion: no given argument or statement is immune from rejection by a linguistically competent speaker (integrated into a speech community). The understanding-assent links fail.