

FACTUAL AND VERBAL DISPUTES

by

Dr. HÜSEYİN BATUHAN

A dispute usually arises when a person A rejects as false an assertion made by another person B or else makes a contrary assertion himself. Such a dispute can be *factual* or *verbal*. It is factual if it arises from one or both of the disputing parties entertaining a mistaken belief about some (actual or possible) state of affairs. This would indeed be the case if, for instance, A made the following assertion

(1) Tegucigalpa is the capital of Honduras

while B rejected it or else he himself put forward

(2) Tegucigalpa is the capital of Nicaragua

as true. These are *incompatible* claims, such that either only one of them is true or both are false. Such a *factual* dispute would come to an end when, by suitable empirical methods, one or both of the contending parties would come to admit having entertained a mistaken belief, due perhaps to a failing of memory or because of having believed something to be true on insufficient evidence or else having relied upon a piece of false information.

But the point is that it is not easy to know, at first sight, whether a dispute is factual or verbal. Very many disputes which we first believe to be factual might later prove to be verbal. So it sometimes happens that even the disputing parties themselves do not know exactly what they are disputing about, whether their disagreement is factual or rather of a verbal nature.

Now, to make sure whether a dispute is *factual* or not, it is necessary to find out whether there is complete agreement among the disputing parties concerning the meaning of the words used. Unless this latter condition is satisfied, the dispute may have a verbal origin.

Actually all verbal disputes are caused by *ambiguity*. But, there being different *kinds* of ambiguity, the disputes they might give rise to can be quite different in nature. *Syntactic* as well as *semantic* ambiguity are sometimes a source of *misunderstanding* and such misunderstanding can also start a dispute, which is at first believed to be factual, but later turns out to be verbal. However, disputes of this kind come to an end as soon as their source is detected. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of verbal disputes having their source in *pragmatic* ambiguity. In point of fact, such disputes can often be very obstinate, as I will try to show in the sequel. But first let me clarify the notion of ambiguity.

The term 'ambiguous' is a meta-linguistic predicate; that means, it can be applied only to *linguistic* expressions. Even though it is *single* words that are ambiguous, they can also render ambiguous some sentences in which they occur.

A *word* is ambiguous if and only if it can function in language in more than one way; not only can it have more than one meaning (*semantic* ambiguity) but it can even belong to more than one syntactic category (*syntactic* ambiguity, or *amphiboly*). Thus the word 'light' in English is ambiguous on both counts: it is syntactically ambiguous in that it functions both as an *adjective* (as in 'this suitcase is very light') and as a *noun* (as in 'the light went out') and as a *verb* (as in 'I couldn't light the lamp'); it is also semantically ambiguous, since the adjective 'light', for instance, means sometimes the same as 'not dark', sometimes 'not heavy'. Semantically ambiguous words can also be said to denote different *concepts*, but the term 'concept' not being very clear itself, we better look for a clearer criterion for ambiguity. For this we will appeal to the notion of *truth-value*. Thus

Definition I : A *declarative sentence* is ambiguous if and only if, interpreted in one way it can be *true*, interpreted in another way, it can be *false*.

From this it is only an easy step to obtain a definition of the ambiguity of single words:

Definition II : A *word* is ambiguous if and only if, *some* sentences in which it occurs may be true when interpreted in one way, whereas they may be false when interpreted in a different way.

These definitions cover *all* kinds of ambiguity, and consequently are too general.

Let us see in what ways ambiguity can give rise to verbal disputes. To illustrate, suppose you tell someone the following, to inform him of some state of affairs which you believe to be the case:

(3) Mr. X is a bachelor.

Now, your interlocutor might interpret (3) at least in two different ways:

(3a) Mr. X is an unmarried adult male.

(3b) Mr. X has a bachelor's degree.

In case you meant the one, but he interpreted it as meaning the other, then he would have *misunderstood* your real intention. Such a misunderstanding would lead to a verbal dispute, if your interlocutor would want to reject (3) as false on the assumption that *his* interpretation of (3) actually conformed to *your* intention. If, on such an assumption he said something like this

(4) But Mr. X has even two children, so far as I know!

then you would easily end this short disagreement by saying that you had meant (3) in the sense of (3b). As a matter of fact, such a verbal dispute would not have arisen at all if, instead of (3), you had said,

(3) Mr. X is a bachelor of arts

since the semantic ambiguity attaching to the word 'bachelor' (when used without any qualifying phrase such as 'of arts' or 'eligible' etc.) would have been rendered ineffective. An ambiguous word is not ambiguous in all of its uses, since in some contexts its ambiguity is removed automatically. Thus an ambiguous word can lead to misunderstanding and hence give rise to a verbal dispute only as long as it *remains* ambiguous. Only in cases where either no ambiguity is involved as in (1) and (2) or, even though an ambiguous expression is used, it does not give rise to any misunderstanding, can we be sure that the disagreement is *factual*. This would indeed have been the case if, on hearing (4) you had retorted:

(5) You are wrong: these two children are not his, but his deceased sister's!

or something of this sort.

Now, the trouble is that not all *verbal* disputes are as shortlived as the one above. Some of them may be very obstinate indeed. This kind of verbal dispute is due to *pragmatic* ambiguity, that is to the inability or the unwillingness of some members of the linguistic community to come to an agreement on the correct use of some of our terms. Pragmatic ambiguity differs from the other two kinds of ambiguity in that although a syntactically and semantically ambiguous word has more than one function or meaning in language, there is almost universal agreement among different users as to the various rules that determine its divergent functions. Thus even though some words are ambiguous, this ambiguity is recognized as such by *all* concerned, whereas in the case of *pragmatic* ambiguity the divergent meanings which are assigned to certain words by different users are not recognized by all as being correct or legitimate. Briefly, they use some words in ways which are *inconsistent* with each other. In the case of syntactic and/or semantic ambiguity, an ambiguous expression can be misinterpreted, yet one can always and easily find out which interpretation is *the* correct one, since in such cases it is assumed that an ambiguous expression can have been used only in *one* of its various senses. In other words, even though an ambiguous sentence may at first sight seem to have different truth-values depending on different ways we might interpret it, we can agree as to which truth-value should be assigned to it as soon as the correct interpretation is found out. This seems to be impossible in the case of pragmatic ambiguity; due to the unwillingness of various users to come to an agreement about the correct use of some words, the same sentence becomes the object of incompatible truth-value assignments. Thus, if, for instance, two users A and B, insist on using the term 'democracy' in ways *inconsistent* with each other, then some such assertion as the following,

(6) Modern Roumania is governed by a democratic régime put forward by one of the false by the other and neither of them might want to admit to be wrong.

Now, it is obvious that such a dispute is a typically *verbal* dispute in so far as it can be assumed that both A and B have all the available evidence at their disposal concerning the various empirical characteristics of the present regime in Roumania. In other words, they both know what the Roumanian régime looks like and agree on all the *empirical* characteristics it has, but still disagree as to how to *characterize* it, the one holding that 'democracy' is the right word to describe it, the other denying this. In such cases where different users insist on using a given word inconsistently with others, verbal disputes of an obstinate kind can be expected to occur.

Pragmatic ambiguity, or inconsistency of use, can be defined as follows :

Definition III: A *declarative sentence* is pragmatically ambiguous if and only if some users assert it as true, whereas some other users reject it as false, even though they agree that no word occurring in it is semantically ambiguous.

Definition IV: A *word* is pragmatically ambiguous, if and only if it is being used inconsistently, such that some sentences in which it occurs are considered as true by some users, and as false by some others, even though they agree that no ambiguity is involved.

Disagreements about the correct use of words find their expression in *verbal disputes*, but why do such disputes arise at all?

It seems to me that at least three motives are involved here. The first is *philosophical*, the second *psychological*, and the third *practical*.

Let me first explain the philosophical motive which I am going to call "Plato's semantic illusion".

This illusion is actually made up of two beliefs, one naive, the other more sophisticated. According to the first, every word, whatever its nature or function in language, has a uniform, precise and unchanging meaning. The other one, which is perhaps an indirect result of this naive assumption, is to the effect that words get their meaning from entities variously called *concepts* or *ideas*. Ideas were construed by Plato as the eternal and unchanging Forms or Prototypes of concrete sensible ob-

jects, while other philosophers conceive them as *mental* entities of some kind or other. But, whatever their nature, the important point for us is that they have been considered by most philosophers as the things which endow words with meaning such that we have in them an *objective frame of reference* enabling us to know under what conditions it is proper to use a given word. To be more explicit, to know *the* correct meaning of a word we have to know the concept or idea which it signifies. Thus, correct *use* of words presupposes *conceptual knowledge*, the implication being that a disagreement on this point and a verbal dispute which might arise from it can only be due to conceptual error. Since we have an objective (conceptual) frame of reference as to the *real* or correct meaning of words, one or both of the disputing parties must be conceptually mistaken. In other words, verbal disputes are not really verbal. This is the reason why people disagreeing about the correct use of words accuse each other of conceptual ignorance, implying thereby that they sincerely believe their disagreement to be really conceptual!

To come to the *psychological* motive, it is that people are generally given to believe that a word's real or correct meaning is the one in which they have usually seen it used or to which they have been accustomed. This linguistic conditioning or habituation might easily lead them to think that when words are used in different ways this is due to a conceptual mistake committed by some users in the linguistic community. This belief is also fostered by the fallacious reasoning to the effect that since most of our words have relatively univocal and precise meanings, this must be the case for *all* of them. The fallacy here seems to be due to the false assumption that all words mean or function in the same way. Thus, the word 'good' is easily believed to function in the same way as the word 'blue' on the ground that they are both adjectives. And why should the word 'poetry' function differently than the word 'table', since they are both nouns? One must indeed be quite sophisticated semantically to suspect that words belonging to the same syntactic category may function in language in quite dissimilar ways. Not only ordinary people, but also very many philosophers seem to be easily given to what we may call the *fallacy of semantic uniformity*.

Concerning the third motive, which is perhaps the most important of all as a source of verbal dispute, it is *practical* in that the real aim of

the disputing parties is to influence each other's attitudes favorably or unfavorably towards a given kind of object, and not, as the parties themselves might be inclined to believe, a theoretical one concerning the customary or usual meaning of a term. What each side offers as the correct descriptive definition of a given word is really a *proposal* as to how it should be used. To use an expression coined by Professor Stevenson, what they offer each other, are "persuasive definitions."*But the point is that both sides act as if they were giving a correct description of the ways a given word is being used and not as if they were *prescribing* a new use for it!

It is not accidental that words giving rise to verbal disputes are usually *value-words* such as 'good', 'beautiful', etc. and also words having a strong *evaluative* connotation such as 'religion', 'art', 'democracy', 'socialism' and even 'philosophy'. Being always accompanied by emotive associations all these words have a strong *emotive* charge in that they easily evoke in people (positive or negative) emotional responses. Even though almost all words have a descriptive as well as an emotive dimension, the emotive force or charge of some words is much greater than that of others. It is due to the fact that words do not simply stand for or denote objects, but that they at the same time *express* our feelings and attitudes towards them! It is obvious that the word 'health', for instance, is descriptive of a certain state of an organism, but it is also expressive of a certain emotional reaction or attitude that people generally have towards such a state. In so far as to be healthy is something we desire, the word 'health' has a positive emotive connotation for us. Value-words can be said to be *mainly* expressive in this sense, since if they ever have some common core of meaning, it consists in their expressing such feelings as pleasure or displeasure, or such attitudes as approval or disapproval, while the things they are applied to can have quite different and even incompatible empirical characteristics. The reason why the statement (6) above could give rise to a verbal dispute on whether modern Roumania has a democratic government or not is simply that the word 'democracy' having a *positive* emotive meaning for *both* parties, but each wanting to restrict its use to a form of government with a definite set of characteristics, each of them might really be trying to influence his opponent's attitude towards a certain

* cf. C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, Yale University Press ,p. 210 ff.

régime while believing that they are disputing about a matter of fact! Mutual accusations of conceptual ignorance hardly occur in connection with words having a rather weak emotive charge.

To illustrate: suppose one day you come across a lemon-shaped and lemon-colored fruit that tastes sweet instead of acid, as you would expect. What would your reaction be before this strange fruit? Would you also call it a lemon, even though you were accustomed to apply the word 'lemon' to a certain acid tasting fruit? Well, it all depends. If you were a staunch Platonist, you would then say that this fruit *cannot* be a lemon, since according to you the Idea of a lemon would necessarily imply the idea of acid taste; in other words, one of the *essential* characteristics of a lemon would be its peculiar taste! A "sweet lemon" on this semantic theory would be as unconceivable as a triangle having four sides! If, on the other hand, you were a common-sense philosopher of Moorean parentage believing in "paradigmatic cases", you might say that this was perhaps an *unusual* or *abnormal* specimen of a lemon but still a lemon! But suppose you were a botanist and hence scientifically minded as botanists usually are, in that case you would first inquire whether the difference in taste was the only difference between this fruit and the other kind of lemons and then most probably you would conclude that lemons actually have two sub-species, acid-tasting lemons and sweet tasting lemons. And in this you would be acting upon considerations of practical convenience, that is, with the aim of finding the most practical solution to accomodate this new kind of fruit into the established system of classification! In any case, you would hardly, if ever, enter into a dispute as to whether this was *really* a lemon or not!

Usually this is the way botanists in particular, scientists in general act. As a matter of fact, when swan-shaped black birds were first discovered in Australia, zoologists simply divided swans into two sub-classes and people at large have shown no perceptible difficulty or unwillingness to accomodate themselves to this sub-division. After all, to call this new kind of bird a "black swan" or something else would have no important effect on our practical life! More interestingly still, Englishmen do not even find it paradoxical to use the apparently self-contradictory expression 'white blackbird' deeming it quite natural that a certain bird originally called "blackbird" because of its color should have another species which is white!

Even though people usually act in this way when emotively neutral words are in question, they act in the opposite way when such emotively charged words as 'democracy' or 'socialism' are involved. Why is it that most people act as if they were staunch Platonists when the meaning of such words is in question? Why, instead of getting into an endless dispute as to the *real* meaning of, say, 'democracy', do they not simply divide democracies into sub-classes such as "bourgeois democracies", "people's democracies", and so on? Why do they insist that there can only be one *genuine* or *legitimate* kind of democracy, implying thereby that all other kinds are fake or spurious?

Now, of course, social *scientists*, at least most of them*, do act in this way, but not so people at large. Politicians as well as politically minded common folk are usually loath to adopt the new linguistic conventions social scientists might find helpful from a theoretical point of view. How is this curious semantic behavior in connection with emotively charged words to be explained?

The answer to this is that such words do not simply *refer* to extra-linguistic entities of a given kind, but also *express* our emotional attitudes and reactions towards these entities. Hence, to the degree to which we are emotionally bound to the things they are supposed to refer to, we will have them used in a way to reflect our individual preferences and even ideals concerning those things. The temptation to accuse people of conceptual ignorance becomes especially acute when we feel that the acceptance of any change in their meaning might affect our whole outlook on life! To put it differently, such words have not only a theoretical function, but also a practical import for the shaping of our lives inasmuch as the regulation and conduct of most of our actions depend in a large measure on the meaning we attach to them. In that case we feel ourselves committed to use them in certain specific ways and are consequently extremely reluctant to see them used in ways incompatible with our own. If, for example, we feel that democracy *as we conceive it is* the best régime for us, then we have a vested interest, as it were, in having the word 'democracy' used only in our specific sense, that is, in the sense

* Even though social scientists try to avoid getting involved in verbal disputes as to the correct meaning of a given word, not all of them can abstain from appealing to the rhetorical device called "persuasive definition". A definition is persuasive when it has the form: 'The *true* meaning of 'X' ...' or else 'In the real sense of the word...'.
 .

that reflects our own (ideal) conception of democracy. Being emotionally committed to this personal or subjective meaning of the word, the Platonic illusion and our individual linguistic upbringing helping, we may even come to believe ourselves that this is in fact the only correct or legitimate meaning it can have. If, consequently, "persuasive definitions" are of no help in our effort to gain proselytes to our own use of the word, we may then try to break their resistance by accusing them of conceptual ignorance. Looked at from this perspective, most verbal disputes are but another means of influencing people's attitudes. Especially where they are of an obstinate kind, we may rightly suspect that the controversy turns around a *practical* issue even when it might have a theoretical aura. In fact, most people, including philosophers, are usually unaware of this, particularly when the object of dispute seems to be an emotively neutral word.

As a matter of fact, not only words belonging to such fields of activity as religion, morals, politics, aesthetics, law, etc. which are particularly emotion-ridden, but also words such as 'knowledge', 'theory', 'law', 'probability', 'truth', 'meaning', 'causality', 'existence', 'analytic' and so on, which constitute the main topics of philosophical discussion, though apparently descriptive, give rise to verbal disputes of great heat and acrimony. Not only are persuasive definitions used generously but also mutual accusations of conceptual ignorance are quite frequent in philosophical controversies. Now this state of affairs suggests that there is no sharp distinction between so-called *evaluative* and *descriptive* terms, and that consequently, the distinction between *descriptive* and *normative* issues is often difficult to make. This seems to be the case especially in the field of philosophy where what is fundamentally at issue is the choice of *standards of excellence*, whether they be concerned with meaning, knowledge or existence. Even though philosophers usually take care of putting their questions in the form "What is (the nature of) X?", or "What is the (correct) meaning of 'X'?", intimating thereby that what they are after is the mere description of a given kind of thing or the analysis of a given concept, it would seem that what they really aim at is to make their ideal conception of X sympathetic to others! So their real intention would be better revealed if they would put their questions in the following forms: "How *should* X be conceived?" or "How *should* 'X' be used?" In so far as most of our words as actually used have no

uniform and precise meaning, as it occurs to be the case with all the words of the philosopher's vocabulary, it is the legitimate duty of the philosopher to want to make their meaning precise, but in that case he should frame his questions in a way to make his real intention clear. In this case he would simply be proposing us new linguistic conventions and in this way all those verbal disputes as to the *real* meaning of a word 'X' would hardly arise.