A Non-test for Ambiguity*

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In a recent article in this journal, Roberts (1984) suggests a semantic method for distinguishing ambiguity and generality, a method which is intended to avoid the problems that others such as Zwicky and Sadock (1975), Hintikka (1973), and McCawley (1980) have found in making such a decision. Roberts claims that his test derives its validity from the observation that an ambiguous expression has a disjunction of meanings, whereas a general expression has but one meaning (which might be disjunctive).[1]

According to Roberts, a term 'is ambiguous rather than general if and only if its meaning is φ in some contexts and Ψ in other contexts' (299-300). His test involves placing a questionable example in a context and asking whether the meaning of the term is φ in that context, whether it is Ψ in that context, or whether it is (φ or Ψ) in that context. If a context can be found such that the meaning of the term is φ, and if a context can be found such that the meanng of the term is Ψ, then the ambiguity of the expression has been demonstrated. If, however,

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1 Actually we dispute the claim that an ambiguous expression has a disjunction of meanings. In our view, a phonetically or orthographically ambiguous form represents two (or more) distinct expressions, each with a single meaning. (See Zwicky and Sadock to appear.)

the meaning of the term is (φ or Ψ) in all contexts, then the term is general.

Unfortunately, this test is circular. In order to apply it we need to be able to make decisions as to the meaning of expressions in contexts; but if we can make such distinctions, then there is no need for the test in the first place. As we pointed out in Zwicky and Sadock 1975, it simply will not do to add material to sentences to force one understanding, for if the sentence is general, 'the added material will *supply* the necessary semantic content, and if ... [it] is ambiguous, the added material will *select* the necessary semantic content' (12). But in fact this is just the tack that Roberts takes in discussing particular examples.

Consider, for example, Roberts' discussion of the word 'bastard.' He claims to be able to prove that the word is ambiguous (rather than general) by embedding it in the following contexts (the numbering is Roberts'):

13. The dean John Smith just excoriated several junior faculty members for leaving their offices before 5 p.m. on class days, and he is trying to get the tenure rules rewritten so that he can threaten more of the faculty with dismissal. From his behavior over the past two years an obvious conclusion must be drawn. John Smith is a bastard. Because of this he is unfit to be dean.

14. John Jones is a bastard. But this fact about his parentage has no bearing on his qualifications for any job.

Roberts asserts that 13 'bastard' must mean 'nasty person' and in 14 it must mean 'illegitimate person,' for otherwise 'the point of what is said in the contexts would be lost' (308).

While this might be true (though we disagree with Roberts' judgments about 13), it could just as well be true if 'bastard' were general. Contrast 13 and 14 with our examples 13′ and 14′ involving the clearly unambiguous (though general) term 'neighbor.'

13′. A buxom truckdriver has just moved next door to John Smith. He is attracted to his new neighbor.

14′. A virile secretary has just moved next door to Johanna Smith. She is attracted to her new neighbor.

Just as in 13 and 14, the point of what is being said would be lost if 'neighbor' were not understood as referring to a female in 13′ and a male in 14′. Whereas the contexts in 13 and 14 presumably *select* different meanings of 'bastard,' the contexts in 13′ and 14′ *supply* the extra

semantic content in the understanding of 'neighbor.' To tell the difference between the two pairs of cases we need to appeal to something other than the way the examples are understood in context. We need to appeal to meaning. But that is precisely the analytic issue.

   We do not dispute that ambiguous terms have two meanings and that general terms have only one. But because Roberts' test relies on our being able to judge which of these situations obtains in any particular example, we cannot see that it is of any value.

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