

Semantic Paradox

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/This sentence is not true./

The string of words above presents most readers with a paradoxical quandary. If the sentence is true, then it is not. If the sentence is not true, then it is.

The problem lies within standard limitations of set theory. Can the set of “all sets that are not members of themselves” be grouped into the set of “all sets not members of themselves?” Upon meeting the defining eligibility criteria, the set would be a member of itself and therefore not belong. Bertrand Russell & Alfred Whitehead recognized that this logical flaw resulted from confusing distinct levels of analysis; but they went no further in defining the nature of the problem.

The problematic sentence above is a visual series of marks on some medium (whether on electronic screen or printed paper). It could just as easily have been a series of spoken utterances. These marks (or sounds) are the *territory* of the sentence. It is only when the marks are taken to mean something about the way the world is arranged (i.e., taken to be a map of a territory) that they confuse a reader. The phrase /this sentence/ misleads the reader to assume that it refers to the semantic unit, indicated by all of the marks, as a representation of conditional states in the world (i.e., a map of the territory).

In fact, the phrase /this sentence/ only refers to the symbols expressed in some medium taken as a collection (the territory is mistaken for a proper map). The predicate phrase /is not true/ refers to the reader’s mapping of a map corresponding to conditions in the world. The neural assemblies for the reader’s map are themselves the territory of a second map containing words (established by convention) as representations of meaning. Only by distinguishing the map of the territory from the territory itself and from the territory of the map, can we understand that the sentence in question is not well-formed; instead we find that it consists of two phrases that do not belong to the same semantic unit: /this sentence/ and /is not true/.

There is nothing wrong with the syntactic structure of the sentence, as long as its semantics are factored out. Its form would read well, if we change each phrase to include generic variables not purporting to represent conditional states in the world: /This A is not B./ Once understood this way, the paradox vanishes.

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