

Reflections on Weak Belief

Outline

- ~ Linguistics of “believe”
- ~ Does this matter for philosophy?
- ~ Directions for further research
- ~ Conclusions

Semantics and lexical semantics

Semantics, a field of linguistics, is the study of meaning, but most semantics concerns itself with either:

- ~ **Composition** of meanings: how parts of sentences (e.g. words) come together to form the meaning of the whole sentence.
- ~ **Logical** or **semi-logical terms**, e.g. quantifiers (“every”, “most”), pronouns (“he”, “she”), modals (“must”, “can”), connectives (“and”, “if”)

Usually semantics has little to say about the meaning of say “dog” or “hit” (part of **lexical semantics**).

Arguments in lexical semantics

- ~ In lexical semantics usually you get evidence about a word like “believe” based on its place in a **class** of related terms.
- ~ We can think about “believe” in terms of its status as a **non-factive attitude verb**.
- ~ Linguists rarely concern themselves directly with questions such as “what is a dog?”, “what is a belief”? These questions are either zoological, scientific, or, perhaps, philosophical.
- ~ Nonetheless we might get some evidence about how a verb like “believe” functions based on how its behavior relates to other connected terms.

Strength of terms

- ~ When I talk about the **strength** of a term, I mean its **logical strength** as determined by **entailment relations**.
- ~ I ran to work > I got to work.
I am completely in love with Bill > I like Bill.
A dog ate the carrot > An animal ate the carrot.
- ~ The question of the strength of **believe** is how logically strong is it

One weakness hypothesis

Believe is one of the weakest attitude verbs of its kind.

~ X is **sure** that, X **knows** that, X is **certain** that are **strictly stronger** than X **believes** that.

Similar strength (or perhaps in some cases incomparable):

~ X **thinks** that, X **favors the view** that, X **considers** that

In other words:

X is believes that P does not imply **X is sure that P**.

Neg raising and strength

Strong negation (neg raising)

- ~ I don't like him. —> I dislike him.
- ~ I don't believe it's raining. —> I believe it's not raining.

Explanations of this phenomenon differ but it's almost always weaker terms that neg-raise.

- ~ I don't love him —> I like him.
- ~ I'm not sure it's raining. —> I think it's raining.

A hypothesis

Weakness hypothesis:

believe unambiguously has as its lexical meaning a strictly weaker propositional attitude than being sure, being certain.

This is what we argued for in Hawthorne, Rothschild, Spectre (2016) as well as Rothschild (2019). See also Dorst (2019), Holguín (2022), Goodman and Holguin (forthcoming)

Other views

As far as I know there are only two other rival views in lexical semantics and pragmatics:

a) belief is strong and weak readings are derived by pragmatics.

(Williamson, Moss)

b) belief is ambiguous, or somehow underspecified, and allows strong and weak readings.

I've argued extensively (2016, with Hawthorne and Spectre, and 2019) against both these views.

‘Believe’ and belief

All this is about the English word **believe**. What is the significance for philosophical study of **belief**.

- ~ Natural thought is that meaning of **believe** maps naturally to our concept of **belief**.
- ~ But possibly what we mean when we talk about **belief** is not actually just what the word picks out (semantically).

Normal meaning vs. semantic meaning

Take the English expression **open the car door**. (Compare Searle's discussion of 'cut the grass')

- ~ If you cause the door to move in a way that allows ingress you have probably opened the door. (e.g. for purposes of settling a bet)
- ~ But when we say he **opened the car door** we almost uniformly mean that he did it in the normal way (e.g. via the handle)
- ~ Similarly, the word **believe** might be weak, but we might normally mean some stronger state when we make belief attributions.
- ~ So we might have a normal "strong belief" concept that we express with English **believe**.

Other claims

A more radical hypothesis is that there is no natural concept of belief that is not weak.

Basic concepts:

- ~ sure/certain
- ~ believe/think/accept(?)

Belief is weak hypothesis provides evidence for this by reducing evidence for other “in-between” concept.

Future research

Issues:

- ~ Cross-linguistic data
- ~ Semantics of **believe**
- ~ Differences between related terms

Cross linguistic

- ~ The primary verb in English for attributing non-factive propositional attitudes is **think**
- ~ Hawthorne, Rothschild, Specter argued there was no difference in strength between **believe** and **think**.
- ~ In many languages including English **believe**-like verbs (e.g. French croire), have a kind of religious connotation.
- ~ Questions: what are the range of similar attitude verbs in other languages? do they always neg-raise (exception have been noted, but status is unclear)? do they otherwise seem weak?
- ~ Note the Whorfian hypothesis vs universalist views.

Semantics of believe

- ~ Holguín argues the to **believe** is like to **guess**.
- ~ How does this square with voluntarism of **guess** but not **believe**.
- ~ Does **thinking likely** really amount to **believing** as Hawthorne, Rothschild and Spectre suggest?
- ~ How is **believe** modified by adverbs, e.g. **strongly**, **barely**.

Differences in these terms

Think, believe, accept, consider all behave weakly in terms of neg-raising and other tests.

But they are also different, what about their semantics accounts for the difference.

Conclusions

- ~ A lot left to understand about the non-factive belief-like attitude verbs.
- ~ Insights into them might usefully inform philosophical accounts these attitudes.
- ~ Cross-linguistic studies might help separate out what is just a linguistic peculiarity and what is universal.