



Logical Oddities and Locutional Scarcities: Another Attack upon Methods of Revelation

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LOGICAL ODDITIES AND LOCUTIONAL SCARCITIES
 Another Attack Upon Methods Of Revelation.¹⁾

The main incentive behind this article is to bring up for discussion some tentative interpretations and explanations of the fact that there are linguistic expressions, locutions, formulations which intuitively or discursively sound *odd* or even '*logically odd*' to at least *some* communicators under certain circumstances, maybe in rare cases, even to *all* communicators under *any* circumstances. However, I will also be dealing with what may be called: '*locutional scarcity*', namely in so far as reasons for the alleged oddness of a certain locution are found in its linguistic *non-occurrence* or its remarkably *infrequent occurrence*. In fact I will try to argue the advisability of the following somewhat audacious looking proposal: Whenever a communicator is confronted with what he clearly, and perhaps instantaneously,²⁾ recognizes to be a *logical oddity*, he should as a rule rather endeavour to conceive of this phenomenon as a *locutional scarcity* (the plausible interpretations of which may present a challenge to his hermeneutical imagination).

Let me first, by way of introduction, indicate what I here mean to refer to by 'logical oddity'. Suppose we adopted a model of thought which would permit us to locate any given proposition somewhere on a continuum ranging from *extremely true but extremely trivial* statements at one end to *extremely audacious but extremely false* statements at the other end.³⁾ The majority of propositions intended to be expressed in

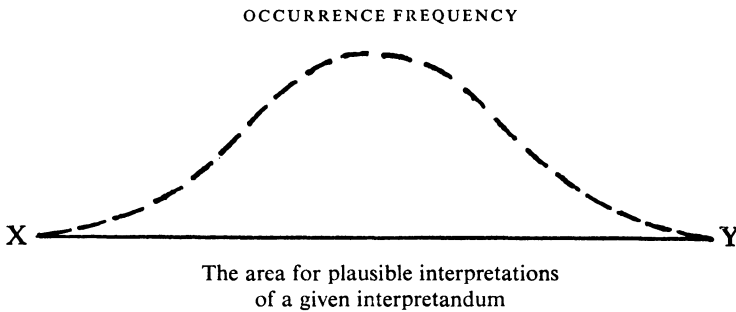
¹⁾ This article may be conceived as a follow-up on my articles in *Synthese*, 'The Fight Against Revelation', *Synthese*, Vol. VIII, Issue 2, Nos. 3-5, and 'Evidence and Illustration', *Synthese*, Vol. XI, No. 1. Cf. also Campbell Crockett's adequate account and brilliant analysis of methods of revelation versus empirical procedures in his 'An Attack Upon Revelation', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LVI, No. 3, and Tennesen and Gullvåg: *Logical Analyses and Definiteness of Intention*, pp. 1-7, Oslo, 1955.

²⁾ Whether recognition can conceivably be anything but instantaneous is discussed by me in a forthcoming article in *Analysis*: 'Dialogue on Duration and Recognition.'

³⁾ This model is excessively oversimplified. For further details and for the introduction of the concepts of '*audacity*' as opposed to '*prima facie tenability*' etc. see: 'On Worthwhile Hypotheses', *Inquiry*, Vol. II, No. 3, pp. 183-198, or better: *Objectivity in Communication and Argumentation*, Sect. 17. to Sect. 22, and 'What Should We Say?', *Inquiry*, Vol. II, No. 4, 1959.

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ordinary, (usual, normal, customary, most frequently occurring,) *standard cases of communication*, would then, I assume, be located near the middle of this continuum. If frequency of occurrence is represented by the ordinate axis, the general occurrence distribution would probably assume the shape of an approximate Gauss curve:



X: Extremely true, but extremely trivial propositions

Y: Extremely audacious, but extremely false propositions

Logically odd propositions are found at, or very close to either one of the two terminal points. In a formalized language, these two extremes might be characterized as having only T's or only F's, respectively, in their truth tables; but in our terminology 'logical oddity' would designate any proposition to which there (within the intended reference of communication) off hand, was found to be *either* practically a 100% *disagreement*, (extremely high *audacity*) or practically a 100% *agreement*, (extremely high *triviality*: *i.e.*, extremely high *prima facie* tenability)¹⁾.

The above diagram is meant to illustrate the more or less obvious hypothesis that in an ordinary, a customary, most frequently occurring, *standard case of communication*, no one would ever intend to transmit any such extreme proposition to himself or to any other communicator, which is just why such propositions are considered 'extreme', 'logically odd' etc.: They are not worth propounding. Hence if a sentence, T, is interpreted to express *either*: an extremely true-trivial statement *or*: an extremely audacious-false statement, neither of these interpretations, will generally be considered a plausible interpretation of T. They make T

¹⁾ Cf. *Objectivity* . . . and Sect. 17-22, *Inquiry*, Vol. II, No. 32, No. 4.

sound odd, maybe, to some, even logically odd. Moreover: the interpretation is the more implausible, the more the external form of T seems to evince either an outrageous audacity or a platitudinal triviality. Thus we have fewer reasons to suspect 'All (un) married men are (un) married' to convey anything in the direction of a logical oddity than in the case of externally less conspicuously extreme or odd formulation such as: 'All bachelors are (un) married' or: 'All (un) married men are bachelors' etc. Furthermore: by the same token we may on occasions find that we have fooled ourselves and our fellow beings by *actually* conveying a logical oddity of sort, when we thought we were making a significant proposition, a worthwhile statement, that is: when we have employed locutions with no or little external manifestation of logical oddity.

Consider, for instance, the following not too conspicuously odd, but rather bold and exciting-looking sentence, T₀: *A normal man does not exist.*¹⁾ T₀ occurs in a textbook in psychology. It sounds quite singular at first sight-staggering, one might even say. If we look up the word 'normal' in one of our dictionaries, we find such suggestions for synonymic alternatives as, e.g.: 'regular', 'ordinary', 'usual', 'most frequently occurring', and the like. So there is this psychologist who has the audacity to maintain that the most frequently occurring, regular, ordinary, usual human being, does not exist at all. If taken at its face value, it certainly seems to convey a proposition, more than audacious enough to deserve a lifted eyebrow. And the empirical semanticist (S) rushes to the psychologist (P) for an interview.

S: Sir, may we ask you what you mean by the sentence: 'A normal man does not exist?'

P: I mean what I said.

S: Oh, I see: That most men do not exist?

P: That is, of course, not what I mean. I am merely pointing to a fact, based on life-long experiences, that all human beings are more or less psychologically abnormal. Neurotic, if you see what I mean.

S: Everybody?

P: Everybody.

¹⁾ This example is borrowed from 'On Worthwhile Hypotheses', *Inquiry*, Vol. II, No. 3.

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S: You, yourself, sir?

P: Humph. Eh. Well, I am a human being, am I not? And similarly constituted. . .

S: Oh, well. No rule without exceptions, you know, the exception that proves the rule and that sort of thing.

P: No. This rule is absolutely without exceptions. That's the way it's bound to be. Let me explain: All placental mammals are viviparous.

S: With a few exceptions. . .

P: Consequently, they are all born, and, at a certain stage, disconnected from their mother's body. Now: As we psychologists define 'traumatic experience', this umbilical disconnection necessarily entails a traumatic experience to the infant. 'Neurosis', on the other hand, is nothing but a name for the functional manifestation of such a traumatic experience. Consequently: (a) All mammals are neurotic. (b) All human beings are mammals. (c) All humans beings are neurotic. Quod erat demonstrandum. Simple logic, isn't it?

S: Quite. What now puzzles me is only this: Why would you want to use 'neurotic' in such a way that everybody, including other mammals as well, becomes neurotic in this sense of 'neurotic'?

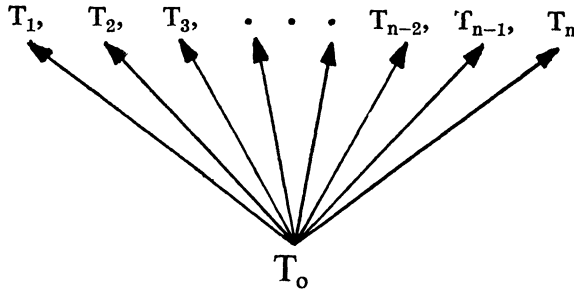
P: That is exactly what I just explained. I am merely pointing to a fact, based on life long experience, that all human beings are more or less psychologically abnormal. Neurotic, if you see what I mean.

S: Everybody?

Etc., Etc., Etc., ad nauseam.

In the terminology here suggested the verbal behaviour of the psychologist may be described as an oscillation between an extremely *audacious* and an extremely *trivial* hypothesis. He is torn between two decisions. On the one hand, he wants to be extremely veracious and tell the absolute, incontrovertible truth; on the other, he wants to overwhelm the world with a flabbergasting, breathtaking novelty. But, as the saying goes: 'The new things aren't true things, and the true things aren't new things.' So what is to be done? The situation calls for a sentence, T_0 , which admits of a sufficiently wide range of precization $T_1, T_2, T_3, \dots T_n$ to bridge the gulf fixed between (a) an extremely tenable, but trivial hypothesis as transmitted, say, by a sentence T_1 , and (b) a highly audacious, but untenable hypothesis as indicated by a sentence, T_n .

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The extremely tenable but extremely trivial direction of precization.

The extremely audacious but extremely untenable direction of precization.

The highly ambiguous T_0 borrows, so to speak, audacity from one direction of interpretation (T_n), and tenability from the other (T_1). – T_n may tentatively be formulated as follows:

T_n *There are no members at all in the class of human beings to which most human beings belong, viz. normal, usual, most frequently occurring human beings.* On the other hand, the extremely trivial direction of precization could, in order to bring out the contrast, be phrased as follows: T_1 : *if the expression 'normal' is used in such a way that nothing can be normal and at the same time belong to the class of human beings, then no human being will ever be normal in this (peculiar) sense of 'normal'.*

An intermediate hypothesis, expressing a moderate degree of both tenability and audacity, may be exemplified by T_m . T_m *No living person today is justified in claiming that he is completely normal in the sense that his cognitive or emotional processes use nerves not sufficiently disrupted so as to interfere with a nearly 100% effective life adjustment.* In other words: The importance of discussing these imaginary extremes of these logical oddities, relates to our fatal propensity to drift, by insensible degrees from a formally and factually audacious hypothesis into a totally unqualified platitudinal triviality. In our example the psychologist argued vigorously that: *'no man is normal'*. He came in like a lion. But, he also went out like a lamb. That is to say: He started out with a sentence which, off hand, sounded as if it were meant to transmit a hypothesis of a marked, maybe even extreme audacity – *i.e.*, logically odd, it seemed, in a sense which comes close to (formal) contradiction. But hard pressed at the audacity end, he tip-toes over to the other tenability-triviality

extreme, and expresses instead, unknowingly, a logical oddity which resembles more a positively analytical proposition, – unperceived, of course, especially by himself.

The predication of logical oddity thus serves the function of a warning to all communicators to be *en garde*: It may be, especially when we believe we are communicating *either* a wildly exciting statement *or* one which is bound to be absolutely true in all possible worlds, that we are not conveying any worthwhile proposition at all, but (at least at times) merely a totally insignificant logical oddity (*i.e.* completely lacking either tenability or audacity, and consequently devoid of human interest). And, as previously stated: The less conspicuously odd the employed locutions, the more reasons do we have to be alert.¹⁾

Let us for comparison consider some linguistic phenomena found in precocious children, pedantic logicians and editors of allegedly humorous comic papers:

The girl next door to where we live had a fight with her brother the other day and complained: 'Ronny is so rough, tomorrow I'll be black and blue all over!' To which my little boy dryly remarked: 'No object can at the same time be black and blue all over.' ²⁾ Needless to say, he also vigorously objects to such parental sayings as: 'Enough is enough', 'I both like it, and I don't' etc. Philosophers do the same, thus, Nowell-Smith labels as 'logically odd' the sentence: 'P is cultivating weeds' ³⁾ which, of course, is the most customary, ordinary, legitimate way in which to describe a very natural and important horticultural activity undertaken by Standard Oil and other anti-weed-spray producing companies. Likewise, it is the same possibility of misinterpretation which makes the well known advertisement from a cleaning establishment worthy of being reprinted in a comic paper: 'Don't kill your wife; let us do the dirty work.' – All the cited cases have one thing in common: Every communicator involved understands perfectly well how the sentences concerned are most plausibly to be interpreted. The logical odd-

¹⁾ This point is most convincingly made by Jacob Meløe in his 'Dialogue on the Hypothetical Character of Logical Analyses', *Inquiry*, Vol. I, No. 1.

²⁾ He had to admit though, later on, that there is really on the market a gift wrapping paper the entire surface of which may be most adequately described as being *at the same time red and gold all over*.

³⁾ P. H. Nowell-Smith: *Ethics* p. 72.

ity occurs solely as a result of actual or potential misinterpretations. In the philosopher's case cited, and in similar examples of other philosophers, it seems as if the logical oddity direction of interpretation prevails because of a widespread optimism among philosophers that sentences may profitably be judged by their appearance, so to speak, that the external form should *reveal* or otherwise permit one to '*see*' what a word or sentence 'means' in a given case, and that consequently it is easy to '*see*' whether a term is used in harmony with a given definition or not . . . or to '*see*' whether a given sentence transmits a proposition which is bound to be *e.g. normative* and not *descriptive*, or *analytic* and not *synthetic*, *meaningful* not *meaningless*, logically *odd*, not logically *orthodox*, and so forth . . .

In contradistinction to this optimistic assumption of logical clairvoyance a more objective and effective communicator attitude may be expressed as follows (using the somewhat deceptive statement / sentence model of thought): In principle, almost any sentence may transmit almost any proposition.¹⁾ Or in other words, it is hard to conceive of two *so different sentences* that it would not also be possible to imagine *some* circumstances under which they would transmit the *same proposition* (for at least one communicator, in at least one reference of communication in at least one language society), and vice versa, for externally identical sentences expressing different propositions. Consequently it seems safe to assume that given a formulation, T₀, and a list of plausible (but cognitively rather similar) precizations T₁, T₂, T₃ and T_n, it would always be possible to phrase the precizations in such a way that the list at the same time furnished examples of every conceivable and relevant syntactical category. Any given transmitter, say for instance, a declarative sentence, can plausibly be interpreted to express statements which might have been just as well or even more precisely transmitted by, say, interrogative or imperative, or exclamatory sentences. Or, in still other words: the general skepticism toward language as a means of rendering the inter- and intra-personal communication more effective, join forces with sharpened sensitivity for language ambiguities in preventing the effective communicator from believing in any cognitively significant distinction between

¹⁾ Vice versa for concepts and linguistic expressions: In principle almost any linguistic expression may transmit almost any concept.

propositions, or between concepts, made solely or mainly on grounds of grammatical categories or on similar differences in the construction or in other outward shapes and skeletal forms of the linguistic locutions, expressions or formulations employed. Thus, regardless of what we intend to understand by, say: 'logically odd' and by 'logically normal (orthodox) (standard)' statements, my view would be that any conceivable sentence, T_0 , may more or less plausibly, be interpreted to express an indefinite number of both logically odd and logically normal propositions.¹⁾

To what extent do ordinary people exhibit these different hermeneutical attitudes, as on the one side, the rigid but clairvoyant hermeneutical attitude, and on the other side the flexible and tolerant hermeneutical attitude? – Some of our recent studies carried out at Berkeley seem to indicate that most people have a tendency to regress to a sort of logical or linguistic rigidity when confronted with naïve, unrefined questionnaires concerning words and language usages. The question has been raised whether it might be possible to condition respondents in our investigations to get groups of both kinds: a rigidity-group and a flexibility-group. As part of a rather extensive study of 147 students, who up to then had been relatively uninfected with logic or semantics in any form, 75, (Group I,) were exposed to a short lecture (207 words), phrased with the purpose of eliciting what we will describe as a '*logico-maniacal*' attitude, and 72 (Group II,) to another lecture (255 words) with what we call a more '*common sensical*' bias. The former lecture went as follows:

I. (LOGICO-MANIACAL LECTURE)

'Most people express themselves very inaccurately and illogically. Often they do not even realize what they are actually saying. One can hear people say, for instance: 'You couldn't possibly tell me where I can find the men's room?' They do not understand that, in an attempt to be polite, they are in fact accusing the other person of not being able to tell where the lavatory is located.

¹⁾ It goes, I hope, without saying, that what here is said about logically odd and logically standard statements also holds true for such distinctions as analytic/synthetic, normative/descriptive, meaningful/meaningless

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We will consider three ways in which people can be illogical:

(a) Consider the following familiar cliché: 'A guy is a guy.' This is, of course, a very silly thing to say. Naturally a guy is a guy, what else could he possibly be? It is, in fact, like saying ' $A = A$ ', ' $2 = 2$ ', and so forth. We will call such sentences: '*Tautologies*'.

(b) Today I heard our neighbour screaming: 'Somebody has dropped paint on my car. It is green and red all over.' Of course, no single object can at the same time be both red and green all over. We will say that my neighbour on this occasion expressed a *self-contradiction*.

(c) Another phrase one quite often hears is this: 'The mail is closed.' Of course, mail is not a thing that can be closed. Such a sentence we call: *nonsensical*.

Please try to pick out (a) tautologies, (b) contradictions, and (c) nonsensical sentences in the following list of sentences. Put an *a* in the margin for *tautologies*; a *b* for *contradictions*; a *c* for *nonsensical sentences*. *State on a separate sheet the reasons for your judgment*, (including, of course, cases where you find that the sentence is not a tautology *nor* a self-contradiction *nor* nonsensical, but simply express an ordinary, maybe somewhat controversial statement.)'

The 'common sensical' lecture on the other hand was worded as follows:

II. (COMMON SENSICAL LECTURE)

'It is good to try to be precise and 'logical'. But it is even more important to be able to *understand* what our fellow beings attempt to convey to us – particularly when the sentences they use sound a bit imprecise and illogical. What we need then is not an attitude of 'logical hairsplitting', but more patience and tolerance and knowledge about our language and how it is actually used in our daily, ordinary communication with ourselves and our fellow beings. Thus we know that when a person says to us: 'You couldn't possibly tell me where I can find the men's room,' he does *not* mean to accuse us of not being able to tell him where to find it. Likewise when we say: 'A guy is a guy', 'Enough is enough' etc. we never intend to convey a superfluous platitude like ' $A = A$ ' or anything of that order. Or as we will say: *Nobody ever wants or intends to express a tautology*. The same is true for statements which are obviously false. *E.g.* if a person says: 'Somebody has spilled paint on my car. It is red

and green all over', we can rest assured that he does not want to tell us that he has a car, the entire surface of which has the colour green, and at the same time the colour of this same surface is red. In short: *Nobody ever wants or intends to express a self-contradiction*. Finally, it goes without saying that: Nobody ever wants or intends to express other kinds of completely nonsensical statements.

Please read carefully down the following list of sentences. Whenever you come to a sentence which you think these rigid, 'hair-splitting' logicians would call a 'tautology', put an *a* in the margin: put a *b* if you think that they would 'see' an alleged 'self-contradiction'; and a *c* if you find sentences that some 'highbrows' might feel tempted to call '*nonsensical*'. Write on a separate sheet your own, plausible interpretation of the different sentences, and give reasons why you think one, some, or all the sentences are neither tautologies, nor self-contradictions, nor nonsensical.

NB! *Do this only if this is what you think!* In cases where you do not think that a sentence should be classified outside the three categories, (a), (b) and (c), give reasons why you think so.'

Both groups were confronted with a questionnaire consisting of 31 sentences, and given the task to pick out (a) tautologies, (b) contradictions, and (c) nonsensical sentences. Group I intuited without difficulties the classifications. Not more than ten per cent of this group found in as many as eight cases any difficulties at all in classifying the sentences concerned in one of the three categories. In equally many cases the decision was unanimous. The following sentences were '*seen*' by 73 or more out of 75 to be either (a) tautologies, (b) self-contradiction, or (c) nonsense sentences:

(a) *Tautologies*: 1. Boys will be boys. 2. A dollar is a dollar. 3. What is done, is done. 6. When one says a thing is not true, one lies. 9. When one is bedridden, one stays in bed. 12. This sentence is sentence. No. 12 in the present questionnaire. 13. When it rains in Berkeley, it rains in Berkeley. 17. A spinster has no child. 18. A guy is a guy. 19. Nothing is both round and square. 21. The deaf cannot hear. 22. Here in the west, men are men. 23. Behind the clouds the sky is always blue. 24. Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. 27. The Berkeley campus of the University of California is in Berkeley, California. 29. I see what I see.

(b) *Self-contradictions*: 11. Not all unmarried men are bachelors. 16.

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The coffee in the coffeeshop is not coffee. 20. The absent-minded professor was looking for the book, even though he knew where it was. 28. Nothing is more exciting than a commonplace platitude. 30. Kim Novak is pretty, and at the same time she is not. 31. (b) Today is Thursday, and I don't believe it. (Or, in 15 questionnaires: 31 (a). Ron Currie has left the room, and I don't believe it.¹)

(c) *Nonsense sentences* (but not contradictions): 4. The stuffed lungs of the fox twitch and cry love, and the strutting gern lay seeds on the black sill. 7. The holy ghost in Meadowsweet Hall, Higglefore-cum-wortlebury-beneath-the Hill was only an anemic yawn of a dandruffed hippopotamus. 10. Either the nothing exists only because the not, *i.e.*, negation exists, or negation and the not exist only because the nothing exists.

This nearly perfect harmony within Group I is only marred by six sentences which were classified just as unmistakably as the others, but differently by a significant number of different respondents. Only one sentence, however, was to an equal extent classified in all three categories, *viz.* No. 25. Unicorns are extinct.

(b) Group II, on the other hand (the group with a common sense bias) seemed almost equally capable of interpreting all the given sentences – except the three nonsense sentences – to transmit plausible, reasonable, fairly interesting, worthwhile, more or less tenable hypotheses or more or less advisable proposals. Only two sentences, both classified as 'tautologies' of Group I, seemed to cause hermeneutical difficulties. Nine students resigned *vis à vis* sentence No. 12, twelve *vis à vis* No. 27; they were both bound to be tautologies! And characteristically, neither of these sentences would ever have been recognized, instantaneously, intuitively, discursively, or otherwise, as tautological or even as analytic by any presumably competent logician. The other sentences, however, of which some are traditionally and, of course, by our Group I given as examples of self-contradictions or at least of logical oddities were easily and unanimously or practically unanimously interpreted to express somewhat controversial synthetic statements. Among sentences the (only) plausible interpretations of which did not seem to raise a shadow of doubt in

¹) Say that these two things were the case at time T_a : (1) R.C. had left the room, and (2) I did not believe that R.C. had left the room, then it seems to follow that I, at time T_b , am justified in asserting: I would have uttered a sentence which would most plausibly transmit a true proposition if I at time T_a had said: 'R.C. has left the room and I don't believe it.'

any members of Group II, a few deserve to be mentioned: No. 11: (Not all unmarried men are bachelors) Not all unmarried men lead a free... wild... unconventional... bohemian life; some have gone steady with the same girl... etc. No. 30. (Kim Novak is pretty and at the same time she is not): K. N. is pretty in some respects only... from certain angles... sometimes ('at the same time' is apparently interpreted as synonymous to 'yet'... 'still'... 'on the other hand'.) No. 31a (Ron Currie has left the room and I don't believe it): I can hardly believe that R. C. had the nerve... would dare to... leave the room. No. 31b (Today is Thursday and I can't believe it): I can hardly believe that it is (already) Thursday.¹⁾ The last examples are particularly interesting. They belong to a type of sentences ('X is true and I don't believe it.' [*i.e.*, that X is true]) quite commonly used to exemplify 'logical oddities', 'contradictions', or even 'contradictory sentences'. And it seems difficult, even to the most visionary hermeneutist to think of plausible or even logical or literal interpretations here (of 31a and 31b) fit to illustrate anything in the direction of logical oddness. Everybody seems familiar with situations where something was true which he at that time did not believe to be true. There is hardly anything odd to be found in the following two reports: (b) 'Yesterday was Thursday and I did not believe it'; or (a) 'I did not believe that R. C. had left the room at a time when he (actually) had left it.' Quite another thing is the fact that it probably would require a Marcel Proust to seize such situations while they were still present, and momentarily report them in an adequate tense. It is this practical-psychological queerness which seems to have caused our 'common sense' students to discard any such so called 'logical' or 'literal' interpretations of the mentioned sentences (31b and 31a) in favour of the previously indicated, more reasonable, more plausible *i.e.* more customary, normally, frequently occurring interpretations. In other words: The two mentioned sentences may more or less plausibly be interpreted to convey statements, propositions which it very rarely would be necessary to transmit. And yet, whenever this necessity occurs, it seems imperative that the adequate linguistic means are at hand. The prevalent confusion of 'logical oddity' with 'locutional scarcity' or 'infrequent occurrence' may – because of the

¹⁾ An amusing response to the well known sentence, '*The present king of France is wise*': 'Agree! Because he doesn't exist, and what could possibly be wiser these days than not to exist.'

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alleged illegitimacy or impermissibility of logical oddities, effectively prevent uncommon, unusual, extraordinary sentences from being employed, even in the rare cases when effective verbal communication would entirely depend upon their availability. This is why it is so important to maintain a certain *tolerance towards locutional curiosities*. And this is why (for purposes of communicability) it would be safer to assume that by and large so called 'logical oddities' are virtually infrequent occurrences.

Group II was also given the task to predict how 'these hair splitting logicians' would classify the same 31 sentences. Their predictions of Group I's classifications were almost perfect (ratio 10.8/11.3). There was only one major exception: a sentence which was 'seen' to be self-contradictory by almost 90 per cent (63) of Group I and which absolutely *none* in Group II would suspect even hair-splitting logicians to 'see' or conceive of as anything but a hackneyed truism about professors. The sentence (No. 20) reads: 'The absent minded professor was looking for the book, even though he knew where it was.' Members of Group I would apparently reject this sentence because they interpreted it to transmit a negative analytic – here misleadingly called: 'self-contradictory' statement. Group II, on the other hand, was unanimously willing to accept the same sentence as expressing a positive synthetic statement. In other words: It might serve as an effective illustration of what Arne Naess calls 'pseudo-disagreement'.¹⁾

In order to bring out this point a little more extensively, the above study was, after three weeks, followed up by another, where 25 or the 31 sentences which lent themselves most readily to a true/false classification, were given to the same sample of students (Group I and Group II) with the following instructions:

- '1. Read carefully the 25 sentences listed below. Try to decide for each one whether you think it can express: (a) a true or (b) a false statement.'
- '2. State your reasons for each decision.'

The collected material furnished a score of splendid illustrations of pseudo-disagreements between the two groups, plus a few useful examples of pseudo agreement within each of the two groups, all apparently due to overoptimism on the part of the informants regarding their ability to

¹⁾ *Interpretation and Preciseness*, Oslo, 1953.

'see' what can possibly be meant by a sentence combined with insufficient sensitivity to language ambiguities.

In conclusion we repeat: The present article endeavors *inter alia* to furnish arguments for what one might call a 'Humpty-Dumpty attitude' to language, and *against* any tendencies to narrow down the field of permissible modes of communication by employing rigid, *a priori* norms or rules for 'what can possibly be said and meant.'

Particularly misleading is the procedure where the linguistic legislator arrives at his 'laws' by asking questions of the skeletal form: 'Is it possible to X?' and conclude from a more or less unanimous 'no' to such questions that one cannot ever say and mean: 'P did X'. For example: Most people would probably, off hand, deny that it is possible to admire a landscape with closed eyes. But this would not prevent them from imagining situations – odd or not – where the necessity might occur for expressing a statement which would be most adequately transmitted, for instance, by the sentence: 'P admired the landscape with closed eyes.' The whole thing is most often a question of general (included hermeneutical) imagination. We may even, if necessary, equip Mr. P. with transparent eyelids, or turn him into an eidetic (with positive after-images) etc.... Fifty years ago nobody would believe it possible for a person to continue his (biological) life after the heart had stopped beating. In fact, the following sentence, T: 'His heart stopped beating and he did not die' might have been commonly considered a 'self-contradiction', 'a logical oddity', 'a sin against language' and what not. Today, things are happening all over the world which are normally, frequently, legitimately and adequately described by means of sentences very similar to this: 'His heart stopped beating and he did not die.' Moreover, there are distinct tendencies particularly within the more developed, 'hard' sciences to formulate sentences and symbols intended to transmit propositions and concepts more or less *unimaginable*, at least to most of the present generation.

The clairvoyant armchair philosopher, blessed with devine revelations who will *a priori* establish *today* what can possibly be said and meant and done *tomorrow*, is reminiscent of a high-esteemed Danish writer who, at the turn of the century, wrote an encyclopedia article on 'Flying Machines'. 'It is obvious,' he concluded, 'that none of these fantastic ideas will ever be realized. Since, as everybody knows, nothing heavier

than water can float in water, nothing heavier than air can ever fly in the air.' And while he was writing, birds sailed through the sky. . .

Another unfortunate way of trying to determine whether a given locution ought to be conceived as a *logical oddity* or not is the method of telling little stories and asking ourselves and occasionally, our fellow beings: 'what should we say?' in the described situation. We *may* be able to elicit – spontaneously or not – an amazing, general, intra- and inter-personal verbal agreement. But other empirio-semantical investigations raise the suspicion that in most cases we have to do with *pseudo*-agreements – in the technical sense of this term as introduced by Arne Naess in his *Interpretation and Preciseness*. Some recent empirio-semantical investigations ¹⁾ revealed twenty-one cognitively different ways in which this locution 'what should we say (when)' could plausibly be interpreted and made more precise. This list of precizations represents *per se* an important warning against any temptation to take verbal agreement to the question: 'What should we say (when)' as a symptom of actual agreement on an issue, a topic, a subject matter – or disagreement to indicate actual disagreement. As long as two or more of the main twenty-one directions of precization of 'what should we say (when)' are slurred over, the chances are that the verbal agreement will turn out to be a pseudo-agreement, a verbal disagreement to be a pseudo-disagreement.

Pretests in these experiments seemed to promise that the most spectacular pseudo-disagreements would arise due to failure to distinguish between two directions of precization of which one may be called: 'a language-direction of precization' and the other: 'a tenability – direction of precization' on the other.

Consequently, two questionnaires were constructed:

1. '*Language Qst.*' and 2. '*Tenability Qst.*'

Both presented eighteen 'Should we ever say. . . ' questions to the 198 adult respondents (non-students) who were asked to answer either 'yes' or 'no' to the questions and state their reasons 'why we should say. . . ', and 'why we should not say' . . . , respectively. The last fifteen questions were the same in both questionnaires, whereas the first three were different. The *language* questionnaire (Qst. 1.) started out with a set of

¹⁾ These studies are also reported in my article: 'What should we say?', *Inquiry*, Vol. II, No. 4, 1959, where one will find the list of the twentyone precizations, pp. 278f.

sentences concerning which a decision as to whether 'we should say' such sentences or not obviously had to do with their correctness from a grammatical-syntactical or idiomatic point of view. The *tenability* questionnaire (Qst. 2) had a corresponding introductory set of three sentences, the acceptability of which was just as clearly dependent upon whether they seemed to transmit tenable hypotheses or not.

The remaining fifteen questions did not lend themselves unambiguously to either of the above interpretations. The guess was ventured that: (a) Qst. 1.: respondents would be apt to let *their* standpoint (as to whether 'we should say' or 'we should not say') to each one of the following locutions depend upon grammatical-syntactical correctness and idiom and: (b) that Qst. 2: respondents would hold that whether 'we should say' a locution or 'we should not say' a locution was solely a function of the tenability of the statement presumably transmitted by the sentence in question. In other words, we would have reasons to suspect pseudo-disagreements between the two groups of respondents as well as, generally between (a) respondents who answered 'yes' (respectively 'no') for tenability reasons; and, what is more important: pseudo-agreements within groups with the same answers (either 'yes' or 'no') to the fifteen last questions. The results of these seemed to support convincingly these hypotheses. In other words: As long as participants in discussions on language usage fail to make explicit which of the major directions of precization they have in mind (intend to transmit) when they employ such sentences, so long shall we have reasons to suspect that any *agreement* reached on 'what we should say when', would easily be revealed as a *pseudo-agreement*.

The significance of this point is quite adequately brought out in another set of empirio-semantical investigations of the question 'when should we ever point to an action, X, and say: "That action (X) is "voluntary", "involuntary", or "not voluntary"?"'

The most conspicuous hermeneutical discrepancies were here found between respondents who would tend to be concerned with the *advisability of adopting a certain terminology* (from different moralistic, hedonistic, humanitarian, socio-psychological and similar points of view) and respondents only discussing the *likelihood* of anybody (ever) uttering: 'X is voluntary.' etc. under the indicated circumstances. The most interesting difficulties, however, did not arise until this normative/

predictive – direction of precization was well overcome. Then it appeared that some respondents understood the sentence ‘*would* you (ever) say that X was voluntary’ to mean something like: ‘say you were given the choice to classify X either under the heading of “voluntary actions” or under the heading: “involuntary actions” (or “not voluntary actions”), which would you choose?’ Others, apparently, thought the following was what was being asked: ‘Is it a tenable hypothesis about (or description of) your behaviour to predict that under the given circumstances you would point to the action X and utter: “X is voluntary (involuntary, not voluntary–)”?’. While the first group was trying to solve subsumability problems, members of the latter were searching their hearts and reins to find out how they would probably act. None the less quite often the two groups would come out with the same decision *e.g.* ‘I would say . . .’ or ‘I would not say’: ‘X is voluntary’. Thus the first group would *not* describe a particular action (X) as ‘voluntary’, *because of practical or theoretical difficulties in determining where on the voluntary-involuntary continuum the action in question (X) should be located*. The second group would *not* say: ‘X is voluntary’, *because the classification of X as a voluntary action was too obvious*. And who ever wants to say the obvious? Thus nobody would ordinarily point to a person who goes to enjoy a good show and say: ‘That person is performing a voluntary action.’ One might just as well have said: ‘That person is that person.’ To say about an action which is obviously voluntary, that it is a voluntary action, is trivial, redundant. One would never do so except under very special circumstances, *e.g.* when teaching children or foreigners to speak English and the like, as indicated below.¹⁾

A study on trivial and worthwhile hypotheses reveals convincingly a universal reluctance to express the obvious (without a good pretext). We would never under ordinary circumstances in a normal, standard, paradigmatic situation point to an ordinary chair, and an ordinary table, an ordinary man and say: ‘that is a chair’, ‘that is a table’, or ‘that is a man’, unless there was something fishy about the chair, the table, the man . . .

‘It goes without saying that a hypothesis found to be invariably *non-*

¹⁾ It must be this well known phenomenon which has led some philosophers to believe that we would (should? can?) only say ‘X is voluntary’ provided something seems fishy about X.

controversial within a certain reference of communication, R_a , will not ordinarily be propounded within R_a except in order to form a basis or a platform on which R_a communicators can stand and debate the relative tenability of other, genuinely controversial hypotheses within R_a .¹⁾

Thus if we are discussing an object which seems to be on the borderline between a chair and a stool, *i.e.*, a 'fishy' chair, it might be a good idea to start out with an agreement on a more trivial, less controversial hypothesis by pointing to an *ordinary* chair and saying: 'Do you agree that this here is a chair? OK? Then I will try to show to you that: *If this is a chair, then that* (not so subsumable) object is a chair.' The same goes for voluntary actions. We may try to solve the problem whether X is a voluntary action, by pointing to an obviously voluntary action, Y (*e.g.*, going to enjoy a good movie) and show how accepting Y as a 'voluntary action' argues for (or against) accepting the more controversial ('fishy') X as a voluntary action.

There are cases where it is necessary to call a spade 'a spade' and a voluntary action 'a voluntary action'.

The last five questions of the questionnaire (in the 'worthwhile hypotheses-study') read as follows:

- (11) Should we ordinarily say: 'Today I met a man who was 5' 10" tall?'
- (12) Should we ordinarily say: 'Today I met a man who was 6' 6" tall?'
- (13) Should we ordinarily say: 'Today I met a man who was 8' 1" tall?'
- (14) Should we ordinarily say: 'Today I met a man who was 9' 9" tall?'
- (15) Should we ordinarily say: 'Today I met a man who was 15' tall?'

Each informant answered only one of these questions (which made it difficult to get an even and sufficient number of informants), and was then asked to explain why he answered as he did. The distributions of 'yes' and 'no' answers to these questions was illustrative:

	(11) 5' 10"	(12) 6' 6"	(13) 8' 1"	(14) 9' 9"	(15) 15'
yes	91	303	511	128	12
no	453	246	38	109	520
other	14	9	9	21	26

¹⁾ 'On Worthwhile Hypotheses,' *Inquiry*, Vol. II, No. 3, Pp. 186.

LOGICAL ODDITIES AND LOCUTIONAL SCARCITIES

Question number 13. seems to present the ideal amount of audacity and tenability (plausibility?) to be *worthwhile saying*, 'to make sense', as the subjects said. – 14. and especially 15., however, are apparently not conceived of as tenable; 11. is considered idle, futile, boring, trivial; 12. is a borderline case.¹⁾

By way of summary one might say: It seems obvious – and maybe nobody would ever doubt it – that there should be no rule against saying X (within a language society, L_a) only because X has so far never occurred, been said, uttered, written (within L_a): *Whereof one so far has been silent thereof one may have to speak*. We need a language with which we can describe unforeseen, unimagined, hardly imaginable phenomena. On the other hand the language must also permit one to express the most boring, futile, idle, commonplace, platitudes whenever that – for some possibly strange reason or other – seems to be important. – And, of course, these are only two of many types of occasions when one would have inhibitions in employing certain locutions. Thus, one would rarely, if ever, succeed in persuading a good Catholic to so much as *utter* the sentence: 'The Pope is a dirty liar.' – Stylistic taste may also forbid one to use particularly technical, flowerig or pompous and bombastic language. Nobody has ever, as far as I know, described a kiss as, say: 'quadro-labial intercourse' or a Calla lily as 'an anemic yawn'. But this does not prevent the occasion from occurring in which these designations would be most proper and fitting. The same goes for the case where an average man in a perfectly normal, conventional, standard situation lights his cigarette, saying that he performed a 'voluntary', 'deliberate', 'causally determined', 'action', or anything as ludicrously pompous as that.

But again: There might be cases where such locutions would be most appropriate, would 'make sense', as some philosophers say.

It is certainly true that a locution is by and large most correctly applied in cases which are the ordinary, conventional, common-sensical, usual, customary, normal, standard, paradigmatic cases of its right application. On the other hand, it would be most unfortunate if one were prevented

¹⁾ This experiment has later been repeated, starting out with 1' 8", 3', 4' 2", etc. with relatively low yes-score and high no-score on 1' 8" and 4' 2", and high yes-score and low no-score on 3'.

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from employing them in such cases as well where they, off hand, sound odd and preposterous.

After all, Wittgenstein said: 'Worüber man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen,' not: 'Worüber man geschwiegen hat, darüber kann man nicht sprechen.'

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