

Canberra-planning cross-linguistic disagreement: a few remarks

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KO TE TANGATA
FOR THE PEOPLE

Two questions



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- My remarks will focus on two questions:
 - What methods should we use in investigating the nature of disagreement?
 - What do these methods tell us about the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement?

Disagreement



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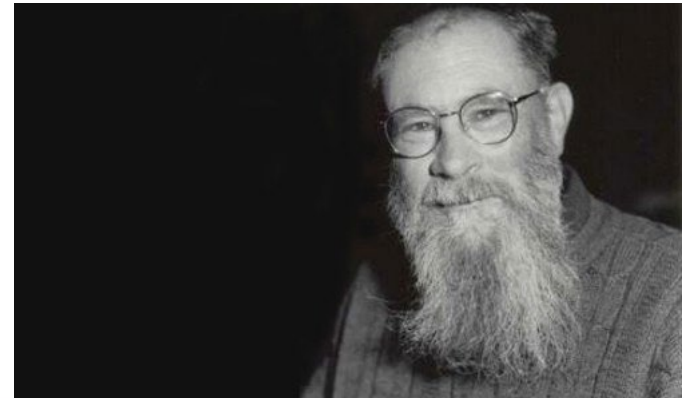
- Philosophers have offered (very!) many conflicting accounts of the nature of disagreement, often focusing on particular kinds of disagreement
- This widespread disagreement about disagreement raises a problem: how should we *adjudicate* between competing accounts of disagreement?
- To fully address this problem, we need to think more carefully about the *methods* that we do—and ought to—use when inquiring about disagreement

Canberra-planning disagreement



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- The basic ideas behind the *Canberra Plan* approach to the study of disagreement are:
 - To know what disagreement is, we first need to examine how our ordinary concept DISAGREEMENT—the concept that we deploy when categorising particular cases as cases of (non-)disagreement—behaves
 - We can then draw on our current evidence to determine whether disagreement, as it is represented by this concept, exists and if so, what it is like



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- To properly study DISAGREEMENT, we need to *empirically* examine the behaviour of this concept using the methods of e.g. psychology and experimental philosophy
 - But: before we do this empirical work, we need reasonable hypotheses to test, and this is where armchair conceptual analysis can earn its keep
 - To generate these hypotheses, we should ask ourselves: what are the *platitudes* about disagreement?



Platitudes about disagreement

- As I use the term, a platitude about x is a proposition that is constitutive of the ordinary concept of x
- Focusing on disagreement:
 - (Platitude) Proposition p is a platitude about disagreement iff p is a member of a set D of propositions such that: person A possesses the ordinary concept DISAGREEMENT iff A is disposed to accept each of the members p' of D (i) in the absence of supporting argumentation for p' and (ii) in the presence of a suitable prompt (e.g. a well-constructed vignette) that causes A to consider p'

Platitudes about disagreement



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- In prior work: I've hypothesised that there are at least two sets of platitudes about disagreement
 - The first set contains *structural* platitudes that pertain to the structural features of the disagreement relation
 - These structural features include: irreflexivity, symmetry, and non-transitivity
 - The second set contains *substantive* platitudes that pertain to the nature of disagreement and correlations between our attitudes about disagreement and our attitudes about e.g. belief and mistake



Platitudes about disagreement

- One of the substantive platitudes is the *Disagreement Principle*
 - *Disagreement Principle*: For all persons A and B , matters m , and times t : A and B are in disagreement over m at t iff at t , A has a (doxastic or non-doxastic) attitude y about m and B has a (doxastic or non-doxastic) attitude z about m , and y and z are incompatible _{y, z} with one another
- As the Disagreement Principle illustrates: I take the platitudes about disagreement to pertain to the relation of disagreement over matter m
 - I conjecture that when we say ‘A disagrees with B,’ what we mean is that there is some matter over which A and B disagree—whether espresso is delicious, whether the effects of climate change will be disastrous, whether Michael Jordan is the most talented basketball player of all time, or etc.



Platitudes about disagreement

- I've subscribed 'incompatible' in the Disagreement Principle because I suspect that we are disposed to regard attitudes y and z as generating disagreement between A and B iff y and z are incompatible in a sense that is specific to those attitudes
- The kinds of attitudes that might generate disagreement include: beliefs, doubts, hopes, wishes, desires, and preferences
- Similar glosses on 'minimal disagreement' include those in Baker (2014), Dugas (2018), Huvenes (2012), Ridge (2013, 2014), Wright (2001, 2006), and Zeman (2020)



Cross-linguistic disagreement?

- In thinking about the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement, the Disagreement Principle seems particularly important
- *The key question:* given the Disagreement Principle, should we regard apparent instances of cross-linguistic disagreement as really being instances of disagreement?
 - *My suspicion:* the answer will vary from case to case, depending on the semantic contents of the expressions that the speakers use



Cross-linguistic disagreement?

- In more detail:
 - Consider two people A and B who are apparently in cross-linguistic disagreement with one another
 - Consider also the set T of all pairs $\langle e_1, e_2 \rangle$ such that:
 - e_1 is an expression of A 's language L_A and e_2 is the best translation of e_1 into B 's language L_B and
 - e_1 and e_2 are respectively used by A and B in the case at issue
 - Call T the *translation set* for A and B in the target case



Cross-linguistic disagreement?

- To determine whether A and B are in cross-linguistic disagreement, we must ask which of the following obtains in the target case:
 - i. The expressions in each pair within A and B 's translation set have the same semantic content (the *same content (SC)* condition)
 - ii. There is at least one pair $\langle e_1, e_2 \rangle$ within A and B 's translation set such that e_1 and e_2 have different semantic contents (the *different content (DC)* condition)



Cross-linguistic disagreement?

- The view that I propose:
 - SC is necessary for A and B to be in cross-linguistic disagreement
 - Accordingly: if the DC obtains, then that is sufficient for A and B to fail to be in cross-linguistic disagreement
- *Caveat*: This view is meant to apply only to *doxastic* cross-linguistic disagreement
- *Additional caveat*: It may be possible for A and B to be in *metalinguistic* cross-linguistic disagreement in cases in which DC obtains

Donald/Stefano case



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- First, consider the *Donald/Stefano case*:

Donald is a monolingual English speaker and Stefano is a monolingual Italian speaker. Donald and Stefano are talking about truth. Donald assertively utters the sentence ‘Truth is the goal of inquiry,’ and he believes the proposition that is expressed by this sentence. Stefano assertively utters the sentence ‘La verità non è l’obiettivo dell’indagine,’ and he believes the proposition that is expressed by this sentence.

Donald/Stefano case



- Suppose that SC obtains, so that e.g. ‘truth’ and ‘la verità’ have the same semantic content
- It then looks sensible to describe Donald and Stefano as being in cross-linguistic disagreement
 - Because SC obtains, we can sensibly say that there is proposition that Donald believes and that Stefano disbelieves: ⟨Truth is the goal of inquiry⟩
 - This proposition is expressed by ‘Truth is the goal of inquiry,’ and its negation is expressed by ‘La verità non è l’obiettivo dell’indagine’
 - Accordingly: there is a single matter *m* about which Donald and Stefano have incompatible beliefs: whether truth is the goal of inquiry
 - Thus: according to the Disagreement Principle, Donald and Stefano are in disagreement about whether truth is the goal of inquiry
 - Moreover: Donald only uses English and Stefano only uses Italian— for this reason, their disagreement is *cross-linguistic*

Donald/Safro case



- Now consider the *Donald/Safro case*:

Donald is a monolingual English speaker and Safro is a monolingual Akan speaker. Donald assertively utters the sentence ‘True propositions are those that correspond to facts,’ and he believes the proposition that this sentence expresses.

The best available translation of this sentence into Akan is: ‘Asem no te saa kyerese ene nea ete saa di nsianim.’ This Akan sentence expresses a definition of the property expressed by ‘ete saa’ (roughly *being so*). However, ‘ete saa’ occurs on both the left-hand and the right-hand side of the sentence, making the definition viciously circular. For this reason, Safro takes the definition to be false, and he accordingly disbelieves it (i.e. believes its negation).

Kwasi Wiredu
(1931-2022)



Donald/Safro case



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- At first glance, it might seem that Donald and Safro are in an interesting cross-linguistic disagreement about truth
- In particular: it might seem like they disagree about whether truth is correspondence to fact and that this disagreement stems from the resources of their respective languages
- However: if Wiredu's analyses of English and Akan are on the right track, then this appearance is illusory

Donald/Safro case



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- Wiredu hypothesises that English speakers implicitly take truth to consist in a truth-bearer corresponding to a fact
- Given this hypothesis, the following inference *I* will be valid in English:
 - x is true
 - Therefore: there is a y such that $y \neq x$ and x corresponds to y

Donald/Safro case



- By contrast: Wiredu observes that Akan speakers implicitly take truth to consist in a judgment's *being so*—which isn't a matter of its corresponding to anything
 - Given this hypothesis: the best available translation of *I* into Akan (whose premise is 'x ete saa') is *invalid* in Akan
- This suffices to show that 'is true' and 'ete saa' have different semantic contents
- Accordingly, there is a pair of expressions in Donald and Safro's translation set—namely, <is true, ete saa>—which have different semantic contents

Donald/Safro case



- Since ‘is true’ and ‘ete saa’ have different semantic contents: the Donald/Safro case doesn’t involve a single subject matter *m* about which Donald and Safro have incompatible beliefs
 - Putting the point in English: Donald has a belief about truth and Safro has a belief about being so
- The Disagreement Principle therefore tells us that Donald and Safro aren’t in disagreement, which means that they aren’t in cross-linguistic disagreement
- *Rather*: it seems apt to say that Donald and Safro’s case involves mere *cross-linguistic difference*

Disagreement or difference?



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- An upshot: when evaluating cases of apparent cross-linguistic disagreement, it seems important to consider whether they involve genuine disagreement or mere cross-linguistic difference
 - This is particularly important when the disagreement seems to be *interestingly* cross-linguistic, as in the Donald/Safro case



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Thanks!