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English love: temporary or permanent?
- a note on intuition and linguistic argumentation

1. Introduction.

Most of us use intuition as a tool in our daily dealings with language phenomena, even though present-day linguistic research stresses the importance of the complementarity of intuition, and information from experiments and databases. Our intuitions are based on our previous knowledge of the world. But since no two individuals can be assumed to have exactly the same knowledge of the world (since we all have different experiences), no two individuals can be assumed to have exactly the same intuitions.

This state of affairs is usually regarded as a minor problem that will be factored out through the use of statistically oriented ways of thinking about language and linguistic examples. However, on and off, we have to remind ourselves that intuition is really a highly subjective factor. I will here illustrate this contention with a brief discussion of some semantic aspects of the word love in English.

Consider first the following two sentences.

- (1) Bill loves Mary.
- (2) *Bill is loving Mary.

(Sentence (2) is to be taken in the sense of it being a near-synonym to (1).)

I consider it feasible to regard sentences (1) and (2) as primary data for an investigation into the semantics of the word love. But there is not only one way in which an argumentation about the semantics of love can be followed through successfully. In fact, the data in (1) and (2) suggest two paths to follow, which go in opposite directions.

2. Love is permanent.

On the basis of intuition and our knowledge of the

world, we can easily argue that 'loving' as a concept is by definition a constant and permanent thing: you love one person, and your (and the other person's) love lasts forever. I will call this experience +.

It is now possible to argue as follows. The fact that sentence (2) is ungrammatical (on the reading intended here) is evidence that love has this particular semantic feature of permanency as part of its lexical entry. Compare also sentences (3) and (4).

(3) Bill lives in London.

(4) Bill is living in London.

Sentence (3) indicates a permanent activity, and sentence (4) a non-permanent, temporary activity.

We can also note that our intuitions about 'hate' appropriately match the description of 'love' that I have just given. That is, since we are usually not inclined to accept a priori that 'hate' is necessarily as permanent as 'love,' then it is understandable that sentence (5) is more acceptable than sentence (2).

(5) ?Bill is hating Mary.

(As human beings - at least in our culture - we readily admit positive aspects to be permanent characteristics of our lives, whereas negative ones are not as readily accepted. That is, it is easier to believe that one's 'love' for someone is more constant than one's feeling of 'hate.' Also, if you cannot overcome your feeling of 'love' for somebody, this is accepted by society - again, at least in most parts of our culture, whereas an unsuccessful attempt to get rid of your 'hate' is scorned by society.)

Furthermore, we can note that sentence (6) is more acceptable than (7), and, in particular, that (8) is more acceptable than (9).

(6) Mary kisses Bill every day.

(7) ?Mary is kissing Bill every day.

(8) Mary loves Bill forever / every day.

(9) *Mary is loving Bill forever / every day.

That is, in sentence (8) we see that love easily combines with adverbs indicating permanency or constancy. Sentences

(6) and (7) indicate that this might be a feature of the simple infinitive in general.

3. Love is temporary.

On the other hand, on the basis of our intuitions and our knowledge of the world in accordance with experience -, we know that 'loving' as a concept is by definition not a constant thing. People fall in love, and they fall out of it. (It does not work to argue that it was not real love, if it did not last, since we have no measure to indicate how long something has to last for it to be of a 'lasting' kind. Is ten years enough, or twenty, or thirty? And we also do not have any way of deciding whether the feeling of 'love' is allowed to change - and how much - during these thirty years, for the feeling still to be called 'real' love.)

In this interpretation, we can argue that the fact that we cannot say (2) is because such a sentence would be redundant. That is, if love has a feature of temporariness built into it, then sentence (2) would be ruled out because it says twice that love is temporary: (a) once in terms of the inherent feature of temporariness of love, and (b) once in the use of the progressive form. (This is not to say that redundancy as such is a negative thing in language; spoken language could simply not do without it. But whereas we can say (10), we do not usually say (11) - since kill already contains the element 'death.'

(10) He was struck by death.

(11) *He was killed by death.)

Furthermore, the reason why sentence (8) is acceptable is precisely because without an adverb indicating permanence (forever), love would simply have its temporary interpretation. That is, if love did not have a feature of temporariness built into it, sentence (8) would be redundant, which it is not. Compare sentence (9), which is redundant, and therefore unacceptable.

4. Implications.

The arguments above should not only be seen as an

extended joke about the essence of 'love.' They show a number of very important aspects of the workings of linguistic argumentation.

First of all, what you take for granted and start out with in an argumentation of the type illustrated above depends on your previous experiences of the world. And depending on your previous experience - in this case, whether it is of the '+' or '-' kind - you will try to fit your arguments to the view you feel you yourself want to ascribe to.

On a more general level, and thus even more seriously, the hypotheses that you start out with - including all the things that you take for granted without perhaps even knowing what you are taking for granted - will influence the direction of your argumentation: you focus on certain aspects, and often remain blind to opposing counter-arguments.

The particular question to be posed after this exercise is this: 'How much is a particular grammar of English influenced by the particular grammarian's prior experiences with love, 'loving,' and love?' And the more general question that arises out of this goes as follows: 'To what extent are particular grammatical descriptions of the English language filled with biased arguments of the kind illustrated here?'

5. Epilogue

Native speakers A, B, and C readily accepted my judgement of the non-acceptability of (2). Native speaker D, however, retorted: "Of course you can say that!" So, in the last resort, 'love,' is an individual thing - for some it is permanent, for others, temporary, and for still others, the concepts permanency and temporariness either have very little to do with 'love,' or they make up a gradient scale that can be moved about on as one sees fit.