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Linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions in the philosophy of language

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5 Machery et al. (2004) reported some preliminary evidence that intuitions about reference vary within and across cultures, and they argued that if real, such variation would have significant philosophical implications (see also Mallon et al. 2009). In a recent article, Genoveva Martí (2009) argues that the type of intuitions examined by Machery and colleagues ('metalinguistic intuitions') is evidentially irrelevant for identifying the correct theory of reference, and she concludes that the variation in the relevant intuitions about reference within and across cultures has not been established.

To substantiate this criticism, Martí draws a distinction between two types of intuitions: metalinguistic intuitions and what we will call 'linguistic' intuitions. Meta-linguistic intuitions are judgements about the semantic properties of mentioned words (e.g. their reference), while, if we understand Martí correctly, linguistic intuitions are judgements about the individuals (substances, classes, etc.) described in the actual and possible cases used by philosophers of language. These judgements would be expressed by sentences using words rather than mentioning them. An example might clarify this distinction. In Kripke's Gödel case (1972/1980: 83–84), the judgement that the proper name 'Gödel' refers to Gödel and not to Schmidt is a metalinguistic intuition, since it is about the reference of the proper name 'Gödel'; by contrast, the judgement that in this case Gödel should not have claimed credit for the incompleteness theorem is a linguistic intuition. Because Martí holds that only linguistic intuitions provide evidence for determining how reference is fixed and because Machery and colleagues used a question that elicited metalinguistic intuitions (viz., 'When John uses the name "Gödel", is he talking about the person who really discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic or the person who got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work?'), she concludes that the variation in the relevant intuitions about reference within and across cultures has not been established.

Martí is certainly right to draw a distinction between these two types of intuitions, but her conclusion is too hasty, for it presupposes that people's metalinguistic intuitions are not in agreement with their linguistic intuitions. Suppose, for instance, that people judge that in Kripke's Gödel case 'Gödel' refers to the individual originally called 'Gödel' and that they say that Gödel should not have claimed credit for the incompleteness theorem; then, their metalinguistic and linguistic intuitions in the Gödel case would be congruent. If the same were also true of the other relevant cases in the philosophy of

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language (that is, if people's judgements about the semantic properties of words were consistent with how they use words to make linguistic judgements), then there would be little reason to distinguish the evidential value of the two types of intuitions identified by Martí. Thus, in order to evaluate
45 Martí's criticism of Machery and colleagues' work, it is important to find out whether linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions are congruent.

Martí's distinction between metalinguistic and linguistic intuitions is important for another reason. If linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions really are incongruent and if only the former are evidentially relevant for
50 identifying the correct theory of reference, then a substantial reform of the usual practices in the philosophy of language is required, since actual or possible cases written so as to elicit metalinguistic intuitions about reference are extremely common in this field (see, e.g. Donnellan 1970: 350, Kripke 1972/1980, Evans 1973: 203).

55 To examine whether people's linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions are congruent or incongruent, we developed two vignettes: *the linguistic Tsu Ch'ung Chih case* and *the metalinguistic Tsu Ch'ung Chih case*, and we collected data on the intuitions elicited by these cases. The linguistic Tsu Ch'ung Chih case is worded as follows:

60 Ivy is a high school student in Hong Kong. In her astronomy class, she was taught that Tsu Ch'ung Chih was the man who first determined the precise time of the summer and winter solstices. But, like all her classmates, this is the only thing she has heard about Tsu Ch'ung Chih. Now suppose that Tsu Ch'ung Chih did not really make this discovery.
65 He stole it from an astronomer who died soon after making the discovery. But the theft remained entirely undetected and Tsu Ch'ung Chih became famous for the discovery of the precise times of the solstices. Everybody is like Ivy in this respect; the claim that Tsu Ch'ung Chih determined the solstice times is the only thing people have heard about
70 him. Having read the above story and accepting that it is true, when Ivy says, 'Tsu Ch'ung Chih was a great astronomer', do you think that her claim is: (A) true or (B) false?

The metalinguistic Tsu Ch'ung Chih case is identical except for the question, which is:

75 Having read the above story and accepting that it is true, when Ivy uses the name 'Tsu Ch'ung Chih', who do you think she is actually talking about:

(A) the person who (unbeknownst to Ivy) really determined the solstice times?

80 or

(B) the person who is widely believed to have discovered the solstice times, but actually stole this discovery and claimed credit for it?



85 Both cases are inspired by Kripke's Gödel case, and they are similar to the
Tsu Ch'ung Chih case used in Machery et al. 2004 (see also Sytsma and
Livengood, 2005). The metalinguistic case is meant to elicit a metalinguistic
intuition (viz. an intuition about the reference of a mentioned word), while
the linguistic case is meant to elicit a linguistic intuition: it does not ask
90 people to make a judgement about the reference of 'Tsu Ch'ung Chih';
rather, it asks people whether they agree with a sentence.

Before going any further, though, we should address a possible worry.
Because 'Tsu Ch'ung Chih' is mentioned, not used, in the question for the
linguistic case, one might object that this case does not really elicit a linguistic
intuition and that our study is thus not relevant to the issue at hand. There
95 are three mutually consistent replies to this worry. First, the question we
asked participants was inspired by the question Martí herself suggests
using to elicit linguistic intuitions. She proposes the following wording
(2009: 47): 'One day, the fraud is exposed, and John exclaims "Today is a
sad day: we have found out that Gödel was a thief and a liar". What do you
100 think about John's reaction?'.¹ This wording mentions 'Gödel' too. Second,
asking people to assess the truth-value of a sentence relates to (though is not
identical with) their desire to assert it and thus to what they would say.
Finally, this procedure is frequently utilized among semanticists, so any
doubt about the question we used would also generalize to the type of evi-
105 dence they use.

We examined the linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions elicited by the two
Tsu Ch'ung Chih cases in three countries that differ substantially in terms of
their culture: India, Mongolia and France.² In each country, participants
were presented with one of our two vignettes. Figure 1 reports the proportion
110 of Kripkean judgements for each vignette in these three countries.

Overall, we found the same pattern of answers in all three countries.
Although the proportion of Kripkean judgements was somewhat higher in
the linguistic than in the metalinguistic case for all three samples, this differ-
ence was very small and it never reached significance.³ Even though null
115 results are difficult to interpret, one can at least conclude that any differences
in the proportions of Kripkean linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions among
Indians, French and Mongolians are not large.⁴ In addition, we found sub-
stantial within-culture variation, since about a third of Indian, French and

- 1 We did not use the wording suggested by Martí because open questions such as 'What do you think of John's reaction?' do not yield easily analysable data.
- 2 India: N=83; age range: 18-26 (mean=20.4); 46% males. France: N=66; age range: 18-70 (mean=32.3); 41% males. Mongolia: N=78; age range: 18-62 (mean=39.4); 65% male.
- 3 India: $\chi^2(1, N=83) < .9$; France: $\chi^2(1, N=66) < .4$; Mongolia: $\chi^2(1, N=78) < .8$.
- 4 This conclusion follows from the fact that if one assumes that the difference between the two proportions corresponded to a large effect size ($w=.5$), then the probability of

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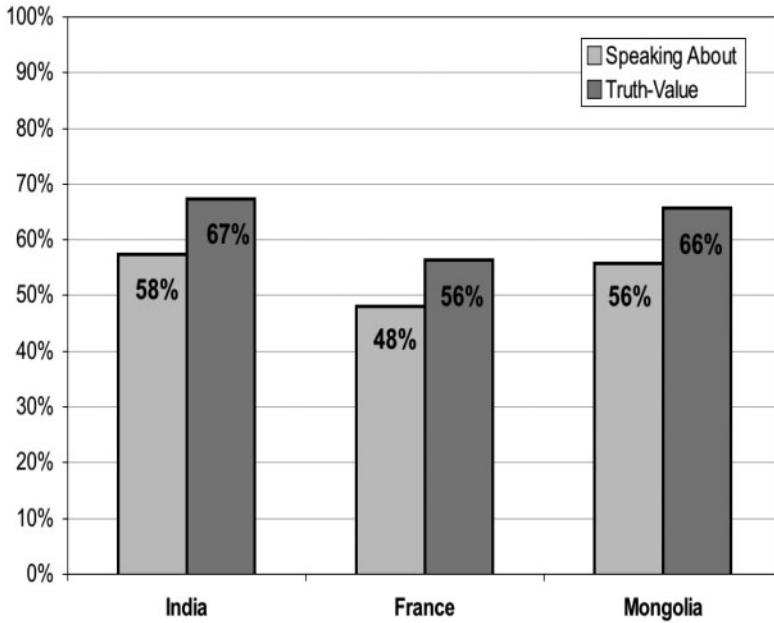


Figure 1. Proportion of Kripkean judgements.

120 Mongolian participants who read the linguistic case had descriptivist intuitions.

Our failure to find differences between these two kinds of intuitions, even in three different cultural contexts, suggests that linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions are largely congruent. People’s intuitions about what proper names refer to in counterfactual cases seem to be in sync with the way they use these proper names to make judgements about the characters described in these cases. Critically, this finding provides substantial validation for the usual practices in the philosophy of language, where philosophers regularly appeal to metalinguistic intuitions. Philosophers justifiably disregard the distinction between metalinguistic and linguistic intuitions because our judgements about what words refer to seem to track the way we use words.⁵

130 Furthermore, this finding considerably blunts Martí’s criticism of Machery and colleagues’ (2004) cross-cultural findings, since it is unclear on what grounds we would grant linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions a different

rejecting the hypothesis that the two proportions were identical would be higher than .90 for each national sample.

5 Future work should examine whether our findings generalize to intuitions about other types of words, such as mass terms, natural kind terms, and artefact terms. Other cases should also be used in addition to the Gödel case.



135 evidential value if people tend to have congruent linguistic and metalinguistic
intuitions. Furthermore, the similarity between linguistic and metalinguistic
intuitions in Mongolia, France and India, in combination with the fact that
Chinese and American metalinguistic intuitions about the Gödel case vary
(Machery et al. 2004, Deutsch et al. [ms](#)), suggests, by induction, that linguis-
140 tic intuitions about the Gödel case are likely to differ between China and the
USA. Thus, even if we grant to Martí that philosophers of language should
only appeal to linguistic intuitions and not to metalinguistic intuitions, the
evidence suggests that the former intuitions are likely to vary across cultures.
Finally, and perhaps most damning to Martí's argument, we repeatedly
found a large within-culture variation in people's linguistic intuitions.
145 Thus, supposing again that philosophers of language should only appeal to
linguistic intuitions, the evidence shows that these intuitions also vary.

Martí might object that we did not find any variation across cultures:
regardless of the country, about two thirds of our participants tended to
150 have Kripkean intuitions. However, we found substantial within-culture vari-
ation in intuitions about reference in all three countries, and this within-
culture variation poses exactly the same philosophical challenge as cross-
cultural variation (Mallon et al. [forthcoming](#)).

Acknowledging that empirical evidence about people's judgements is rele-
vant to developing a theory of reference, Martí contends that previous work
155 has focused on a class of intuitions that is evidentially irrelevant: people's
metalinguistic intuitions. In this article, we have provided new evidence that
people have congruent linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions: their judge-
ments about the semantic properties of words seem to agree with their use of
words to make judgements about individuals (substances, classes, etc.)
160 described in the actual and possible cases that philosophers of language
have developed. This finding justifies philosophers' disregard of the distinc-
tion drawn by Martí, and it undermines her criticism of Machery and col-
leagues' work.⁶

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