

Uncertain Luck and Counterfactual Stupidity

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Outline

Introduction

Background

Barker's proposal

Predicates of relative stupidity and modality

A modal, comparative analysis

What this talk is about

- ▶ A special class of predicates in a particular construction:
predicates of relative stupidity
- (1)
- a. Ed was stupid/crazy/clever/wise to accept the job.
 - b. Ed was nice/kind/considerate to give up his seat.

What this talk is about

- ▶ A special class of predicates in a particular construction
- (2)
- a. Ed was stupid/crazy/clever/wise to accept the job.
 - b. Ed was nice/kind/considerate to give up his seat.
- ▶ with epistemic modals
- (3)
- a. Maybe Ed was fortunate to be turned down for the job.
 - b. Ed may have been foolish/stupid to accept the job.

What this talk is about

- ▶ in counterfactual and subjunctive conditionals with an overt or covert antecedent
- (4) a. Ed accepted the offer. He would have been crazy to reject it.
b. Ed will probably accept the offer. He would be crazy not to.
- ▶ if issue (truth of infinitival clause relative to subject argument) is presupposed to be settled, counterfactual: *would have*
- ▶ if issue (truth of infinitival clause relative to subject argument) is presupposed not to be settled, subjunctive: *would*

Motivation for this work

- ▶ An intriguing proposal by Barker (2002), “The Dynamics of Vagueness” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25
 - ▶ predicates of relative stupidity have no at-issue entailments but only the meta-linguistic effect of giving information about the prevailing standard for the relevant relation (e.g. relative stupidity, luck, wisdom, rudeness)

Motivation for this work

- ▶ An intriguing proposal by Barker (2002), “The Dynamics of Vagueness” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25
 - ▶ predicates of relative stupidity have no at-issue entailments but only the meta-linguistic effect of giving information about the prevailing standard for the relevant property

“what is special about adjectives like stupid [with an infinitival complement] is that they have no entailments whatsoever (beyond what they presuppose) except for their update effect on vague standards. ... relative uses of stupid-type adjectives have only a metalinguistic mode of use.” (p. 3)

Plan

- ▶ A bit of background on predications of relative stupidity and related predications
- ▶ Barker's proposal
- ▶ Predicates of relative stupidity with epistemic modals and with counterfactuals
- ▶ A modal, comparative analysis

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Predications of relative stupidity

- ▶ Their syntax and implications
Wilkinson (1970, 1976), Rivière (1983), Cormack (1998),
Barker (2002), Landau (2006)

Predications of relative stupidity

- ▶ *NP be Adj to VP*: factive

- (5) a. Ed was stupid/crazy to turn down the job.
Ed turned down the job.
In turning down the job Ed made a bad decision.
- b. Ed was clever/wise to accept the job.
Ed accepted the job.
In accepting the job Ed made a good decision.
- (6) a. Ed was not stupid/crazy to turn down the job.
Ed turned down the job.
In turning down the job Ed did not make a bad decision.
- b. Ed was not clever/wise to accept that job.
Ed accepted the job.
In accepting the job Ed did not make a good decision.

Predications of relative stupidity

- ▶ *NP be Adj to VP*: factive

- (7) a. Ed was nice/polite to talk so openly to us.

Ed talked openly to us.

It was good given the standards of proper behavior that Ed talked openly to us.

- b. Ed was evil/rude to talk so openly to us.

Ed talked openly to us.

It was bad given the standards of proper/moral behavior that Ed talked openly to us.

Predications of relative stupidity

► *NP be Adj to VP*: factive

- (8) a. Ed was lucky/fortunate to be offered the job.

Ed was offered the job.

It was a good outcome for Ed to be offered the job.

- b. I was lucky/fortunate to survive that accident, let alone come out unscathed.

I survived the accident and, moreover, came out unscathed.

It was highly unlikely that I would survive the accident and even more unlikely that I would come out unscathed.

Predications of relative stupidity

► *It be Adj of NP to VP*: factive

- (9) a. It was lucky/fortunate of Ed to be offered the job.
Ed was offered the job.
It was a good outcome for Ed that he was offered the job.
- b. It was not clever/wise of Ed to accept that job.
Ed accepted the job.
It was not good for Ed that he accepted the job.
- c. It was proper/absurd/improper of Ed to talk so openly to us.
Ed talked openly to us.
It was good/bad given the standards of proper behavior that Ed talked openly to us.

Predicates of relative stupidity are gradable and vague

- (10)
 - a. Ed was totally stupid to speak to insult Mary.
 - b. I was an absolute idiot to dance like that.
 - c. You were very clever to get out of the assignment.
- (11)
 - a. Ed was definitely fortunate to be given this assignment.
 - b. Ed was definitely rude to speak to his hosts like that.

Related predications

- *NP be Adj enough to VP / NP be too Adj to VP*: implicative

- (12) a. Ed was stupid/crazy/clever/wise enough to accept the job.
Ed accepted the job.
- b. Ed was too stupid/crazy/clever/wise to accept the job.
Ed did not accept the job.
- c. Ed wasn't stupid/crazy/clever/wise enough to accept the job.
Ed did not accept the job.
- d. Ed wasn't too stupid/crazy/clever/wise to accept the job.
Ed accepted the job.

Related predications

- ▶ *NP be Adj enough to VP / NP be too Adj to VP*: implicative
- (13) a. Ed may be stupid/crazy/clever/wise enough to accept the job.
Ed may accept the job.
- b. Ed may be too stupid/crazy/clever/wise to accept the job.
Ed may reject the job.

Predicates of relative stupidity

- ▶ Predicates of relative stupidity differ in the kinds of implications they are associated with regarding the control and intention of the referent of the subject NP/*of*-phrase over the event described by the VP
 - ▶ Some examples from Barker (2002):
- (14)
- a. She was lucky/fortunate to be born in the 21st century.
Good outcome over which she had no say.
 - b. She was stupid to fall into that ditch.
Fall could have been unintentional.
Some other action leading to the fall was under her control.
 - c. She was smart to fall into that ditch.
Intentional fall.

Predicates of relative stupidity

- ▶ Predicates of relative stupidity differ in the kinds of implications they are associated with regarding the control and intention of the referent of the subject NP/*of*-phrase over the event described by the VP
- ▶ It gets even more complicated: what the agent knew prior to the event may matter (S. Kaufmann, p.c.)
- ▶ (15) is not true/felicitous just because the coin came up tails, nor because the coin was biased towards tails as long as the agent had no way of knowing that

(15) He was stupid to bet on heads.

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Barker's view on vagueness

- ▶ Descriptive content of an assertion vs. information about the prevailing standard

“part of the ignorance associated with a use of a vague predicate is uncertainty about the applicability of a word. That is, it is ignorance pertaining to the state of the discourse itself – in other words, it is purely linguistic ignorance.” (p. 4)

Barker's view on vagueness

- ▶ Sometimes use of a vague predicate only gives information about the prevailing relevant standard for the relevant property
- ▶ e.g. uttering (16) when it is common ground exactly how tall Feynman is

(16) Feynman is tall.

“The context update effect of accepting (16) under such circumstances would be to eliminate from further consideration some candidates for the standard of tallness. My purpose in uttering (16) under such circumstances would be nothing more than to communicate something about how to use a certain word appropriately – it would be a metalinguistic use.” (p. 2)

Sharpening as the only informative component of meaning

- ▶ Barker's claim is that this metalinguistic update, in addition to their presuppositional content, is the only meaning contribution of predicates of relative stupidity
- ▶ Presuppositional content includes the factivity presupposition and, depending on the predicate, some combination of SENTIENCE, DISCRETION, INTENTIONALITY

“Given a context that satisfies the relevant presupposition, the only update effect of evaluating [a sentence with a stupid adjective] is to exclude candidates in which the standard of relative stupidity is set too high. In other words, the lexical semantics of stupid adjectives guarantees that their update effect involves sharpening and nothing else.” (p. 26)

Sharpening as the only informative component of meaning

- ▶ Barker takes the positive form of the adjective to be basic.

(17) Feynman was stupid to dance.

(18) **Presup:** For any context c ,
 $\llbracket \text{Feynman be stupid to dance} \rrbracket(c)$ is defined only
 if $c \subseteq [\text{SEN}(f) \wedge \text{DISC}(f, \llbracket \text{to dance} \rrbracket(f)) \wedge$
 $\llbracket \text{to dance} \rrbracket(f)]$
CCP: $\lambda c. \{w \in c \mid \mathbf{stupid}(\mathbf{d}(w)(\llbracket \text{stupid} \rrbracket), f, \llbracket \text{to dance} \rrbracket)\}$

- ▶ \mathbf{d} is a delineation function mapping a world and a gradable property to a degree, providing the relevant standard
- ▶ Barker follows Stalnaker (1998) in assuming that worlds in a context include information about the discourse underway, thus accounting for the context-dependency of standard setting

Sharpening as the only informative component of meaning

(19) Feynman was stupid to dance.

- ▶ An assertion of (19) instructs the hearer to draw the dividing line between stupid and non-stupid individual-event pairs in such a way that the pair of Feynman and his dancing count as stupid.
- ▶ Implicit comparison as to stupidity between individual-event pairs of any kind.

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In the scope of attitude predicates

- ▶ Factivity presuppositions are relativized to the holder of the attitude
 - ▶ Unclear what the content of the attitude is in Barker's analysis
- (20)
- a. John thought that Ed was stupid to reject the offer.
 - b. John was wise to think/say that Ed was stupid to reject the offer.
 - c. John mistakenly believed that Ed rejected the offer and thought that he was stupid to do so.

With epistemic modals

- ▶ Barker does not discuss such cases except as they pertain to the presuppositions of the construction
 - ▶ presuppositions project through epistemic modals

- (21) a. Maybe Ed was lucky/smart to reject the offer.
Ed rejected the offer.
It is an open question whether in rejecting the offer Ed made a good decision.
- b. I may have been stupid/crazy to decide to give this talk.
I decided to give this talk.
It is an open question whether that was a good decision or not.

- ▶ What is the uncertainty in (21) predicted to be about?

With epistemic modals

- (22) a. ??Perhaps Ed was rude/polite to speak so openly to us.
She spoke openly to us.
Uncertainty about the rules of proper behavior
- b. #Maybe I was lucky to survive the accident.
Low likelihood of my surviving is taken for granted.

Epistemic modals

- ▶ Assuming a Veltman-style consistency check for epistemic possibility modals, the analysis would imply that (21) are used to ensure that the standard for stupidity/luck are not so stringent so as to exclude my giving the talk/Ed's rejecting the offer to count as stupid/lucky.
- ▶ If one moreover assumes that assertions with a possibility modal indicate that worlds in which the standard for stupidity/luck is more stringent cannot be excluded from the context, use of epistemic possibility modals with stupid predicates ought to indicate that the speaker is unable to resolve the vagueness at all.
- ▶ But you can use (21a,b) when you are certain about the relevant standard but uncertain about the kind of world you are in

In counterfactuals

- ▶ Barker addresses the fact that (23a,b) have no factive presuppositions
 - ▶ local satisfaction of the factive presupposition relative to a counterfactual context determined by the discourse
- (23) a. Ed accepted the job. He would have been crazy to reject it.
b. If they had offered the job to Ed, he would have been crazy to reject it.

Counterfactuals

- ▶ But what is the communicative effect of the counterfactual and how is it to be derived from its meaning?
- ▶ It would seem that (24a) and (24b) have exactly the same effect of sharpening the standard of stupidity
- ▶ (24a) would be uttered in a context where it is taken for granted that he didn't reveal his plans, (24b) in a context where it is taken for granted that he did

- (24) a. He would have been stupid to reveal his plans.
b. He was stupid to reveal his plans.

Counterfactuals

- ▶ Need a principle that ensures that similarity preserves the values of delineation functions: each maximally similar world to the world of evaluation w relative to any proposition p is exactly like w in the standard for vague predicates
- ▶ For any Adj , w , p : $(\forall w' \in Sim(w, p)) \mathbf{d}(w, \llbracket Adj \rrbracket) = \mathbf{d}(w', \llbracket Adj \rrbracket)$
- ▶ Assumptions about the discourse are preserved by Sim

Counterfactuals

- ▶ If *Sim* preserves the standard of the world of evaluation no matter what its propositional argument, Strengthening of the Antecedent ought to hold for conditionals with predicates of relative stupidity in the consequent
 - ▶ What about the coherence of sequences of counterfactuals as in (25)?
- (25)
- a. If they had offered me the job, I would have been stupid to turn it down.
 - b. But if they had offered me the job on a very low salary, well then I would certainly not have been stupid to turn it down.

A possible escape hatch?

- ▶ Barker has a short discussion of how facts may matter in assessing relative stupidity in connection with cases of disagreement, as in (26)

(26) [Context: Feynman dances wildly and spills beer on his shirt]

Speaker A: Feynman is stupid to dance like that.

Speaker B: Feynman is NOT stupid to dance like that. What you don't realize is that he is distracting that spy over there.

A possible escape hatch?

- ▶ In trying to pin down what the disagreement is about and what the objection of Speaker B amounts to, he says (I = Speaker A, you = Speaker B):

“In fact, you don't even deny that dancing wildly enough to spill beer on oneself meets the standard of stupidity under normal circumstances. Rather, what you are doing is encouraging me to take a wider view of the situation in order to direct my attention to extenuating circumstances. I will take the phrase ‘extenuating circumstances’ rather literally. What the objector is doing is insisting on extending each situation in the extension of the VP so as to include a larger chunk of the world: not only the dancing and its immediate consequences, but some larger objectives as well.

A possible escape hatch?

Let's assume that when I uttered my claim I had in mind for the denotation of the infinitival VP a set of Portnerian situations that included Feynman, dancing, beer, Feynman's shirt, and nothing else. Participating in that restricted set of situations does indeed render Feynman relatively stupid. Your challenge goes to my selection of a set of relevant situations. You would like to suggest a set of situations that contains more. . . . Relative to that set of situations, Feynman may not be stupid – he may in fact be preventing the nuclear secrets of his nation from falling into enemy hands.” (p. 24)

A possible escape hatch?

- ▶ The question is how 'extenuating circumstances' fit into the analysis
- ▶ Speaker B communicates to speaker A that Feynman's relative stupidity under discussion is not for *dancing like that* but for, say, *dancing like that in order to distract the spy*.
- ▶ 'Feynman is stupid to dance like that' is true in the set of worlds speaker A takes to be the common ground,
- ▶ Speaker B proposes that the set of worlds to be considered common ground are worlds in which Feynman dances wildly in order to distract the spy.
- ▶ Learning this shifts the common ground but not the standard.

A possible escape hatch?

- ▶ Can we adapt this view to account for epistemic modals and counterfactuals?
 - ▶ It looks more promising for counterfactuals than for epistemic modals.
 - ▶ In order to explain the coherence of sequences of counterfactuals as in (27), two different kinds of VPs ought to be given as arguments to the stupid predicate
 - ▶ For instance, in (25a) *it = the job on a normally expected salary*, while in (25b) *it = the job on a low salary*.
- (27)
- a. If they had offered me the job, I would have been stupid to turn it down.
 - b. But if they had offered me the job on a very low salary, well then I would certainly not have been stupid to turn it down.

A possible escape hatch?

(28) I may have been stupid/crazy to decide to give this talk.

- ▶ The uncertainty expressed by (28) comes out as uncertainty about what is being evaluated as being stupid and indirectly about what kind of world I am in.
 - ▶ It could be, for instance, *my giving that talk and having everyone like it* or it could be *my giving that talk and having everyone hate it*.
- ▶ But factive presuppositions with the more specific predicates cannot be satisfied in the same context.

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Main idea

- ▶ Predicates of relative stupidity presuppose a choice of behavior/decision/indeterminism point between alternative developments which, depending on the predicate, may be presupposed to be under the control of the relevant agent (referent of subject NP) or not
 - ▶ Restrict attention here to polar alternatives
- ▶ They are associated with at-issue entailments: relative to a fixed standard of e.g. stupidity the agent counts as stupid relative to his choice for the stated alternative but does not necessarily count as stupid relative to a choice for an alternative.
- ▶ Implicit comparison between alternative choices/decisions/outcomes
- ▶ Similarity with analysis of *compared to* in Kennedy (2007).

Support from Unconditional Conditionals

- ▶ Predicate is not applicable regardless of choice/outcome/decision.
- (29)
- a. #Whatever he does, he'd be stupid to do it.
 - b. No matter how little he revealed, he was stupid to say anything at all.
 - c. Whatever he brought, he was wise to bring something.

Main idea

- ▶ Like factive emotives (e.g. *proud, glad, sorry*), they express an evaluative attitude which, depending on the predicate, is positive or negative
- ▶ Unlike factive emotives the holder of the attitude is not the referent of the subject NP but the speaker, or when the stupid predicate is in the context of a propositional attitude the holder of that attitude
- ▶ Evaluative attitude as a conventional implicature?

Comparative semantics for factive emotives

(30) a is glad/sorry that p

- ▶ Heim (1992), von Stechow (1999) semantics: comparing the world as a believes it to be to the world as a believes it would be if p were not true.
- ▶ Introducing counterfactual alternatives in the modal base
- ▶ Evaluate relative to a modal base and an ordering source that orders propositions

Modal base for predicates of relative stupidity

- ▶ Modal base has to be compatible with every alternative
- ▶ One of the alternatives is presupposed to be true by the speaker
 - ▶ With factual sentences it is the stated alternative
 - ▶ With counterfactual sentences, in the appropriate contexts, it is the polar opposite of the stated alternative
- ▶ Modal base plays a role in basic descriptive content and in the evaluative attitude

(31) A modal base for 'x is clever/stupid to VP' is a mapping from an evaluating agent a , a world w_0 and $\lambda w. \llbracket \text{VP} \rrbracket (w, x) = p$ to a set of worlds as in (32)

$$(32) f(a, w_0, p) = \{w \in W \mid (\exists w' \in \text{Dox}(a, w_0)) w \in \text{Sim}(w', p) \vee w \in \text{Sim}(w', \bar{p})\}$$

At-issue and evaluative content

Positive predicates

(33) 'Ed was clever to quit' is true in w_0 relative to an evaluating agent a , modal base f , ordering source g , and standard s iff

- a. $(\forall w' \in f(a, w_0, \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) \cap \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed}))$
 $(\exists d > \mathbf{s(clever)}) \text{clever}(w', \text{Ed}, \llbracket \text{quit} \rrbracket, d) \wedge$
 $(\exists w' \in f(a, w_0, \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) \cap \lambda w. \neg \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed}))$
 $\neg (\exists d > \mathbf{s(clever)}) \text{clever}(w', \text{Ed}, \llbracket \text{not quit} \rrbracket, d)$
- b. $f(a, w_0, \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) \cap \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed}) <_{g(a, w_0)}$
 $f(a, w_0, \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) \cap \lambda w. \neg \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})$

At-issue and evaluative content

Negative predicates

- (34) 'Ed was stupid to quit' is true in w_0 relative to an evaluating agent a , modal base f , ordering source g , and standard s iff
- same as for positive
 - $f(a, w_0, \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) \cap \lambda w. \neg \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) <_{g(a, w)}$
 $f(a, w_0, \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed})) \cap \lambda w. \text{quit}(w, \text{Ed}))$