## The Semantic Uniformity of 'Ought'
Abstract

Justin Snedegar, USC Philosophy

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Call the view that there is only one sense of the normative 'ought', which expresses a propositional operator, and means that its prejacent sentence ought to be the case, the *semantic uniformity thesis*. Some 'ought' sentences, such as "It ought to be that there is less suffering in the world", are very amenable to this thesis. It is very plausible that the 'ought' in this sentence is a propositional operator. Call these sentences *non-agential* 'ought' sentences, since they do not obviously involve any particular agent. Some sentences, such as "Chris ought to do his homework", do not obviously fit this pattern. Call these sentences *agential* 'ought' sentences, since they do make reference to an agent. On a naïve view, agential 'ought' sentences appear to say that an agent stands in a certain relation – the *ought* relation – to an action. On this view, 'ought' has a sense which does not express a propositional operator, but rather a relation. The semantic uniformity thesis, however, maintains that the 'ought' that figures into agential 'ought' sentences is the same as, or at least can be reduced to, the 'ought' that figures into non-agential 'ought' sentences.

Peter Geach and Gil Harman have argued against the semantic uniformity thesis, based on *passivization.* In a recent paper, Mark Schroeder presents the most sophisticated version yet of this argument. He argues that some agential 'ought' sentences are not equivalent to any non-agential 'ought' sentence, and that this is due to an ambiguity in 'ought'. On some uses, 'ought' expresses a propositional operator, which says of the proposition expressed by the prejacent of the 'ought' sentence that it ought to be the case. This is the *evaluative* sense of 'ought'. But other uses of 'ought' express a relation holding between agents and actions that they ought to perform. This is the *deliberative* sense.

The First Step of Schroeder's argument is to show that there are 'ought' sentences of the form ⌜x ought to A⌝ which have a reading that is not equivalent to a corresponding sentence of the form ⌜It ought to be that x As⌝. So even though agential 'ought' sentences often have a reading which is equivalent to a non-agential 'ought' sentence, at least some appear to be ambiguous between this sort of reading, and a reading on which they are not equivalent to any non-agential 'ought' sentences.

The Second Step is to argue that this ambiguity in the 'ought' sentences arises from an ambiguity in 'ought' itself, and not in any other part of the sentence. Some philosophers have argued that the ambiguity is located instead in the prejacent of the 'ought' sentence. The basic idea behind this *agency in the prejacent* theory is to introduce a 'sees to it that', or 'stit' operator to capture the agency in agential 'ought' sentences. So the agential sense of "Larry ought to win the lottery" is rendered as "Ought: Larry stit: Larry wins", while the non-agential sense is rendered as "Ought: Larry wins". The

'ought' sentence is ambiguous between these readings, but this is not due to any ambiguity in 'ought'. Rather, the ambiguity is in the prejacent. Schroeder presents compelling linguistic evidence that this theory undergenerates ambiguities: it fails to predict a clear ambiguity in certain 'ought' sentences, because it is implausible to suppose that the corresponding prejacents are ambiguous in the ways required by the theory. This argument, like Geach's and Harman's, is based on passivization. The agency in the prejacent theory is committed to saying that a sentence and its passive transformation can have very different readings, but this is implausible. Having argued (i) that some agential 'ought' sentences are ambiguous, and (ii) that this ambiguity does not arise from an ambiguity in the prejacent, Schroeder concludes that the ambiguity arises from an ambiguity in 'ought'.

In this paper, I show how, by adopting a version of *contrastivism* about 'ought', the advocate of the semantic uniformity thesis can respond to Schroeder. Contrastivism maintains that 'ought' is contrast-sensitive: 'ought' sentences are (often implicitly) relativized to sets of alternatives. So a sentence like "I ought to order a salad" is to be understood as something like "I ought to order a salad (out of {I order a salad, I order a hamburger, I order onion rings})". The specific set of alternatives will be determined by context. Contrastivism about 'ought' is independently motivated, and has been defended by a handful of philosophers, including Aaron Sloman, Frank Jackson, and more recently, Fabrizio Cariani and Stephen Finlay. This paper, then, illustrates another interesting application of the theory.

The contrastivist solution explains the ambiguity in the relevant 'ought' sentences not by positing an ambiguity in 'ought', nor by positing an ambiguity in the prejacent sentence, but rather by appealing to differences in the sets of alternatives to which the various readings of the sentence are relativized. Some sets of alternatives are *agential*, and some are *non-agential.* For example, if the relevant set of alternatives for the sentence "Bill ought to kiss Lucy" is {Bill kisses Lucy, Bill shakes Lucy's hand, Bill snubs Lucy}, then we will get an agential reading of the sentence. If the relevant set of alternatives is {Bill kisses Lucy, Ted kisses Lucy, Rufus kisses Lucy}, we will not get the agential reading. In contexts in which we are offering advice or deliberating – which will be the contexts in which we want the agential readings – the contextually relevant set of alternatives will be agential, in the above sense. And when we're merely *evaluating* states of affairs, we will likely *not* get an agential set of alternatives.

After presenting the contrastivist solution, I consider the objection that the theory also undergenerates ambiguities, in the same way as the agency in the prejacent theory does. But I show that there is a plausible way for the contrastivist to explain the linguistic data which motivated Schroeder's rejection of the agency in the prejacent theory. The basic move is to deny Schroeder's premise that a sentence and its passive transformation have to have the same readings available. By passivizing, we signal that we do *not* have an agential reading in mind.