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Section A.2 Philosophical and applied logics

Contradiction in the Question- Answer Relation

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1. Introduction

Conversation is basically compounded out of questions and answers. A strange contradiction rises occasionally between questions and answers. I think it is familiar to us but it has not yet been analyzed. The aim of this article is to give an analysis of this contradiction.

What people call a contradiction in a daily life is almost always a logically syntactical contradiction. It has the general form “P and not P”.

We have other kinds of contradiction, i.e. semantic contradictions and pragmatic contradictions.

A semantic contradiction is a contradiction in a sentence which has as its predicate a semantic notion. It might be better to call this “semantic paradox” E.g.

“This sentence is false.”

“”heterological” is heterological.” (Grelling-Nelson’s paradox)

The pragmatic contradiction is a contradiction between an utterance act and a proposition or between an illocutionary act and a proposition. E.g.

* 1. Contradiction between utterance act and proposition “Please talk quietly here!” (said in a loud voice)

“Let us pronounce corrictly!” (pronounced incorrectly)

* 1. contradiction between illocutionary act and proposition “I assert nothing.”

“I don’t exist.”

“Don’t follow my order!”

By the way, there is a different kind of contradiction from these. Some utterance doesn’t have a contradiction in itself but falls into contradiction in relation to a question. This is a contradiction between question and answer, which I call a “question-answer contradiction”. I will explain it through examples.

1. The First Type of Question-Answer Contradiction
2. Question-Answer Contradiction on Confirmation of Connection.

Questions and Answers confirming that an addressee can hear a speaker’s voice seem to bring about a question-answer contradiction. Consider the next example.

“Can you hear me?” “No, I cannot hear you”

An utterance “I cannot hear you” has no intrinsic contradiction. But when I say “I cannot hear you” as an answer to the question “Can you hear me?”, it is contradictory, because I could not answer like that, if the answer is right.

When I am asked “Can you hear me?”, I cannot answer “I cannot hear you”. Therefore, if I answer, my answer is always “Yes”. If I do not answer, I cannot hear the question or I refuse to reply to it, even if I can hear it.

By the way, we can conclude from this that when a speaker thinks that an addressee can hear him, but is nevertheless not answering him, he supposes that the addressee is refuting to answer. So, if we don’t intend to be taken to be refuting to answer, we reply an addressee immediately in order to prevent such a misunderstanding, i.e. we are always preparing to answer an address from others.

1. The Analysis of This Contradiction
2. Pragmatic Contradiction of the question

In this case the cause of this contradiction seems to be in the question, because the answer is not contradictory by it self. The question might involve a pragmatic contradiction.

Generally speaking, to ask a question always presupposes that an addressee can hear it.

Therefore it is contradictory that a questioner asks a question doubting this presupposition. But in this case a speaker asks “Can you hear me?” and doubts that an addressee can hear it.

Therefore to ask this question involves a pragmatic contradiction.

1. Difference from the Other Pragmatic Contradictions

But this contradiction is different from the other pragmatic contradictions. A pragmatic contradiction in usual cases is a contradiction between an utterance act and a proposition or between an illocutionary act and a proposition, And the contradiction in this case seems to be similar to a contradiction between illocutionary act and a proposition. But in usual cases, when an illocutionary act and a proposition is in contradiction, if we negate the proposition, then the contradiction will be resolved. In contrast, the question-answer contradiction will not be resolved, even if the proposition is negated. For example,

“Can’t you hear me?”

“No, I cannot hear you.”

This answer “No” must be also impossible, if it is right.

1. The Particular Feature of This Type

By the way, what did the questioner do, when the addressee couldn’t hear him and the illocutionary act of questioning didn’t hold? It might not be the case that he only conducted just a monologue, because he intended a dialogue. He intended to perform an illocutionary act, but it failed. Is this case the same as when man throws a dart at a target aiming to hit it without confidence and fails? No, it is not the same. There is a difference. The difference is that even if this questioner failed to perform an illocutionary act of questioning, i.e. he could get no answer, he succeeded in getting some information he wanted, i.e. he realized that an addressee couldn’t hear him.

1. The Second Type of Question-Answer Contradiction
2. A Question-Answer Contradiction on Confirmation of Understanding a Language “Do you understand English?”

“No, I don’t.”

When I am asked “Do you understand English?” and answer “No, I don’t”, this answer (not in the sense “No, I don’t understand enough English”, but in the literal sense) is contradictory. The utterance “I don’t understand English” is pragmatic contradiction, not only when it is uttered as an answer to the above question, but also when it is uttered alone. But when I answer “Ich kann nicht Englisch sprechen” in German to that English question, this answer involves no pragmatic contradiction, but involves a question-answer contradiction, because I must understand the English question in order to answer.

1. Analysis of This Contradiction

What is the cause of this question-answer contradiction? The cause is that the question “Do you understand English?” involves a pragmatic contradiction. Generally speaking, to ask a question presupposes that an addressee can understand a question. But in this case a questioner doubts it and wants to confirm it by his question. Therefore the question “Do you understand me?” involves a pragmatic contradiction.

1. The Third Type of Question-Answer Contradiction
2. Question-Answer Contradiction on Sincerity

When we have a conversation, we understand mutually that we are talking sincerely and we are always confirming it at the level of meta-message. We can express the confirmation in the form of questions and answers as follows.

“Will you answer me sincerely?”

“Yes, I am now answering you sincerely.” “No, I’m not answering you sincerely.”

This question and the negative answer are in a question-answer contradiction.

1. An Analysis of the Question-Answer Contradiction

We can understand the negative answer in the two following senses. “This utterance is a lie.”

“This utterance is a joke.”

They might involve semantic contradiction (paradox) or pragmatic contradiction. But even if they don’t involve semantically and pragmatically a contradiction, they involve a question- answer contradiction.

At first we will confirm that the question “Will you answer me sincerely?” is a pragmatic contradiction. Generally speaking, to ask a question entails the expectation that an addressee answers sincerely. But in this case the questioner doubts whether an addressee answers sincerely or not, and ask to confirm it. Therefore this question involves a pragmatic contradiction.

If the addressee don’t intend to answer sincerely, he will answer “Yes, I am answering you sincerely”, because his answer must be a lie or a joke. If he answers “No, I am not answering sincerely”, then it becomes a sincere answer. Therefore this question and the negative answer are in a question-answer contradiction.

1. The Peculiarity of This Type

We can show the two differences between this type of question and the above mentioned two kinds of questions like “Can you hear me?” or “Can you understand me?”.

* 1. The question “Can you hear me?” or “Can you understand me?” hold, when its answer is “Yes”, but doesn’t hold, when its answer is “No”. In contrast, “Will you answer me sincerely?” holds, whether its answer is “Yes” or “No”, because the question is heard and understood by an addressee.
  2. “Can you hear me?” or “Can you understand me?” doesn’t hold, if its answer is “No”. But the questioner could gain some information he wanted, even if he failed to ask a question. In contrast, in the case of the question “Will you answer me sincerely?”, when the addressee is answering it sincerely, his answer is “Yes”, and also when he is a liar and answering it insincerely, his answer is “Yes, I am answering you sincerely”, because his answer is a lie or a joke. Therefore the question “Will you answer me sincerely?” cannot get any information that the questioner wants.

1. The Significance of the Question-Answer Contradiction
2. General Analysis of the Question-Answer Contradiction

When A asks B and B answers A, the following conditions must hold.

① The voice of A reaches to B.

② B can hear the voice.

③ B can understand the language of A.

④ B intends to answer the question of A sincerely.

We could further add other conditions to them. These conditions are presuppositions in order that B can answer the question of A. Therefore, when A asks B whether anyone or more of the conditions hold or not, the negative answers fall into question-answer contradiction.

1. The Question which involves a pragmatic contradiction is also meaningful.

The above questions involve pragmatic contradictions, but they are not nonsense. Confirmation of connection, understanding a language, and sincerity is the most fundamental confirmation for the communication and is indispensable. Therefore such questions and answers like “Can you hear me?” “Yes, I can hear you” are conducted meaningfully.

From these question-answer contradictions we can prove the necessity to answer them affirmatively. And from the necessity of the affirmative answers I suppose that we can show the necessity of a kind of mutual knowledge and mutual recognition between persons talking with each other. Discourse ethics which was proposed by Otto Apel attempted to prove mutual recognition and minimal logic as transcendental pragmatic presuppositions by using the concept of “pragmatic contradiction”. I suppose that we reconstruct this argument by using the concept of “question-answer contradiction”.

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