

International Phenomenological Society

Review: François Recanati's "Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation"

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Source: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Mar., 2003), pp. 481-488

Published by: International Phenomenological Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20140551>

Accessed: 28/07/2010 06:00

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François Recanati's *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation*

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Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta is about metarepresentations. A metarepresentation is a representation of a representation that represents what it represents. Recanati intends the discussion to cover all sorts of metarepresentations, but it makes best sense of most of the discussion to suppose attention is restricted to linguistic metarepresentations. The prime examples are attitude and indirect discourse reports (henceforth both will be subsumed under 'attitude reports'), such as (an utterance of) 'John believes that I am tall', or 'Johnson said that everyone has gone home'. Thus, the sentence 'John believes that I am tall', as used on some particular occasion, represents a representation, John's belief, as well as what that belief represents. Call the *content* of John's belief the object representation. The thematic idea of the book is that the object representation is "contained" in the metarepresentation, that is, metarepresentations are "iconic."

The book is divided into twenty chapters, divided in turn into six parts. Parts I-III contain the main positive account of metarepresentations. The main semantic thesis of parts I-III is that metarepresentational sentences are not relational, but involve a metarepresentational operator applied to a sentence which functions in its usual way, but which is evaluated relative to a "shifted circumstance" in use. This is supposed to represent a novel account of the semantics of attitude sentences that preserves "semantic innocence" and the principle of iconicity, that a metarepresentation "contains" its object representation. Parts IV-VI are concerned with a perceived threat to this picture from examples that are to suggest that metarepresentational operators shift context as well as circumstances. In the end, the response to the examples is that they involve pragmatic phenomena. This discussion could have been significantly compressed.

We can summarize the central claims of Recanati's account of linguistic metarepresentations as follows:

* François Recanati, *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation* (MIT Press, 2000).

- 1) Metarepresentations are iconic, i.e., they contain, in some suitable sense, the object representation.
- 2) Metarepresentations are semantically innocent.
- 3) Metarepresentational sentences are not relational, but involve a metarepresentational sentential operator applied to a sentence.
- 4) Metarepresentational operators shift situation or circumstance of evaluation.
- 5) Metarepresentational operators are not context shifting operators.

The first shapes and motivates the rest of the discussion. There is not space here to discuss more than a few central claims. I will discuss the argument from 1) and 2) to 3) and 4), what the official analysis comes to, and whether it is plausible. I will skip over many details and arguments that deserve detailed critical discussion, and omit discussion of parts IV-VI altogether.

Linguistic metarepresentations contain, or encode, another sentence. ‘John believes that I am tall’ contains ‘I am tall’; ‘John wants his hair done’ encodes ‘John will get his hair done’. Without attempting to make this precise, following Recanati, let ‘ dS ’ represent a sentence that contains or encodes the sentence ‘ S ’. Recanati’s starting point is the claim that there are instances of the schema (I) in English and other natural languages where ‘ dS ’ is replaced by a sentence representing a representation.

- (I) One cannot entertain the thought that dS without entertaining the thought that S .

Recanati says that he will “reserve the term ‘metarepresentation’ for those representations of representations which *do* satisfy (I)” (p. 12). (It is worth noting that in general only *present tense* attitude sentences, with no variables bound by quantifiers outside the scope of the complement, even *prima facie* satisfy it.) The claim that attitude sentences satisfy schema (I) is initially presented as the ground for the principle of iconicity.

Attitude reports and other metarepresentations contain the object-representation not only syntactically (in the sense that dS contains S), but also semantically: the proposition Q expressed by dS ‘contains’ as a part the proposition P expressed by S —and that’s why one cannot entertain Q without entertaining P . (p. 10; Recanati is not consistent about using ‘ dS ’ and ‘ S ’ as schematic letters for sentences, as opposed to names for sentences)

However, Recanati subsequently denies that satisfaction of schema (I) is sufficient to establish the iconicity principle, because an account that treats that-clauses as “iconic names” shows how we could satisfy schema (I) without

endorsing it. He objects to the iconic name account, instead, on the grounds that it violates semantic innocence.

Let 'Comp(s)' represent any syntactical transformation that takes a sentence into a sentential complement. The iconic name account gives the following rule for determining the referent of a sentential complement (p. 15; I generalize, and substitute 'proposition' for 'content'):

[R] For any sentence S , for any proposition x , for any context c , if S expresses x in c , then $\text{Comp}(S)$ refers to x in c .

Recanati says that if a referring term has this character, then "in order to determine its content, one must grasp the content expressed by S " (p. 15). In this way, the iconic name account is supposed to show how attitude sentences can satisfy schema (I). However, this is a mistake. [R] does not require one to grasp the proposition a sentence S expresses to determine what $\text{Comp}(S)$ refers to. One can be informed in many ways of what proposition is expressed by a sentence without grasping the proposition expressed by it. What Recanati has noticed is that since sentential complements encode a sentence in the language that its speakers understand, given [R], one can figure out what the referent is by relying on one's understanding of the encoded sentence. Thus, typically auditors competent in the language of a report will figure out what the referent is by way of grasping what proposition is expressed by the sentence.

Does this suffice for the iconic name account to show how (present tense) attitude reports can satisfy schema (I)? Not if entertaining the thought that dS is just grasping what proposition is expressed by ' dS '. For then, if the iconic name view of complement clauses is correct, one can entertain the thought that, e.g., John believes that snow is white, without entertaining the thought that snow is white. Does this then show that the iconic name account is mistaken? No. It casts doubt on whether satisfaction of schema (I) should be required of a semantic account of attitude reports. For the iconic name account certainly does explain why when we understand a belief sentence, e.g., we grasp the proposition expressed by its sentential complement (if any), and that seems to be the ground level motivation for supposing that attitude sentences satisfy schema (I).

So, Recanati is right to think the evidence doesn't support the principle of iconicity, but for the wrong reason. In any case, he rejects the iconic name approach (and would presumably reject similar, less ontologically committed, approaches, such as the dual use-mention account in (Ludwig & Ray, 1998)) on the grounds that it violates semantic innocence.

However, Davidson's invocation to "recover our pre-Fregean semantic innocence" is directed against the view that words in complement clauses are understood differently than when unembedded, as on Frege's account of

oblique contexts. Recanati glosses this by saying, "In an 'innocent' framework, the semantic value of an expression in the embedded part of a belief report is construed as its *normal* semantic value" (p. 9). On the face of it, however, the iconic name account does not violate this condition, for the complement clause serves its function on that account *only in virtue of the contained terms being understood in the usual way* (including context sensitive terms, which are interpreted relative to the context of utterance). We can construct a stronger requirement, of course, e.g., that the semantic account validate the iconicity principle! This is in effect what Recanati requires. However, there is no reason to accept *this* as a requirement on the semantics of attitude sentences.

The alternative account is not just in trouble on the grounds that it is unmotivated. For it is, first, unclear what the positive semantic proposal is, and, second, unclear, insofar as we can discern what it is, that it is an alternative to traditional approaches in the way that Recanati claims it is.

The account is first indicated in section 3.2, and then developed in chapter 5. The discussion, brief as it is, resists summary, largely because it is so unclear. Recanati defines the term 'functor' as a term that "makes a sentence out of one or several expressions which can be either terms *or* sentences" (p. 30). (This is not used, incidentally, in the sense in which it was introduced by Carnap, as "any sign whose full expressions (involving n arguments) are *not* sentences" (Carnap, 1958).) He then defines a 'connecticate' as a "functor" that forms a sentence out of terms of different categories, and observes that 'believes that' "makes a sentence out of a term (e.g., 'Paul') and a sentence (e.g., 'Grass is green')" (p. 30). Further, when "a term is provided, the connecticate becomes a monadic propositional operator," and "'Paul believes that' thus belongs to the same logical category as other sentence-forming operators like 'it is not the case that' or 'it is necessary that'" (p. 30). This is confused. The term 'connecticate' has been introduced solely by a syntactic criterion. It is therefore fatuous to suggest as Recanati does that some expression's being in this sense a connecticate entails anything about its logical category. One might as well suggest that it has the same logical role as 'However, ...' or "'...' is analytic', on this basis. Nor may we intelligibly take the suggestion to be that 'A believes that' is an operator in the sense that, like 'it is not the case that', it receives a recursive clause in a truth theory of the form: ' $O(p)$ ' is true in L iff $O(p)$ is true in L). This clearly does not work for ' a believes that', since it can be true, e.g., that a believes that he is sitting without it being true that he believes that 'he is sitting' is true. So far, then, no positive proposal has been advanced, or indicated. The sole content is that 'believes' is *not* logically a relational predicate.

A minimal requirement on introducing an account of the logical form of a construction is to say (or indicate) what axiom it receives in an interpretive

truth theory. No one who fails to do this can be said to have even taken the first step in giving an account of the semantic contribution of some expression to the truth conditions of sentences in which it appears.

The proposal is developed in Chapter 5. Recanati introduces the “Austinian Framework,” borrowing from (Barwise & Etchemendy, 1987). However, without indicating this is so, he departs from the development Barwise and Etchemendy (B&E) give, which significantly confuses what the proposal is supposed to come to. In the B&E development, the Austinian Framework proposes that sentences specify a type of state of affairs, and an utterance of a sentence asserts that some “demonstrated” actual situation is of that type. The world consists of facts, on this (Tractarian) view, and situations are portions of the world, which B&E model with sets of facts. Thus, e.g., if someone utters ‘Claire has the ace of hearts’ and “demonstrates” a situation involving a certain game of poker, the utterance is true iff the token state of affairs indicated is of the type expressed by ‘Claire has the ace of hearts’. Recanati, however, treats situations as things such as events, objects, and the like! This *abandons* the B&E framework, which maintains a distinction in kind between entities and situations containing them. Recanati tries to have his cake and eat it too by suggesting that situations have a dual nature, that they can be viewed either as an entity or a situation (chapter 6). But this is not intelligible. Something may be neither fish nor fowl, but it cannot be both.

Recanati’s introduction of the “Austinian Framework,” however understood, is largely gratuitous. The only point of it is to try to find a way of analyzing metarepresentations that satisfies the iconicity principle. On its basis, he introduces a relation of “support” which is to hold between a situation and a fact or proposition, and which is the inverse of the ‘holds in’-relation, in terms of which the truth of an utterance is characterized: “... an utterance is true if and only if the fact it states holds in ... the situation it concerns” (p. 64): “Whenever a fact σ holds in a situation s , or equivalently, whenever a proposition is true at s , we say that the situation in question supports that fact or proposition” (p. 64). We write this as: $[s] \models \sigma$. When we have a sentence, such as ‘grass is green’ we refer to the “fact” it expresses with ‘ \langle grass is green \rangle ’ (i.e., this is a singular term which refers to the fact expressed by the sentence ‘grass is green’). The support relation is characterized as holding indifferently between facts and propositions. It is not clear whether Recanati intends to identify the two (which seems a bad idea) or not. If we look to B&E as a guide, it would appear that Recanati uses ‘fact’ in the sense of type of situation (and perhaps ‘proposition’ also), and ‘situation’ in the sense of token demonstrated situation. However, given the “dual nature” of situations, it is hardly clear what any of this could come to.

B&E represent situations by sets of facts. Recanati rejects this on the grounds that it has the consequence that a situation would support a fact just

in case the fact were an element of the set representing the situation, and this would mean that a situation supports a fact necessarily if at all (p. 68). As a counterexample, Recanati represents ‘It is raining in Chicago’ as ‘[Chicago] \models «it is raining»’, and says that obviously it might not have been raining in Chicago (at this time). This relies, of course, on the identification of situations with entities like cities! (And what is the ‘support’-relation in this case? Being a location of?) Evidently, the dual nature of situations enables one to engage one’s opponent and sidestep him at the same time.

This motivates, however, thinking of situations as “associated with” different facts in different worlds. Worlds are represented as sets of situations ($\text{Dom}(w)$) and a function ($W(s)$) from situations to sets of facts “concerning” them (this is to use ‘fact’ not in the sense of ‘fact’ but in the sense of ‘possible state of affairs’). It seems best to understand these as the facts that “constitute” the situation at that world. (Perhaps here a situation is to be thought of as an entity, and the facts concerning it at a world the facts in which it figures: what it is for a fact to “concern” a situation is never explained.) So a situation can be thought of as a set of ordered pairs of worlds and sets of facts. ‘support’ is redefined as follows:

A situation s supports an atomic fact σ with respect to a world w if and only if σ belongs to $W([w,] s)$. (p. 69; I have added an extra argument place to the function term to indicate the needed relativization of the set to the world w .)

To put it another way: if an atomic fact is in the set of facts which “concern” a situation at a world, then the situation supports the fact. We now write: $[s] \models_w \langle p \rangle$.

This is extended to higher-order facts, that is, to situations supporting situations supporting facts. The schematic characterization is as follows (p. 69):

$[s] \models \langle s' \models \langle p \rangle \rangle$ (if and?) only if (i) s' is accessible from s and (ii) $\langle [s'] \models \langle p \rangle \rangle$.

In effect, this is to represent the form of ‘ $[s] \models \langle [s'] \models \langle p \rangle \rangle$ ’ as ‘ $\langle [s'] \models \langle p \rangle \rangle$ & $A(s, s')$ ’. No motivation to speak of is given for this. What is the accessibility relation? No general characterization is given. In practice, it looks as if the accessibility relation is a grab bag of quite different sorts of relations, e.g., variously, one situation is accessible from another if it is spatially contained in it, or one situation is accessible from another if in it the other is believed by someone to obtain, etc. Thus, no uniform account truth conditions for this “form” of sentence is offered.

How is this to be applied to analyzing utterances of metarepresentational sentences? Consider the sentence ‘John believes that he is being persecuted’. An utterance of this is represented (initially) as follows:

$[s'] \models_{@} \ll s \models_J \langle \text{John is being persecuted} \rangle \gg$

'@' represents the actual world, and 'J' represents "John's belief world." 's' represents the situation the utterance concerns, and 's' represents the situation of John's beliefs, or, as Recanati puts it, John's belief state!

How is this to secure semantic innocence? The idea is that the complement sentence is evaluated in the usual way, only relative to a shifted situation, and the metarepresentational "operator" 'John believes that' is a "situation shifting operator." The unclarity over what situations are in Recanati's discussion makes it difficult to see what this comes to. If we take this in the B&E sense, then we are asking above whether *John's belief state* is a token situation of the type expressed by 'John is being persecuted'. This just sounds like a category mistake. So, how are we to understand this? In plain (if not clear) English, it comes to the following: the fact that John is being persecuted holds in the situation of John's belief state in John's belief world. Do we understand this independently of knowing that it's supposed to be equivalent to 'John believes that he is being persecuted'? We have only the syntactic form of the Austinian framework left. Insofar as we understand this, it is simply a baroque way of writing 'Some belief state of John's has as its content that John is being persecuted'. We should note also that the semantic form assigned to the sentence 'John believes that he is being persecuted' is 'R(s, J, $\langle \text{John is being persecuted} \rangle$)', and thus, contrary to 3.2, the official account represents it as involving a three-place relation. And what is ' $\langle \text{John is being persecuted} \rangle$ ' referring to? A fact or ... proposition! Have we not come full circle?

There are still some additional difficulties worth reviewing. If we are thinking of John's belief world as something like a possible world, which is required by the official characterization of the 'support'-relation, John's beliefs will not be adequate to characterize such a world because there will be many things that John won't have any beliefs about. Recanati recognizes this in a footnote, but does not modify the account in response to the difficulty. Presumably, we should look at worlds compatible with what John believes. To integrate this into the formal proposal we should then use a restricted quantifier binding the argument position for world in the 'support'-relation (this represents the content of an utterance of the sentence):

$[s'] \models_{@} \ll [\text{all } w \text{ compatible with what John believes}] (\text{John's belief state } \models_w \langle \text{John is being persecuted} \rangle) \gg$

Notice that this invokes the analyzed expression, 'John believes x'. If we offer the same analysis again, we are obviously off on an infinite regress! A similar problem (here and above), though less obvious, attends use of 'John's belief state', for John's total belief state is fixed by the totality of the propo-

sitions that John believes. Now consider someone who has a necessarily false belief, perhaps that there is a greatest prime. In this case, there are no possible worlds compatible with what John believes. Thus, the condition for John's believing any proposition will be vacuously satisfied, and, on this account, John will believe everything. This is obviously an embarrassment.

The analysis is refined in chapter 7, though not in a way that removes the difficulties already noted. Without going into the details of the discussion that motivates it, Recanati arrives at this penultimate analysis (for the content of an utterance of a metarepresentational sentence): $[s'] \vDash_{@} \langle R \vDash_{@} \langle s \vDash_w \langle p \rangle \rangle \rangle$. 'R' here represents a real "situation" (like a book, or a belief state), and 's' is an "imaginary" situation presented by it. So, we represent an utterance of 'John believes he is being persecuted' as: $[s'] \vDash_{@} \langle \text{John's belief state} \vDash_{@} \langle s \vDash_w \langle \text{John is being persecuted} \rangle \rangle \rangle$. Recanati objects that this looks too complicated, and that there need be no specific situation *s* presented by John's belief state we have in mind. To handle the appearance of complexity, Recanati introduces an abbreviated notation, thinking it makes the proposal semantically simpler. In the end, what it really comes to is the following (where *W* is the set of situations represented by *R*): $[s'] \vDash_{@} \langle R \vDash_{@} \langle [\exists y: y \in W](y \vDash_w \langle p \rangle) \rangle \rangle$. If we now include our earlier modification we get: $[s'] \vDash_{@} \langle R \vDash_{@} \langle [\exists y: y \in W][\forall w: \text{comp}(w, R)](y \vDash_w \langle p \rangle) \rangle \rangle$. Thus, the account of the logical form of belief sentences looks to involve complex relational verbs and multiple quantifications over situations and worlds, requires independent understanding of the construction it analyzes to understand it, and fails (on formal grounds) to get the extension right. One is reminded of Russell's admonition to retain a sense of reality even in the most abstract studies.

Oratio Obliqua, Oration Recta is not a book that rewards close reading. Beneath the analytic veneer, it fails to fill in crucial details, leaving central proposals unclear, and discussion, argument, and terminology are often unclear, and, indeed, confused. It is also, oddly, too long, in the sense that much of the discussion is not to the point, and repetitious.

References

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