

# Can We Think Nonsense?

by Christian Michel

## 1. Introduction

Consider the following sentence

“The theory of relativity listens to a breakfast.”

Is this sentence just nonsense or is it meaningful, though maybe absurd and just false?

Sentences like this one or like “Cesar is a prime number” or “Colourless green ideas sleep furiously”<sup>1</sup> are cases of category mistakes. They are grammatically correct and contain only meaningful words. However, the concepts used in those sentences seem not to fit together properly, leading to a characteristic oddness or infelicity of the sentence.

The question I want to deal with is whether those sentences are nonsense and don't express anything that can be a real propositional thought or whether they do express something, something which is simply false. A quick argument for the view that they are nonsense is the intuition that someone who honestly asserts “Cesar is a prime number” seems not to say merely something false, but rather manifests incompetence in the application of the involved concepts. Something seems wrong with his thinking. But there seems also nothing wrong with defending the view that category mistakes are meaningful. Indeed Cesar is not a prime number. This sentence is simply false (and certainly absurd). So what is the right view on category mistakes?

Before starting to tackle this question, let me address the question of why this should matter.

## 2. Why do category mistakes matter?

A clarification whether category mistakes are nonsense may help shedding light on long-standing philosophical problems.

Gilbert Ryle maintained in his “Concept of Mind” (1949) that the so difficult mind-body problem, means the problem around the nature of the mind and how it can interact with the physical body, is a bogus problem. It can be overcome by recognizing that it rests on a category mistake.

According to Ryle, to say “humans have a body and a mind” is like saying “She went home in tears and a Mercedes” or like “I bought a right hand glove, a left hand glove and a pair of gloves”. To frame or recognize a mind-body problem in the first place is to commit a category mistake and a confusion in thought, because the concepts of mind and body are of a very different type and do not stand in the opposition that is implied by speaking of a mind-body problem. To speak e.g. of “mental causation” is to apply a wrong sort of predicate to “mind”, namely a mechanistic one, as if the mind is subject to analogue mechanistic laws - though in the realm of the immaterial.

Ryle, therefore proclaims: “Philosophy is the replacement of category-habits by category-discipline.”

Bertrand Russell is another philosopher to identify category mistakes as a source of trouble for thought<sup>2</sup>. According to him, the famous liar paradox is a category mistake. Consider the statement “This sentence is false”. When trying to figure out whether it is true or false we are led to logical contradictions. Namely, if it is true then it is false and if it is false it is true.

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<sup>1</sup> This famous example is from Chomsky (1957).

<sup>2</sup> See Coquand (2014).

A solution can be provided by distinguishing object and meta-language. Meta-language is about some sentence (in an object language). Russell's idea is that truth predicates in object language cannot be applied on meta-language level. But this is the same as saying that a sentence cannot say about itself that it is true or false. What we need is a hierarchy of truth predicates. The solution then is to recognize that the liar sentence is a category mistake because an object language truth predicate is applied to a higher level (to the sentence itself), means to the wrong type of sentence.

The importance of the distinction between a category mistake being false or being meaningless (or contentless) then is the following: if category mistakes are merely false, they may represent a meaningful hypothesis in form of a thought with content. Its truth-value could be found out either by empirical investigation or by some a priori reasoning. However, if category mistakes are nonsense, such an investigation or reasoning can't (or should) not even get off the ground. To think about whether a category mistake is true or false is a confusion in thought from the start, there is no content to think with in the first place.

A proper understanding of category mistakes will also reveal something fundamental about the relationship between language and thought. Is putting meaningful words together in a grammatically correct manner sufficient to express a content bearing thought? Or does language outstrip thought and is sometimes – as it is possibly in the case of the liar paradox and other philosophical problems - an empty and deceptive formal game with words?

Against this background, I want to defend in this talk the claim that category mistakes don't express propositions and, therefore, fail to express thoughts with propositional content.

### **3. Linguistic meaning versus content, and propositions**

First of all, let me clarify a crucial distinction I will refer to again and again in my talk; this is the distinction between *linguistically encoded meaning* (short: *linguistic meaning*, or simply *meaning*) and *propositional content* (short: *content*)<sup>3</sup>

*Linguistically encoded meaning* is a property of a sentence. It is roughly, what the sentence literally says in virtue of the meaning of the words appearing in it. From the linguistically encoded meaning, we can obtain the *propositional content* of the sentence, which is a proposition that is maximally specific such that it can be truth-evaluated. Content is then the property of a propositional thought. A propositional thought is one that can be expressed by a "that"-clause. E.g. "I think *that* the Philsoc is a great organization."

To make the distinction between meaning and propositional content clear take the sentence "That is green." This sentence is meaningful with respect to linguistically encoded meaning as it stands, so to speak literally taken, even if it is undetermined what the word "that" refers to. Once the sentence is uttered in a certain context, and it gets clear what "that" refers to (e.g. to the pencil on the table), we can obtain the propositional content of that sentence. The propositional content allows us to evaluate whether the sentence is true or false, which is not always possible with the linguistically encoded meaning, specifically when it contains indexicals ("I", "this", "that",...) or ambiguities.

Let me also clarify what I take a *proposition* to be<sup>4</sup>. A proposition is something like an abstract statement or idea which can be shared with others and expressed by different sentences (and sentences in different languages). A proposition is truth-evaluable and can be reported by a that-clause. Propositions are the content of propositional thoughts.

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<sup>3</sup> I am following here e.g. Carston (2002). See also Magidor (2013)

<sup>4</sup> See McGrath (2014).

There may be other types of thoughts, e.g. those that rely on images, in contrast to those with propositional content, but I will not deal with them here, nor do I claim that only thoughts with propositional content are genuine thoughts.

Maybe we can think of sentences as being instructions to form a specific thought (or: a propositional content). If a sentence is intelligible as conveying such an instruction to form a propositional thought then it is meaningful (in the sense of linguistically encoded meaning). Having been successful in conveying an instruction does not imply that the instructions can successfully be executed resulting in a thought. The reason is that e.g. sentences with indexicals like “That is green” do not (yet) express a proposition, as the referent of the word “that” needs to be determined.

Therefore, I can accept that category mistakes are meaningful in a certain sense, namely in the sense of linguistically encoded meaning. But I then claim that they can't ultimately succeed in expressing a thought because they have no content. Category mistakes express an intelligible instruction to form a thought but the instruction fails on the way to build a thought with propositional content. In short: category mistakes are meaningful but contentless.

#### **4. Are category mistakes meaningful and/or have content?**

To admit that category mistakes are meaningful in the linguistic sense, but insist that they do not express propositions allows accommodating the following intuition:

To say that category mistakes are nonsense is to ignore the strong intuition that a category mistake does not look like complete nonsense. A category mistake makes more sense than other sorts of nonsense, like Carroll's Jabberwocky sentence: “'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe”, which looks grammatical but contains various meaningless words, or a word salad of meaningful words put together without any grammatical order, like “bus go today I.” A category mistake does have proper grammar and all words are meaningful. We can't say it is complete rubbish.

But – as already pointed out - success in transmission of an instruction to build a thought does not imply success in building this proposition. What is missing for full success is that the concepts used in the instructions fit together properly.

But there are those who think that category mistakes do express propositions with proper truth conditions, and hence express contentful thoughts. Such a view has been very recently defended by Ofra Magidor, an Oxford philosopher, in her book “Category Mistakes” from 2013. According to her, category mistakes are perfectly meaningful and have content, though they are always false and characteristically absurd or infelicitous.

What I want to do now is to undermine two of Magidor's arguments that category mistakes are meaningful or have content. Magidor provides a much larger number of arguments for the meaning- and contentfulness in her book but obviously I need to focus on a few.

The first argument I try to undermine, the argument from propositional attitude ascriptions, is one for the meaningfulness of category mistakes. I have granted already that category mistakes may be meaningful but even so they may fail to have content. Granting that, there should be no point to refute an argument that category mistakes are meaningful, I should rather refute that they are contentful. However, if we accept that for a sentence to be contentful the sentence must necessarily be meaningful, then any weakening of the argument that the sentence is meaningful is a weakening of the argument that the sentence expresses a proposition.

The second argument I want to undermine, the argument from metaphor, is also an

argument for the meaningfulness of category mistakes. Here I am not going to refute the meaningfulness of category mistakes, but I will show that even if we grant that metaphors are meaningful, there is a way to consider them as having no content.<sup>5</sup>

### 5. Argument from propositional attitude ascriptions

The first argument for the meaningfulness of category mistakes is, in a nutshell, the following: That-clauses with embedded category mistakes are meaningful and consequently the embedded category mistakes are meaningful.

Consider two such that-clauses:

(A) Peter said that the number two is green.

(B) Jane believes that the number two is green.

I will concede that IF those two propositional attitude ascriptions are meaningful, THEN the embedded category mistakes need to be meaningful. This is plausible because only if each component of a sentence is meaningful can the whole sentence be meaningful. But I will argue that by assuming that both examples are meaningful the question is begged.

According to Magidor the first sentence is meaningful; indeed it seems that this sentence simply reports what Peter said. But on what grounds is it easier to show that (A) is meaningful than to accept that “two is green” is meaningful? It is not clear to me how (A) is more obviously meaningful than “two is green” alone.

If we grasp the meaning of a sentence bottom-up from the parts, it is meaningful only if its parts are meaningful, and the argument is question begging for both sides: assuming “two is green” is meaningful (A) is meaningful. Assuming “two is green” is meaningless, (A) is meaningless.

So Magidor must assume we grasp the meaningfulness in some other way, but which one? Top-down or holistically at once without appealing to the components of the sentence? But how would this work – based on mere intuition? But the opponent may have a different intuition.

But even if we concede that there is something intuitively meaningful expressed by (A), there are reasons to think that the intuitive meaningfulness is only apparent. To see this, let’s suppose that Peter said “Claudia is grympolistic”. Then (A) is not better than:

(A\*) “Peter said that Claudia is grympolistic.”

This sounds like a true indirect speech report as well, not very different from (A). But it should be meaningless as “grympolistic” is meaningless.

The reason why we could easily mistake (A\*) for meaningful could be e.g. that we conflate its reading with something like:

(A\*\*) Peter said that Claudia is ‘grympolistic.’

where the meaningless expression “grympolistic” is quoted or mentioned or used deferentially. Imagine you visit a doctor and he tells you that you have systochis and you don’t know what that means, but you neither ask for a clarification. You then report your wife: “The doctor said that I have systochis.” The next day the doctor tells you that yesterday he just made a joke, there is nothing like systochis, he invented the name, and you are totally healthy. In this situation you have used systochis deferentially in your report to your wife.

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<sup>5</sup> Magidor considers specific arguments for the view that category mistakes are meaningful but contentless but ultimately rejects them (2013:80-109)

If you buy this argument, then Magidor's opponent can argue that "Peter said that two is green" is similarly deceptive, because it should be read as something like: "Peter said that 'two is green' ", and in this case one can hold that 'two is green' is nonsensical. This nonsensical word-string is merely quoted or deferentially used.

So I suspect that both sides simply beg the question against each other by applying their own standard of meaningfulness. But of course, this argument also does not prove that "two is green" is meaningless, it just shows that Magidor's argument is unconvincing.

Magidor's argument does not work either for other types of attitude ascriptions. E.g. take a belief ascription (B)

"Jane believes that two is green."

Here a mere belief is reported, and someone could simply (falsely) believe that that 'two is green'.

The opponent would argue that no one who is linguistically competent in the use of the words "two" and "green" can honestly believe that 'two is green.' Magidor responds to this objection that we can imagine situations where we can make correct belief ascriptions of category mistakes, without assuming linguistic incompetence with the words "two" and "green" of the believer. Imagine Jane, a philosopher of mathematics, for whom the number two is the set of all possible pairs of things in the world. Moreover, the 'number two' is 'green' when most of the pairs of things are 'green.' To determine the 'colours' of all 'numbers' is now just an empirical question and for each number it can be decided at least in principle what 'colour' it has. Consequently, the belief ascription is meaningful and true.

I disagree. The belief ascription is true only under a technical, but not common-sense, understanding of numbers and colours for numbers. Of course, you can adjust the meaning of words so that you eliminate the category mistake. However, on a more conventional understanding of what a number is and what colours are, Jane cannot have anything like a belief that 'two is green'. She simply means something different, and indeed inside her conceptual system such an ascription is meaningful, has content and is either true or false.

## **6. Argument from Metaphor**

Here is another argument for the meaningfulness of category mistakes:

Metaphors, like "Juliet is the sun" or "The poem is pregnant", have a meaning. But metaphors are category mistakes. Hence at least some category mistakes are meaningful.

In those cases where category mistakes are used figuratively and express something meaningful, or in other forms of figurative speech, like metonymies ("Table four asks for the bill"), I guess the intuition of a competent speaker would be the following:

1. Under a "literal reading" those are category mistakes
2. But on the other hand, they are meaningful and express content, but "as metaphors"

It seems natural to distinguish a literal and a metaphorical meaning. One could then argue that the sentence expressing a metaphor is a category mistake under the literal meaning and perfectly meaningful under the metaphorical meaning.

However this move leads, according to Magidor, to an undesirable massive ambiguity of the metaphorical meaning of "sun" because the sense in which e.g. Stalin is the sun is not the sense in which Juliet is the sun. She therefore claims that what must be at work at a metaphor to achieve its communicative purpose is a (unique) literal meaning.

I am sympathetic with the idea that meaning should be unique and massive ambiguity on meaning level is undesirable. Magidor does not provide a reason for the rejection of massive ambiguity of meaning. One reason could be that we would lose grip of the identity of a word and its meaning if it could mean too much.

However, I will argue that even with the concession that metaphors have a unique literal meaning (are meaningful literally) we need not to give up the position that all category mistakes are contentless and fail to express a propositional thought.

The idea is the following. We need to consider the process from the linguistic meaning of a sentence to the thought content that I described before. Consider a sentence that contains the word "I". The meaning of "I" is unique (as an instruction to pick out a referent, means to get a content) but its content is massively ambiguous until the context determines the specific person to which it refers. Only then do we get a proposition which is truth evaluable and which can be the content of a propositional thought.

A metaphor could work similarly. All the words contained in it have a unique meaning, but can have many different contents, depending on the context of the use of the sentence. We still have ambiguity on content level, but a less harmless one, because all possible content is bounded by the unique meaning, so the possible concern of massive ambiguity on meaning level has been addressed.

This account has one important advantage over Magidor's account. It can explain the double intuition that on the one hand a metaphor is a category mistake "literally taken" and on the other hand that it has content. It seems to me that Magidor has difficulties to account for this double intuition, because according to her all category mistakes are meaningful and express propositional content. She then needs an explanation why some category mistakes are metaphors and other not.

The view proposed here can account for this double intuition. I suggested that meaning of a sentence is modulated into content when using the sentence in a specific context.<sup>6</sup> Then it is plausible that such a modulation starts from the most conventional and most frequent content from the past uses of that word. However, as the most conventional content produces a "category mismatch" the modulation process continues to produce other candidate contents compatible with the meaning of the word, until a modulation is reached that makes sense content-wise to the thinker. Both the initial most frequent content and the final content are active in the thinker and produce the double intuition that a metaphor is a nonsensical category mistake and also something meaningful.

The account still relies on ambiguity, but it is a harmless notion of ambiguity. The meanings are not ambiguous in the same sense in which "bank" is ambiguous - with totally disjoint meanings. Though the sense in which Stalin is the sun is not the same as the sense in which Juliet is the sun, they are related. Secondly, it provides a way to understand how metaphors work. Metaphors can be understood simply as meaning-to-content modulations further away from the more frequent modulations. Confronted with a category mistake under an initial, more conventional modulation, we try to make sense of the category mistake and modulate the meaning until we have eliminated the category mistake.

The account of metaphor based on meaning modulations may not be the right account

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<sup>6</sup> Several philosophers endorse "dynamic views" on word or sentence meaning: E.g. Ludlow (2014) proposes that lexical meanings are "modulated" depending on the context. However, he does not make explicitly the meaning/content distinction. Davidson (1986) introduces the idea of "passing theories" of meaning. According to this view we adjust constantly the meanings in order to make sense of what others say (principle of charity). Carston (2002:320) speaks, in the context of metaphor, of "narrowing and broadening" of content.

for other reasons. However, at least the opponent has resources to accommodate Magidor's reasonable requirement that metaphors need a literal meaning in order to achieve its communicative purpose and at the same time insist that all category mistakes are contentless.

## 7. Conclusion

I conclude that the two arguments by Magidor I have focused on to defend the view that category mistakes are meaningful or have content seem unconvincing.

I suspect that using very simple category mistakes don't make very obvious that they are nonsense. As they are simple, we grasp very clearly the grammatical structure and the meaning of the individual words. We get a very intelligible instruction to form a thought with a certain content. However, the last step to form a contentful thought fails and this is the reason why we consider a category mistake odd or infelicitous.

Consider a more complex example of a category mistake from Elisabeth Camp:

*"The orbited candle would have been imposing a sharpened carpet's fourteenth copper gesture, but insignificance elects the first folder time."* (2004: 229)

This is a fully grammatical sentence, and each word is meaningful. However, who could deny that this is a clear case of nonsense?

Another advantage to consider category mistakes as failing to express propositions is that certain problematic phenomena, like the Liar Paradox and related other logical paradoxes could be resolved. For Magidor this door is closed. The reason is that the Liar sentence cannot be false, because the assumption of falsehood leads to a logical contradiction. Therefore, the best proposal to deal with the liar sentence is to deny that it succeeds to express a proposition in the first place. An account that can treat different phenomena, like category mistakes, metaphors and semantic paradoxes in a unifying way seems to be preferable to a theory with a limited scope.

If all this is correct, then sentences involving category mistakes cannot express the content of thoughts. This means we cannot really think nonsense.

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