

The Illogicians' Conversation

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*In this crazy discussion, each speech turn contains a semantically deviant or infelicitous utterance.
Can you guess what is causing each oddity?*

1. B: Hi Gottlob! In what way are you doing?
2. G: Yes! What about you, Bertrand?
3. B: I'm very happy! Yesterday, I came back from a trip to France or Paris.
4. B: Most of the master students came with me, that is, all of them. It was their first time in Paris.
5. G: Really? It surprises me, who has ever been to Paris.
6. B: After that trip, every student stopped hating Paris. Only one student used to hate Paris.
7. B: We went to a restaurant. We ate a French ratatouille. Then we went to the Louvre museum. It was delicious!
8. G: Colorless green ratatouilles always sleep deliciously.
9. B: Some students took a dessert. They ate democracy.
10. G: Great! And how was the Louvre? Did you learn that fact about the painting *Mona Lisa*?: It is Lisa Gherardini that Francesco del Giocondo ordered a painting that portrays.
11. B: I did! This is such a famous piece. If no student took a selfie in front of this painting, it will probably be published online.
12. G: Here is a fun fact you might have missed, though. Five of the six Da Vinci paintings exhibited in the Louvre are made of oil on a panel. It is made of chalk on paper. Can you guess which one it is?
13. B: It is not *Mona Lisa* and it might be *Mona Lisa*.
14. G: The solution is: DA VINCI made *Portrait of Isabella d'Este* with chalk on paper, not someone else.
15. B: Oh, I didn't know that. More people like Da Vinci than I do. Do you like art history?
16. G: I once read a book about gender equality. By the way, where was your hotel?
17. B: On earth.
18. G: Nice! But how much did you not pay for all of this?
19. B: A lot! The university didn't give every student any money for the trip.
20. G: At least, in France you may pay in euros or in pounds. So you didn't pay change fees. Did you take the time to get informed about French politics?
21. B: I did! It is false that the king of France is bald. And some ministers look authoritarian.
22. G: Be careful what you say! Any French student might enter this room. He disagrees with you.
23. B: Right! I will go back to my office and be as mute as a ringing fire alarm. See you!

Solution

1. B: Hi Gottlob! **In what way are you doing?**

Infelicitous: “How are you (doing)?” is an idiomatic fixed phatic expression. It cannot be rephrased literally.

2. G: **Yes!** What about you, Bertrand?

Infelicitous: We cannot answer “yes” or “no” to a wh-question.

3. B: I’m very happy! Yesterday, I came back from **a trip to France or Paris.**

Infelicitous: Two terms where one entails the other cannot be disjoined. Here, going to Paris entails going to France. This is called a Hurford disjunction.

- 3.5. (bonus) G: Oh yes, now I remember. You told me you were leaving with **several master students.** Which **master student** was part of the trip?

Infelicitous: The uniqueness presupposition triggered by “which master student” (singular)—that is, “exactly one student was part of the trip”—clashes with the information that several students left.

4. B: **Most of the master students** came with me, that is, **all of them.** It was their first time in Paris.

Infelicitous: The expression “most of the master students” triggers the scalar implicature that “not all of the master students came with Bertrand”. This contradicts “all of them”.

5. G: Really? It **surprises** me, **who** has **ever** been to Paris.

Semantically deviant or ungrammatical: Negative polarity items like “ever” are not licensed in interrogatives embedded under emotive factive attitude verbs, like “surprise”.¹

6. B: After that trip, **every student stopped** hating Paris. **Only one student** used to hate Paris.

Infelicitous: The verb phrase “stopped hating Paris” triggers the lexical presupposition “used to hate Paris”. This inference projects universally to “every student”. This information contradicts the second sentence.

- 6.5. (bonus) G: I **don’t know whether** you **did anything** in Paris. **What is it** that you did in Paris?

Infelicitous: As a clefted question, the second sentence triggers the existential presupposition that “you did something in Paris”. This inference contradicts the ignorance expressed in the first sentence.

7. B: We did many things. We went to a restaurant. We ate **[a French ratatouille]^j**. **Then**, we went to the Louvre museum. **It_j** was delicious!

Infelicitous: The discourse referent j introduced by “a French ratatouille” can only be accessed in subsequent sentences that elaborate or continue this sentence. By changing the topic—using a “narration” discourse relation—the fourth sentence blocks the access to j in subsequent utterances. We cannot refer to the ratatouille after having started talking about the museum. This is adapted from a famous example by A. Lascarides and N. Asher.

8. G: **Colorless green** ratatouilles always sleep deliciously.

Semantically deviant: This sentence contains contradictory terms. This is adapted from a famous example by N. Chomsky.

9. B: Some students took a dessert. They **ate democracy.**

Semantically deviant: The predicate “eat” has a semantic selectional restriction. Democracy is not an edible thing.

10. G: Great! And how was the Louvre? Did you learn that fact about the painting *Mona Lisa*?: It is **[Lisa Gherardini]₁** that Francesco del Giocondo ordered a painting **[that** portrays t_1 **]**.

Semantically deviant or ungrammatical: Relative clauses like “that portrays” are extraction islands. We cannot extract a noun phrase from them to create a cleft.

11. B: I did! This is such a famous piece. If **no student** **[took [a selfie]^j** in front of this painting], **it_j** will probably be published online.

Infelicitous: Negative quantifier “no student” is externally static. This means that the discourse referent j introduced by “a selfie” in its scope cannot be accessed by a pronoun outside of its scope, like “it”.

12. G: Here is a fun fact you might have missed, though. **[Five of the six]^k**^j Da Vinci paintings exhibited in the Louvre are made of oil on a panel. **It_{k\j}** is made of chalk on paper. Can you guess which one **it_{k\j}** is?

Infelicitous: Semantically equivalent sentences may have different effects on the discourse. For example, the second sentence means the same as “Oneⁱ of the six Da Vinci paintings exhibited in the Louvre is not made of oil on a panel”. This rephrasing makes subsequent reference to the discourse referent i —representing the painting made in a different way—possible. We could then say “It_i is made of chalk on paper”. But the reference to this painting

¹Here, sentence (i-a) without the NPI *ever* also sounds weird because of the present perfect tense. Sentence (i-b) is more convincing. This sentence is acceptable if *anything* is replaced by *something*.

- (i) a. ?It surprises me, who has (already) been to Paris.
b. #tI surprises John, who bought anything for his birthday.

i is impossible using the phrasing in the text, making j —the five other paintings—salient instead. An alternative explanation for this infelicity is the following: singular pronouns, like “it”, cannot refer to complement sets, like $k \setminus j$. This is adapted from a famous example by B. Partee.

13. B: It is not **Mona Lisa** and it might be **Mona Lisa**.

Semantically deviant: The factual information in the first conjunct rules out the epistemic possibility in the second one. This is adapted from an example by F. Veltman.

14. G: The solution is: **DA VINCI** made *Portrait of Isabella d’Este* with chalk on paper, **not someone else**.

Infelicitous: The question asked by Gottlob sets a Question under Discussion, which must be resolved by providing the name of a painting. By contrast, the solution presented uses stress and negation to focus on the painter, indicating that the new information—the comment—is the painter, not the name of the painting. This creates a mismatching information structure.

15. B: Oh, I didn’t know that. **More people** like Da Vinci **than I** do. Do you like art history?

Semantically deviant or ungrammatical: This sentence is comparing a group of persons “more people” to the state of a singular person, which is impossible. We should have expected something like “More people like Da Vinci than I could believe”, or “People like Da Vinci more than I do”. This is called a comparison illusion (or an Escher sentence), because it sounds grammatical to many people on a shallow analysis.

16. G: **I once read a book about gender equality**. By the way, where was your hotel?

Infelicitous: This response has nothing to do with the question asked by Bertrand. It violates Grice’s Maxim of Relevance. Therefore, this is a non-cooperative utterance.

17. B: **On earth**.

Infelicitous: This answer to Gottlob’s question is too general, and so, unhelpful. It violates Grice’s Maxim of Quantity.

18. G: Nice! But **[how much]₁** did you **not** **[pay t_1]** for all of this?

Semantically deviant or ungrammatical: Sentential negation creates a weak island, from which some wh-expressions cannot be extracted. Here, it does not make sense to ask what are (all) the prices that Bertrand did not pay, because there are infinitely many ones.

19. B: A lot! The university **didn’t** give **every student any money** for the trip.

Semantically deviant or ungrammatical: Negative polarity items like “any (money)” are licensed in downward-entailing environments, such as in the scope of “didn’t give”. However, a universally quantified noun phrase, like “every student”, intervenes when located between these two elements: it blocks licensing.

20. G: At least, in France **you may pay in euros or in pounds**. So you didn’t pay change fees. Did you take the time to get informed about French politics?

False statement: Disjunction under a deontic existential modal, like “may”, triggers a free-choice inference. Instead of being construed as “you may pay in a currency and that currency is euro or pound” (what formal logic predicts), the sentence is understood as “you may pay in euros and you may pay in pounds”, which is false.

21. B: I did! **It is false that the king of France** is bald. And some ministers look authoritarian.

Infelicitous: Definite descriptions like “the king of France” trigger the presupposition that “France has a king”, which is false. This presupposition projects through negation, that is, it remains an inference even with “it is false that”, hence the presupposition failure. The sentence “The present king of France is bald” is a famous example by Bertrand Russell himself.

22. G: Be careful what you say! **[Any French student]_j** **might** enter this room. **He_j** **disagrees** with you.

Infelicitous: A non-specific discourse referent introduced inside a modalized sentence is hypothetical. It cannot be referred to in a subsequent sentence using indicative mood. Modal subordination is necessary, e.g. “He_j might/would disagree”.

23. B: Right! I will go back to my office and be **as mute as a ringing fire alarm**. See you!

Semantically deviant: The metaphor is oxymoronic: fire alarm are typically loud, not mute.