

That's Not Art: Backhanded Sentences and Distant Worlds

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In this paper I examine logically complex sentences like (1), which I call “backhanded sentences” due to their indirectness.

(1) If that's art, then my pet dinosaur can fly.

Backhanded sentences are composed of two logical components, the second of which is obviously not true. This obvious untruth triggers an inferential process that invites the hearer of the sentence to consider the status of the first logical component. In the case of a conditional sentence like (1), the implied meaning is something like “that's not art,” and so the sentence effectively serves as a negation of this first component. Backhanded sentences can also be disjunctive, as in (2).

(2) Either that's art, or my pet dinosaur can fly.

In these cases, the implied meaning is rather an affirmation of the first component, and so the sentence effectively means something like “that *is* art.”

Backhanded sentences have several unusual properties. First, the speaker utters them for the sole purpose of triggering an inferential process in the hearer, and so their literal, stated content is irrelevant to their effective meaning. Second, they exploit logical complexity in order to emphasize their implied meaning, making them more powerful than a bare assertion to the same effect. Finally, they can allow for what look like existential presupposition violations (“my pet dinosaur”).

I will provide an explanation of the meaning of backhanded sentences that accounts for all of the above and derives their implied meaning from their logical properties. I propose that in such sentences, the second component must not only be false but also “outlandish,” that is, true only in worlds distant from (or incredibly unlike) the actual world. If backhanded sentences are then treated as universal quantifications over worlds of evaluation, the resultant meaning follows straightforwardly as an implication of the sentences' logical properties.