

A New Perspective concerning Experiments on Semantic Intuitions

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Abstract

In two fascinating articles, Machery, Mallon, Nichols, and Stich (2004; forthcoming) use experimental methods to raise a specter of doubt about reliance on intuitions in developing theories of reference which are then deployed in philosophical arguments outside the philosophy of language. Machery et al. ran a cross-cultural survey asking Western and East Asian subjects about a famous case from the philosophical literature on reference (Kripke's Gödel example). They interpret their results as indicating that there is significant variation in subjects' intuitions about that case. We argue that this interpretation is mistaken. We detail a type of perspectival ambiguity found in Machery et al.'s probe but not yet noted in the response literature. We argue that this ambiguity could have affected their results. We do not stop there, however: Rather than rest content with a possibility claim, we ran four studies to test the impact of perspectival ambiguity on subjects' responses. We found that this accounts for much of the variation in Machery et al.'s original experiment. We conclude that in the light of our new data, their argument is no longer convincing.

Subjects: [General Issues: Experimentation](#)

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