

Representation, Meaning, and C-Synonymy

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a brief critical discussion of some elements of the pragmatist view of language defended by José Zalabardo in his book *Pragmatist Semantics* [Zalabardo (2023)]. I argue that Zalabardo's pragmatist theory is not clearly stronger than the other pragmatist theories already defended in the literature; partly this is because those other theories may be able to explain the same phenomena as Zalabardo's view, and partly it is because Zalabardo's view does not obviously explain those phenomena as well as we might hope.

KEYWORDS: *Zalabardo, Representation, Meaning, Pragmatism.*

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una breve discusión crítica de algunos elementos del punto de vista pragmatista del lenguaje defendida por José Zalabardo en su libro *Pragmatist Semantics*. [Zalabardo (2023)]. Argumento que la teoría pragmatista de Zalabardo no es claramente más fuerte que las otras teorías pragmatistas ya defendidas en la literatura; en parte esto se debe a que esas otras teorías pueden ser capaces de explicar los mismos fenómenos que la concepción de Zalabardo, y en parte se debe a que dicha concepción no explica obviamente esos fenómenos tan bien como podríamos esperar.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Zalabardo, representación, significado, pragmatismo.*

I. INTRODUCTION

José Zalabardo's *Pragmatist Semantics* is part of the flourishing pragmatist (or 'neo-pragmatist') movement, a movement based around the suspicion of concepts like representation as used to explain how various kinds of language and thought work. Zalabardo's main aim in the book is to delineate and defend a distinctive pragmatist theory of language which he applies to several different domains — meaning, belief and desire, truth, and even science. Zalabardo devotes equal time to questions of detail about these discourses and to much bigger picture

questions about the nature of his favoured theory and its relationship to other philosophical issues in the area. In this short critical discussion of the book, I will focus on some big picture questions about Zalabardo's own pragmatist theory. I will argue that it is not so obvious that Zalabardo's theory has the edge over its rivals. Partly this is because what Zalabardo claims to be its key advantage seems available to these rivals [as I'll argue in III], and partly it is because his account leaves out some elements that are essential to securing that advantage in the first place [as I'll argue in IV].

II. ZALABARDO'S PRAGMATISM

We can introduce Zalabardo's pragmatism by posing two questions about some area of language. first: why do the distinctive terms in that area mean what they do? What are their *meaning grounds*? Second: do these terms, and the sentences they appear in, represent (things in) the world? Zalabardo claims that typically, philosophers' answers to the first question are constrained by their answers to the second. They typically assume that those sentences that represent the world mean what they do *because* they represent the world in the way that they do. Conversely, those terms whose meaning is not grounded in the way they represent the world therefore do not represent the world. While sometimes combining answers in this way is reasonable, Zalabardo rejects the idea that these answers must always go together. He calls this idea the *RR assumption*; rejecting it is the foundation of his project.

The fall of the RR assumption creates space for the view that terms in the domain represent the world, but they do not mean what they do because they represent the world. They have their meaning for other reasons, concerning the distinctive ways in which they are used. In Zalabardo's terminology, these terms do not have *representational meaning grounds*, but instead have *pragmatist meaning grounds*. Yet they still represent the world in just the same sense as terms with representational meaning grounds. Zalabardo calls his view 'pragmatism', but since that is typically a name for a large and ill-defined family of theories which cluster around a rejection of representation as a helpful philosophical concept, I'm going to call his view *moderate pragmatism*. It is *moderate* because, unlike some well-known theories that can reasonably be called pragmatist and whose defenders are comfortable with that label – such as metaethical expressivism – it allows that terms in the relevant domain *do* represent

the world. Indeed, Zalabardo takes this concession to be vital to his view and its advantages over its rivals. However, his view is still *pragmatist* in that it denies the classical representationalist claim that the terms of the domain mean what they do because they represent the world in the way they do. Moderate pragmatism is therefore the best option when we find dis-courses for which these representationalist explanations fail, yet which intuitively seem to represent the world. for instance, Zalabardo argues that it is hard to give a representationalist explanation of why belief ascriptions mean what they do; yet it is very counterintuitive to say that a sentence like

(1) Lucy believes that Vera is barking

does not represent things as being a certain way. In this case, moderate pragmatism will be the right theory to adopt. Let's call discourses for which moderate pragmatism seems like a good idea *candidate discourses*.

While a good chunk of *Pragmatist Semantics* takes us into some very interesting detail about semantic, psychological, and alethic discourse, detail often neglected by pragmatist writers, in my view the most interesting questions raised by the book are big-picture ones. They concern the RR assumption, how its rejection impacts a good pragmatist theory of meaning grounds for a given discourse, how a theory of meaning grounds relates to a metaphysics for a discourse, and how moderate pragmatism relates to existing options in the literature. I find myself in two minds about Zalabardo's major points on these topics. On the one hand I find myself agreeing with many of Zalabardo's conclusions. On the other, I think that these conclusions can be embraced by other pragmatist theories that Zalabardo rejects. In particular, I think Zalabardo does not sufficiently demotivate a view I'll call *deflationary pragmatism*, which I think provides a better account than moderate pragmatism in some ways.

III. REPRESENTATION

Zalabardo's moderate pragmatism agrees with other pragmatist theories in what it says about the meaning grounds of the discourse in question, but disagree with them over whether the discourse represents the world. But what is it to say that a discourse represents the world? It is not exactly clear in the book; there is more than one notion of

representation at play. At one point Zalabardo discusses the idea that it involves commitment to there being absolute standards of correctness for acceptance of sentences in the discourse [§7.13].¹ But I don't think this helps distinguish moderate pragmatism from other kinds of pragmatism, such as metaethical expressivism as defended by writers like Blackburn and Gibbard. for as Zalabardo points out, moral discourse is taken by its users to be constrained by such standards, and the expressivist will want to accept this. So I don't think this notion of representation is going to help drive a wedge between moderate pragmatism and other kinds.

Instead, I think it's more helpful to think about what the pragmatist is excluding from the meaning grounds of the discourse in question. The distinction Zalabardo begins with is that between what he calls *representational meaning grounds* and *pragmatist meaning grounds*. The first are relations between terms and things in the world, intuitively the things that they refer to or represent, that are meant to ground the meaning of those terms. for instance, someone who says

- (2) 'Good' means good because it refers to goodness (or things that are good)

is giving representational meaning grounds for 'good'. Pragmatist meaning grounds, are facts concerning how speakers 'regulate' the acceptance and rejection of sentences in the domain. for instance, someone who says

- (3) 'Good' means *good* because speakers use it only when they have a certain kind of attitude towards the action (/person/thing) in question

is giving pragmatist meaning grounds for 'good'. I'm going to count a theory as pragmatist if it gives pragmatist meaning grounds for its chosen domain, not representational ones. This is a useful baseline definition of pragmatism as a broad philosophical approach.

What this suggests is that we think of representation as involving certain relations between words and the things they are about. This is an intuitive gloss of the notion of representation as used by writers on both the pragmatist and representationalist side of these debates. Zalabardo's pragmatism, then, shares with its pragmatist rivals the evasion of these relations in the specification of meaning grounds for the domain — the

explanation of why its terms mean what they do. But according to him it disagrees with them over whether these terms nevertheless represent things in the world. It would seem then that Zalabardo is committed to the following claim for the domain in question

- (R) The terms of the domain bear some kind of representation relation to the things in the world that they are about. (e.g. the predicates in the domain bear some kind of relation to properties corresponding to them.)

I think it is plausible that Zalabardo's moderate pragmatist accepts this, since he devotes a whole chapter [chapter 8]) to giving an account of the things represented by terms that are repre-sentational.

If this is moderate pragmatism, why is it preferable to an alternative which denies (R) for a candidate discourse? Zalabardo's primary argument is that it accords better with our intuitive conception of these discourses as ones that really are representational:

I regard [the denial of representation] as a major disadvantage of these [rival pragmatist] views. It seems to me that on our intuitive conception of these dis- courses, they aim at rep-re-senting the world, and they succeed in doing so, no less than the discourses for which representationalist meaning grounds can be provided. In my view, other things being equal, we should aim to vindicate this intuitive conception. One of my main goals in the present book is to develop a strategy for achieving this. [Zalabardo (2023), p.77].

He develops this idea in greater detail later on, where he argues that these discourses involve '*genuine* representation' [p. 81, my emphasis], and that their 'involvement with representation is on a par with' discourses whose meaning grounds are representational [p. 81]. Zalabardo argues that only moderate pragmatism delivers this parity, and more familiar pragmatist theories (such as Blackburn's quasi-realism) do not.

I don't think things are so straightforward. In particular, I think that the weaknesses Zalabardo identifies in his pragmatist rivals with regard to the question of representation are equally present in his moderate view, and that it is unclear whether they are really weaknesses anyway. To see this let's retread a well-worn path, and ask: what should a pragmatist should say about representation, beyond that it has no role in meaning grounds for our candidate discourses? The familiar story is that

in the old days, pragmatists said that their favoured domains were not representational, but later dropped this claim, and replaced it with a hedged claim: the domain is representational but only in a thin, weak, minimal sense, not a thick, strong, robust sense. This raises questions about what these new words mean and how they make a difference to the philosophical debate here.²

One picture that has emerged in response to this discussion is a deflationary one; Zalabardo argues against it in §4.3. However, I will argue that Zalabardo's moderate pragmatism is no better than this deflationary view, and not obviously significantly different from it. The deflationary view is that representation comes free with the right kind of meaning, a kind of meaning we can all agree is had even by sentences in tricky domains like morality or mind. The idea is that if you can say that a sentence *S* means that *p* (for some *p*), then you can say that *S* represents things as being such that *p*. If a sentence of the form 'a is *F*' means that *a is F*, then 'a' refers to a, and 'F' refers to F-ness. All of this is trivial and unexplanatory. And that means that it is consistent with the key pragmatist claim that the terms in the discourse don't have representationalist meaning grounds: whether the terms in question mean what they do because of relations with the things they are about is just a separate question to whether they count as having this trivial property of being representational. Call this kind of view *deflationary pragmatism* for short; I think it has a good claim to be the prevailing version of pragmatism in the current literature.³

Zalabardo argues that the deflationary pragmatist introduces a counterintuitive two-tier view of discourses. We have *pragmatist discourses*, which have pragmatist meaning grounds, have a non-representational function, and represent the world because they mean what they do (which, in turn, is because of their non-representational function). Then we have *representationalist discourses*: these have representational meaning grounds, and their only function is to represent the world, and they mean what they do because they represent the world. Zalabardo thinks this distinction doesn't do justice to our intuitions:

I'm claiming that, so long as a non-representational function is treated as part of the meaning ground of a sentence, we haven't done justice to the intuition that its involvement with representation is on a par with that of a sentence whose meaning ground doesn't include the performance of any non-representational function. Genuine representation, I maintain, requires meaning grounds that don't include the performance of a non-

representational function. Therefore, a quasi-realist construal of a discourse doesn't allow us to treat its sentences as genuinely representational [Zalabardo (2023), p. 81].

This is Zalabardo's crucial argument against deflationary pragmatism.

I don't think this argument succeeds. Before we get into the main reason why, I think it's worth resisting Zalabardo's description of the situation here. Zalabardo claims that the deflationary pragmatist takes representational predicates to have a single function – representation – that explains their meaning. However, this view isn't quite available to the deflationary pragmatist. For if they do embrace deflationism about representation, they must say that representation cannot be part of *any* term's meaning grounds. This is because it always the trivial result of meaning, not what explains it. This collapses the distinction between pragmatist and representational predicates, since *none* of these predicates means what it does because it represents!

Typically, deflationary pragmatists want to reinstate this distinction in different terms, despite this collapse at the hands of deflationism. There are tricky questions about how exactly to do that – can we find some concepts that (a) won't be nice candidates for a similar deflationary treatment and (b) will be good candidates for meaning grounds in representational cases but not pragmatist ones? These questions are discussed in the literature on the problem of creeping minimalism, and the threat that pragmatism will collapse into a view about all discourses, not just some.⁴ I have argued that the deflationary pragmatist can point to the family of relations between words and their putative subject matter, and that some of these will plausibly satisfy (a) and (b) here, even if the broad concept *representation* does not [Simpson (2020)]. Whatever the details here, the deflationary pragmatist will still draw a contrast: even if all representational terms trivially count as representational because they mean what they do, there are some that mean what they do because of some relation they bear to their subject matter.

This might seem like terminological quibbling, since the deflationary pragmatist still wants the same distinction they began with, but grounded in a different way. However, I think it is actually significant when we return to Zalabardo's argument. Let's ask: does this reinstated distinction conflict with our intuitive conception of the candidate discourses as representational? Not obviously. I agree that there is an intuitive sense in which, say, belief ascriptions are just as representational as talk about chairs and tables. We can ordinarily talk of representation in

both areas; both areas involve some sense of getting things right or wrong; we can mix these sentences; and so on. But these similarities are relatively superficial, and the deflationary pragmatist has always aimed to accommodate them. The distinction the deflationary pragmatist uses is more specific, and concerns what's going on under the hood – *why* 'belief' means *belief*, versus why 'table' means *table*. It's not clear to me that our ordinary intuitions about representation tell either way on this issue.⁵

More significantly, it seems that Zalabardo's moderate pragmatism *also* delivers a two-tier system. This emerges in chapter 8, when Zalabardo aims to solve the 'problem of harmony'; roughly the problem of saying why a predicate with a pragmatist meaning ground counts as representing a property in the world. Zalabardo uses a method of abstraction, based on a relation he calls C-synonymy, to define predicate reference:

(C) for all representational predicates P, Q, the referent of P = the referent of Q iff P and Q are C-synonymous [Zalabardo (2023), p.172].

However, Zalabardo is at pains to emphasise that (C) is not the only definition of predicate (co)reference. For predicates with representational meaning grounds, we already have a view of what property they refer to, since specifying that property just is what it is to specify a representational meaning ground for it. But this is not the case for pragmatist predicates. Zalabardo argues that this is a coherent use of the abstraction method [§8.5]. But even if it is, it seems to usher in a two-tier view of these predicates. Pragmatist predicates refer to properties *because they are self-C-synonymous*; representational ones are self-C-synonymous because they refer. This is a coherent distinction, but in a sense it introduces a difference in the way these two kinds of predicates interact with representation, or rather reference. One kind refers to a property because of its pragmatist meaning, the other refers and thereby gets its meaning. To the extent that our intuitions about representation demand that these predicates relate to representation in the same way, this distinction is also counterintuitive. Or, as I'd prefer to say, both this distinction and the deflationary pragmatist's distinction are equally consistent with our ordinary intuitions about representation.

I suppose a crude way of putting the above points is that *every* pragmatist will want at least one kind of distinction between terms: those with pragmatist meaning grounds and those with representational ones.⁶ But that's enough to introduce a difference in how these predicates relate

to representation; only representational ones have relations with their subject matter in their meaning grounds. If this difference is counterintuitive, then there is simply no intuitive pragmatist view; but I don't think our intuitions go so far. Instead, we should just try to respect our ordinary usage of terms like 'represents', which both deflationary pragmatism and Zalabardo's modest pragmatism do, as they both give accounts of representation on which that ordinary usage is coherent.

Zalabardo might at this point want to draw our attention to the deflationary pragmatist's functional claim; in his argument against the deflationary view, he talks not just about whether the terms in question represent but the pragmatist's claim that they have some non-*representational function*. He argues that this is inconsistent with 'genuine representation'. I don't think this adds any intuitive strength to the argument, since a suitably framed deflationary pragmatism can leave claims about function sufficiently 'under the hood' to be out of reach of ordinary intuitions. Zalabardo cites Sebastian Köhler's recent discussion of function [Köhler (2023)], which puts it at the heart of a pragmatist account, and distances his own view from that. I side with Zalabardo on this, but I think it can easily be accommodated into a deflationary pragmatist view. The 'non-representational function' claim, in my view, just falls out of the claim about pragmatist meaning grounds. For, following Wright's account of function [1973], if the function of a discourse is just the features it has that explains why it's there, it is likely that the meaning grounds of a discourse will supply its function. For instance, moral language expresses attitudes, and that's why we have it. In particular, note that the deflationary pragmatist needn't deny that these sentences represent; rather, she can just say nothing about representation at all here.

Zalabardo argues that the non-representational function claim makes the discourse 'incapable of performing the function of representing the world' [p. 100; §4.3]. But the sense in which this is true is no threat to the deflationary pragmatist. The pragmatist does have to deny that we have these sentences *because* they represent; but this latter claim is sufficiently detached from ordinary intuitions to be no threat to the view. And crucially it is entirely consistent with saying that these sentences represent the world. So I think moderate and deflationary pragmatism are on equal footing in this regard: both can say that pragmatist discourses represent the world while denying that their meaning grounds involve representation.

IV C-SYNONYMY

I will finish by noting a more minor concern, regarding Zalabardo's use of abstraction to vindicate the idea that even pragmatist discourses can represent the world. As we saw earlier Zalabardo uses the notion of C-synonymy to give the definition (C) of predicate reference and thereby secure the idea that predicates with pragmatist meaning grounds represent properties. However, it is unclear what C-synonymy is, except that it is a placeholder for whatever we need for the abstraction argument to go through. First, C-synonymy is, by definition, an equivalence relation, since if it isn't, it cannot ground the identity of two predicates' references, identity being an equivalence relation. Second, C-synonymy must be implied by synonymy: synonymous predicates must be C-synonymous, since if they weren't we would have no route to predicate reference via meaning grounds. Providing that route is what it means to solve the problem of harmony. But third, C-synonymy does not imply synonymy, since co-referring predicates needn't be synonymous (consider 'is water' and 'is H₂O') but given (C) they must be C-synonymous, so there must be cases of predicates that are C-synonymous but not synonymous. What could this relation be, then? Zalabardo gives us no clear answer. Crucially, because C-synonymy is in a sense a weaker relation than synonymy (being necessary but not sufficient for it), we cannot characterise it fully in terms of shared meaning grounds. The best we can do here is to say that since shared meaning grounds implies synonymy, and *that* implies C-synonymy, then we will still have a solution to the problem of harmony. For instance, it will imply that because 'good' has the meaning grounds it has, it represents things as being good. But this is ultimately unsatisfactory if we don't know what C-synonymy is, except that it is something necessary but not sufficient for synonymy, and that whatever it is, coreferential predicates bear it to one another.

A further problem with the C-synonymy abstraction project concerns its scope. Zalabardo limits (C) explicitly to representational predicates, but it is hard to see why there should be such a restriction. The idea behind (C) is that we start with an independently specifiable notion, C-synonymy, and thereby define a derivative notion of co-reference for predicates. But why shouldn't C-synonymy be something that may also relate genuinely non-representational predicates, or words of other kinds? After all, it is reasonable to think that some non-representational words are synonymous; if C-synonymy follows from

synonymy, we can surely then talk of coreference. If ‘ouch’ and ‘ow’ have the same meaning grounds – use them when you’re in pain – then they are surely synonymous, and so C-synonymous, and therefore refer to the same property as one another. Intuitively, they don’t refer to a property at all. But that’s only because of something *we already know* about reference and properties, and the abstraction strategy is meant to work in absence of such knowledge. So while (C) is restricted to representational predicates, it’s unclear why that restriction is merited, especially in the absence of a concrete account of C-synonymy. And even if we restrict C-synonymy *itself*, so that only representational predicates can be C-synonymous, that doesn’t tell us what C-synonymy is. Here, perhaps, the deflationary pragmatist has an advantage, since she only needs the deflationary account of properties and representation that Zalabardo discusses and rejects in §4.4.

V. CONCLUSION

Zalabardo’s *Pragmatist Semantics* is an excellent addition to the thriving literature on non-representational approaches to meaning, and I think its detailed theories of Zalabardo’s chosen discourses – meaning, belief and desire ascriptions, truth, and science – are important and interesting additions to the growing set of pragmatist theories available. Zalabardo’s argument in chapter 9, that even scientific discourse might require pragmatist meaning grounds is extremely interesting and should give pause to one kind of pragmatist view on which scientific discourse is a kind of default representational case against which other discourses can be set. Nevertheless I think some interesting questions remain about how Zalabardo’s view can secure representation and an account of properties and states of affairs, and whether his moderate pragmatism is significantly different from the deflationary pragmatist views already defended in the literature.

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NOTES

¹ Section and page references are to Zalabardo (2023), unless otherwise specified.

² The locus classicus is Dreier (2004).

³ See Simpson (2020) for discussion and references.

⁴ See e.g. Dreier (2004) and Price (2011).

⁵ See Ridge (2009) for a very similar point about moral belief and assertion.

⁶ The ‘global’ pragmatist [see e.g. Price (2011)] will perhaps deny this, and say that no terms have representational meaning grounds. However they will still want to appeal to relations between words and subject matter, and this will be enough to get this distinction going again.

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