Two-Tier Pragmatist Representationalism

Javier González de Prado Salas

ABSTRACT

In *Pragmatist Semantics*, Zalabardo argues that sentences can be used to represent the world even when they have pragmatist meaning grounds (that is, even when we give pragmatist, use-based answers to metasemantic questions about what makes those sentences mean what they do). In this paper, I discuss the conditions for representationality to which Zalabardo resorts to assess the representational nature of speech with pragmatist meaning grounds. I suggest that these conditions only manage to capture a thin notion of representation, which would count as representational, for instance, relativistic speech about personal taste. I conclude by suggesting that Zalabardo's thesis can be vindicated if we adopt a form of global pragmatism.

KEYWORDS: *José Zalabardo, Pragmatism, Semantics, Representationalism, Relativism.*

RESUMEN

En *Pragmatist Semantics,* Zalabardo defiende que puede haber oraciones que se usen para representar el mundo incluso si los fundamentos de su significado son pragmatistas (es decir, incluso si damos una respuesta pragmatista, basada en el uso, a la pregunta metasemántica sobre qué hace que esas oraciones tengan tal significado). En este artículo, discuto las condiciones de representacionalidad en las que se basa Zalabardo al evaluar el carácter representacional del discurso con fundamentos del significado pragmatistas. Argumento que estas condiciones solo capturan una noción débil de representación, según la cual, por ejemplo, un discurso relativista sobre gustos personales contaría como representacional. Como conclusión, sugiero que la tesis de Zalabardo puede reivindicarse si se adopta una forma global de pragmatismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *José Zalabardo, pragmatismo, semántica, representacionalismo, relativismo.*

We often use language to describe the world, to represent how things stand. What does it take for language to perform this representational function? An initially attractive answer is that sentences can be used to describe the world in virtue of standing in certain relations with the things they represent. Zalabardo's (2023) book challenges this thought. He argues that certain sentences can be used representationally

even if explanations of what makes them have their meanings do not appeal to representational relations between these sentences and the bits of the world they describe.

Zalabardo, in this way, makes an important distinction between two questions. On the one hand, the question about the uses of a sentence, in accordance with its meaning. On the other hand, the question about what makes a sentence have the meaning it has. The latter is a meta-semantic question — on Zalabardo's terms, a question about the *meaning grounds* for the expressions involved in the sentence.

Zalabardo's point, therefore, is that a representationalist answer about the uses of a sentence does not require a representationalist answer about its meaning grounds, that is a specification of the sentence's meaning grounds in terms of semantic relations with the world. Indeed, sentences that are used representationally can have non-representationalist, *pragmatist meaning grounds*. These are meaning grounds constituted by aspects of the use of the sentence, and which do not include semantic relations between the sentence and the things it represents.

Ethical discourse is used by Zalabardo as an illustrative example of representational speech with pragmatist meaning grounds. However, his main interest is semantic discourse itself, in particular truth ascriptions and attributions of meaning and mental attitudes. Zalabardo offers pragmatist meaning grounds for this type of discourse, while vindicating its representational function.

On Zalabardo's view, the uses of sentences with pragmatist meaning grounds can be as genuinely representational as those of paradigmatic forms of descriptive speech. In this, he distances himself from quasi-realism and classical expressivism, according to which the target discourses at best appear to represent the world, without actually doing it in a fully fledge way. Zalabardo does not commit himself either to global pragmatism, the view that all sentences have pragmatist meaning grounds (put forward among others by Brandom (1994) or Price (2011). For Zalabardo is ready to grant that there are fragments of discourse with representational meaning grounds.

Thus, Zalabardo occupies an unexplored region of the debate, according to which some sentences with pragmatist meaning grounds can have uses that are no less genuinely representational than those of descriptive sentences with representationalist meaning grounds. I am going to examine whether representationalists could push back and argue that Zalabardo's target discourses only count as representing the world in a thin, somehow watered-down way. In particular, relativistic speech could

count as genuinely representational on Zalabardo's view. However, if relativistic discourse manages to represent the world it is only in a shallow sense, insofar as it does not fix worldly referents that generate perspective-independent correctness standards for statements. Despite this, I think that it is possible to vindicate Zalabardo's thesis that discourse with pragmatist meaning grounds can count as genuinely representational. I will do so by arguing that non-relativistic, paradigmatic representational discourse (for instance in science) can receive pragmatist meaning grounds. This will lead me to a version of global pragmatism about representational discourse.

I. QUASI-REALISM

There are certain discourses that behave as if they had representational functions, but for which it is not easy to give representational meaning grounds — because it is not obvious how to pair expressions from such discourses with referents in the world (especially if the candidate referents are restricted to natural entities). Ethical discourse is a typical example.

Expressivist approaches deal with these discourses by arguing that, despite appearances, their primary functions are not representational. The meaning ground of sentences in these discourses is specified in terms of such non-representational functions (for instance, the function of expressing non-doxastic attitudes).

These expressivist views clash with the apparent representational behaviour of the target discourse. Quasi-realist versions of expressivism try to save appearances by claiming that the relevant discourses only behave representationally in a superficial way, without being representational in a more substantial sense. Quasi-realism, thus, appeals to deflationary or minimalist conditions for being representational. Any well-behaved, truth-apt declarative sentence would count as representational in this minimal sense.

Quasi-realists are often local expressivists. They distinguish the target, minimally representational discourses from more robustly representational speech [Blackburn (2013)]. The meaning grounds of the latter are constituted by semantic relations with bits of the world, while those of the former are specified in terms of non-representational functions. This view is unsatisfactory for Zalabardo, because he wants to treat the target discourses as representational in a strong sense. He wants to be

able to claim that representing is the main function of these discourses [p. 80], and not just a subsidiary function merely accounting for the superficial behaviour of sentences in such discourses. Zalabardo, therefore, rejects including non-representational functions in the meaning ground. Instead, he characterizes pragmatist meaning grounds in terms of how sentences are used, in particular the procedures regulating our acceptance of sentences.

For Zalabardo, thus, discourses whose meaning grounds include non-representational functions are not robustly representational. But, of course, Zalabardo cannot take the further step of claiming that full representational status requires that semantic, representational relations are part of the sentence's meaning grounds — this would be incompatible with having pragmatist meaning grounds. The challenge for him is to account for what it takes to be robustly representational in a way that is compatible with having pragmatist meaning grounds, specified solely in terms of features of the use of sentences.

II. Representational Discourse

According to Zalabardo, treating some sentence as having a representational function involves treating its acceptance as subject to absolute correctness standards [p. 153] — standards that apply to any speaker at any time. This should be seen as a condition on ascriptions of representationality, which is perfectly compatible with the relevant sentences having pragmatist meaning grounds. The acceptance of a sentence can be regulated by this condition even without an independent specification of when it is actually correct to accept it — that is, without an independent identification of states of affairs represented by the sentence (which would be sufficient to specify representationalist meaning grounds).

Zalabardo suggests including in the (pragmatist) meaning ground of the target sentences the condition that their acceptance is subject to this type of correctness standard [p. 157]. This could be seen as vindicating the representational character of the target sentences, insofar as a distinctive condition for representationality would be part of their meaning grounds.

However, on reflection it becomes clear that this regulatory condition only vindicates a shallow form of representation. It is a condition that can be met by relativistic speech, as described by MacFarlane (2014), in which there are no perspective-independent correctness standards,

even if from every perspective the relevant sentences are treated as subject to absolute standards.

Think, for instance, of speech about gastronomical taste. On MacFarlane's (2014) view, when I assess as correct the assertion that Brussel sprouts are tasty, I take it to be correct for any speaker at any time. That is, I treat it as governed by an absolute correctness standard. These evaluations, however, are relativistic in that they are made from the perspective of my taste. You will assess the correctness of that assertion from your own perspective, applying the standards determined by your taste. And there is no perspective-independent fact of the matter as to which of these perspectives is the right one. This type of relativistic speech meets the conditions for representationality set by Zalabardo. However, realists may object that discourse about tastes is not genuinely representational — or that, in any case, it does not represent the world in the same way as paradigmatic representational discourse does.

The problem, it could be argued, is that succeeding in representing the world does not only require that the sentence's acceptance is taken to be subject to absolute correctness standards, but also that there are worldly facts that determine whether the acceptance of the sentence is correct. That is, it should be possible to identify states of affairs represented by the sentence, so that accepting the sentence is correct just in case those states of affairs obtain [Zalabardo (2023), pp. 163-164]. Otherwise, we will only have a thin form of representation, which will be distinctly weaker than the type of representation found in sentences with representationalist meaning grounds.

III. PRAGMATIST REFERENTS

Can the pragmatist identify represented states of affairs? If the target sentences succeed in representing states of affairs, this will not be an accident, but something necessitated by their meaning [Zalabardo (2023), p. 164]. But the pragmatist is committed to the claim that all aspects of the meaning of the target sentences can be accounted for in terms of those features of their use that constitute their meaning grounds. So, if the pragmatist is to allow that the target sentences represent certain states of affairs, this must be determined by the sentence's pragmatist meaning grounds.

Zalabardo makes an interesting proposal along these lines, according to which the acceptance procedures that constitute the meaning grounds

of the target sentences can be seen as determining representational connections between the sentences and certain states of affairs — even if these connections are not part of such meaning grounds. Instead of providing an independent specification of the referents of expressions in the target sentences, Zalabardo suggest providing an identification by *abstraction,* in terms of synonymity or co-referentiality between representational expressions.[1]

In this type of identification by abstraction, two representational expressions are taken to have the same referent just in case they meet a condition that makes them co-referential.[2] What we need, therefore, is a condition for being co-referential. Zalabardo, p. 173, argues that two representational expressions are co-referential just in case they share their meaning grounds. So, representationalists expressions with pragmatist meaning grounds are co-referential if and only if they have the same acceptance procedures. This provides an identification by abstraction of the referents of expressions with pragmatist meaning grounds. We can identify in a similar way the states of affairs represented by sentences with pragmatist meaning grounds. Two representational sentences (with pragmatist meaning grounds) represent the same state of affairs just in case their use is regulated by the same acceptance procedures.

Zalabardo offers, thus, a way to identify the referents of representational expressions with pragmatist meaning grounds. To be sure, this identification is not independent of the acceptance procedures we apply for those expressions [pp. 176-177]. That is, it is not an identification that provides an independent correctness criterion for these acceptance procedures. In this way, subjects who do not already know how to use the relevant expressions will not be in a position to single out their referents by means of this type of identification by abstraction. This contrasts with the identification of referents for expressions with representationalist meaning grounds. Here, we can just identify the expression's referent by pointing at the bit of the world paired with the expression according to its meaning grounds. In this case, finding out the referent of the expression can be a way of learning its meaning.

This contrast, which is acknowledged by Zalabardo, can be taken to threaten his project. It can be argued that what we have is two kinds of representation, one with robust, genuine referents, and the other with thin referents that cannot be identified independently. So, it is not clear that Zalabardo has managed to show that the target discourses represent the world in the same sense as paradigmatic representational speech.

Note that we could identify by abstraction referents for expressions involved in relativistic speech (which meets Zalabardo's conditions for representationality, as we saw above). So, the predicate 'is tasty' would share its referent with those other predicates whose ascription is regulated by the same procedures. But, again, it can be objected that these relativistic predicates only represent the world in a shallow sense. In particular, as I have pointed out, these relativistic referents do not introduce perspective-independent standards that allow us to adjudicate between applications of the expression made from different perspectives. Those with realist leanings may argue, therefore, that only non-relativistic referents generate genuine friction between the world and the relevant discourse.

IV SCIENTIFIC REFERENTS

The worry I have just considered is that identification by abstraction only yields thin referents, as opposed to the thick, robust referents of paradigmatic representational speech. In one of the most daring and interesting moves of the book, Zalabardo challenges this idea, by arguing that, on the contrary, the identification of referents in all representational discourse ultimately relies on identifications by abstraction.

Zalabardo focuses on scientific discourse, which is one of the paradigmatic types of representational discourse, and indeed has a claim to being the most fundamental one. Resorting to Lewis' (2009) discussion of humility, Zalabardo argues that we lack cognitive access to the referents of fundamental theoretical predicates in science. While we know the conditions that fix these referents – playing a certain role in a scientific theory — we do not know what properties or entities actually satisfy these conditions in our world. That is, we cannot identify these referents other than as whatever properties actually behave as specified by the theories in question.

Zalabardo's suggestion is to identify the referents of scientific predicates by abstraction, in terms of the role they play in our scientific theories. In this way, abstraction would become the most fundamental type of referent identification, rather than being associated with a weaker or thinner form of reference. Even in scientific discourse, referent identification would ultimately rely on identification by abstraction.

I will grant that we lack direct cognitive access to the referents of scientific theoretical terms. Still, it can be argued that there remains an important difference with pragmatist representational discourses. Let us

make the realist assumption that there is a true, final scientific theory that succeeds in representing reality. Then, there will be entities and properties that actually realize this theory in our world. More specifically, these bits of the world will behave as the theory says that the referents of certain expressions behave. The representationalist can take these worldly entities to be the referents of the relevant expressions. These referents generate independent correctness standards for scientific statements, insofar as they determine accuracy conditions for such statements.

By contrast, in the case of representational discourse with pragmatist meaning grounds there do not need to be worldly referents that can provide perspective-independent correctness standards for acceptance procedures. Consider again relativistic speech about tastes. The correctness of incompatible taste statements, made from different perspectives, cannot be adjudicated by appeal to perspective-independent facts about a property of tastiness, referred to by 'is tasty'. In this sense, the type of reference found in speech about taste still seems thinner than that of scientific discourse — even if in both cases we lack direct cognitive access to the relevant referents.

Representationalists do not need to be committed to our having cognitive access to the meaning grounds of expressions. Thus, our lack of access to the referents of scientific terms does not bar these referents from figuring in the (representationalist) meaning grounds of such terms. Zalabardo, p. 188, objects that these inaccessible referents play no role in explanations of linguistic phenomena. I think, however, that they can play a role in explaining the establishment of our theories and the acceptance procedures derived from them. For example, the fact that scientist interact causally with quarks in certain ways, via experiments, is part of what explains the establishment of our theories for quarks. This is so even if we lack direct access to quarks and we cannot observe them. That we cannot observe directly some entity does not mean that we cannot interact causally with it. Unobservable referents, therefore, can contribute to causal explanations of our use of scientific discourse, on top of providing correctness standards for such discourse. No worldly referents play an equivalent explanatory role in the case of the pragmatist discourses targeted by Zalabardo.

V. Two-Tier pragmatism

I remain doubtful that meeting Zalabardo's conditions for representationality is sufficient to represent the world in the same sense as scientific discourse does. As we have seen, Zalabardo's conditions can be

satisfied by discourses in which there are not worldly referents providing perspective-independent correctness standards — for instance relativistic discourse about taste. In scientific discourse, by contrast, there are such referents, even if we are not in a position to identify them independently. I want to suggest, however, that we can provide pragmatist meaning grounds for scientific discourse in a way that vindicates the existence of these types of referents. The idea is to conceive of these meaning grounds as constituted by acceptance procedures derived from the procedures by means of which the relevant theories were established *in interaction with certain bits of the world*. These (pragmatist) meaning grounds would fix the actual referents of scientific predicates.

Think, as an example, of our scientific theories about water. The development of these theories is partly explained by our causal interactions with a certain substance in our environment. As a result of these interactions, we have come up with theories in which the term 'water' plays a certain role — including in descriptions of causal interactions with the environment. Our procedures for stablishing these theories have, as deployed in our actual environment, fixed water as the referent for 'water'. If we had deployed these procedures in a different world, we could have come up with a theory for a different substance XYZ, which would be the referent for 'water' as fixed by that theory. This would be a term with different meaning, and different meaning grounds, than 'water' as used in our community.

My suggestion is that we can specify these theory-establishing procedures, and the acceptance procedures derived from them, as deployed in our environment, without appealing to semantic relations between 'water' and water. If this is so, we could provide pragmatist meaning grounds for the term 'water'. Something analogous could be done for expressions about unobservable entities in other scientific theories. The (pragmatist) meaning grounds for these expressions are specified in terms of the procedures for establishing the theory, and accepting statements within it, as deployed in our actual environment (in causal interaction with certain bits of our world). Note that lacking direct cognitive access to the relevant referents does not prevent them from being adequately fixed by this type of pragmatist meaning ground.

Zalabardo does consider the possibility of deriving the referents of all representational discourse from pragmatist meaning grounds [p. 74]. His concern is that the use of an expression like 'is water' could be regulated by the same ascription procedures in our world, where it refers to water, and in another world where it is used to talk about XYZ. Yet I have argued that this worry can be overcome if the meaning grounds of

the expression specify the environment in which the relevant procedures were deployed when establishing the theories framing our use of the expression. So, for example, the (toy) procedure for ascribing 'is water' would not just be to ascribe it to any transparent, thirst-quenching liquid, but to liquids that have those features and are of the kind that interacted with the establishment of our water theories. So, if we had reasons to suspect that we are in a radically different environment from that in which our theories were established, we could have reasons to doubt whether the transparent, thirst-quenching liquid in front of us is water. Our acceptance procedures for 'water', therefore, presuppose that we are talking about the same substance that contributed causally, in our world, to the development of our water theories.[3]

I have arrived at a two-tier pragmatist picture of representation. All representational discourse can be given pragmatist meaning grounds, in terms of features of use (in particular, of acceptance procedures). But there are significant differences between two types of representation. In one type, the features of use constituting the meaning grounds manage to fix worldly referents that provide perspective-independent correctness standards of acceptance. This is what happens with paradigmatic representational discourse, like that of science (under the realist assumptions I am making). By contrast, in the second type of representation, the meaning grounds of expressions do not fix worldly referents that give rise to perspective-independent correctness standards for the use of those expressions. This is what we find, I think, in the discourses targeted by Zalabardo, and more generally in speech amenable to a relativistic analysis.

Thus, my conclusion is that the discourses targeted by Zalabardo do not, after all, represent in quite the same sense as other paradigmatically representational discourses (for instance, scientific discourse, or descriptive discourse about our observable environment). However, I do not think that this is so because the former type of discourse has pragmatist meaning grounds and the latter has not. Quite the contrary, I have suggested that all representational discourses can have pragmatist meaning grounds. On my view, therefore, Zalabardo's project paves the way for an attractive version of global pragmatism.

Departamento de Lógica, Historia y Filosofía de la Ciencia
Facultad de Filosofía
Paseo Senda del Rey 7, 28050 Madrid
E-mail: jgonzalezdeprado@fsof.uned.es

NOTES

¹ For Zalabardo, remember, treating an expression as representational is a matter of treating its acceptance as subject to absolute correctness standards.

² Zalabardo, p. 172, uses the label 'C-synonymity' to talk about this notion of co-referentiality. Two expressions are C-synonymous if and only if they have the same referent.

³ My proposal is externalist. We cannot discriminate among worlds in which there are different empirically undistinguishable water-like substances. Yet, if we are in a world in which water is the substance interacting with our procedures for establishing our water theories, then these procedures will latch onto that substance, which becomes the referent of our term 'water'.
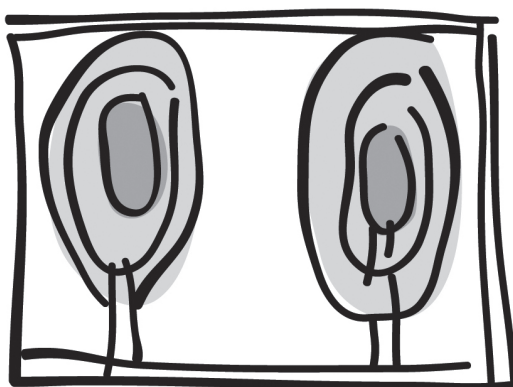
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JOSÉ L. ZALABARDO

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