ABSTRACT. We present a strategy to dissolve semantic paradoxes which proceeds from an explanation of why paradoxical sentences or their definitions are semantically defective. This explanation is compatible with the acceptability of impredicative definitions, self-referential sentences and semantically closed languages and leaves the status of the so-called truth-teller sentence unaffected. It is based on platitudes which encode innocuous constraints on successful definition and successful expression of propositional content. We show that the construction of liar paradoxes and of certain versions of Curry’s paradox rests on presuppositions that violate these innocuous constraints. Other versions of Curry’s paradox are shown not to be paradoxical at all once their presuppositions are made explicit. Part of what we say rehearses a proposal originally made by Laurence Goldstein in 1985. Like Goldstein we dispose of certain paradoxes by rejecting some of the premises from which they must be taken to proceed. However, we disagree with his more recent view that the premises to be rejected are neither true nor false.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many would agree that paradoxical sentences such as the liar sentence ‘This sentence is not true’ are semantically defective. But, as Mark Sainsbury has urged, this response will be ad hoc as long as no explanation of semantic defectiveness is being offered that doesn’t just reduce to the simple observation that these sentences would otherwise lead to paradox (cf. Sainsbury, 1995, p. 113). Some have accordingly tried to blame the use of self-referential devices in constructing such sentences or, what comes to pretty much the same thing, the use of impredicative definitions of which ‘\( S = df 'S \text{ is not true}' \)’ is an example (Russell, 1908). Others have argued that there is something seriously wrong with applying the truth-predicate to object-language sentences within the object-language itself (Tarski, 1944/45, 1956). Yet others have suggested that the relevant sentences fail to express a proposition because these sentences could not be made true or false by anything outside language: they are in this sense ‘ungrounded’ (Kripke, 1975; for the notion of groundedness, see...
Herzberger, 1970; for a more informal exposition of Kripke’s ideas, see Sainsbury, 1995, pp. 114–116).

All these suggested explanations have one feature in common: they all imply that the so-called truth-teller sentence ‘This sentence is true’ and its definitional analogue ‘$S = \text{df} S$ is true’ are semantically defective for the very same reason (cf. Sainsbury, 1995, pp. 115–116). Now, these latter sentences are surely odd; and giving a unified account is often a virtue. But it seems to us that ‘This sentence is true’ is clearly not as odd as ‘This sentence is not true’, or at least odd for different reasons. Although we won’t argue for this, we believe that the truth-teller sentence does express a proposition, and insofar as its being true should require that there be something outside language that makes it so, a false proposition at that.\textsuperscript{1} In the same vein, we believe ‘$S = \text{df} S$ is true’ to be a definition that is in perfectly good shape.

The idea that the object-language is not semantically closed and hence does not contain its own truth-predicate, was originally conceived as a response to the finding that semantically closed languages would seem to allow for the construction of significant but paradoxical sentences (Tarski, 1944/45, pp. 347–351, 354, 1956, pp. 154–165, 262). It cannot claim to capture anything intuitive besides. The same seems true of the idea that semantically acceptable sentences had better not be allowed to refer to themselves (cf. Sorensen, 2001, p. 168). What’s worse, impredicative definitions can be put to perfectly good use as non-foundational set-theory teaches, or so we hear (Barwise and Etchemendy, 1987, pp. 34–58).

Whither now? In what follows, we will sketch an alternative explanation of why paradoxical sentences are semantically defective. This explanation will leave the semantic status of the truth-teller sentence unaffected. It will be compatible with the acceptability of impredicative definitions, self-referential sentences and semantically closed languages. It will be based on what we consider to be platitudes: principles that are otherwise hardly worth stating. These platitudes encode innocuous constraints on successful definition and successful expression of propositional content. We show that the construction of liar paradoxes and of certain versions of Curry’s paradox rests on presuppositions that violate these innocuous constraints. Other versions of Curry’s paradox are shown not to be paradoxical at all once their presuppositions are made explicit. The account proposed doesn’t invoke any technical machinery of the kind familiar from other accounts. We consider this to be one of its strengths. Our explanation does, however, rely on a distinction