Acceptable Contradictions: Pragmatics or Semantics?  
A Reply to Cobreros et al.

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Abstract  Naive speakers find some logical contradictions acceptable, specifically borderline contradictions involving vague predicates such as Joe is and isn’t tall. In a recent paper, Cobreros et al. (J Philos Logic, 2012) suggest a pragmatic account of the acceptability of borderline contradictions. We show, however, that the pragmatic account predicts the wrong truth conditions for some examples with disjunction. As a remedy, we propose a semantic analysis instead. The analysis is close to a variant of fuzzy logic, but conjunction and disjunction are interpreted as intensional operators.

Keywords  Contradiction · Vagueness · Fuzzy logic · Pragmatics · Natural language · Conjunction

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of vagueness has many facets. One important aspect is the existence of borderline cases. We focus on one fact that is particularly interesting from an empirical, linguistic perspective: In some cases, sentences that
seem to correspond to contradictions in classical logic are actually not judged contradictory when they involve borderline cases. Examples of this type illustrated by (1) have been discussed as least since [8]. Recently a number of experimental studies have brought the issue to the forefront [1, 9, 10]. These studies confirm that many ordinary speakers are in fact disposed to accept contradictions of a certain kind, exemplified by the following:

\[(1)\quad \text{John is tall and not tall.}\]

Following Ripley, we refer to examples like (1) as **borderline contradictions** in the following. Both [1] and [9] show that borderline contradictions have the highest acceptability precisely for borderline cases: e.g. (1) is most acceptable if John’s height is 5’11”—the borderline height for a Western man to be tall. The question then arises for any view on vagueness how to account for speakers’ acceptance of borderline contradictions. Should such dispositions be dismissed as merely confused? Should they be given a semantic account by which contradictions come out true? Should they be given a account in linguistic pragmatics by which they are false but highly assertible? Or should we find yet some other way?

In this paper we shall review a pragmatic account of the phenomenon recently offered by Pablo Cobreros, Paul Egré, David Ripley and Robert van Rooij [3]. Cobreros et al. operate with three different notions of satisfaction: strict, classical, and tolerant truth (which inter alia allows them to assert an approximation to an ordinary tolerance principle), and use the interplay between these modes of evaluations for a pragmatic account of borderline contradictions. In Section 2, we present the details of the proposal, and show that it faces a problem with sentences that have a borderline contradiction as one part, but contain additional material. Cobreros et al.’s pragmatic proposal would evaluate either the entire sentence strictly or non-strictly. But, we show that there are examples where the intuitively available interpretation is one where the sentence, so to speak, is in part evaluated strictly and in part non-strictly. The pragmatic analysis doesn’t allow for this, because it operates at the sentence level. In Section 3, we propose a semantic analysis that remedies the problem. Instead of building on a choice of evaluation, the semantic analysis assumes (a) a multivalued logic, and (b) a semantics of conjunction that is not fully truth-conditional, but contains a modal component: if the two conjuncts are necessarily at least a partial contradiction, their conjunction will be fully true. In Section 3, we also discuss further relevant examples that test our proposal, but conclude that the judgment on the examples is impossible to ascertain. Section 4 presents our conclusions.

### 2 The Pragmatic Proposal for Borderline Contradictions

Cobreros et al. [3], hereafter CERvR, present a framework that uses three notions of truth for sentences involving vague predicates: in addition to the classical notion of truth, a notion of tolerant truth and a notion of strict truth.