

Intending, Intention, Intent, Intentional Action, and Acting Intentionally: Comments on Knobe and Burra

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It is tempting to think that a variety of similar sounding English words are used to express a single basic folk concept involving intending to do something.

- (1) Jack intended [verb] to break the vase.
- (2) Jack had an intention [noun] to break the vase.
- (3) Jack was intent [adjective] on breaking the vase.
- (4) Jack's breaking the vase was intentional [adjective].
- (5) Jack intentionally [adverb] broke the vase.

In particular, there has been a temptation to treat (1)-(3) as equivalent, to treat (4) and (5) as equivalent, and to suppose that each of (4) and (5) entails any of (1)-(3).

There has been considerable controversy about whether this last entailment always holds. Ordinary subjects may judge that (4) and (5) are appropriate in cases in which none of (1)-(3) are—cases in which Jack's breaking the vase is a foreseen but undesired consequence of Jack's intentionally doing something else. It is currently debated what the best explanation of such ordinary reactions might be. It is also debated what to make of the fact that ordinary judgments using the adjective *intentional* or the adverb *intentionally* seem influenced by normative considerations.

In their interesting and important paper, "The Folk Concepts of Intention and Intentional Action: A Cross-Cultural Study," Joshua Knobe and Arudra Burra (hereafter "KB") introduce an exciting new consideration into these debates, namely to consider how the concept expressed by the adverb *intentionally* and that expressed by the noun *intention* are expressed in other languages. They present evidence that the concept expressed by *intentionally* in English is expressed in Hindi by *jaan-bujkar*, which is related to the Hindi verb *jaan* which they say means what the verb *know* means in English. They offer this (along with various other considerations) as evidence that there is no

more of a special connection between the concept of doing something intentionally and the concept of intention than there is of such a special connection between the concept of doing something intentionally and the concept of knowledge.

1 Theory of mind, morality, reasons

KB begin by suggesting that the ordinary concept expressed in English by the noun *intention* is part of “a proto-scientific theory of the human mind,” whereas people’s use of the adverb *intentionally* “does not simply reflect their beliefs about the psychological states of the agent” but “is sensitive in a complex way to the *moral* status of the agent’s behavior,” because whether something done as a foreseen side effect is described is considered to be done intentionally is sensitive, according to KB, to the “*moral* status” of that side effect.

My comment: Actually, ordinary use of the term *intentionally* seems to be sensitive to whether there is a (prima facie or default) *reason* against doing what is done as a foreseen side effect. The reason need not be a *moral* reason (Harman 1976, Knobe and Mendlow 2004).

It’s an interesting question whether the folk “proto-scientific theory of the human mind” invokes the concept of a *reason* in this sense. I am inclined to think that it does. If so, that “theory” might also invoke the concept of an action done intentionally.

2 Comparison with adverbs of manner

KB speculate that “the relationship between ‘intention’ and ‘intentionally’ is ... like the relationship between ‘ration’ and ‘rationally’—just two separate words that happen to be morphologically related”! In particular, the relation between *intention* and *intentionally* is “radically different from” the relationships between *compassion* and *compassionately*, *love* and *lovingly*, or *lust* and *lustfully*. They say, “Most linguists think that the meaning of the adverb in each of these pairs is derived from the meaning of the corresponding noun.”

It seems that there is a single rule which can be used to derive the meaning of each of these adverbs from the meaning of the corresponding noun. In each case, the adverb is used to indicate that a behavior was performed in the manner of one who has the mental state denoted by the noun. Thus, the word ‘lovingly’ means roughly ‘in the manner of one who feels love,’ and ‘lustfully’ means ‘in the manner of one who feels lust.’

But *intentionally* does not mean even roughly *in the manner of someone who has an intention*.

My comment: The account of the other adverbs is oversimplified, of course. Jack does not lovingly stumble into a table just because someone who feels love might stumble into a table. Nor does Jack

act lustfully just because he ignores his studies although that's something someone who feels lust might do.

A more plausible account might say that to act lovingly toward *S* is to act toward *S* in the stereotypical manner of someone who feels love for *S*, and to act lustfully towards *T* is to act in the stereotypical manner who feels lust for *T*. This is almost certainly circular, however, because the stereotypical manner of acting of someone who feels love for *S* might be defined as that manner of acting towards *S* that we normally describe as *loving*.

KB also say that “None of these adverbs serve simply to indicate that a behavior was caused by a given mental state. All of them are used to indicate something about the manner in which the behavior was performed.”

My comment: While I agree that the adverbs in question can be used to indicate something about the manner in which something is done, it seems to me that they can also be used in another way. Jack might cheerfully wash the dishes while disguising his cheerfulness, and similarly for compassionately helping someone out of a jam, etc. So, I do not see that a clear contrast has been demonstrated between these adverbs and the adverb “intentionally.”

And, of course, there are many other adverbs that are not (or not always) manner adverbs: *purposefully*, *accidentally*, *happily*, *sadly*, *sneakily*, *surprisingly*, *unexpectedly*, *honestly*, *courageously*, *truthfully*, *stupidly*, *intelligently*, etc.

3 Which is basic: adverb, noun, adjective, or verb?

Going back to the discussion of adjectives like *compassionately*, *lovingly*, and *lustfully*, recall that KB say, “Most linguists think that the meaning of the adverb in [such examples] is derived from the meaning of the corresponding noun.”

My comment: Surely, most linguists think that the meanings of these adverbs derive in the first instance from the meanings of the corresponding *adjectives*: *compassionate*, *loving*, and *lustful*.

Furthermore, it is possible that in at least some cases, the corresponding verb is more basic than than the noun. Not for *compassion*, where there is no corresponding verb. And perhaps not for *lust*, where intuitively the noun seems more basic than the verb.

On the other hand, the meaning of the verb *love* seems more basic than meaning of the noun *love*, just as the meaning of the verb *intend* seems more basic than the meaning of the noun *intention*.

This, as Chomsky (1970) observes, is not to say that the meanings of such nouns are mechanically derivable from the meanings of the corresponding verbs. In particular, it seems to me that the meanings of the verb *intend* and the noun *intention* can sometimes diverge at least for some speakers, for whom *intention* can mean *aim* or *goal*. For such speakers, it might be possible to say that KB's assassin shoots with the intention (aim) of hitting the president without being committed to stronger claim that he intends to hit the president.

What relation is there between the adverb *intentionally* and the adjective *intentional*? Suppose Jack needs to extricate his car from between two other cars parked too close to his own. He realizes that this is impossible without denting the rear fender of the car in front. He does get his car out and in the process dents the fender of the other car. Was that intentional? That is, was his denting the fender intentional? I am inclined to say no it wasn't. Did he do it intentionally? I am inclined to say yes he did.

The placement of the adverb may matter. Did Jack intentionally dent the fender? Did Jack dent the fender intentionally? These seem slightly different questions. I can envision a situation about which I am more inclined to agree that Jack intentionally dented the fender than that he dented the fender intentionally. The latter seems to me to imply that his aim was in part to dent the fender, whereas the former does not seem to.

4 Strength of the Rejected Assumption

Sometimes KB describe what they oppose as the relatively weak assumption that the concepts of intention and of acting intentionally “must be related.” Sometimes they describe it as the assumption “that the concept of acting intentionally is more closely related to the concept of intention than it is to the concepts of wanting, trying, foreseeing, and so forth.”

My comment: Clearly, these two assumptions are not the same. The weaker assumption is compatible with the idea, rejected in the stronger assumption, that the concept of acting intentionally is equally related to several of the concepts of intention, foreseeing, etc.

After considering one such analysis by Mele, KB say, “Clearly it is not that philosophers are looking for the simplest, most elegant analysis [of doing something intentionally] and then are naturally led to give a prominent role to the concept of intention. On the contrary, the concept of intention seems only to be making the analysis more complex and unwieldy.”

They then formulate as their preferred “plausible” alternative “that the words ‘intention’ and ‘intentionally’ express two entirely different concepts and that there is nothing important to be learned from the fact that they sound so much alike . . . the meaning of the word ‘intentionally’ is a kind of primitive.”

My comment: It may well be that almost all concepts are primitive in this sense and that none have completely adequate analyses in other terms. Even so, there might be sometimes be connections among the meanings of these terms, in the way that there do seem to be connections between the meanings of the verb *intend* and the noun *intention* or between the meanings of the adjective *intentional* and the adverb *intentionally*.

It may be that doing something intentionally is (roughly) to do it at least with some sort of intention, where other conditions are involved also. Furthermore, suppose that *intention* is here used in the sense of *aim*. Then (again roughly) perhaps *S* *Ds* intentionally only if *S* successfully acts with an aim (intention), the realization of which *S* knows will involve *D*-ing, where *D*-ing is either *S*'s aim or part of *S*'s means for achieving that aim or is something there is some (prima facie) reason for

S not to do. Then the adverb ‘intentionally’ would express a concept tied to concepts expressed by the nouns ‘intention’ and ‘knowledge’ and certain other concepts as well.

It is true that such an account is complicated and incomplete. But the same point applies to any plausible account of a manner adverbial in terms of the corresponding noun or verb.

5 Words in Other Languages

KB say that “A casual inspection of other languages” shows a great deal of variation in their words for *intentionally*.

My comment: I am in no position seriously to challenge their specific claims, but let me mention possible doubts about a couple of them.

First, KB say that the French for *intentionally* is *exprés*. But the French word *intentionnellement*, unlike *exprés*, is derived from *intention*. Is it possible that the meaning of French “*exprés*” corresponds better to English “deliberately” or “on purpose”?

KB say that the Slovak word for *intentionally* is *naschvál*, which I could not confirm using a web based translation service. According to that service, the translation of the English adjective *intentional* is *úmyselný* in Slovak and one translation of the English noun *intention* into Slovak is *úmysel*.

6 Conclusion

KB make an important methodological contribution with their idea of looking at how key concepts are expressed in other languages. However, I am not “convinced that their results show that “the relationship between ‘intention’ and ‘intentionally’ is . . . like the relationship between ‘ration’ and ‘rationally’—just two separate words that happen to be morphologically related.”