

Ofra Magidor, *Category Mistakes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 171.

If you have a systematic language with a large vocabulary you will end up with a lot of nonsense. For example, besides sentences like ‘The number two is a prime’ and ‘Julius Caesar conquered Gaul’ you also get ‘The number two conquered Gaul’ and ‘Julius Caesar is a prime.’ Since Gilbert Ryle’s 1949 *The Concept of Mind*, philosophers have referred to these absurd sentences as *category mistakes*. The idea is that their subjects pick out an entity of the kind to which their predicate cannot be applied.

Alas, this gloss doesn’t really single out category mistakes. We could say that ‘Napoleon’s white horse was true’ is a category mistake because Napoleon’s white horse is not the kind of thing that could be true. But then why is ‘Napoleon’s white horse was blue’ not a category mistake? After all, a white horse is certainly not the kind of thing that could be blue. Category mistakes aren’t just obvious (or necessary, or analytic, or a priori) falsehoods – they carry a peculiar sense of anomaly. We know them when we hear them (more or less).

So, what exactly is wrong with category mistakes? Three possibilities come to mind: that they are ungrammatical, that they are meaningless (albeit grammatical), or that they are truth-valueless (albeit grammatical and meaningful). Ofra Magidor argues that none of these diagnoses is correct, and suggests a fourth: that, in typical contexts, category mistakes suffer from presupposition failure. Since she advocates a pragmatic theory of presupposition, this is compatible with category mistakes being syntactically and semantically flawless sentences.

After a brief introduction, Magidor defends her negative claim in three chapters marshalling a number of intricate arguments. Let me mention three I take to be particularly telling. First, there is the point about embedding: category mistakes occur as syntactic constituents of grammatical, meaningful and truth-valued sentences, such as ‘John said that a continuous function stole his valet’ or ‘Mary dreamt that a slice of cheese has married her daughter.’ Unless quoted, well-formed sentences can’t have ill-

formed constituents, so category mistakes can't really be ungrammatical (38-9). Second, there is the observation that being a category mistake is a matter of context. If it is common knowledge that the speaker is thinking of Julius Caesar 'The thing I am thinking of is a prime' is a category mistake, if it is common knowledge that she is thinking of the number two it isn't. Since being grammatical or meaningful are not features sentences have relative to some contexts but not others, this suggests that category mistakes are grammatical as well as meaningful (54-5). Finally, being a category mistake is a matter of degree, as illustrated by the fact that the following examples (originally due to Theodor Drange) which go from a clear case of straightforward falsehood to a paradigm example of a category mistake: 'Englishmen/squirrels/bacteria/stones/electrons/quadratic equations like coffee better than tea' (152). Ungrammaticality, meaninglessness, and lack of truth-value don't permit this sort of gradation.

Magidor's crucial insight is to look at complex category mistakes. She reports a striking asymmetry: while perhaps neither (1) nor (2) is entirely felicitous, the former is considerably better than the latter (115-6):

- (1) Numbers are colored and the number two is green.
- (2) # The number two is green and numbers are colored.

This should remind us of the contrast between (3) and (4):

- (3) France is a monarchy and the king of France is bald.
- (4) # The king of France is bald and France is a monarchy.

The standard explanation of the latter pattern (originally due to Robert Stalnaker) goes as follows. Assume that assertion is a proposal to add the content of the sentence uttered to the common ground and that felicitous assertion requires that the presuppositions of the sentence be already common ground. Also, assume that to assert a conjunction is to assert its conjuncts sequentially. Then making an assertion uttering (4) will be typically infelicitous, since the existence presupposition of the first conjunct – being a well-known falsehood – is unlikely to be common ground. By contrast, making an assertion uttering (3) will be typically felicitous since by asserting that France is a monarchy the speaker has already proposed to add the relevant presupposition of the second conjunct to the

common ground by the time he asserted its content. (The other presuppositions of the conjunction – that if France is a monarchy then it has no more than one ruler, and that ruler is not a queen, a regent, an emperor, or whatnot – is sufficiently innocuous that it will be accommodated without much ado.) If we say that ‘The number two is green’ presupposes that the number two is colored, the contrast between (1) and (2) can be explained analogously.

As Magidor argues in §4.1, the conjunction data is not a fluke: being a category mistake projects just as being a presupposition failure does. So, her proposal is that the vast majority of natural language predicates are presupposition triggers: the semantic content of ‘is a prime’ is the property of being a prime, its presuppositional content is the property of being a (natural?) number; the semantic content of ‘conquered Gaul’ is the property of having conquered Gaul, its presuppositional content is the property of having been an (intentional?) agent, and so on. Now we can see why being a category-mistake admits of degrees. When we declare ‘The present king of France is bald’ to be anomalous we don’t deny that it could be used felicitously – for example, after asserting that France has decided to go in for another round of Bourbon Restoration – only that its use in a typical context would be infelicitous. And when we judge that ‘Squirrels prefer coffee to tea’ is less of a category mistake than ‘Stones prefer coffee to tea’, what we are really saying is that a conversation where it is accepted that squirrels have preference rankings is less far-fetched than one where it is accepted that stones do.

I like the idea that category mistakes are presupposition violations, but I also think that the theory misses a crucial component. Compare ‘Numbers are colored’ with ‘The number two is colored.’ I take it that the latter is a clear category mistake, while the former is not. But a theory that locates the source of the linguistic anomaly category mistakes give rise to exclusively in the presupposition of the predicate cannot explain this difference. Suppose ‘is colored’ presupposes something like being visible – the proposition that numbers are visible is just as unlikely to be common ground as the proposition that the number two is. Note also that the contrast between ‘Numbers are colored’ with ‘The number two is colored’ is crucial for Magidor. The argument for the

claim that category mistakes project over conjunction just as normal presupposition failures does not go through with (1') and (2'):

(1') # The number two is colored and it is green.

(2') # The number two is green and it is colored.

Here we lose the asymmetry, since both conjuncts have implausible presuppositions.

The missing component of the theory is an account of the categories. Even though 'Prime numbers below 100 are colored' strikes me as a fairly clear example of a category mistake, 'Numbers are colored' does not, which presumably has to do with the fact that 'prime numbers below 100', unlike 'numbers', picks out a fairly gerrymandered kind.

Even if I am right, and Magidor's theory is incomplete, it is certainly an important step in the right direction. This book will put all those who think category mistakes are syntactically or semantically defective sentences – surely the majority of linguists and at least a significant minority of philosophers – on the defensive and it opens the way for a detailed study of pragmatic mechanism that gives rise to them.

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