
That’s Not Art: Backhanded Sentences and Distant Worlds
Patrick Munoz
University of California, San Diego

1. Introduction
(1-4) are examples of what I will call “backhanded sentences.”

(1) If that’s art, then my pet dinosaur can fly.
(2) If that’s art, then I’m a sperm whale.
(3) Either that’s art, or my pet dinosaur can fly.
(4) Either that’s art, or I’m a sperm whale.

Though productive, backhanded sentences also appear as idioms or clichés, such as in (5)-(7).

(5) If I lose this game, I’ll eat my hat.
(6) If you’re an atheist, then I’m the Queen of England.
(7) You’ll taste the difference, or my name isn’t Orville Redenbacher.

The asserted content of any backhanded sentence is subordinate to its implied content, so much so that the former sinks into irrelevancy and the latter shoulders the entirety of its de facto meaning. For instance, (1) and (2) imply “that’s not art,” while (3) and (4) imply the opposite: “that’s art.” The talk of dinosaurs or sperm whales conveys nothing about ancient animals or large water mammals, but rather is only a means to draw out this implication. The inferences of such sentences has the sole purpose of triggering an inferential process in the interlocutor, and what the interlocutor infers as a result of this process exhausts

I would like to thank all the folks who have given me support and suggestions for this paper: everyone in the UCSD Semantics Lab; the entire CUSP 5 and UCSD, in particular Donka Farkas, who pointed out to me the existence of Sokolski (1977); the audience at CLS 49, especially Chris Kennedy and Simon Finebeze, and most of all my advisor, Ivan Capelongo, who has been very patient in guiding me through the multiple revisions of this paper. Thank you, Ivan!

In addition, these idiomatic formations are more easily interpretable than their productive counterparts; I would like here to emphasize that their non-conventional forms do not mean that the construction itself is therefore conventional.

From Finkel (2012: ex. 6) offers another example of such a backhanded “Queen of England” sentence—the phrase lends itself quite well to this construction. However, von Finkl provides the treatment in this paper will take an entirely different route, and claim that a sentence like (6) implies the falsity of its antecedent rather than presupposing it.
what the speaker intends to communicate to the interlocutor by means of the utterance. In what follows I provide a detailed description of the main semantic and pragmatic properties of backhanded sentences and suggest an account of the mechanism by which their inferred content arises. This account crucially relies on the logical structure of backhanded sentences, basic Gricean principles, and the notion of "distant worlds," inspired by David Lewis' (1973) notion of "spheres of similarity."

This paper provides the first detailed description and analysis of backhanded sentences of which I am aware. It also contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of logic and grammar in what is usually considered pragmatics, and provides further support for the need of Lewis' notion of distance between worlds of evaluation in order to fully account for the mechanism by which human language conveys meaning. In the case of backhanded sentences, what is crucial is an understanding of distant worlds in particular—worlds very unlike the actual world or relevant world of evaluation. This contrasts with previous motivations for introducing distance between possible worlds in order to select the closest possible worlds of evaluation, e.g. in counterfactual statements as proposed by Stalnaker (1968) and Lewis (1973), and so helps round out the overarching theoretical notion by looking to how its opposite extreme manifests in language.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the main semantic and pragmatic properties of backhanded sentences. Section 3 outlines several desiderata that any successful account of these features will have to meet. Section 4 provides a preliminary attempt at such an account, making use only of the logical properties of conditional and disjunctive sentences and Gricean principles, explaining the meaning of backhanded sentences as logical inferences evaluated with respect to a single world of evaluation. It also gives several reasons why such an account must fall short of the desiderata outlined in Section 3. Section 5 uses these shortcomings to motivate introducing possible world semantics into the account of backhanded sentences, including the Lewis-inspired notion of distance between possible worlds. Section 6 uses this expanded apparatus to provide a new account of backhanded sentences. Section 7 then compares this new account against the desiderata that the preliminary analysis failed to meet, and argues that it successfully satisfies them, before briefly concluding.

2. Facts about backhanded sentences

In this section, I present the main facts concerning the semantic and pragmatic behavior of backhanded sentences. I repeat examples (1)–(4) here with some bracketing that will be useful for the discussion that follows:

(1) If [that's art], then [my pet dinosaur can fly].
(2) If [that's art], then [I'm a sperm whale].
(3) Either [that's art], or [my pet dinosaur can fly].
(4) Either [that's art], or [I'm a sperm whale].

The literally asserted content of backhanded sentences is irrelevant to their meaning. This is highlighted by two observations. First, neither the speaker nor the interlocutor of backhanded sentences is required, or even likely, to believe that their asserted content is true. For instance, if the speaker of (2) literally believed the asserted content of (2), then he or she might, upon having a change of heart, decide that that is art, and therefore declare "Thus, I am in fact a sperm whale." This has the air of a joke, not a literal admission; the conditional is not truth-conditionally binding, and the conversational participants understand that its literal truth is therefore not at issue. Second, the interlocutor cannot object to a backhanded sentence by contesting its asserted content. For instance, if in response to (2) one were to reply, "Not true! If that's art, then you're a whale shark, not a sperm whale!" one would be missing the point rather than voicing a legitimate objection—what can be objected to appropriately is the implied content alone.

(1)–(4) share several structural features in common. First, each is a logically complex sentence containing two proposition-denoting clauses: I will hereafter refer to the first clause of a backhanded sentence as p, and to the second clause as q, as they are bracketed and labeled in the examples above. (1)–(4) are grouped according to logical form: (1) and (2) are conditional sentences, while (3) and (4) are disjunctive sentences. Second, each of the sentences has in its meaning an implication about the truth of its first clause: in the case of (1) (2), p is pronounced false (whatever "that", it is not art), while in the case of (3)–(4), the truth of p is asserted ("that" is art). Third, in each case, the presence of q somehow works to engender this implication regarding p, such that q is somehow essential to the implied meaning of the sentence.

In each of (1)–(4), it is clear that q does not convey a true proposition. In (1) and (3), q contains a presupposition failure: my pet dinosaur can fly includes the definite description my pet dinosaur, which triggers the presupposition that there exists a pet dinosaur that is especially related somehow to the speaker. But both the speaker and the interlocutor know that no such pet exists in the actual world, and so there is an apparent existential presupposition violation. In (2) and (4), on the other hand, q is a simple empirical falsehood, so long as the speaker is not, in fact, a sperm whale. These two types of clauses in backhanded sentences are both what I call outlandish, which I tentatively and informally take to mean that they
are both obviously not true in the actual world or relevant world of evaluation; they are egregiously untrue. Furthermore, their outlandishness is crucial to the meaning of the sentences in which they are embedded; when they are replaced with clauses conveying propositions that are true in the actual world, the implied meaning of the backhanded sentence disappears, and the sentence no longer acts as a denial or affirmation of the first clause.

(8) **Context:** The speaker owns a canary.

If [that's art], then [my pet canary can fly].

Either [that's art], or [I'm a human being].

The introduction of an outlandish q, then, causes the sentence to imply the denial or affirmation of p. Furthermore, this implied denial or affirmation of p is somehow more emphatic than a bare assertion of its denial or affirmation; a sentence like (10) lacks the hyperbolic character of a sentence like (2).

(10) That's not art.

(2) If [that's art], then [I'm a sperm whale].

Backhanded sentences can also become ineffective if q is not egregiously untrue in the actual world, even if q is false. Consider (11).

(11) **Context:** The speaker is wearing a dark grey shirt.

If [that's art], then [I'm wearing a light grey shirt].

(11) does not have the same effect that (1) and (2) do, to the extent that it is questionable whether it acts as a denial of that's art at all. And yet, I'm wearing a light grey shirt is clearly false. q is false in (11), but not outlandish, as required by a backhanded sentence—that is, its falsity is not egregious. Whatever the outlandishness of q consists in, it therefore must be something other than mere falsity in the actual world or relevant world of evaluation.

Finally, in order for a backhanded sentence to be effective, both the speaker and interlocutor must agree that q is outlandish. An utterance of (11), for instance, in a situation in which either the speaker or the interlocutor believes that the speaker owns a flying pet dinosaur, will no longer behave as a denial of that's art. Therefore, if the meaning of backhanded sentences arises as a result of an inferential mechanism, it means that the interlocutor will have to make use of the knowledge that q is outlandish in that mechanism, and the speaker will likewise have to know that this knowledge will be exploited in order to trigger the mechanism effectively.

3. **Desiderata for an account of backhanded sentences**

An adequate account of how the meanings of backhanded sentences arise should satisfy the following desiderata.

**Desideratum I.** It should explain why backhanded sentences require a logically complex structure, by elucidating how the two clauses in each of the sentences must interact with one another to engender the appropriate inference.

**Desideratum II.** It should provide a unified explanation of both logical types of backhanded sentences—conditional and disjunctive—such that they acquire their meaning as the result of the same inferential process, and further in such a way that their differing meanings are traceable to differences in their logical properties.

**Desideratum III.** It should account for why at least some backhanded sentences include a presupposition failure with respect to the actual world or relevant world of evaluation are acceptable. For instance, in cases like (1) and (2) (repeated below), it should explain why backhanded sentences that violate the presupposition of existence triggered by the definite description can be uttered felicitously.

(1) If [that's art], then [my pet dinosaur can fly].

(2) Either [that's art], or [my pet dinosaur can fly].

**Desideratum IV.** It should account both for cases of presupposition failure, as in (1) and (2), and for cases of ordinary falsity, as in (3) and (4) (repeated below), in the second clause of backhanded sentences, via the same mechanism. It should identify the feature common to both that makes them similarly effective at focusing backhanded sentences, and so define more precisely in virtue of what both are similarly outlandish.

(3) Either [that's art], or [my pet dinosaur can fly].

(4) Either [that's art], or [I'm a sperm whale].

**Desideratum V.** It should explain why backhanded sentences imply a more emphatic affirmation or denial than is asserted in bare sentences like (10) (repeated below), and characterize more precisely what this emphasis consists in.

(10) That's not art.

**Desideratum VI.** Finally, it should account for why the effectiveness of backhanded sentences weakens or disappears altogether in cases where the second clause of the sentence is false, but not egregiously untrue, and so not outlandish.

4. **First attempt: a single-world account**

In this section, I develop an analysis of conditional and disjunctive backhanded sentences that treats them as material conditionals and inclusive disjunctions, respectively: that is, conditional sentences are assumed to be of the logical form: p
→ q, and disjunctive sentences of the logical form p ∨ q. The sentences will then be evaluated with respect to a single world of evaluation—the actual world or relevant world of evaluation—and the appropriate backhanded meaning will arise from a combination of the sentences' logical properties and some simple conversational maxims and inferences.

First, we can reconstitute how the implied content of (2), which amounts to a denial of that's art, arises as a function of both clauses of the sentence working in tandem, along with (a) the basic Gricean assumption on the part of the interlocutor that the speaker is being truthful in uttering the sentence, and (b) the previously held assumption on the part of both the speaker and the interlocutor that clause p of the statement is unequivocally untrue.

(2) If [that's art], then [I'm a sperm whale],

\[ p \rightarrow q \]

(i) \( p \rightarrow q \) is true. [Maxim of Quality]

(ii) \( q \) is false. [speaker and interlocutor's shared world knowledge]

(iii) \( p \) is false. [from (i), (ii) and Modus Tollens]

First (i), it is assumed that the speaker is being truthful (Grice's Maxim of Quality), and so that (2) as a whole is true. Therefore, a charitable interlocutor will calculate the truth values of the sentence's clauses so as to preserve the truth of the sentence as a whole. Second (ii), it is obvious, and a matter of shared knowledge between speaker and interlocutor, that I'm a sperm whale is false. With this in mind, the interlocutor can conclude (iii) that \( p \) is false, via Modus Tollens: if \( p \) were true, then the conditional taken as a whole would be false, which violates the assumption that the speaker is telling the truth in (i).

Put simply, the speaker asserts a conditional, the consequent of which is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer that the antecedent must be rejected. And this is the relevant implied content of (2).

A similar story can be told in the case of disjunctive sentence, as with (4).

(4) Either [that's art], or [I'm a sperm whale],

\[ p \lor q \]

(i) \( p \lor q \) is true. [Maxim of Quality]

(ii) \( q \) is false. [speaker and interlocutor's shared world knowledge]

(iii) \( p \) is true. [from (i), (ii) and Disjunctive Syllagm]

In uttering (4), the speaker asserts a disjunctive sentence, one of whose disjuncts is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer, via a Disjunctive Syllagm, that the other disjunct must be true. And this is the relevant implied content of (4).

This analysis is appealing for a number of reasons. First, it explains why these meanings arise in the context of logically complex propositions: the logical relationship between the two clauses is what allows the inference to the meaning of the sentence to be made. Second, it can account for why disjunctions and conditionals have opposite resultant meanings when the same device is used: this is also a straightforward result of the logical properties of the complex sentences.

Third, it illuminates why \( q \) must be false (but merely false, i.e. not necessarily false) that makes the inference possible.

But the shortcomings of this approach are clear, given its failure to satisfy several of the desiderata outlined in Section 3. Its most immediately problematic in the cases of (1) and (3). It is unclear why (1) and (3) should be felicitously, unambiguously identified. Further, the inability to evaluate the truth value of sentences as anything other than true or false with respect to the actual world makes these existential presuppositions not straightforwardly measurable, even if their felicity is explained. Clearly, they are not simply false with respect to the actual world in the same way that I'm a sperm whale is false; and so a procedure similar to that of Section 3 could be used to capture them.

Put simply, the speaker asserts a conditional, the consequent of which is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer that the antecedent must be rejected. And this is the relevant implied content of (2).

A similar story can be told in the case of disjunctive sentence, as with (4).

(4) Either [that's art], or [I'm a sperm whale],

\[ p \lor q \]

(i) \( p \lor q \) is true. [Maxim of Quality]

(ii) \( q \) is false. [speaker and interlocutor's shared world knowledge]

(iii) \( p \) is true. [from (i), (ii) and Disjunctive Syllagm]

In uttering (4), the speaker asserts a disjunctive sentence, one of whose disjuncts is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer, via a Disjunctive Syllagm, that the other disjunct must be true. And this is the relevant implied content of (4).

This analysis is appealing for a number of reasons. First, it explains why these meanings arise in the context of logically complex propositions: the logical relationship between the two clauses is what allows the inference to the meaning of the sentence to be made. Second, it can account for why disjunctions and conditionals have opposite resultant meanings when the same device is used: this is also a straightforward result of the logical properties of the complex sentences. Third, it illuminates why \( q \) must be false (but merely false, i.e. not necessarily false) that makes the inference possible.

But the shortcomings of this approach are clear, given its failure to satisfy several of the desiderata outlined in Section 3. Its most immediately problematic in the cases of (1) and (3). It is unclear why (1) and (3) should be felicitously, unambiguously identified. Further, the inability to evaluate the truth value of sentences as anything other than true or false with respect to the actual world makes these existential presuppositions not straightforwardly measurable, even if their felicity is explained. Clearly, they are not simply false with respect to the actual world in the same way that I'm a sperm whale is false; and so a procedure similar to that of Section 3 could be used to capture them.

Put simply, the speaker asserts a conditional, the consequent of which is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer that the antecedent must be rejected. And this is the relevant implied content of (2).

A similar story can be told in the case of disjunctive sentence, as with (4).

(4) Either [that's art], or [I'm a sperm whale],

\[ p \lor q \]

(i) \( p \lor q \) is true. [Maxim of Quality]

(ii) \( q \) is false. [speaker and interlocutor's shared world knowledge]

(iii) \( p \) is true. [from (i), (ii) and Disjunctive Syllagm]

In uttering (4), the speaker asserts a disjunctive sentence, one of whose disjuncts is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer, via a Disjunctive Syllagm, that the other disjunct must be true. And this is the relevant implied content of (4).

This analysis is appealing for a number of reasons. First, it explains why these meanings arise in the context of logically complex propositions: the logical relationship between the two clauses is what allows the inference to the meaning of the sentence to be made. Second, it can account for why disjunctions and conditionals have opposite resultant meanings when the same device is used: this is also a straightforward result of the logical properties of the complex sentences. Third, it illuminates why \( q \) must be false (but merely false, i.e. not necessarily false) that makes the inference possible.

But the shortcomings of this approach are clear, given its failure to satisfy several of the desiderata outlined in Section 3. Its most immediately problematic in the cases of (1) and (3). It is unclear why (1) and (3) should be felicitously, unambiguously identified. Further, the inability to evaluate the truth value of sentences as anything other than true or false with respect to the actual world makes these existential presuppositions not straightforwardly measurable, even if their felicity is explained. Clearly, they are not simply false with respect to the actual world in the same way that I'm a sperm whale is false; and so a procedure similar to that of Section 3 could be used to capture them.

Put simply, the speaker asserts a conditional, the consequent of which is absurd, and so doing invites the interlocutor to infer that the antecedent must be rejected. And this is the relevant implied content of (2).

A similar story can be told in the case of disjunctive sentence, as with (4).
so worlds of evaluation other than the actual world, opening up the door to non-
actual existential presuppositions and shedding light on their purpose in
backhanded sentences. Second, it will make room for evaluations of truth and
falsity of a wider scope than binary truth conditions within a single world of
evaluation.

"Possible worlds" is here synonymous with "possible situations" in the most
ordinary sense, and in invoking them, the minimal assumption is that that the
speaker and the interlocutor do not merely consider their factual knowledge of the
actual world, but further (a) project truth values onto non-actual situations, and (b)
do so in a way that allows them to maneuver, even if only very crudely, the relative
similarity or dissimilarity of these possible situations to the actual world.

The introduction of possible worlds thus allows a ground for comparison
between worlds of evaluation. It is now not merely a matter of truth and falsity,
but also a matter of the manner in which a proposition can be considered to be
true or false, and of understanding how similar or dissimilar non-actual worlds are
to the actual world. This allows the possibility of characterizing the meaning of
backhanded sentences in terms of the distance of worlds of evaluation from the
actual world.

In introducing the notion of distance I have in mind something similar to David
Lewis' spheres of similarity that surround a world of evaluation w (characterized
here as the actual world, though the same will apply mutatis mutandis to any
single relevant world of evaluation). The core idea is that any world of evaluation
can be schematized as a point sitting in the center of a series of concentric circles.
As one moves outward from w, one encounters worlds different from but similar to
w, and the farther one moves away from the center, the less similar the worlds
encountered are to w. That is to say, any movement outward on the polar graph
corresponds to a decreasing similarity to w, and any movement inward
 corresponds to an increasing similarity to w. In moving completely inward, one
closes in on w itself (perfect similarity with w), and in moving arbitrarily far
outward, one reaches worlds arbitrarily dissimilar to w.

Using this schema we can draw a twofold distinction between worlds close to
the actual world, and worlds distant from the actual world.

Figure 1: Schema of the world of evaluation w, and worlds close and distant to
it.

There is no need for a quantitative measurement of distance from the actual
world, if such a thing is even possible. All that this model does is help
characterize in a crude and intuitive way what it means for a world of evaluation
to be distance, as opposed to close to, the actual world; that it is, it is highly
dissimilar to the actual world along some pragmatically determined metric.

This allows for a new characterization of outlandishness, given in (12) below,
that includes both empirical falsities and presupposition failures with respect to
the actual world, capturing them both in their egregious extremity.

(12) A proposition p is outlandish if it is neither true in the actual
world, nor any world that is close to the actual world.

Hence an outlandish proposition is not merely false when evaluated with
respect to the actual world, but false and at a remove. Happily, worlds distant
from the actual world are exactly the sorts of places that odd creatures like pet
dinosaurs are hiding—and they are also places in which I am perhaps a sperm
whale. What the empirical falsities and existential presupposition violations share
in their distance from actuality, and in being so removed, the existential
presuppositions can now be evaluated blasphemously in the dinosaur-filled worlds.
The common assumption held by both the speaker and the interlocutor is now
not merely that the second clause q in a backhanded sentence is not true in the
actual world, but that it is outlandish. With this in mind, a new account of
backhanded sentences is possible, which will evaluate the clauses of the sentences
with respect to worlds of evaluation in general, rather than with respect to the
actual world alone. Such an account I will now endeavor to give. In what follows
I will treat backhanded disjunctive and conditional sentences as quantifications
over worlds of evaluation—their differing meanings with respect to the actual
world will then be derivable based on the logical properties of disjunctions and

---

These spheres of similarity are characterized in (1973: 13-16). Lewis himself gives a
formal account of how the spheres are nested, but given that the appropriation used here makes
use of only a single circle distinction, the four points are irrelevant for the present purposes.
Bernett (2005) includes discussion of measuring distances between worlds, his description of
the formal account in Lewis (1973) is in §74, "Closest and Similarity," and onward.
6. Revised attempt: a multiple-world account

In treating conditionals and disjunctive backhanden sentences as universal quantifications over worlds of evaluation, they become equivalent to classical strict conditionals. So, backhanden sentences of the form "If p, then q," and "[Either] p or q," as have the literal semantic content stated in (13) and (14) below, respectively.¹

(13) Conditional
\[ \forall w (p(w) \rightarrow q(w)) \]
In prose: For all worlds of evaluation w, if p is true in w, then q is true in w.

(14) Disjunctive
\[ \forall w (p(w) \lor q(w)) \]
In prose: For all worlds of evaluation w, either p is true in w, or q is true in w.

This treatment allows for a plausible derivation of the meaning of conditional and disjunctive backhanden sentences: the speaker of these sentences is referring to a sphere of possibilities rather than merely to the state of a single world of evaluation, either (i) the actual world, or (2) some specific possible world other than the actual one. The inadequacy of the first possibility is apparent from its inability to explain the felicitous utterance of statements that contain presupposition failures in the actual world; the second possibility leaves open the question of how a statement about a non-actual world of evaluation can have its ultimate relevance as either affirming or denying the truth of its first clause in the actual world.

¹I am unsure exactly how far back the pedigree of this treatment of conditionals and disjunction goes. Copeland (1980) cites C.S. Peirce on a possible progenitor: "an ordinary Hilbertian conditional [if A then B] is expressed by saying "if any possible state of things, I, either (i) is not true [in w] or [ii] is true [in w]." (Hartshorne & Weis 1952). The uncertainty here will not exceed this initial level of sophistication.

The inadequacy of treating conditionals that quantify over worlds of evaluation as strict implications (applying to all contextually relevant worlds in which p is true) has long been noted, due to the objection that the antecedent of the conditional can be strengthened to include a subset of the w-worlds that turns out to make the conditional false, as in the kampene example of Loew (1975): if Kampene had not read, they would not speak; on such a strict interpretation, should expect that if Kampene had not read but [and] said readings, they would still ever be true. Some measure must then be taken against this, such as stipulating that the worlds in which p is true that the antecedent picks out must be as close to the actual world as possible. However, such stipulations will turn out to be irrelevant in the case of backhanden sentences, precisely because the purpose of the backhanden conditional, and by extension his disjunctive counterpart, is to justify the q-worlds as far away from the actual world as possible. The results of strengthening would not then falsify the conditional, though it might make the backhanden effect flatter. Other conditions, such as the covert epistemics necessary to be Kratzer (1986), are also ignored, since the literal content of the sentence is not in question.

This treatment overcomes both obstacles. First, it will not treat the sentences as pertaining to a variable world of evaluation bound by the universal quantifier; the arbitrary w, and so q will only be evaluated with respect to those worlds in which the existential presupposition is satisfied. Existential presuppositions are no longer problematic for the sentence's meanings, but rather act as indicators that the world in which q is true is in fact distant from the actual world—the speaker better for the intended effect if the non-actual entity is a marked fantastical one. Second, a universal quantification over worlds of evaluation will allow an inference to be drawn with respect to the actual world by speaking of the truth or the actual world can follow, as will be shown.

Given the meanings ascribed to conditional and disjunctive backhanden sentences above, as well as the assumption shared between speakers in conditions about the actual world in which q is true is distant from the actual world—we can derive the sentence, the semantic-grammatical inferential mechanism is given in (15) below.

(15) \[ \forall w (p(w) \rightarrow q(w)) \]
(i) \[ \forall w (p(w) \rightarrow q(w)) \] is true [Maxim of Quality]
(ii) p is not true in any world close to the actual world, i.e. q is outstanding [speaker and hearer's shared world knowledge, and definition of outstandingness in (13)]
(iii) Any world in which p is true is one in which q is true. [Semantic content of a conditional statement in (13)]
(iv) Any world in which p is true is not close to the actual world. [From (i) and (iii)]
(v) Therefore, p is not true in any world close to the actual world, i.e. p is outstanding [from (iv), and definition of outstandingness in (12)]

In (i) above, the entire conditional is assumed to be true because it is assumed that the speaker is being truthful, following Grice's pragmatic Maxim of Quality. (ii) introduces "outstandingness" in the interpretation of the conditional: the speaker and the hearer share the knowledge that q can be true only in worlds that are distant from the actual world, i.e., q is outstanding. (iii) requires p to be true whenever q is true and follows from the logico-semantic properties of q-worlds. (iv) then follows from (ii) and (iii): since q is not true in any world close to the actual world, and any world in which p is true is one in which q is true, it follows that any q-world must not be close to the actual world. Finally, (v) arrives at the conclusion that p is not true in any world close to the actual world; and so following the definition of outstandingness given above, p is outstanding.
Disjunctive backhanded sentences then follow a similar pattern, but derive, as
desired, the opposite result. This is shown most easily by considering the logical
relationship between conditionals and disjunctions. In classical logic, a
disjunction of the form \( p \lor q \) is logically equivalent to its counterpart conditional
with its antecedent negated: that is, \( \neg (p \land q) \rightarrow (\neg p \rightarrow q) \). So, to say that for all
worlds of evaluation, either \( p \) is true in that world or \( q \) is true in that world, is
equally to say that for all worlds of evaluation, if \( \neg p \) is true in that world, then \( q \) is
true in that world: hence, \( \forall w(\neg p(w) \rightarrow q(w)) \). The gloss of the meaning of
disjunctive backhanded sentences can thus be rephrased: "Any world of
evaluation in which \( \neg p \) is true is one in which \( q \) is true." This is fortunate, as we
are now in the same position with disjunctive sentences as we were with
conditional sentences, except that the antecedent within the universal
quantification has been negated; and so the same derivational process will result
in the conclusion that \( \neg p \) is outlandish, rather than \( p \).

\[ (16) \forall w(\neg p(w) \lor q(w)), \text{ equivalent to } \forall w(\neg p(w) \rightarrow q(w)) \]

(i) \( \neg p \) is not true in any world close to the actual world. [speaker and
hearer's shared world knowledge, and definition of outlandishness
in (12)]

(ii) Any world in which \( \neg p \) is true is one in which \( q \) is true. [semantic
content of a disjunctive statement in (14)]

(iii) Any world in which \( \neg p \) is true is not close to the actual world.
[from (i) and (iii)]

(iv) Therefore, \( \neg p \) is not true in any world close to the actual world, i.e.
\( \neg p \) is outlandish. [from (iv), and the definition of outlandishness
in (12)]

Thus, the opposite propositional content that is inferred from the two types of
sentences falls out of the same inferential mechanism as a direct result of the
logical properties of the sentences.

7. Accounting for the desiderata

The multiple-world account in Section 6 preserves everything that is attractive
in the preliminary single-world account in Section 4: that is, it satisfies Desidera
I and II for the same reasons that the single-world account does, by (a) making
both clauses of the sentence essential to the inferred meaning, and so explaining

An issue arises here in that this logical equivalence requires an inclusive reading of
the disjunction; an exclusive reading would be equivalent instead to \( \neg (p \land q) \land \neg (p \land q) \). However,
this additional constraint only raises an extra restriction on the behavior of \( p \) and \( q \) across worlds of
evaluation; it will still hold true that \( \forall w(\neg p(w) \lor q(w)) \) by simplification, which is what is
relevant for the derivation, and the result holds all the same.

the presence of a complex logical structure, and (b) deriving the inferred meaning
from the logical properties of the sentences, giving a unified account of the
conditional and disjunctive cases and their opposite results. We have also already
remarked upon how the multiple-world account satisfies Desidera III and IV in
the first case, presupposition failures with respect to the actual world are now
licensed, as they apply to an arbitrary world of evaluation \( w \) in which the
presupposition is satisfied. In the second case, the notion of distance between
possible worlds has given us a way to characterize presupposition failures and
empirical falsehoods as both outlandish, in that they can both be true only in
worlds distant from the actual world, and hence work equally well to render the
meaning of backhanded sentences.

That the above inferential mechanism derives the result that either \( p \) or \( \neg p \) is
outlandish, in the case of conditional and disjunctive backhanded sentences,
respectively, is also extremely helpful in answering to the remaining desiderata.
As stated previously in Desideratum V, we want to account for why the
affirmation or denial of the actual world of the first clause of backhanded
sentences seems somehow stronger than a bare assertion to the same effect. This
intuition is captured in concluding that the implied meaning of backhanded
sentences is not merely that \( p \) is true or false in the actual world, but rather to
pronounce either that either that \( p \) is outlandish, in the case of conditional
sentences, or that its negation is outlandish, in the case of disjunctive sentences.
The claim that a proposition is outlandish is stronger than the claim that it is false
with respect to the actual world—a point in addition that one must move quite
distance away from the actual world in order to make it true. And this
characterizes the emphasis of backhanded sentences: the proposition in question is
not merely false with respect to the actual world, but is somehow very false, in
that its truth is not even within a close sphere of possibility.

Thus the consideration of possible worlds and the ability to judge distance
between them gives speakers of a language a tool for emphasizing truth and
falsity; truth values need not be just stated as either-or matters pertaining to one
specific world of evaluation, but can also be situated at a remove from that world
for increased rhetorical effect. In the case of conditional backhanded sentences,
the result is that \( p \) is declared outlandish—the entire world to the actual world in
which \( p \) is true is distant from the actual world. A bare assertion like (10),
repeated here, is simply unable to convey this meaning, confined as it is to a
single world of evaluation.

(10) That's not art.

In the case of disjunctive backhanded sentences, the result is that \( \neg p \) is
outlandish—that one would have to stray quite a distance from the actual world in
order to make \( p \) false. This secures the truth of \( p \) more forcefully than a bare
assertion can, by noting that not only does \( p \) happen to be true in the actual world,
but also that it would take some serious uprooting of the way the actual world is
to make it false. The proposition is in a sense asserted to be very true with respect to the actual world.

We are now also in a better position to fulfill Desideratum VI and account for the failure of sentences like (11), repeated here.

(11) CONTEXT: *The speaker is wearing a dark gray shirt*

If [that's all], then [I'm wearing a light gray shirt].

These sentences do not accomplish what the backstruck sentence sets out to accomplish, because $q$ is not outlandish, and therefore $p$ is not asserted to be outlandish either. The response to such a sentence should be the hearer's confusion about the speaker's communicative goals. In (11), $p$ is inferred to be true within a realm of possibility that is very close to the actual world, since $q$ is true in worlds that are close to the actual one. Even if the interlocutor does interpret the speaker of (11) as proclaiming the falsity of $p$ in the actual world, the sentence also implies that $p$ is true in worlds that are very close to the actual one. In other words, $p$ is not inferred to be outlandish. Therefore, the conditional lacks the hyperbolic effect that follows from outlandishness and its meaning is weaker than a simple statement. In fact, a simple statement like *That's not all* leaves the possibility open that it may not be true in any worlds close to the actual one, while a conditional like (11) does trigger the inference that $p$ is true also in worlds close to the actual one. The sentence will remain bizarre and circumlocutory, as it accomplishes no more or only infinitesimally more than a bare assertion does, and in a confusing manner. In such a circumstance where $q$ is not outlandish, the sentence undershoots its goal by not moving $p$ far enough from the actual world, defeating the entire purpose of the mechanism we have been discussing.

If the meaning of backstruck sentences lies in declaring the outlandishness of $p$ or $\neg p$, rather than their mere falsity, then we should equally find cases where properly formed backstruck sentences overshoot their goal. That is, we should expect that using a backstruck sentence is inappropriate in cases where $p$, or $\neg p$, as the case may be, is false but outlandish. Imagine, for instance, that Jill asks Bob whether Joan is home, and further suppose that both Jill and Bob agree that there is nothing unreasonable about thinking either that Joan is home or that she is not. In other words, neither case is outlandish, as both lie close to the actual world, though one is false. (17) should then be infelicitous.

(17) If Joan is home, then my pet dinosaur can fly.

(17) implies that it is somehow not only false, but ridiculous, i.e., outlandish, that Joan should be home; this makes sense only if we assume that Joan is never home, and so it is unreasonable for us to assume that she would be. But if this is not assumed, then (17) elicits a meaning inappropriate to the situation. This corroborates the conclusion that the purpose of (17) as a backstruck sentence is to declare $p$, Joan is home, not merely false, but also outlandish.

The account given here of backstruck sentences accomplishes three important tasks. First, it presents a case of natural language's sensitivity to measures of distance between possible situations, and shows that speakers exploit their knowledge of this distance in order to make rhetorical use of this sensitivity. Second, it provides further theoretical motivation for measuring distance between possible worlds by providing a "distant" counterpart to theories that make use of notions of "closeness," as in accounts of counterfactuals and ordering sources. Finally, it shows a rhetorical phenomenon previously thought to be purely pragmatic or conventional to be semantically grounded in a principled way.

References


