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Apparent syntax-semantics mismatches in the distribution of adverbs. Why semantics alone is not enough

A reply to Fortuin (2022)

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Abstract

Fortuin (2022) argues that the syntactic analysis of two types of syntax-semantics mismatches in the distribution of adverbs proposed in Barbiers (2018) can be reduced to semantics. This would have the advantage that syntactic movement does not need to be assumed. Although I agree that the syntactic analysis I provided in (2018), and, more generally, the syntactic hierarchy of adverbs proposed in Cinque (1999), needs to be complemented with a semantic analysis, I would like to claim in this reply that the semantic analysis provided by Fortuin cannot do the job and does not make syntactic movement a superfluous ingredient of the analysis.

1. Introduction

In Barbiers (2018), I discussed the two types of apparent syntax-semantics mismatches in the distribution of adverbs exemplified in (1) and (2). In (1), the adverb *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ surfaces in the embedded clause but must be interpreted in the matrix clause. In (2) the adverb *helaas* ‘unfortunately’ surfaces in the main clause but can be interpreted in the embedded clause.

- (1) Ik denk [dat ze **eerlijk gezegd** voor Rooney gaan].
I think that they honestly for Rooney go.
‘Honestly, I think that they will go for Rooney.’

- (2) Ik denk helaas [dat Jan niet wint].
 I think unfortunately that Jan not wins
 ‘Unfortunately, I think that Jan will not win.’
 ‘I think that Jan unfortunately will not win.’

I proposed to analyze mismatch type 1 as a case in which the adverb is in its base position while the matrix verb has moved upward/leftward across it from a position right below/to the right of the adverb, and mismatch type 2 as a case in which the adverb has moved from its base position within the embedded clause into a position in the middle field of the main clause. Thus, the two types of mismatches are only apparent as the adverbs in these mismatches are interpreted in their base positions, next to the part of the clause that they modify.

I also claimed that the following generalizations hold:

- A. Mismatch type 1 with *denken* ‘think’ as the matrix verb is restricted to speech act adverbs such as *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ and other adverb types that are very high in the hierarchy of adverbs proposed in Cinque (1999), such as the exocomparative adverbs *trouwens* and *overigens* ‘by the way’.
- B. Mismatch type 1 with *willen* ‘want’ as the matrix verb is restricted to volitional adverbs such as *per se* ‘definitely’.
- C. Both types of mismatches are only possible with bridge verbs as the matrix verbs, such as *denken* ‘think’ and *willen* ‘want’, i.e. verbs that also allow other transparency phenomena such as long WH-dependencies.

Any analysis of the two apparent mismatch types should explain the generalizations in A-C.

2. Generalizations A and B: Restrictions on adverb types

Fortuin (2022) provides the following explanation for generalizations A and B: ‘Only those adverbs which naturally pertain to the verb in the main clause due to their meaning can be placed in the subordinate clause.’ This explanation raises the following questions:

- (i) What does ‘naturally’ mean in this context?
- (ii) What are the principles that determine adverb placement?

- (iii) Why would an adverb that modifies the main clause or the matrix verb be placed in the embedded clause, given that this could complicate the processing and the interpretation of the sentence?

I will first address question (i). Other types of adverbs, for instance frequentative adverbs such as *altijd* ‘always’ and *vaak* ‘often’, do not allow apparent mismatches of type 1. When they occur in the embedded clause they cannot be interpreted in the matrix clause, unlike speech act adverbs such as *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ (example 3). Fortuin’s claim seems to be that frequentative adverbs do not naturally pertain to the verb in the main clause. However, sentences such as (4) are completely natural and, as far as I know, there are no differences in the frequency of their use that would justify the claim that *denk eerlijk gezegd* ‘think honestly’ would be more natural than *denk altijd* ‘think always’ and *denk vaak* ‘think often’. For example, informal Google searches give 69,300 hits for the string *denk altijd* ‘think always’, 30,000 for *denk vaak* ‘think often’ and 38,000 for *denk eerlijk gezegd* ‘think honestly’.

- (3) Ik denk [dat zij **altijd/vaak** wint].
 I think that she always/often wins
 ‘I think that she will always/often win.’
 # ‘I always/often think that she will win.’
- (4) Ik denk **altijd/vaak** [dat zij wint].
 I think always/often that she wins
 ‘I often/always think that she will win.’

In the absence of a more specific definition of ‘naturally’, this concept does not have explanatory force.

As for question (ii), Fortuin proposes the following rules:

- (5) Rules for adverb placement (Fortuin 2022)
- (a) The basis of the word order phenomena are the meanings of the adverbs and the verbs and the way they meaningfully combine.
 - (b) The general rule is that the adverb pertains to the verb of the clause in which it occurs. As such, the main (matrix) clause and subordinate (complement) clause partly behave as separate domains.
 - (c) Rule (b) can be overruled by the meaning of the adverb and/or the verb.

Rules (5a) and (5b) are uncontroversial. Ernst (2002) argues that an adverb attaches to the part of the clause that it can modify given its lexically specified meaning. From left to right (and high to low in a syntactic tree), a clause can be roughly divided in a discourse-related domain, a mood/modality domain, a (temporal) anchoring domain, an aspectual domain and an event domain. This would correspond syntactically to CP, Mo(o)dP, TP, AspP and VP. An adverb that attaches to one of these levels will modify that level. Adverbs that cannot modify a particular level due to their lexically specified meaning will not attach to that level (unless they can be ‘repaired’, cf. Barbiers 2018). In such an approach, syntax and semantics go hand in hand. Cinque’s (1999) approach is largely compatible with Ernst (2002), except that Cinque argues that there is a much more fine-grained and universal syntactic hierarchy of adverb types. The question whether that hierarchy (or Ernst’s division of the clause) can be reduced to semantic principles has been under debate since Cinque’s book appeared (cf., for instance, Ramchand and Svenonius 2014) and the issue is unsettled, as far as I know.

Rules (5a) and (5b) directly account for unmarked adverb placement, but not for the apparent syntax-semantics mismatches under discussion. The full burden then falls on rule (5c) to explain these mismatches and this requires an elaborated analysis of the meaning aspects that would play a role here. Importantly, notice that in Barbiers (2018) rule (5b) is not overruled, ~~as the adverbs~~ in apparent mismatches of type 1 modify the relevant part of the clause in their base position (and do not move).

Fortuin (2022) says that answering question (iii) above is beyond the scope of his paper. His goal is to explain why such mismatches are possible, not why speakers use them. For Barbiers (2018), the answer to (iii) is straightforward. Such mismatches occur because they are no real mismatches. The base structures of sentences showing these apparent mismatches fully obey the rules of unmarked adverb placement (such as 5a,b), but the workings of these rules are obscured by subsequent, independently motivated ~~verb~~ movement operations that produce surface orders in which the adverb no longer seems to have scope over the matrix verb. Crucially, ~~it does have scope over the matrix verb in its base position.~~

Fortuin argues that the adverb can be interpreted in the matrix clause because there is not any possible interpretation of the adverb in the embedded clause, given the meaning of the adverb. If there was a general rule that constituents that cannot be interpreted in the embedded clause can find an interpretation in the matrix clause, then it is unclear why *tegen Jan* ‘to Jan’ or *hardop* ‘aloud’ in (6b) cannot be interpreted in the main clause and why the sentence is ungrammatical.

- (6) a. Ik zei tegen Jan/hardop [dat het mooi weer is].
I said to Jan/aloud that it nice weather is
'I said to Jan/aloud that it is nice weather.'
- b. *Ik zei [dat het tegen Jan/hardop mooi weer is].
I said that it against Jan nice weather is.

3. Generalization C: why only bridge verbs?

Generalization C states that these apparent syntax-semantics mismatches are only possible with bridge verbs (e.g., *denken* 'think'), as opposed to factive verbs (e.g., *weten* 'know').

The contrast is illustrated in (7).

- (7) a. Ik denk [dat ze eerlijk gezegd voor Rooney gaan].
I think that they honestly for Rooney go
'I honestly think they will go for Rooney.'
- b. *Ik weet [dat ze eerlijk gezegd voor Rooney gaan].
I know that they honestly go for Rooney

Barbiers (2018) explains this contrast as follows. While a matrix bridge verb originates in a syntactic position right below/to the right of the 'misplaced' adverb and moves up/leftward across it, a matrix factive verb originates and remains in a syntactic position above/to the left of the relevant adverb, such that the adverb will never take scope over that factive verb.

Fortuin (2022) argues that the restriction to bridge verbs is due to semantic-pragmatic properties. He claims that combining *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' with verbs such as *weten* 'to know' and *toegeven* 'admit' is pragmatically odd (cf. 8a,b), which would make an interpretation of such an adverb in the matrix clause difficult, even when it is placed in the matrix clause. The explanation for (7b) would then be that there is no possible interpretation for *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' in the embedded clause and that interpreting the adverb in the matrix clause would be pragmatically odd.

- (8) a. ?Eerlijk gezegd weet ik dat ... Fortuin (2022; ex 15)
honestly know I that ...
- b. ?Eerlijk gezegd geef ik toe dat ... Fortuin (2022; ex 16)
honestly admit I PART

I agree that (8a,b) are pragmatically odd, but I don't think that this can explain the ungrammaticality of sentences such as (7b). I put aside (8b) because there seems to be an additional complication there, as the meanings of *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' and *toegeven* 'admit' are redundant. If you admit something, you are honest about it.

As for (8a), Fortuin correctly points out that in the right context the pragmatic oddness disappears, and also when matrix negation is added to the sentence (9a). But other modifiers, such as *al* 'already' can do the job as well, even without context (9b). Given the reasoning just given, one would expect (7b) to improve considerably with such modifiers, but that is not the case (9c,d).

- (9) a. Eerlijk gezegd weet ik niet of ... Fortuin (2022; ex 18b)
 honestly know I not whether
 'Honestly, I don't know whether ...'
- b. Eerlijk gezegd weet ik al dat ...
 honestly know I already that ...
 'Honestly, I already know that ...'
- c. *Ik weet niet of ze **eerlijk gezegd** komt. Fortuin (2022, ex. 19d)
 I know not whether she honestly comes
 'Honestly, I do not know whether she will come.'
- d. *Ik weet al dat ze **eerlijk gezegd** komt.
 I know already that she honestly comes
 'Honestly, I already know that she will come.'

Fortuin gives (9c) a question mark, but for me the sentence is as unacceptable as (7b), and I have not found any examples of this type with Google searches. Similarly, (9d) is unacceptable for me. If the cause of the ungrammaticality of (7b) was the pragmatic oddness of combining interpretively the adverb with the matrix verb, then (9c,d) should be fully acceptable given that pragmatic oddness does not play any role there, as (9a,b) show.

4. The Cinque hierarchy

Barbiers (2018) shows that finite clausal complements of the verbs *denken* 'think' and *willen* 'want' have different syntactic structures despite looking the same superficially. More specifically, in the complement of *willen* 'want' the higher layers of the clause, i.e. the speaker-oriented layer, the referential

tense layer and the epistemic modal layer are lacking and therefore, the corresponding adverbs cannot occur:

- (10) a. Ik denk [dat ze eerlijk gezegd/helaas/misschien niet komen].
I think that they honestly/unfortunately/maybe not come
b. *Ik wil [dat ze eerlijk gezegd/helaas/misschien niet komen].
I want that they honestly/unfortunately/maybe not come

Fortuin argues that this can be explained semantically because the meaning of *willen* ‘want’ is incompatible with the meaning of the relevant adverbs. I agree, but that does not imply that the semantic explanation takes priority over or is any deeper than the syntactic explanation. I would rather say, and this was also the claim in Barbiere (2018), that the syntactic explanation and the semantic explanation are two sides of the same coin in this domain. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the syntactic defectiveness of finite complements of *willen* ‘want’ and the impossibility for certain adverb types to occur there and to be interpreted there. Syntax can be reduced to semantics here, but semantics can also be reduced to syntax.

5. A potential counterexample to a semantic explanation

In apparent mismatches of type 2, an adverb that surfaces in the matrix clause can (but need not) be interpreted in the embedded clause (cf. 11). In my 2018 analysis, the base position of the adverb in the first interpretation is in the middle field of the main clause, while the adverb has raised from the embedded clause in the second interpretation.

- (11) a. Ik denk *helaas* [dat Jan niet wint].
I think unfortunately that Jan not wins.
I. unfortunately > think: ‘Unfortunately, I think that Jan will not win.’
II. think > unfortunately: ‘I think that Jan unfortunately will not win.’
b. Ik denk *ook* [dat ze zal bellen].
I think also that she will call
I. also > think ‘I also think that she will call.’
II. think > also ‘I think that she will also call.’

Fortuin raises the question why *helaas* ‘unfortunately’, when it surfaces in the embedded clause, cannot be interpreted in the main clause, whereas *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ can. This despite the fact that *helaas* ‘unfortunately’

can surface and then be interpreted in the main clause quite naturally. I am not sure that I fully understand his explanation in terms of evaluative meanings, but I don't think evaluation is a relevant factor here, as the same problem arises with non-evaluative adverbs such as *ook* 'also' and *weer* 'again'.

If I had to defend his semantic explanation, however, I would say that such adverbs cannot be interpreted in the main clause when they surface in the embedded clause because of a preference to interpret an adverb in the position where it surfaces. In the case of *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly', it is impossible to interpret it in the embedded clause and then the interpretation shifts to the matrix clause. In the case of adverbs involved in apparent mismatches of type 2, the embedded interpretation is possible and clearly distinct from the matrix interpretation. Therefore, the interpretation of this adverb in the embedded clause cannot shift to the matrix clause. This distinctness of interpretations is illustrated in (12).

- (12) a. Ik denk [dat ik weer ziek ben], (#maar ik ben nooit eerder ziek geweest).
 I think that I again sick am, but I am never earlier sick been
 'I think that I am sick again, (#but I have never been sick before).'
- b. Ik denk weer [dat ik ziek ben], (maar ik ben nooit eerder ziek geweest).
 I think again that I sick am, but I am never earlier sick been
 I. 'I think again that I am sick (but I have never been sick before).'
- II. 'I think that I am sick again.'

In the first interpretation, the sentence in (12b) allows for the continuation between brackets, because this sentence only makes a claim about repetitive thoughts about sickness, not about repetitive instances of sickness. In (12a), we find the opposite. Shifting the interpretation of the adverb in (12a) to the matrix clause would yield a clearly distinct matrix interpretation. With respect to this particular point, the semantic and syntactic explanations seem to be equally good. It is unclear, however, how the semantic account could explain why certain adverb types surfacing in the matrix clause can have an embedded interpretation, given that the matrix interpretation (cf. 12b-I) does not imply the embedded interpretation (cf. 12b-II). The syntactic raising analysis proposed in Barbiers (2018) does explain this.

6. Conclusion

The syntax-semantics mismatches in the distribution of adverbs discussed in Barbiers (2018) are only apparent mismatches if analyzed as the result of verb movement (mismatch 1) and adverb movement (mismatch 2). An exclusively semantic analysis as proposed in Fortuin (2022) does not explain why such apparent mismatches occur and why there are restrictions on the types of adverbs that can occur in these mismatches. At the same time, for part of the observations the syntactic analysis and the semantic analysis seem to be two sides of the same coin. More work needs to be done, as a true explanation of the adverbial hierarchy proposed in Cinque (1999), whether syntactic or semantic, is still lacking.

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