CHAPTER 2: SAYING THE SAME THING

“What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.’

‘A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably’.

In ordinary English, we use the terms ‘sentence’, ‘statement’ and ‘proposition’ interchangeably but for some purposes we'll want to distinguish between them. In particular, when it comes to deciding when people are ‘saying the same thing’ we shall distinguish between the question of whether they are uttering the same sentence, making the same statement or expressing the same proposition.

1 DIFFERENT WAYS OF COUNTING

Sentences, statements and propositions are not three different kinds of things: the question of whether we have the same sentence, same statement or same proposition signals different ways of counting the same things. We can count things in different ways by grouping them according to different features. Counting in the most fine-grained way—‘counting by token’—every individual object counts as one. There are 10 individual pieces of fruit here:

But we could also count fruits by kind: counting in this way, by fruit type, there are three fruits here: apple, cherry and avocado:
Alternatively, we could count by color. There are two colors: red and green.

The point is that kinds and colors aren’t additional objects over and above individual pieces of fruit. Rather counting by kind and counting by color are different ways of counting the same things, in this case individual pieces of fruit. The same goes for counting sentences. We can group them differently and, on the basis of these different groupings, count them in different ways.

There is no mystery about what sentences are. A sentence is a physical object, made of sounds, quantities of ink or pixels, which is used to do a linguistic job. A sentence consists of words of a language arranged according to the grammatical conventions of that language. People use sentences to do a variety of jobs, e.g. to ask questions, make promises, give orders and make statements. Sentences that make statements, typically declarative sentences, have truth value, that is, truth-or-falsity, in virtue of the truth value of the statements they make. Not all meaningful sentences have truth value however. Questions, for example, may have ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, but they aren’t, strictly speaking, true of false; orders may be obeyed or disobeyed.
but they aren't, literally, true or false. We are interested in sentences that make statements, those that may be true or false, and in different ways of counting those sentences.

2 COUNTING BY SENTENCE TOKEN AND SENTENCE TYPE

When we use words like ‘identical’, ‘same’ and their cognates there is often a type-token ambiguity that comes about because we don’t know what kind of counting is intended.

They wore the same dress

The women on the left are wearing different tokens of the same type dress. Those on the right are wearing the same token dress.

In counting sentences, too, we can count by token or by type. Suppose I write:

(1) John is Paul's brother

(2) John is Paul's brother

In one sense I said the same thing when I wrote (1) and (2): (1) and (2) are the same type sentence, that is, they consist of the same words in the same order. But they are not the same token sentence, that is, they aren't the very same individual physical object, but are different objects, occupying different places, consisting of different bits of ink (or pixels if you're reading this online).
At this point you may be tempted to ask: ‘What’s a type?’ ‘What’s a token’. In an important sense that is the wrong question to ask because it assumes that there are such things as *types* and *tokens* over and above the business of counting-by-type and counting-by-token. Though back in elementary school we were told that nouns were ‘names of persons, places or things’ this isn’t quite right. In English, and other natural languages, not all nouns do the job of naming or referring. Some nouns figure in idioms, and don’t refer to anything:

(3) A is the same **height** as B

But there isn’t a third thing, a height, in addition to A and B: there are just two bears.

(4) John did the wash for Mary’s sake

But there is just John, Mary and the Wash—this isn’t, in addition to the people and laundry, such a thing as a ‘sake’.
There aren’t any such things as sakes and heights in the world, even though language may mislead us into thinking that they are. The heights and sakes in (3) and (4) can be paraphrased away as something like:

(3’) A and B are equally tall.

(4’) John did the wash in order to benefit Mary.

In the same way we could paraphrase away types and tokens: Sentence (1) is type-identical to Sentence (2), but (1) is not token-identical to (2). There aren’t two different kinds of things, token-sentences and type-sentences. There are just two different ways of counting sentences: we can count-by-sentence-token or count-by-sentence-type. Counting-by-token means counting each utterance or inscription as one. Counting-by-type is counting groups of sentences, in particular those that are of more or less the same shape. Sentences are of the same type when they consist of the same (type) words in the same order, as is the case with (1) and (2).

But there are different ways of grouping sentences and so different ways of counting them. We could, for example, group them by meaning. We can, that is, count sentences by the propositions they express. Once again, however, propositions aren’t an additional kind of thing. Rather counting-by-proposition is another way of counting the same kinds of things, viz. sentences.

3 COUNTING BY PROPOSITION

Propositions are what sentences express; they may be understood as the meanings of sentences. Thus the sentences (1) and (2) above, since they mean the same thing, express one and the same proposition. However, different sentence types may also express the same proposition. (1), (2) and (3) express the same proposition.

(1) John is Paul’s brother

(2) John is Paul’s brother

(5) John is the male sibling of Paul.

Although (3) is not the same type (or token!) sentence as (1) and (2) it is synonymous with them: all three sentences have the same sense or dictionary meaning so they express the same proposition.

Conversely, sometimes the same sentence can have more than one meaning: sentences, like (6), which can express different propositions, are ambiguous:
(6) Last night I shot an elephant in my pajamas.

Groucho disambiguated (6) by adding, ‘And what he was doing in my pajamas I’ll never know’.

4 CONTEXT DEPENDENCE: COUNTING BY STATEMENT

Some sentences are context dependent, that is, what they say depends upon the context in which they are said, that is: by whom they are said, the time or place at which they are said or other features of the speaker’s situation.

Consider the following sentences, as stated on the days indicated in brackets (note, the bracketed expressions aren’t parts of the sentences but just indicate when they are uttered):

(7) [stated September 11, 2014] Today is Thursday.

(8) [stated September 12, 2014] Today is Thursday.

(9) [stated September 12, 2014] Yesterday was Thursday.

‘Today is Thursday’ is context-dependent: what it says, in one way, depends on when it is said. (7) says that September 11, 2014 is a Thursday; (8) says that September 12, 2014 is a Thursday. But in another way, insofar as (7) and (8) express the same proposition, they still say the same thing: they have the same sense or dictionary meaning. So ‘saying the same thing’ is ambiguous. When we say that two sentences—or two people—are saying the same thing we might mean that what they say has the same dictionary meaning or, alternatively, we might mean that they’re ascribing the same properties to the same bit of the world—that they’re saying the same thing about the same thing. (7) and (8), uttered on September 11 and
September 12 respectively, have the same dictionary meaning but they aren’t talking about the same thing: they’re talking about different days, viz. September 11, 2014 and September 12, 2014 respectively. (9), however, is saying the same thing about the same day as (7) even though it doesn’t have the same dictionary meaning as (7): today is yesterday tomorrow! The moral: the question of whether two sentences, or two speakers, are ‘saying the same thing’ is ambiguous—and confusing.

To eliminate confusion between these two different ways of saying the same thing we introduce a fussy distinction between expressing the same proposition and making the same statement—and understand the latter as saying the same thing about the same thing. (7) and (8) are not about the same thing: (7) says something about the day September 11, 2014; (8) says the same thing about September 12, 2014. So we will say that they make different statements, even though they express the same proposition, that is, have the same dictionary-meaning. But (9) makes the same statement as (7) so, although it expresses a different proposition from (7), we will say that it makes the same statement, namely that September 11, 2014 is a Thursday.

Again, there are no such things as statements or propositions as distinct from sentences in the world on the account suggested here. There are, once again, just different ways of counting sentences. For convenience we’ve decided to use the terminology of ‘same statement’ and ‘same proposition’ to represent different ways of grouping sentences.

5 THE MEANING OF MEANING

‘Meaning’ is ambiguous: when we think of the ‘meaning’ of a word or expression what we usually have in mind is its sense or dictionary meaning. Sometimes, though (as when I say ‘I mean you!’) the word ‘mean’ means aboutness, or reference. The mathematician Gottlob Frege made the distinction between sense and reference in his article ‘Auf Sinn und Bedeutung’ (‘On Sense and Reference’) We can understand sense as dictionary meaning, as when we say, ‘‘bachelor’ means ‘unmarried male who never has been married.’ Reference is aboutness, or picking-out—meaning as in ‘I mean you!’ Crudely, we can think of the sense of a word as the idea (though Frege argued that senses were not ideas in the head but abstract public objects!) The sense of a word is what people who understand that word grasp, but which people who don’t understand it don’t grasp—what we ordinarily think of as the meaning of a word. The reference of a word is the thing it picks out.
English and other natural languages include a variety of indexicals, words whose reference changes systematically depending where, when, by whom or in what circumstances they are said. These include pronouns like ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘she’ and ‘he’, demonstratives including ‘this’ and ‘that’, and a whole range of other words including ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘today’, ‘yesterday’ and so on. These words don’t change their sense when uttered by different people at different times or places or in different circumstances. ‘I’ always has the sense, ‘the first person singular’, but when uttered by different people it refers to different people. The sense of ‘here’ is ‘the vicinity of the speaker’ but it the word ‘here’ picks out different places when uttered by speakers who are at different places.
‘Here’ in an indexical: the place it picks out depends on where the speaker is. So these guys aren’t disagreeing: they’re talking about different places!

Indexicals make sentences in which they occur *context-dependent*. And when sentences are context-dependent you can have same proposition/different statement or different proposition/same statement. (1), (2), and (5) are not context-dependent: they all express the same proposition and make the same statement wherever, whenever, in what circumstances and by whomever they are spoken.

(1) John is Paul’s brother
(2) John is Paul’s brother
(5) John is the male sibling of Paul

(7) - (9) are context-dependent: the statements they make depend on the context in which they are spoken, in particular, the date on which they are said.

(7) [stated September 11, 2014] Today is Thursday.
(8) [stated September 12, 2014] Today is Thursday.
(9) [stated September 12, 2014] Yesterday was Thursday.

Once again, don’t ask what types and tokens, statements and propositions ‘really’ are—because they aren’t! Talking about them as if they were objects alongside individual sentences is convenient but misleading. Instead we should think of counting by sentence token, sentence type, proposition and statement as different ways of counting the same items—like counting a group of students by individual student, by major, by class year.

Sentences may both express the same proposition and make the same statement. And sometimes they do. But sometimes they don’t.
THE MORAL OF THE STORY

When we ask whether two speakers are ‘saying the same thing’ we need to be clear about what we’re asking. Are we asking whether they’re expressing the same proposition? Whether they’re making the same statement? Or whether they’re uttering the same noises (or making the same marks).

5.1 SO WHAT KIND OF QUESTIONS COULD THERE BE ON A TEST ABOUT THIS?

An example of a question on counting by sentence token, sentence type, statement and proposition (from a past test):

True of False? (see the Cinderella story above)

___ 1  Cinderella and Ugly are uttering the same type sentence.

___ 2  Cinderella and Ugly are uttering the same type sentence.

___ 3  Cinderella and Ugly are expressing the same proposition.

___ 3  Cinderella and Prince are making the same statement.

___ 4  Cinderella and Prince are expressing the same proposition.
6 THE PUZZLE ABOUT NECESSARY TRUTHS

Now that we’ve distinguished between different ways of “saying the same thing” we’re in a position to return to the puzzle about necessary truths, which recall, went like this:

How can anything be logically impossible...or logically necessary?!!? We can always describe a "world" in which a given state of affairs obtains, if we’re clever. Take "all bachelors are unmarried": I can describe a world were "bachelor" means "male under 30" and such a world is one in which there are married bachelors, right? Similarly "2+2=4" and "2+2=5": it’s just a matter of how you define the symbols, right?

This argument can be generalized: it is contingent that any given word has the sense it does: we can change language so it seems there can be no necessary truths! But this is crazy: changing language doesn’t change the world! So we have to respond to this threat!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 + 2 = 4 - true</th>
<th>2 + 2 = 5 - false</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>English*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = ****</td>
<td>4 = *****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = *****</td>
<td>5 = ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual World</td>
<td>W* (another possible world)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Can we really conceive of, or coherently describe, a world at which there are married bachelors or where 2 + 2 ≠ 4? Recall that when we argued that ‘San Diego is in California’ was contingent we weren’t initially successful in telling a story about a possible world at which our fair city was somewhere else. Our first attempt was, rather, a story according to which there was a city named ‘San Diego’ in Texas which, it turned out, was a different San Diego from the one we know and love. This means that we’ve gotta be careful: sometimes we think we’re imagining a possible world of a certain kind when we’re really imagining a different kind of possible world.

This, I claim, is what’s going on when we think we’re imagining a possible world at which there are married bachelors or one at which 2 + 2 = 5. You may think that w* is a possible world at which 2 + 2 = 5...
But think again. Arguably w* is a world at which speakers make the noises (and write the marks) ‘2+2=5’ to mean what we mean when we say ‘2+2=4’! The number English* speakers call ‘5’ is a different number from the number we call ‘5’ that happens, in their language, to have the same name as the number we call ‘4’. To show that ‘San Diego is in California’ was contingent we needed to describe a possible world in which this city was somewhere else—not a world in which there was a city somewhere else that happened to have to same name. To show that ‘2+2=4’ was contingent we would have to describe a possible world in which the numbers we talk about when we say ‘2’ and ‘4’ don’t add up—not a possible world, like w*, where different numbers have the same names!

When English speakers and English* speakers say ‘2 + 2 = 5’ they don’t mean the same thing. They aren’t saying the same thing in the requisite sense, that is, they aren’t expressing the same proposition.

They’re making the different noises but expressing the same mathematical truth--which is true at all possible worlds!

English-Speaker and English*-Speaker are expressing the same proposition (and making the same statement) even though they are uttering different type sentences! These sentences in those two different languages have the same sense.
Now they’re making the same noises but expressing the different mathematical propositions.

So in ‘moving’ from the actual world to \( w^* \), shifting from English to English*, we don’t change the mathematical fact that \( ** + * = **** \) is true but \( ** + * = ***** \) is false. We just change then subject so to speak. We’re no longer talking about the mathematical truth that \( ** + * = **** \): we’re expressing the mathematical falsehood that \( * + * = ***** \) The first is true at all possible worlds; the second is false at all possible worlds. Mathematical propositions are either necessarily true or necessarily false, even if it is a contingent matter how we express them!
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In ordinary English "identical" and "same" are ambiguous: sometimes we mean same type, other times we mean same token. Give examples of situations in which we mean same type and situations in which we mean same token, e.g. what do we mean when we talk about "identical twins"?

2. Give an example of a situation in which different sentences can be used to express the same proposition. [synonymy]

3. Give an example of a situation in which the same sentence may be used to express different propositions. [ambiguity]

4. Give an example of a situation in which sentences that express the same proposition are used to make different statements.

5. Give an example of a situation in which sentences that express different propositions are used to make the same statement.