

Cross-linguistic disagreement is possible:

Eight arguments*

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Abstract: Cross-linguistic disagreement occurs when a speaker of one language asserts some declarative sentence S and a speaker of another language denies the translation of S, without misunderstanding or factual error informing either assertion. This paper presents eight arguments that cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

keywords: language; disagreement; agreement; lying; bilingualism

Introduction

For present purposes, a cross-linguistic disagreement occurs when a speaker of one language asserts some declarative sentence S and a speaker of another language denies the translation of S, without misunderstanding or factual error informing either assertion. The two assertions needn't occur in the same context, at approximately the same time, or even in awareness of the other. By "misunderstanding" I mean failing to correctly interpret the meaning of the sentence in question. By "factual error informing the assertion" I mean basing the assertion on a falsehood. Importantly,

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the assertion itself being false does not imply that it is based on a falsehood.

Regarding the ordinary sense of “disagreement,” I do not believe the requirement of *factual error informing neither assertion* is essential. If either or even both of the contradictory assertions was based on factual error, that would not tend to prevent us from classifying it as a disagreement; instead, the factual error would be a presumptive explanation for the disagreement. Or so it seems to me, so I flag it here explicitly in order to forestall confusion.

By contrast, the requirement of *no misunderstanding* might come closer to capturing something about the ordinary sense of “disagreement.” If one person says, “Oysters are sea life,” and another person says, “No, they are not,” then they have disagreed. However, if the second person mistakenly thought that the first person said, “Oysters are felines,” then I am tempted to say that it wasn’t *really* a disagreement, but rather just a misunderstanding. Or perhaps it’s a superficial and easily resolved disagreement and therefore a disagreement after all? Again, this is just to call further attention to a potential contrast with the technical definition of *cross-linguistic disagreement* given above, to forestall confusion.

My thesis is that cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. I will offer eight arguments for that thesis. In doing so, I will use sentences from contemporary English and Spanish, including the following sentences, which are translations of one another (negations in parentheses): “Dogs are (not) wolves” and “Los perros (no) son lobos.”

The basic idea behind most of the arguments is to locate a variable that can vary without causing misunderstanding or factual error to inform either assertion. These variables include whether a speaker agrees or disagrees with a sentence, a speaker’s epistemic policy, a speaker’s epistemic mood, a belief’s basis, a speaker’s choice, the incursion of randomness, and whether a

speaker lies.

Arguments

Argument from agreement. Cross-linguistic *agreement* occurs when a speaker of one language asserts some declarative sentence S and a speaker of another language asserts the translation of S, without misunderstanding or factual error informing either assertion. If cross-linguistic agreement is possible, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. And cross-linguistic agreement is possible. Therefore, cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

For example, an English-speaking student examines the evidence and asserts, “Dogs are wolves,” and a Spanish-speaking student examines the same evidence and asserts, “Los perros son lobos.” They agree on the point in question, resulting in cross-linguistic agreement. Now it is possible to change exactly one detail about the case: the English-speaking student instead drew the opposite conclusion (or, alternatively, changes his mind), “Dogs are not wolves.” If there is cross-linguistic agreement in the initial version of the case — as I maintain there is — then there is cross-linguistic disagreement in the ever-so-slightly revised version.

Argument from policy change. An epistemic policy is an imperative sentence, or set of imperative sentences, setting a standard for endorsing information. If it’s possible for a bilingual person to change epistemic policies without basing the change on a factual error, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. And it is possible for a bilingual person to change epistemic policies without basing the change on a factual error. Therefore, cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

An example can help illustrate. Julio is a bilingual (Spanish/English) man who has a habit of cycling through epistemic policies of varying strictness on different days of the week. Today he holds a relatively strict epistemic policy. Before going to bed, he reads an article arguing that dogs are wolves. It doesn't satisfy his strict policy and he asserts, "Los perros no son lobos." Then he goes to bed. The next morning he awakens, changes to a slightly laxer epistemic policy, reads the same article, and says, "Dogs are wolves." Julio's present and former selves disagree on the point in question.

To be clear, neither time does Julio reason even partially from a factual premise that the article's argument does or doesn't satisfy his current epistemic policy. The policy guides the rejection or acceptance of the relevant sentence, but not as a premise.

Argument from mood change. An epistemic mood is a generic mental disposition pertaining to how readily one accepts information. Unlike a policy, it is not aptly expressed in an imperative sentence, but rather corresponds more to a general feeling without propositional form or content. If we like, we can think of it as an index of how skeptical or gullible — or, alternatively, how contrarian or agreeable — a person tends to be when encountering information. If it's possible for two people who speak different languages to have different epistemic moods, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. And it is possible for two people who speak different languages to have different epistemic moods. Therefore, cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

Again, let's illustrate with an example. Edgar is an English speaker in a gullible mood and Sarita is a Spanish speaker in a contrarian mood. Edgar reads an article that classifies dogs and wolves as different species and concludes, in gullible fashion, "Dogs are not wolves." Sarita reads

a perfect translation of the same article and concludes, in contrarian fashion, “Los perros son lobos.” They disagree on the point in question.

Argument from baseless beliefs. A baseless belief is a belief held in its own right and not based on any claim. (Note: *baseless* in this sense isn’t a negative evaluation — as in “baseless accusations” — but merely a description of the belief’s etiology.) If it’s possible for two people who speak different languages to have contradictory baseless beliefs, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. And it is possible for two people who speak different languages to have contradictory baseless beliefs. Therefore, cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

To illustrate with an example, consider Eli and Sonja. Eli is an English speaker with a baseless belief he expresses with, “Dogs are wolves.” Sonja is a Spanish speaker with a baseless belief she expresses with, “Los perros no son lobos.” They disagree on the point in question.

Argument from voluntarism. Doxastic voluntarism is the view that it is possible to choose either to believe or to disbelieve a proposition at a given time. The view does not imply that it is always possible to choose one’s doxastic state, only that it is sometimes possible. Nor does the view imply that one can believe against the evidence, no matter how strong. If doxastic voluntarism is true, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. And doxastic voluntarism is true (Turri, Buckwalter & Rose 2018; Cusimano & Goodwin 2019). Therefore, cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

To make this more concrete with an example, suppose Eric is an English speaker and Sonja is a Spanish speaker. Eric reads an article that classifies dogs and wolves as different species. Sonja reads a perfect translation of the same article. And let this be one of those occasions where Eric and Sonja are each able to choose either to believe or disbelieve the article’s conclusion. Eric

chooses to believe and says, “Dogs are not wolves.” Sonja chooses to disbelieve and says, “Los perros no son lobos.” Only their respective choices, or acts of will, distinguish the conclusion they draw. They disagree on the point in question.

Argument from randomness. An outcome is random if the totality of earlier facts plus the natural laws are consistent with the outcome occurring and consistent with it not occurring. If it is possible for a random belief change to occur, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. Whether outcomes are ever actually random, or merely seem random, is a notoriously thorny issue in physics and philosophy (Eagle 2018). My view is that some outcomes probably are random. So, on this basis, I conclude that cross-linguistic disagreement is probably possible too.

An example might better illustrate the idea. Ethan is an English speaker and Susanna a Spanish speaker. They both read translations of the same article in their respective languages and conclude “Dogs are wolves” or “Los perros son lobos.” Ethan and Susanna agree. Then Ethan’s view on the matter randomly changes, not because of any new information or re-evaluation of old information, but as the result of a random cellular event in his brain that causes a neural cascade leading to belief revision. Then Ethan says, “Dogs are not wolves.” Now Ethan and Susanna disagree on the point in question.

Argument from lying. To lie is to knowingly make a false assertion (Turri 2016: p. 34 ff.; Benton 2018; Holguín 2019; Turri 2020). Or, at least, if you make an assertion that you know is false, then you lie. If it is possible to lie, then cross-linguistic disagreement is possible. And it is possible to lie. Therefore, cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

For example, a Spanish-speaking student examines the evidence, concludes that dogs are wolves, and asserts, “Perros son lobos.” An English-speaking student examines the same evidence,

concludes that dogs are wolves, then decides to lie, “Dogs are not wolves.” There is no misunderstanding or factual error in either case. The discrepancy arises due to deceptive intent.

This example differs from the others considered above because it involves linguistic disagreement without a corresponding psychological disagreement. Both speakers have the same psychological representations of the relevant facts, differing only in their intent to be honest or deceptive and, consequently, assert or deny the key proposition. If the underlying psychological agreement prevents this from being a case of cross-linguistic disagreement, then the definition of cross-linguistic disagreement needs to be amended. Or, rather, it could suggest that our research focus is essentially psychological rather than linguistic.

Argument from intra-personal disagreement. As best I can tell, the central issues at stake in the other arguments and examples offered here aren’t essentially tied to the disagreements being *cross-linguistic*. In principle, one could raise analogous questions about the possibility of disagreement between speakers of different dialects of the same language, members of a monolingual community without distinct dialects, or even a single monolingual person at different points in time. If this observation is on the right track, then it suggests another argument for the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement:

Diachronic intra-personal disagreement occurs when one’s present self disagrees with one’s former self, without misunderstanding or factual error informing either assertion. (Synchronic intra-personal disagreement occurs when a “part” of one’s current self disagrees with another “part” of one’s current self; this is colloquially described as “being of two minds” about an issue.) If diachronic intra-personal disagreement is possible, then cross-cultural linguistic disagreement is

possible. And diachronic intra-personal disagreement is possible. Therefore, cross-cultural linguistic disagreement is possible.

Conclusion

In summary, I offered eight arguments supporting the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement. I submit that it is much more likely that at least one of these arguments succeeds than that cross-linguistic disagreement is impossible. Accordingly, at this point, we should provisionally conclude that cross-linguistic disagreement is possible.

When evaluating a hypothesis, it's good practice to survey evidence for and against it. However, in the present case, I'm unaware of any previous evidence offered for or against the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement. Moreover, while researching the matter, I was unable to identify a single reason to suspect that cross-linguistic disagreement was impossible. Perhaps this shouldn't be too surprising, though, because *impossibility* is a high bar to clear. Nevertheless, such a new question should not be treated as closed regardless of how the initial spate of arguments turn out.

Consistent with the possibility of cross-linguistic disagreement, there could still be concepts unique to users of a specific language (cf. Mizumoto 2018 on epistemic concepts in Japanese and English). In other words, from the fact that speakers of different languages can disagree about some things, it doesn't follow that they can disagree about all things. Of course, similar points also apply to speakers of the same language, because some of them could have unique concepts not shared by other members of their linguistic community. Indeed, a single individual could have

concepts at one time that he lacked at another; in fact, this is true of every normally developing human fortunate enough to survive childhood and into adulthood.

The basic idea behind most of my arguments was to vary something about a situation without causing misunderstanding or factual error to creep in. It is always possible to rephrase the guiding question to exclude variation of the relevant sorts. At some point, it might no longer be, or seem, possible to disagree without violating one of the restrictions. Assuming that the arguments given here are broadly correct, the guiding question will already have lengthened to at least the following form:

Is it possible for a speaker of one language to assert some declarative sentence S while a speaker of another language denies the translation of S, without misunderstanding, factual error informing either assertion, an epistemic policy change, a difference or change in mood, either assertion expressing a baseless belief, either assertion expressing a voluntarily chosen belief, either assertion expressing a randomly caused belief, or either speaker lying?

I submit that this question probably isn't worth pursuing.

Even if the question is successively lengthened to such a disjunctive monstrosity (or beyond), at least two of my arguments remain to be dealt with: the argument from agreement and the argument from intra-personal disagreement. I just don't see how, ultimately, *agreement* is any less challenging to achieve or puzzling than *disagreement*. Nor do I see how anything essential changes by making the situation *cross-linguistic* (or perhaps even *inter-personal*). Of course, depending on how long the list gets, perhaps it will be genuinely impossible to disagree *in any way, with anyone* without varying at least one of the forbidden features.

So why the disparate treatment of disagreement and agreement? Why would scholars question the possibility of disagreement without their doubt spreading to cover agreement in turn? One hypothesis begins with Thomas Hobbes's claim that we experience disagreement as "odious" and the cause of "the greatest discords." "To dissent" from someone's stated view is as insulting and disagreeable as calling them "a fool," says Hobbes (Hobbes 1642 [1949]: p. 26). If we naturally loathe disagreement and interpret it as an insult apt to breach the peace, then that could provide incentive to overlook it or even deny that it has occurred. Taken to its extreme, motivated cognition could lead us to question whether disagreement is even possible, while nothing motivates similar questions regarding agreement. Of course, disliking disagreement would likely never be offered explicitly as a reason to doubt its possibility. Instead, on this hypothesis, antipathy operates quietly beneath the surface to coax our explicit efforts in one direction or another.

One response to most of my arguments is to claim that every feature I varied causes, or counts as, misunderstanding or factual error informing the assertion. I would not have offered the arguments had I thought this construal was plausible, but others must judge for themselves. For example, I can't fathom how *lying* means you misunderstood the sentence at issue or based your judgment on a false assumption. Nor do I see how a change in your epistemic policy for assessing claims means that you misunderstood the sentence or based your judgment on a false assumption. Of course, we could choose to redefine terminology so that, in a revised language, we could truthfully say "If you lie, then you've misunderstood what you're saying," and so on. But this raises the question of why we would ever want to do that. What would we gain?

In closing, I would like to offer a tentative prediction about explicit forthcoming arguments that cross-linguistic disagreement (in the initial sense defined in the Introduction) is impossible. I

predict that these arguments will be motivated by preexisting commitments to some linguistic or philosophical theory which implies that such a disagreement is impossible. This is partly because, as already mentioned, impossibility is a very strict status, and it seems likely that it would be defended on theoretical grounds. Moreover, given the many plausible examples and consilient arguments supporting its possibility, I suspect that embracing the opposite conclusion will result from following where an otherwise attractive theory leads.

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