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Question–Answer Contradiction¹

1. Introduction

Conversation is essentially composed of questions and answers; however, occasionally, a strange contradiction between questions and answers can arise. Although this contradiction may be familiar, it has yet to be analyzed in detail. The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of this contradiction. What people call a contradiction in a daily life is almost always a logical syntactical contradiction with the general form “P and not P”. Other kinds of contradiction (i.e., semantic contradictions and pragmatic contradictions) also exist.

A semantic contradiction is a contradiction in a sentence with a semantic notion as its predicate (e.g., “This sentence is false” or Grelling-Nelson’s paradox: “‘heterological’ is heterological”). A pragmatic contradiction constitutes a contradiction between an utterance act and its propositional content or between an illocutionary act and its propositional content. For example,

- (A) Contradiction between an utterance act and its propositional content:
“Please talk quietly in here!” (Said in a loud voice.)
“Let us pronounce correctly!” (Pronounced incorrectly.)
- (B) Contradiction between illocutionary act and propositional content:
“I assert nothing.”
“I don’t exist.”
“Don’t follow my order!”

A different kind of contradiction can be found in those utterances that lack a contradiction in themselves but that stand in a contradictory relationship to a question. The following represents a contradiction between question and answer:

“Can you hear me?”
“I cannot hear you.”

¹ The first version of this paper appeared as one chapter of my paper, “Paradox in Metacommunication (1)” in the “Bulletin of Osaka Shoin Women’s College” Vol. 30, 1992. The second version appeared as “Some Contradictions between Questions and Answers” in a report of the Collaborative Research based on the Kagaku Kenkyuhi of the Japanese Ministry of Education and Culture “The Ontology of Communication”, 2001. The third version appeared as my presentation, “Contradiction in the Question–Answer Relationship”, at the 13th International Congress of Logic Methodology and Philosophy of Science, Beijing, 2007.

In this instance, the answer is not characterized by a semantic or a pragmatic contradiction, but is contradictory in relation to the question. I will refer to this category of contradiction as a “question–answer contradiction” and will describe two types of this contradiction with the use of examples.

2. The Pure Type of Question–Answer Contradiction

(I) Question–Answer Contradictions about the Confirmation of Connection.

(1) Question–Answer Contradiction

The combination of a question and an answer, in which the latter confirms that an addressee cannot hear a speaker’s voice, seems to result in a question–answer contradiction. Consider the next example.

“Can you hear me?”
“No, I cannot hear you.”

The utterance “I cannot hear you” is not contradictory in itself. However, responding with “I cannot hear you” to the question “Can you hear me?” is contradictory because this answer would not have been offered if it were accurate. The question “Can you hear me?” cannot truthfully be answered by “I cannot hear you”. Therefore, if I answer truthfully, my answer must always be “Yes”. The absence of an answer indicates that I could not hear the question or that I do not want to reply to it.

Thus, we can conclude that the questioner is assuming that the addressee is refusing to answer when no answer follows this question and that the questioner thinks the addressee can hear him/her. For this reason, individuals should reply immediately to prevent such a misunderstanding if they do not intend to refuse to answer. Indeed, we should always be ready to answer a direct query from others.

(2) Analysis of This Type of Question–Answer Contradiction

a. Pragmatic Contradiction of the Question

In this case, the contradiction seems to be caused by the question because the answer is not contradictory in itself. Indeed, the question might involve a pragmatic contradiction. Generally speaking, asking a question always presupposes that an addressee can hear it. Therefore, it is inherently contradictory for a questioner to question this presupposition, and such questioning results in a pragmatic contradiction between the content of the question and the illocutionary act of asking.

b. Difference in relation to Other Pragmatic Contradictions

However, this contradiction differs from other pragmatic contradictions in which the negation of the proposition usually resolves the pragmatic contradiction. For example, the utterance “I don’t exist” represents a pragmatic contradiction, but its negation “I exist” does not constitute a pragmatic contradiction. In contrast, the pragmatic contradictions involving questions cannot be resolved, even if their propositional content is negated. Therefore, the question–answer contradictions inherent in such questions cannot be resolved. For example,

“Can’t you hear me?”
“No, I cannot hear you.”

This answer “No” is impossible if it is truthful.

c. Particular Features of This Type of Contradiction

One might wonder what the questioner should do when an addressee cannot hear the question, and the illocutionary act of questioning does not work. In such circumstances, the questioner might not be intending to engage in a monologue. Indeed, dialogue may have been the goal. The speaker certainly intended to perform an illocutionary act, and this act failed. Is this case the same as one in which an individual throws a dart at a target and aims, albeit without confidence, to hit it and fails to do so? No, these cases are not the same. Even though this questioner’s illocutionary act of questioning failed (i.e., no answer was forthcoming), s/he succeeded in getting certain desired information (i.e., that an addressee could not hear her/him).

(II) Question–Answer Contradictions about Understanding a Language

(1) Question–Answer Contradiction

“Do you understand English?”
“No, I don’t.”

When I am asked, “Do you understand English?” and answer, “No, I don’t”, this answer (not in the sense of “No, I can’t understand enough English,” but in the literal sense) is contradictory. The utterance “I don’t understand English” is a pragmatic contradiction not only when it is uttered as an answer to the above question but also when it is uttered alone. However, answering with “*Ich kann nicht Englisch verstehen*” (i.e., in German) to that question involves no pragmatic contradiction, but involves instead a question–answer contradiction because the

responder must have understood the English question to provide this answer.

(2) Analysis of the Second Type of Question–Answer Contradiction

What causes this question–answer contradiction? The cause involves the question “Do you understand English?”, which includes a pragmatic contradiction. Generally speaking, a question is asked under the assumption that an addressee can understand the question being posed. However, the questioner in this case doubts the validity of this assumption and seeks to confirm it with the question. Thus, the question “Do you understand English?” involves a pragmatic contradiction. This question must be posed in English for it to constitute a question–answer contradiction. For example, the next exchange does not represent a question–answer contradiction, even though the answer does constitute a pragmatic contradiction.

“*Kannst du Englisch verstehen?*”
 “No, I don’t understand English.”

3. The Ambiguous Type of Question–Answer Contradiction

(I) Question–Answer Contradictions about Confirming Sincerity

(1) Question–Answer Contradiction

Engagement in a conversation involves a mutual understanding of mutual sincerity, which is constantly reconfirmed at the level of the meta-message. We can express this confirmation in the form of questions and answers as follows.

“Will you answer me sincerely?”
 “Yes, I am now answering you sincerely.”
 “No, I’m not answering you sincerely.”

If the addressee intends to answer sincerely, s/he will answer with, “Yes, I am answering you sincerely”. However, if the addressee does not intend to answer sincerely, s/he will still answer with, “Yes, I am answering you sincerely”; otherwise, the answer will really be true and sincere. Therefore, this question and the negative answer seem to constitute a question–answer contradiction.

(2) An Analysis of the Third Type of Question–Answer Contradiction

a. Pragmatic Contradictions of the Question

We will first confirm that the question “Will you answer me sincerely?” is a pragmatic contradiction. Generally speaking, asking a question entails an expectation that the addressee will answer sincerely. The perlocutionary act of questioning entails that an addressee answer sincerely. An illocutionary act can succeed even if it does not result in a perlocutionary act. However, the illocutionary act includes the intention inherent in a perlocutionary act as a constituent element. Therefore, questioning necessarily involves the expectation that an addressee will answer sincerely. In the case of the question “Will you answer me sincerely?” the questioner harbours doubts about whether an addressee will answer sincerely. Therefore, this question involves a pragmatic contradiction.

Two differences between this type of question and the aforementioned kinds of questions (e.g., “Can you hear me?” or “Can you understand me?”) should also be noted.

(a) The question “Can you hear me?” or “Can you understand me?” makes sense when the answer is “Yes” but not when the answer is “No”. In contrast, “Will you answer me sincerely?” makes sense irrespective of whether the answer is “Yes” or “No” because the question is heard and understood by the addressee.

(b) “Can you hear me?” or “Can you understand me?” does not make sense if the answer is “No” but could produce the desired information. In contrast, the answer to, “Will you answer me sincerely?” will be “Yes” irrespective of whether the answer is indeed sincere because individuals answering sincerely as well as those lying or joking will answer in the affirmative. Therefore the question “Will you answer me sincerely?” cannot obtain the information the questioner seeks.

b. Pragmatic Contradictions of the Answers

The problematic aspects of the following sentences can be easily understood.

“This statement is a lie.”
“This statement is a joke.”

“This statement is a lie” is the famous liar’s paradox, which is usually thought of as a kind of semantic paradox (i.e., as in “This sentence is false.”). However, these two are not quite the same because the former represents a pragmatic rather than a semantic contradiction for the following reason.

A lie is not a false statement; it a statement that the speaker considers to be false. Thus, it can be true even if the speaker thinks it to be false. “This statement is a lie” means, strictly

speaking, “This statement is one that I believe to be false” or “I think this statement is false”. If we refer to “This statement is one that I believe to be false” as L , it follows that if L is true, it is the case that I think that L is false. However, it does not follow that L is actually false. Therefore, no contradiction would emerge from either the truth or the falsity of L . Thus, no semantic contradiction is present. However, the claim that, “I think this sentence L is false,” entails that the speaker thinks that the sentence L is true (because s/he claims it) and does constitute a pragmatic contradiction between the propositional content and the illocutionary act.

Next, we consider whether the utterance, “This utterance is a joke,” represents a semantic contradiction. If this utterance has the same meaning as the utterance, “This utterance has no literal meaning,” which is called J , and if J were true, J would have no literal meaning, and therefore J would be false. If J were false, then J would have a literal meaning, and therefore J would be true. J clearly contains a semantic contradiction and a semantic paradox. However, the utterance J also represents a pragmatic contradiction because it is a claim, and the illocutionary act of claiming contradicts the propositional content that it is a joke. Therefore, “This utterance is a joke” is also a pragmatic contradiction.

Whenever we understand “I’m not answering you sincerely” as “This utterance is a lie” or “This utterance is a joke”, this negative answer constitutes a pragmatic contradiction.

c. Ambiguous Question–Answer Contradictions

Does the negative answer “I am not answering you sincerely” constitute not only a pragmatic contradiction but also a question–answer contradiction? We will first consider the short answer “No”, which does not appear to contain a pragmatic contradiction. Nevertheless, it does seem to be contradictory to reply “No” to the question “Are you answering sincerely?” Therefore, the question and the negative short answer to it constitute a question–answer contradiction.

However, one might object to this reasoning and argue that the short negative answer is an abridged form of the long negative answer, and that the contradiction of replying “No” can be explained in terms of the pragmatic contradiction in the long negative answer “No, I am not answering sincerely”. I would tentatively respond that the answer “No” certainly has the same meaning as “No, I am not answering sincerely” in this context, but that this equivalence is due its relationship to the question. Thus, we can identify a question–answer contradiction between the question and the short answer “No”.

(II) Question–Answer Contradictions about the Confirmation of Existence

(1) Question–Answer Contradiction

“Does anyone exist?”
“No, nobody exists.”

To be meaningful, the reply “No, nobody exists” must mean “No, nobody exists but me” or “No, nobody you are looking for exists”. For example, if you enter a shop and ask “Is anyone here?” an answer of, “No, no-one is here” means that “There is no here one who can attend to customers”. If the answer “No, no-one is here” were uttered sincerely and held a literal meaning, it would mean that the speaker does not exist. This question and the negative answer to it constitute a question–answer contradiction.

(2) Analysis of the Question–Answer Contradiction

The question “Is anyone here?” is a pragmatic contradiction in the same way as is the question “Can you hear me?” On the one hand, the illocutionary act presupposes that an addressee exists. On the other hand, however, the question also asks whether the addressee exists. Therefore, the content of the question and the illocutionary act are in a relationship of pragmatic contradiction.

The negative answer to the question constitutes a pragmatic contradiction by itself in the same way as the utterance “I do not exist” constitutes a pragmatic contradiction. However, this negative answer constitutes not only a pragmatic contradiction but also a question–answer contradiction because the short negative answer “No” also constitutes a contradiction in relation to the question.

(III) General Explanation

As noted above, pragmatic contradictions are divided into two types: (A) contradictions between the utterance act and the propositional content, and (B) contradictions between the illocutionary act and the propositional content. As explained in a previous paper², because all utterances can have meaning as an answer to some question, the utterance of a pragmatic contradiction can also have a meaning as an answer to some question. Type (A) pragmatic contradictions would seem unsuitable as answers to questions involving pragmatic

² Cf. “A Proof of Collingwood’s Thesis” in *Philosophia Osaka*, Nr. 4, Published by Philosophy and History of Philosophy/Studies on Modern Thought and Culture, Division of Studies on Cultural Forms, Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, pp. 69–83, 2009.

contradictions. However, type (B) pragmatic contradictions can serve as answers to questions with pragmatic contradictions. When type (B) utterances are answers to some Yes–No questions, these questions are necessarily pragmatic contradictions. For example;

- ① “Do you exist?”
“No, I don’t exist.”
- ② “Do I exist?”
“No, you don’t exist.”
- ③ “Are you claiming anything?”
“No, I am claiming nothing.”
- ④ “Shall I obey your order?”
“No, you should not obey my order.”

This sort of relationship between questions and answers exemplifies the question–answer contradiction because, even if these negative answers were in the short form of “No”, they would nonetheless constitute contradictions in relation to each question. The aforementioned pairs of questions and answers (I) and (II) are instances of this type.

4. Conclusion

(I) General Analysis of the Question–Answer Contradiction

When A asks B and B answers A, the following conditions hold.

- ① A and B exist.
- ② B can hear the voice of A.
- ③ B can understand the language of A.
- ④ B intends to answer the question of A with sincerity.

Additional presuppositions can be added to enable B to appropriately answer the questions posed by A. Therefore, a negative response to A’s asking B whether one of the conditions holds represents a question–answer contradiction. Although the foregoing explanation of the ambiguous type might not include a sufficiently persuasive argument for considering this type to be a clear example of a question–answer contradiction, it is clear that the ambiguous type does qualify for this status when one considers that the negative answer to questions of this sort involve denying one of the conditions necessary for a question–answer relationship.

(II) The Significance of Question–Answer Contradictions

The above questions involve pragmatic contradictions but they are not nonsensical because confirmation of connection, of understanding a language, and of sincerity among

conversation partners constitutes the fundamental condition for communication. Therefore, such questions and answers are necessary for confirming appropriate communication.

Given that conversation partners can exchange roles as questioner and answerer, the following conditions must hold in conversations.

- ① A and B exist.
- ② A and B can hear the voices of one another.
- ③ A and B can understand the language of one another.
- ④ A and B are speaking to each other with sincerity.

The aforementioned question–answer contradictions prove the need for partners to claim and accept these conditions of conversation because participants must provide affirmative answers to the questions embedded in the conditions. Moreover, we can prove the need for a kind of mutual recognition among partners on the basis of the necessity for such affirmative answers. The need for mutual recognition is based only on the linguistic and logical relationships between questions and answers³. Discourse ethics (*Diskursethik*) has attempted to prove that mutual recognition and minimal logic are transcendental pragmatic presuppositions by using the concept of pragmatic contradiction⁴. Apel does not distinguish between a pragmatic contradiction and what I call a question–answer contradiction. Thus, we might improve this argument by including the concept of question–answer contradictions.

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³ The necessity of mutual recognition can be proved in the following way. A dialog of mutual denial can be formalized as follows.

A “Your judgments are false.”
 B “Your judgments are false.”

Of course, such mutual denial destroys discussion. One-way recognition is formalized as follows.

A “Your judgments are false.”
 B “Your judgments are true.”

This dialog creates a paradox. If the judgment of A were true, then the judgment of B would be false, and if the judgment of B were false, then the judgment of A would be false. If the judgment of A were false, then judgment of B would be true, and if the judgment of B were true, then the judgment of A would be true. This dialog creates a paradox. Therefore, one-way recognition renders discussion impossible. Thus, mutual recognition is a necessary condition for the possibility of discussion.

⁴ Cf. Karl-Otto Apel, ‘The Problem of Philosophical Fundamental Grounding in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language’ in “Mann and World”, vol. 8, No. 3, 1975.