

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Martin on the Semantics of 'Looks'

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A natural way of understanding (non-epistemic) looks talk in natural language is phenomenalist: to ascribe looks to objects is to say something about the way they strike us when we look at them. This explains why the truth values of looks-sentences intuitively vary with the circumstances with respect to which they are evaluated. But Mike Martin (2010) argues that there is no semantic reason to prefer a phenomenalist understanding of looks to "Parsimony", the position according to which looks are basic visible properties. He suggests a semantics for looks-sentences that explains their intuitive truth values and is compatible with Parsimony. I argue that there is semantic reason to prefer a phenomenalist understanding of looks to a parsimonious one since there is a simpler semantics compatible with a phenomenalist understanding of looks, but not with Parsimony. This semantics provides a better explanation of the relevant truth value distribution.

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Introduction

A natural way of understanding (non-epistemic) looks-talk in natural language is phenomenalist: to ascribe looks to middle-sized macroscopic objects is to say something about the way they strike us when we look at them. This promises an explanation of the fact that intuitively, the truth value of utterances of sentences like (1) and (2) varies with the circumstances with respect to which they are evaluated:

- (1) Sam looks straight.
- (2) Sam looks bent.

Sam is a straight stick. Looking at Sam in broad daylight with nothing obscuring our view, an utterance of (1) strikes us as true, while (2) seems false. Looking at Sam half-way immersed in a glass of water, (1) strikes us as false, while an utterance of (2) seems true. It is natural to think that these truth values reflect changes in looks: Sam's look changes when Sam is put into water. Since there is no change in Sam's intrinsic properties, it is tempting to further analyse the change in look as a change in Sam's relational properties involving our visual experiences of him. Let's call any position that understands looks in terms of relations to visual experiences "Phenomenology".

Natural as a phenomenalist take on looks might be, Mike Martin (2010) argues that there is no semantic reason for preferring Phenomenology to what he calls "Parsimony". According to Parsimony, looks are intrinsic properties of objects, more precisely, they

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are identical with the basic visible properties (such as shape and color properties) of objects (cf. pp. 161; 207ff). To show that “there is no reason from the semantics alone to attribute to objects more than the basic visible properties that we were committed to positing anyway” (p. 222), Martin argues that the relevant natural language sentences containing ‘looks’ are to be construed as comparatives: to say that Sam looks straight is to say that Sam’s look is relevantly similar to that characteristic of certain straight things. What the relevant measure of similarity is, however, remains underdetermined by the standing meaning of such sentences; it depends on the context. This allows Martin to provide a semantic explanation of the intuitive truth values of utterances of (1) and (2) despite embracing Parsimony.

Offering such a semantics, however, is not sufficient for establishing the claim that there is no semantic reason to prefer Phenomenology over Parsimony. To establish this, Martin not only needs to explain the intuitive truth values of looks-sentences. He also needs to make it plausible that his explanation is as good as it gets. I shall argue that, given Martin’s semantics, it is rather obvious that there is a simpler semantics with equal explanatory power. Such a semantics provides a better explanation of the relevant truth values than Martin’s. But it is not compatible with Parsimony. Therefore, there is semantic reason to prefer Phenomenology over Parsimony.

Martin-style looking

Traditionally, three different “senses” or “uses” of natural language ‘looks’ have been distinguished: the epistemic sense, the comparative sense, and the phenomenal or non-comparative sense of ‘looks’ (cf. Chisholm 1957; Jackson 1977). While it is not completely clear that making these distinctions originally amounted to full-fledged claims of ambiguity, such ambiguity claims would be contentious today.¹ As far as I can tell, Martin accepts a version of the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic senses of ‘looks’. He is mainly interested in non-epistemic looking and argues that non-epistemic looks-talk mostly takes comparative form: when we say of things that they look red or straight, we compare their looks to those of red or straight things.² I shall not take any stance on matters of ambiguity here. And, for the purposes of this paper, I shall grant the assumption that the (non-epistemic) looks-sentences we are interested in have the logical form of comparatives.³ What I shall take issue with is the particular form the analysis takes in Martin’s hands.

Martin uses a famous advertisement from the 1970s to usher his analysis in. It shows a young man looking hugely pregnant. Looking at the ad, one might say:

(3) That model looks pregnant.

The question then is what logical form to assign to (3). Here’s how Martin conceives of this task: “The sentence needs to convey that there is some way of looking characteristic of the pregnant that is similar to the model’s way of looking” (p. 172). And according to him, what holds for (3) *mutatis mutandis* holds for sentences like (1) and (2). Speakers uttering sentences of the latter kind compare the way Sam looks to the characteristic way

straight or bent things look. And they are saying that these ways are relevantly similar. Therefore, Martin suggests, all these looks-sentences have the following logical form:

$$(3') \exists y (\text{has}(o, y) \& (\text{WL}(y) \& \text{SIM}(C(F, \text{WL}, k), y))),$$

where 'SIM' is a function from the context of use to a particular similarity measure and 'C(F, R, k)' a function returning what is characteristic of the *k*-restricted *F*s for respect *R*. Here, respect *R* is set to ways of looking, so C(F, WL, *k*) returns the characteristic way of looking of the *k*-restricted *F*s (cf. p. 172). '*k*', I take it, is a context parameter.

However, if it indeed is "a contextually determined matter" (p. 172) which similarity measure is selected by SIM, (3') doesn't really capture the intended logical form. To get it right, SIM needs to be construed as having a context variable, too—and thus as three-place instead of as two-place, as Martin does. We then get:

$$(3'') \exists y (\text{has}(o, y) \& (\text{WL}(y) \& \text{SIM}(C(F, \text{WL}, k), y, c))),$$

where 'SIM(*x*, *y*, *c*)' is the kind of similarity between *x* and *y* relevant in context *c*. According to this "Parsimo-semantics" for looks-sentences, (3) is true if "the look that model has is relevantly similar to whatever look is characteristic of the *k* pregnant" (p. 173). Note that, according to Martin, the semantic values of utterances of such sentences thus are *doubly context dependent*: both the semantic value of *k* and that of SIM are determined by context. *k* restricts the class of *F*s to the contextually salient subclass of *F*s whose characteristic way of looking is the object of comparison.

Note especially, that SIM does *not* play any role in fixing the way of looking that is the object of comparison. *That* is supposed to be done by C on the basis of the contextually salient subclass of *F*s alone.⁴ But then, what work *is* SIM supposed to do?

Redundant context-dependence

To see what work the context dependence of SIM does we can ask another question: how does Martin's semantics explain the intuitive truth values of looks-sentences when combined with Parsimony? Take (2) as uttered in a context where Sam is half-way immersed in a glass of water. Here, Sam's look is relevantly similar to the characteristic look of bent things. Intuitively, this is true because here Sam's look is *the same* as that characteristic of bent things. But Martin claims that there is no semantic reason to embrace this explanation. Rather, (2)'s being true under these circumstances is perfectly compatible with a parsimonious account of looks.

According to Parsimony, the looks of things consist in their basic visible properties, properties such as redness, bentness, and straightness. Let's therefore restrict our discussion to sentences of the form '*o* looks *F*' where *F* is a predicate denoting such a property. Using (2), then, is comparing Sam's basic visible properties with bentness (cf. p. 208). But since Sam is not bent, there are no circumstances under which Sam's look is the same as that characteristic of bent things. The parsimonist thus cannot embrace the intuitive explanation of why (2) is true when uttered in our context.

But that does not mean there is nothing “in common between the way the stick is and the way bent things are,” Martin explains: “The stick is similar to bent things simply with respect to how it strikes *me*, or the subjective bearing it has on me” (p. 215). More precisely, looked at when half-way immersed in water, Sam is such that a speaker uttering (2) “enjoys a visual experience relative to which they would find the stick similar to a bent thing” (p. 221). It is here that the context dependence of SIM gets to do its work: the context somehow has shifted the similarity measure to something involving visual experiences of Sam. It remains somewhat unclear what the value of SIM is supposed to be, but presumably Sam is similar to bent things in that the experience he causes in the speaker at the moment of utterance is either of the same phenomenal kind as experiences of bent things, or at least of a kind that is subjectively indistinguishable from experiences of bent things. Whatever the precise details, let's call a similarity measure of this kind “phenomenal identity”.⁵

What this shows is that it is only by means of what we could call “double shifting” that a comparative analysis of looks-sentences is compatible with Parsimony. But is there any Parsimony-independent, *semantic* reason to think of these sentences as doubly context dependent? In particular, does Parsimo-semantics provide *the best semantic explanation of the intuitive truth value assignments to looks-statements*? If it does not, there is good reason to think that there are semantic reasons against Parsimony.

My claim is that it does not. There is a much simpler semantics that explains the relevant truth value assignments. We can get it from Parsimo-semantics by setting SIM constantly to phenomenal identity:

$$(3'') \quad \exists y (\text{has}(o, y) \& (\text{WL}(y) \& \text{ID}(\text{C}(F, \text{WL}, k), y))),$$

where 'ID' is the identity function. This “Pheno-semantics” is much simpler than Parsimo-semantics. It dispenses with double context dependency.⁶ The only difference in immediate outputs is that Pheno-semantics has identity of looks where Parsimo-semantics has relevant similarity. Thus, Pheno-semantics cannot be combined with Parsimony. It requires that Sam and bent things share the way of looking characteristic of bent things. And Sam is not bent. But if we interpret 'looks' along some plausible phenomenalist lines, it seems reasonable to expect that Pheno-semantics will predict most, if not all the intuitive truth values for looks-sentences.

To illustrate, take the following phenomenalist interpretation of 'looks': an object *o* looks *F* (to a subject *S* at a time *t*) iff *S* at *t* has an *F'* experience of *o*, where *F'* is a visual phenomenal property or kind. On such an interpretation, two objects have the same look iff they are objects of experiences of the same phenomenal kind.⁷ This is rough, of course, but it will do for present purposes.⁸ Sentences like (2) can then be understood as identifying a way Sam looks with that characteristic of (certain) bent things. They will be true if the relevant experiences of Sam have the phenomenal properties characteristic of experiences of these bent things.⁹ This is as it should be: such a Pheno-semantics predicts the intuitive truth values for (1) and (2) with respect to varying circumstances, and it seems reasonable to expect this result to generalize.

Three test cases

I shall conclude by looking at three kinds of cases where Parsimo-semantics might seem to have an explanatory advantage over Pheno-semantics. The first, discussed by Martin himself, involves scenarios where misleading looks abound (cf. p. 175f). Imagine that you are in a large hall filled with bright daylight. In front of you is a long row of transparent glasses identical in size and shape and filled with equal amounts of water. Each contains a half-way immersed stick with a name tag. Your task is to identify the straight sticks, if any. Initially, you were allowed to take them out and check. But now, you are required to do it by looking only. So, you walk around and say things like 'Sam looks straight' and 'Bob does, too'. Intuitively, these utterances are true precisely if Sam and Bob are straight.

Let's accept for the sake of argument that in a "telling scenario" like this, statements of the form '*o* looks straight' indeed are true iff *o* is straight. The worry is that Parsimo-semantics can explain these truth values while Pheno-semantics cannot. But that is not the case. There is, in fact, a very good phenomenalist explanation for them.¹⁰ Pheno-semantics tells us that a sentence of the form '*o* looks straight' is true iff *o* looks the way characteristic of a contextually restricted set of straight things. And it does: there is a characteristic look that all the straight sticks in our telling scenario share. This is the look you are trying to recognize and it is different from that of the bent sticks in this scenario. This look is determined by an appropriate restriction on the set of straight things: it is the look characteristic of straight sticks halfway immersed in that much water in glasses of that size. Pheno-semantics can explain the truth value of 'looks straight' statements in telling scenarios just as well as Parsimo-semantics. Telling scenarios thus do nothing to tip the overall balance of explanatory power towards Parsimo-semantics.¹¹

A second kind of case might seem more promising: in "blind scenarios", a speaker ascribes a look to an object that nobody is looking at. According to Martin, an utterance of (1) is true if uttered at a time t_1 where Sam is in a position of unobstructed visibility but nobody is looking at him. But if uttered at t_2 where Sam is halfway immersed in a glass of water while nobody is looking at him, (2) is true (cf. p. 209). I am not sure how widespread and stable these intuitions are. Personally, I am inclined to think that looks-sentences do not have literal truth values in blind scenarios. Speakers use them to pragmatically convey statements about how things would look were someone to look at them (under certain conditions). Thus, blind scenarios might not provide very strong test cases to begin with. But even if we all shared Martin's intuitions about them, blind scenarios would not favor Parsimo-semantics over Pheno-semantics.

Whether Pheno-semantics has problems with blind scenarios, and which problems it has, depends on precisely how we construe the relation to visual experiences we identify having a look with. If this relation requires the actual presence of an experience of a certain kind, looks statements cannot be literally true in blind scenarios. But the phenomenalist could give a pragmatic explanation for the intuitive truth value assignments along the lines indicated above. Alternatively, looks themselves could be construed in terms of hypothetical experiences. For instance, one could think of looks

as dispositions to cause experiences of certain kinds (in certain kinds of perceivers under certain circumstances).¹² I am not saying that this would be uncomplicated or unproblematic. My point is merely that the Parsimo-semanticist faces problems of the very same kind.

To see this, note that Martin's claim is *not* that 'looks *F*' is co-extensional with 'is *F*' if uttered in a blind context. Even if no-one is looking, Sam looks bent when half-way immersed. Consequently, even a blind context where Sam is half-way immersed shifts the value of SIM. But what does it shift it to? Presumably to some form of phenomenal identity—what else could it be? So, what does phenomenal identity amount to here? Well, that is exactly the kind of question we just saw that blindness poses for phenomenologists. Blind scenarios thus require a solution to this kind of problem regardless of which semantics we work with. And the options seem pretty much the same in each case, too: either go pragmatic or revise the notion of phenomenal identity in terms of hypothetical experiences. If this is correct, blind scenarios do not tip the explanatory balance in the direction of Parsimo-semantics, either.

Last, but not least, let's consider "similarity cases". These involve comparisons between things that look *similar* but not exactly alike in any respect. To appreciate why such cases might be problematic for Pheno-, but not for Parsimo-semantics, it might be best to look at an example of a slightly different surface form:

(4) Sam looks like Marilyn Monroe.

Intuitively, (4) can be true (in some context) even though Sam does not look exactly like Marilyn Monroe in any respect. Imagine that you are looking at a distorted picture of Sam. He looks hourglass shaped. His hourglass look is similar to, but not exactly the same as that characteristic of Marilyn Monroe.¹³ Assuming that the suggested semantics for looks-sentences is supposed to cover sentences of the surface form '*o*₁ looks like *o*₂'—an issue Martin himself seems to remain neutral on (cf. p. 172)—the question is whether Pheno-semantics can account for the intuitive truth of (4) in the context described. Since Pheno-semantics requires identity of looks, it might seem that it cannot do that—while Parsimo-semantics would not have any problem here.¹⁴

Whether Pheno-semantics in fact predicts the falsity of (4) in similarity contexts depends on the precise nature of the phenomenal identity it requires. So far, I have only said that sharing a look consists in being the object of experiences belonging to the same phenomenal kind. And intuitively, objects can share looks without being the objects of experiences that are phenomenally exactly alike in the relevant (or indeed any) respect. Consider looking red. In broad daylight, an experience of something scarlet is pretty different from that of something burgundy. Nevertheless, both look red. Looks categories thus can be rather broad. But they can be quite fine-grained, too. Looking scarlet allows for much less phenomenal variation than looking red, and looking red₅₂ even less. To capture this intuitive variability in determinateness, the phenomenal kinds employed by Pheno-semantics need to be equally variable. But as far as I can see there is nothing that stops us from construing them that way. All we need to do is cash out the identity of looks Pheno-semantics requires by means of suitably variable phenomenal

kinds. Then, Pheno-semantics can account for the intuitive truth of an utterance of (4) in the similarity case above: the look Sam and Marilyn Monroe share is a suitably broad hourglass look.

One might worry, however, that on such an interpretation of phenomenal identity Pheno-semantics would make pretty much any looks-sentence true in pretty much any context, thus impaling it on the second horn of a dilemma.¹⁵ For if we construe looks broadly enough, pretty much anything will share *some* look with everything else. But this worry underestimates either the power of *C*, the function delivering the characteristic look of the salient class of objects, the power of salience itself, or both. It is simply not the case that any look is characteristic of a given class of objects. Nor is it the case that any class of objects can be raised to salience by an utterance of a looks-sentence in any given context. Take (5):

(5) Sam looks red.

Uttered spontaneously in a perfectly ordinary context where no particular class of red things has already been raised to salience, the most salient class of red things will be a class of clear cases of red—looked at under normal circumstances. And to have their characteristic look will require being the object of an experience of a certain phenomenal kind: a red' experience. Of course, there are other contexts, contexts in which the salient class of red things will be a class of red things looked at in rather dim light, for instance. Their characteristic look is different. But this does not mean that for any looks-sentence *S* and any context *C*, there will be a look that both is the relevant characteristic look and makes *S* true.¹⁶

If this is correct, not even similarity cases tip the explanatory balance in the direction of Parsimo-semantics. In terms of predicting intuitive truth values, Pheno-semantics is at least as good as Parsimo-semantics. But Pheno-semantics is simpler: it achieves this result with a single context dependent parameter. There is thus a very good semantic reason to prefer Pheno-semantics over Parsimo-semantics: it provides a better explanation of the intuitive truth values of looks statements. Consequently, there is semantic reason to prefer Phenomenology over Parsimony.

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Notes

- 1 It is quite widely, but not universally accepted that 'looks' is ambiguous between an epistemic and a non-epistemic sense (the claim is disputed by Thau (2002, p. 229ff), while Brogaard (2013) provides a linguistically informed defense). With respect to the phenomenal use, some hold that there simply is no such thing (e.g. Travis 2004), others argue that there is no ambiguity because the comparative use can be analysed in terms of the phenomenal use (e.g. Brogaard 2013). Yet others hold that there indeed is further ambiguity (e.g. Byrne 2009).

- 2 Martin does not deny that 'looks' can be used phenomenally, but argues in effect that using 'looks *F*' phenomenally is using it to say *of a look* that it is *F*. Thus, we can for instance say of a look that it is splendid, but that is not what we do when we talk about things looking red or straight. Here, we predicate something—a look—of the object itself (cf. p. 178ff). I agree with the latter claim, but I fail to understand why that rules out using 'looks *F*' phenomenally.
- 3 This assumption by itself does not carry commitment to the existence of a comparative sense of 'looks'.
- 4 One could worry here that contextual restrictions on a class of objects might not be sufficient for determining a particular characteristic look. But Martin—quite rightly, I think—takes this to be a matter taken care of by "wordly knowledge". Thus, he comments on (3): "This is, of course, an indirect characterization of the model's way of looking. But an audience that has suitable worldly knowledge with the lexical item 'pregnant' is in a position straight off to make the invited comparison and so comes to appreciate directly the way of looking attributed" (p. 173, see also p. 207f). I shall therefore set such "indeterminacy worries" to the side here.
- 5 Martin does not tell us what it is in the context we are considering that shifts the similarity measure. But the basic mechanics of the proposal are obvious enough: for basic visible *F*, we identify looking *F* with being *F*. And whenever the truth value of an '*o* looks *F*' statement cannot be explained by *o*'s being *F* the similarity measure has been shifted by the context. One obvious problem with this suggestion is that as long as we are not told anything about how the relevant similarity measure depends on the context, looks-statements could have any truth value with respect to any circumstances. After all, everything is similar to everything else—in some respect.
- 6 Comparing (3'') and (3'''), the gain in simplicity is obvious in the logical form, as replacing SIM by ID dispenses with the need for a context variable.
- 7 This talk of kinds is not meant to carry great metaphysical significance. I do not intend anything beyond sharing phenomenal properties by it. Note that the relevant properties might need to be construed functionalistically in order to deal with issues of privacy and the inverted spectrum. Pagin (2000) accounts for the meaning of sensation terms along such lines.
- 8 Phenomenalist interpretations of 'looks' could take many different forms, of course. The example is just meant to illustrate why it is reasonable to expect Pheno-semantics to get the intuitive truth values of looks-sentences right.
- 9 Of course, one might raise indeterminacy worries here, too. I do not think that it is an objection against a semantics of 'looks' that it determines the way of looking that is the object of comparison by means of, or conditional on the presence of, certain cognitive mechanisms at work in normal perceivers. In the case of the Pheno-semantics under consideration, the mechanisms in question are such that certain kinds of objects characteristically are objects of experiences of the same phenomenal kind, if they are experienced at all. Moreover, even if an answer like this would not help with indeterminacy worries, that would hold for Pheno- and Parsimo-semantics alike.
- 10 A Pheno-semanticist might well be inclined to construe the use of 'looks' in a telling scenario as epistemic. My point is that even if the Pheno-semanticist accepts the data there is no problem accounting for them.
- 11 For the Parsimonist, telling scenarios are quite crucial: if one wants to argue that there are no semantic reasons against identifying looks with basic visible properties, it would at least be embarrassing if *all* contexts in which Sam is the object of a bent' experience would set SIM to phenomenal identity. If looks really are basic visible properties, one would think, it ought to

- be at least possible for SIM to be set to identity of basic visible properties even in contexts where experience is misleading. Thanks to Stephen Butterfill for discussion here.
- 12 Looks would then be at least very similar to what Shoemaker used to call “phenomenal properties”; cf. Shoemaker (1994).
 - 13 Sentences like (4) make it easier to see the potential problem because the class of objects whose characteristic look is to be compared to Sam’s appears to be less open to contextual manipulation than in the case of sentences like (1) or (2). It is thus easier to imagine contexts where the characteristic look of the objects in the relevant class plausibly can be said to be similar but not exactly alike to any of Sam’s looks.
 - 14 This intriguing worry was pressed by an anonymous referee.
 - 15 A dilemma due, again, to the anonymous referee.
 - 16 It does not mean, either, that for any given looks-sentence *S* and any look *L* there will be a context *C* such that *L* is the relevant characteristic look in *C*. It might, for instance, be impossible to ever get ‘looks red’ to be (non-epistemically) true of things that have the look characteristic of triangular things under normal circumstances.

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