

Force: Morality and Context

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1 Overview

Moral judgments have a surprising impact on an array of distinct phenomena, e.g. judgments of causation and intentional action Knobe (2010). We aim to get a better understanding of this phenomenon by studying the impact of morality on judgments about *force*.

2 Baseline

We conducted a series of experiments ($N = 1589$). We first used a scenario outlined in (1) to replicate previous research showing participants agree at lower rates that someone was forced to do φ when φ is morally bad than when φ is neutral or good Phillips and Knobe (2009); Young and Phillips (2011).

- (1) A captain overtaken by a storm realized his ship would sink if he didn't make it lighter. The only things on the boat were a sailor, small but expensive cargo, and several passengers. The captain ordered the sailor to throw the [cargo/passengers] overboard. The [cargo/passengers] sank to the bottom of the sea. The captain and his ship survived.

We replicated the previously observed pattern: Participants in the morally neutral (cargo) condition agreed with (2) at higher rates ($M = 5.37$) than those in the morally bad (passenger) condition ($M = 3.54$, $t(195.53) = 8.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$ (on a 1-7 Likert agreement-scale)).

- (2) The sailor was forced to throw the [cargo/passengers] overboard by the captain.

3 Attention

We then tested the effect of calling attention to either the forcer or forcee, while holding fixed the action. We tested this with passivization, as in (3-a)/(3-b), and with 'as for' clauses, as in (4-a)/(4-b).

- (3) a. The captain forced the sailor to throw the [cargo/passengers] overboard.
b. The sailor was forced to throw the [cargo/passengers] overboard by the captain.
- (4) a. As for the captain, the captain forced the sailor to throw the [cargo/passengers] overboard.

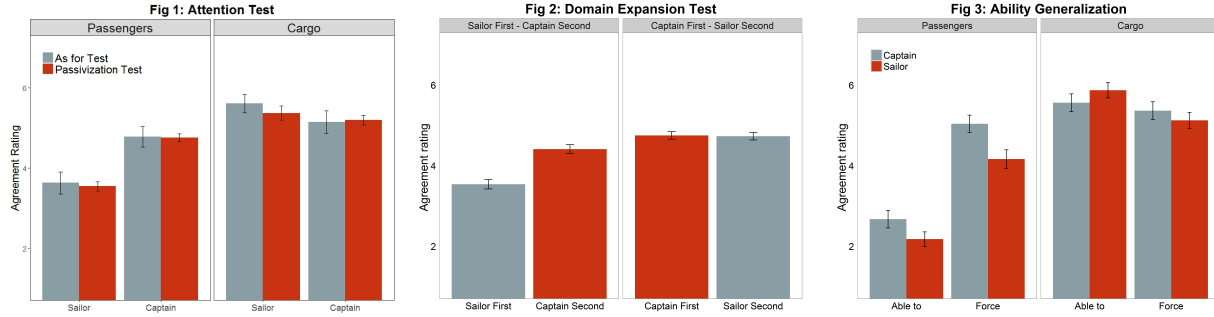
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- b. As for the sailor, the captain forced the sailor to throw the [cargo/passengers] overboard.

We observed an interaction effect between attention and the morality of the action ($F(1, 1278) = 37.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .027$): When the action was immoral, participants more agreed when attention was drawn to the captain than when attention was drawn to the sailor was ($t(779.22) = 8.63, p < .001, d = 0.602$). This pattern disappeared in the non-moral variant ($t(443) = -1.46, p = .146, d = 0.146$; see Fig. 1).

This kind of attention is known to affect how context determines quantifier domains von Fintel (1994). As a preliminary hypothesis, we thus propose to explain this effect by positing that the meaning of ‘force’ varies with a contextually given domain, whose assignment is affected by attention.



4 Order effects

Quantifier domain expansion is ‘sticky’: when a domain is expanded, it tends to remain large, rather than reverting to its original size Lewis (1979); von Fintel (2001). A quantifier domain hypothesis thus yields a prediction: if A and A' mean the same thing, except that A' expands a quantifier domain, then, in a sequence of assertions $\langle A, A' \rangle$, rates of agreement with A will differ from rates of agreement with A' . By contrast, in a sequence $\langle A', A \rangle$, rates of agreement will stay constant, since the first assertion introduces an expanded domain which persists for the second. Thus, to test our hypothesis about ‘force’, we tested rates of agreement with sequences of force sentences which varied on attention (again using passivization and ‘as for’). The first sequence ran $\langle (3-b), (3-a) \rangle$ or $\langle (4-b), (4-a) \rangle$, calling attention to the sailor, then captain. The reverse sequence, $\langle (3-a), (3-b) \rangle$ or $\langle (4-a), (4-b) \rangle$, called attention to the captain, then sailor. Our results showed a striking pattern (see Fig. 2). In the first sequence, subjects have low agreement with (3-b)/(4-b), then higher agreement with (3-a)/(4-a). By contrast, in the second sequence, subjects have high and uniform agreement for both sentences. Statistically, this is captured by a significant interaction effect between attention (captain vs. sailor) and the order of presentation, $\chi^2(1) = 54.417, p < .001$.

5 Analysis

This confirms the pattern expected from quantifier domain expansion, and provide two further data points. First, since higher rates of agreement are the ‘stickier’ ones, domain expansion in this case results in *elevated* rates of agreement. Second, since the captain-attention sentence induces ‘sticky’ rates of agreement, it is calling attention to the *captain* which forces domain expansion. We propose to make sense of this as follows. First, we adopt this semantics for ‘force’:

- (5) $\llbracket A \text{ forced } B \text{ to } \varphi \rrbracket^{c,w}=1$ iff the following are true in $\langle c, w \rangle$:
- (i) ‘B did $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket^c$ ’; (ii) ‘B was unable to refrain from $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket^c$ ’; (iii) ‘A made (ii) true’; and
 - (iv) ‘A would not have done $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket^c$ if B had not made (ii) true’.

This semantics, as desired, incorporates a context-sensitive quantifier, in the ability modal in (ii). But if we adopt the standard treatment of ‘able’ as an existential quantifier over worlds Kratzer (1977, 1981), we face a puzzle: the negated ability claim in (ii) will have *universal* force, and so expanding the relevant domain should lead to *depressed* levels of agreement, contrary to observation.

We solve this puzzle by adopting the approach in Mandelkern et al. (2015, 2017), who outline independent problems for the standard semantics for ‘able’ and propose an alternative: With $f_c(w, \psi)$ Stalnaker (1968)’s selection function, taking a world and proposition to the closest world where that proposition is true; with $\mathcal{C}_{c,w}$ a *causal background*, which we model as a set of propositions; and with $\Pi_c(\cap \mathcal{C}_{c,w})$ a contextually salient cover of $\cap \mathcal{C}_{c,w}$, which we interpret as the set of salient actions compatible with the relevant causal background:

- (6) $\llbracket S \text{ is able to } \varphi \rrbracket^{c,w}=1$ iff $\exists A \in \Pi_c(\cap \mathcal{C}_{c,w}) : \llbracket S \text{ does } \varphi \rrbracket^{c, f_c(w, \llbracket S \text{ tries to do } A \rrbracket^c)} = 1$.

Informally: ‘ S is able to φ ’ is true just in case, for some action A , made salient by context and compatible with the causal background, S does φ in the closest world where S tries to do A .

What is crucial about this semantics is that, unlike the standard one, it predicts that *expanding the relevant domain* $\mathcal{C}_{c,w}$ will make the set of relevant actions *smaller*, making it *harder* for ability ascriptions to be true as more causal background is taken into consideration, and thus *easier* for force ascriptions to be true. This is consistent with our results, which, again, suggest that force ascriptions become more plausible when the relevant domain grows. And it affords a substantive explanation of our results: We propose that, when we are thinking about moral agency, we tend to ignore substantial parts of a causal background, conceptualizing agents as free to act in morally *good* ways Phillips and Knobe (2009). Focusing our attention on an agent by passivization or ‘as for’, as in (3-b)/(4-b), heightens this tendency. By contrast, however, when we make salient elements of the causal background — by calling attention to the captain, reminding the interlocutors of his causal role — it becomes harder to ignore those causal factors. The set of background causes thus expands, making ‘force’ judgments more likely to be true.

An alternate hypothesis would be that morality’s influence is exerted through the third component of our analysis – that A made (ii) true – which is itself a causal matter. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a final experiment, which asked subjects directly about ability instead: given scenario (1), we asked whether the sailor was able to do anything other than throwing the passengers/cargo overboard. We found a complementary attention effect (morality \times attention interaction, $F(1, 278) = 3.89, p < .05$) (Fig. 3). This suggests that the source of the influence of morality on ‘force’ is likely instead in the interpretation of the ability component of its semantics.

6 Conclusion

Our approach builds on emerging research which understands modal flavors as arising from an interaction between the linguistic representation of modality and a psychological representation of possibility Phillips and Cushman (2017); Phillips and Knobe (2018). The attention and order effects we describe are not well captured in a standard semantics for ‘force’ and ‘able’. Our account makes sense of these effects in a new framework, which can be extended to a variety of other constructions involving agency. Importantly, however, it will not extend to epistemic modals, if these have a standard semantics, since that semantics is not be sensitive to the posited causal background parameter. This rightly predicts an observed contrast between the strong effects of morality on judgments about agency, but not on corresponding judgments about epistemic modality. Our proposal thus moves us closer to a precise model of how morality does and does not influence modal judgments.

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