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PRAGMATIC INTERACTIONS OF THE SYNTAGM "IN THAT" IN CONTEXTS

Case
Study

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Abstract

This work is an empirical study, trying to identify the role of "in that" clause in different contexts. The aim of this paper is to analyze the pragmatic result of stretching or limiting the meaning of a word when I use "in that" construction. I shall prove that "in that" clauses work like hedges, limiting the domain over which an assertion is held to be true, removing the speaker from responsibility for interpretations other than those specifically mentioned. I shall also prove that "in that" can stretch the meanings of words, giving them various metaphorical or connotative values. Finally, by this study, I would like to demonstrate once again that pragmatics and syntax interact and influence each other in order to create acceptable speech.

People have often spoken vaguely about stretching or limiting the meaning of a word. As Klaus specified in his book *Barron, Anne, Schneider, Klaus specified the role of Pragmatics as it deals with meaning in context, it bridges the gap between the system side of language*” (Barron, Anne, Schneider, Klaus, 2014) In English we use the construction “in that” to do just this. “In that” clauses function as hedges, limiting the domain over which an assertion is held to be true and removing the speaker from responsibility for possible interpretations other than the one explicitly mentioned. Consider for example, (1)- (3):

(1). She is strange *in that* she is unable to cope with reality.

(2). Mary is a good runner *in that* she wins each and every competition.

(3). He’s a good friend of mine *in that* I’ve known him for years.

The “in that” clause in each of the sentences specifies how the speaker believes the initial assertion to be true. In this way the “in that” clauses function as hedges, limiting the applicability of the initial assertions. In each case the speaker has left open the possibility with respect to factors which are often considered to be part of its domain. Thus, the speaker of (2) has only asserted that as far as her ability to win competitions is concerned, Mary is a good runner. (2) is felicitous and true even if Mary is a poor runner by any other criteria. Notice that (1a), (2a) and (3a), below are acceptable:

(1a). She is strange *in that* she is unable to cope with reality, but otherwise she is just fine.

(2a) Mary is a good runner *in that* she wins each and every competition, but her style is terrible.

(3a) He’s a good friend *in that* I’ve known him from years, but we are not really very close.

The unacceptability of (4) is further evidence that “in that” clauses are hedges which only assert that truth of a statement with respect to a specifically mentioned domain:

(4). *Pikes are fish *in that* they swim very well.

The problem with (4) is that that pikes are fish, period. Given what we know about pikes, we cannot call them fish with respect to their swimming ability and leave open the possibility that they are not fish in other ways. (1), (2) and (3) could be followed by a statement which basically contradicted the initial assertion. For example, one could say “She is a friend *in that* we know her for years, but otherwise we’re like strangers.” One could not construct a parallel sentence for (4) because the initial assertion is so obviously true no matter how we look at it. We see then that the use of “in that” rests in part on the ability of the initial assertion to be true in some ways and false in others. A given assertion can be substantiated by a number of facts. We saw from (4) that the “in that” clause must limit the initial assertion by picking out

some small subset of these facts and that this could not be done if the initial assertion was obviously true in all respects. Looking now at sentences like (5), we see that there is a second restriction on the use of “in that” clauses. In (5) we see that the initial assertion, “He is sick”, cannot be followed by an “in that” clause which contains a fact that embodies the notion of sickness. In other words, (5) is unacceptable because the “in that” clause is automatically associated with the initial assertion:

(5) *He is sick *in that* he has smallpox.

(5) is starred because having the smallpox embodies the notion of sickness to such an extent that the “in that” clause does not limit the initial assertion. Looking back at (1) we see that smallpox embodies the notion of sickness in a way that being unable to cope with reality does not. It seems that asserting that x is sick has a core meaning- that x has a sickness. We intuitively feel that smallpox is always a sickness, whereas being unable to cope with reality is only at times considered to be sick and is not considered to a sickness per se. This distinction is borne out in (6) and (7) as well:

(6) He is sick with smallpox.

(7) *He is sick with an inability to cope with reality.

All names of illness interact within such „ in that “ clauses in this way. Thus, all sentences in (8) are unacceptable in a context free environment:

(8) *He is sick *in that* he has a cold.

*She is sick *in that* she has a flu.

* He is sick *in that* he has schizophrenia.

Looking at (9), (10) and (11) we see that “in that” clauses can limit the domain over which a statement is held to be true while stretching the meaning of that statement. Compare (9)- (11):

(9) *He killed Susan *in that* he murdered her.

(10) He killed Susan *in that* he did nothing to keep her alive.

(11) He killed Susan *in that* he was always jealous.

(9) is unacceptable, again, because “he murdered her” does not limit the domain over which the initial assertion is being held to be true. One cannot murder someone without killing them in the process. In (10) and (11), the “in that” clauses are successful hedges. They not only limit the domain over which he killed Susan” is believed to be true, but also stretch the meaning of this initial assertion. If the speaker only said “he killed Susan”, addressees would not normally interpret this to mean that he did nothing to keep her alive.

In (10) and (11), the “in that” clauses are adding something to the meaning of “kill”. In these sentences, “he killed her” actually means something like “he indirectly caused her death”. In addition to adding to the meaning of a word, “in that” clauses can be used to pick out connotated rather than literal meanings.

(12) Joe’s a fish *in that* he swims so well.

Sentence (12) is obviously not asserting that Joe is, in real life, a fish. On the contrary, it is obvious that he is a human being. (4), which differs from (12) only in that tunas are fish, is unacceptable and involves no stretching. Sentence (12) ascribes to Joe a particular characteristic of fish- good swimming. The “in that” clause limits the domain over which the initial assertion is true to include only swimming ability. It leaves open the possibility that Joe has no other fish-like qualities. Here we see that the “in that” clause is hedging on the initial assertion- the speaker of (12) could only be held responsible for insinuating that Joe smells like a fish or looks like a fish.

“In that” clauses can pickout characteristics that are only metaphorically associated with the initial assertion. In (13), for example the word “thief” does not mean a person who steals property, but has a more metaphorical meaning:

(13) My butcher is a thief in that he charges 2 \$ for a loaf of meat.

Sentence (14), although similar to (13), is unacceptable except in a limited context:

(14) *My butcher is a thief in that he is selfish and doesn't respect others' rights to property.

There are two differences between “in that” clauses in (13) and (14). First notice that in (13) the “in that” clause mentions a thief like action. This in turn brings to mind the connotative meaning of thief- one who gets things by unnatural, immoral means. In (14), however, the “in that” clause actually mentions attributes which are connotatively associated with thieves. In this way, (14) is on the other end of the spectrum from (15), which does not stretch the meaning of thief from its literal one, nor limit the domain over which “those men are thieves” is true:

(15) *Those men are thieves in that they're robbers. Sentence (14) differs from the acceptable (13) in a second way. Its “in that” clause does not contain an adequate justification for the initial assertion. One cannot call someone a thief because they have personality characteristics in common with thieves. “Thief” describes a performer of certain types of activities, not a type of person. To be called a thief, one must do something thief-like. Thus, we find response in (16) to be odd, while the response in (17) seems perfectly alright:

(16) A: Bill is selfish and disrespectful of others' rights to property.

B: *What a thief!

(17) A: My butcher sells hamburger for 2 \$ a piece.

B: What a thief!

Another example of an “in that” clause which stretches the meaning of a word is given in (18):

(18) All of us are students in that we're learning new things all the time.

Strictly speaking, the initial assertion in (18) is false: it is actually implied that those addressed are not in fact students. The “in that” clause in (18), like that in (13), gives us evidence that the initial is true as a metaphorical description.

Because the “in that” clause shows what “all of us” do which is similar to what the students do, (18) is acceptable. The “in that” clause in (19), however, is unacceptable:

(19)*All of us are students in that we are unsure of our futures.

Although most students are unsure of their futures(probably more than they are learning new things all the time), this insecurity is not considered a central characteristic for the determination of whether or not someone is a student. Thus, there seems to be a continuum for studenthood which is roughly as shown in (20):

(20)

In that + things synonymous to student or things which embody studenthood	In that + things which students do, but which don't make one a student	In that + things only tangentially associated with being a student
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Unacceptable / acceptable / unacceptable

No stretching too stretched

Sentence (21) fits into the left-hand category while (19) fits into the right-hand category:

(21) *He is a student in that he is a registered student at UTM.

A continuum such as that in (20) could be made for any predicate. Each such continuum would vary in the amount of space between its poles. Words will have more or less flexibility for use with „in that” depending on how many characteristics there are which neither embody that word nor fall only tangentially within their domains. Thus a sentence like (22),

(22) My father is alive in that he holds a permanent place in my hearts.

is acceptable because it picks out a metaphorical meaning of alive which has validity in terms of our conception of what “alive” normally means even though it implies that my father is in fact dead. The following sentence, (23),

(23) *My father is alive in that his name is John, is unacceptable because the “in that” clause does not give ample justification for the claim that my father is truly or metaphorically alive. Sentence (24):

(24) *My father is alive in that he is living, is unacceptable because “in that” clause does not limit the initial assertion, but rather is synonymous with it.

The right situation or context allows one to stretch the meanings of the words even farther than they can be stretched in a context-free environment. Gurillo, Lenor Ruiz, Ortega, M. Belon Alvarado, 2013). Compare (25) to (26):

(25) *He is sick in that he is standing there without speaking.

(26) I really think Bob is sick in that he is standing there without speaking while John yells at him, and he never interrupts or tries to defend himself.

(25) is acceptable when found in the right context as provided by (26). This transition from unacceptability to acceptability is related to two conditions on the use of “in that”. These are given in (27):

(27) A. The speaker feels that x is a possible candidate for the domain over which the initial assertion may be true.

B. The given “in that” clause limits the domain over which the initial assertion could be believed to be true.

Obviously, these two are related. Sentence (26) demonstrates that context allows condition B to be met by extending the domain of the initial assertion, in this case ‘he is sick’. In (26) “sick” is stretched to include something like “not behaving in a manner that the speaker desires or approves of”.

The “in that” clause is picking this meaning out by specifically mentioning such a behavior. Notice, the stretched meaning of “sick” is related to the literal meaning of the word. One cannot extend a word so far that its stretched meaning is completely unrelated to its normal one. In fact, the usage of “sick” in (26) is similar to the use of “sick” in the expression of exasperation, “he’s sick”, uttered after hearing that a person did something we do not approve of or would not do ourselves. The concept of abnormality which is associated with illness is thus carried over to behaviors which are alien or unacceptable to the speaker.

We have seen, then that “in that” clauses can enlarge the domain of a word, especially in a suitable context. Sentence (28) is similar to (5):

(28) *She is fat in that she has 80 kilos.

Fatness seems to have too few dimensions to allow us to pick out weight as a limiting one. (28) is acceptable, however, when placed in an appropriate context, as in (29):

(29) A: I don’t think she is fat.

B: She’s fat in that she has 80 kilos and that I’m sure is not little.

The appearance of doubt that 80 kilos implies fat is enough to allow “in that” clause to occur as a hedge on “she is fat”. The context in (29) invites the speaker to use “in that” in this way for two reasons. First, because argumentative discourse forces one to explicitly state the domain over which one believes doubt as to whether or not the speaker’s

domain is the entire domain as seen from the addressee’s point of view.

If we compare (30) and (31):

(30)* There’s a guy on our team who’ll help us win tonight because he is tall and can reach the basket.

(31) A: He I not tall compared to other players.

B: Yeah, but he is tall in that he can reach the basket and that’s all that counts!

Even though what is significant about the player’s height in (30) is his ability to reach the basket, the “in that” clause is not limiting or hedging the initial assertion, “he is tall”. In (31), however, there are two kinds of tall which are at issue – relative height and height as it relates to shooting baskets. Speaker B’s comment is acceptable because “in that” clause in (31) limits the initial assertion to one type of tallness. “In that” occurs also in sarcastic discourse:

(32) She is a swimmer in that she swims a lot.

(3#) she is swimmer in that she thinks she is.

(32) is acceptable when read sarcastically because condition A (see (27) above) is violated, because swimming a lot does not make one a good swimmer. Using “in that she swims a lot” to justify the initial assertion “she is a swimmer”, implies that no better justification could be found, and therefore, that in the speaker’s opinion, the statement is false.

The sarcastic readings with “in that” are made clearer by the addition of “only” as in (34) and (35):

(34) She is a swimmer only in that she swims a lot.

(35) She is sick only in that she thinks she is.

With “only” sentence like (28) are acceptable. (36) provides a context which is the basis for the sarcasm, demonstrates this:

(36) A: Oh, I didn’t notice that Bill was particularly tall.

B: Right, He is only tall in that he is 1, 80 meters. I can see why you never noticed.

“Only” can also serve to expand the possible domain of the initial assertion – to make condition A apply. Thus, (37) and not (5) is acceptable:

(37) Doctor: You have no cause to worry. He is sick only in that he has the smallpox. The other tests were negative.

In conclusion, after analyzing several contexts, from the discourse level, we may say that “in that” is a construction which works like a hedge to limit the domain over which an assertion is held to be true, removing the speaker from responsibility for interpretations other than those specifically mentioned. In the process of doing this, “in that” can stretch the meanings of words while limiting their applicability to a fixed and specified domain. In order to account for the occurrence of “in that” clauses in English, a device is needed which can determine the domain over which a given predicate can apply, the degree to which various metaphorical, connotative meanings or implicatures are central or tangential to the predicate’s basic

meaning, and the way these things change in context. That “in that” interacts as it does with context once again demonstrates that pragmatics and syntax are not necessarily separate, but that each influences the other to create acceptable speech.

References

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