Getting Mental Ontology through Linguistics: the case of Phenomenal Contrast Arguments

Phenomenal contrast arguments (PCAs) are normally employed in philosophy as arguments for arguing that a certain mental feature contributes to (the phenomenal character of) our experience or is phenomenologically manifest (Siewert 1998; Kriegel 2007). Such arguments play an essential role within the project of determining the admissible contents of experience (Tolliver 2007; Siegel 2010) as well as within the project of vindicating different kinds of sui generis phenomenologies such as cognitive phenomenology (Strawson 2010; Kriegel 2015; Chudnoff 2015a). In this paper we examine a neglected aspect of such arguments, i.e., the ontological profile of the mental episodes involved in them, and argue that this happens to be a crucial feature of the arguments. We use linguistic tools to determine the lexical aspect of verbs and verb phrases – the tests for a/telicity and for duration. We then argue that all PCAs can show is the presence of a generic achievement-like phenomenology, especially in the cognitive domain, which contrasts with the role that PCAs are given in the literature.

PCAs paradigmatically present subjects with two scenarios that are alike in most respects except from one. Then PCAs ask subjects to imagine being in the first scenario, moving afterwards to the second, while inviting them to acknowledge that there is a phenomenal contrast when one thus moves from the first to the second scenario. Given that the scenarios differ in only one relevant aspect, it is argued that the phenomenal contrast should be accounted for by appealing to this specific element, which can thus be said to contribute to the phenomenal character of the experience.

The cases: [1] Strawson (2010 [1994]: 5-6) presents the example of Jacques and Jack: Jacques is a monoglot Frenchman and Jack a monoglot Englishman and they are both listening to the news in French. The difference between the two is that Jacques has an 'understanding-experience', while Jack does not. [2] Siewert (1998) presents the example of understanding something in two different ways (Siewert 1998: pp. 278–279). [3] Chudnoff (2015b: 98) has also presented a PCA with respect to the episode of "seeing" that a proposition is true (contrasted with not seeing it as true) or what has been called 'intuiting'. The cases of understanding and "intellectual seeing" have also been explored in hypothetical scenarios by Horgan and Kriegel, respectively. [4] Horgan (2013: 241-244) presents a case where a person initially in Searle's Chinese-Room scenario moves through a series of stages where the apparent level of his proficiency in Chinese is increased step by step without increasing his actual understanding of Chinese (he uses a monitoring device that does the real work). Horgan compares this guy's last stage with the case of a person who does understand Chinese and concludes that the guy lacks Chinese language-understanding phenomenology. [5] Kriegel (2015), in turn, puts forward the character Zoe, a sensory-algedonic-emotional zombie that happens to be a mathematical genius who "[o]ften (…) struggles to find the solution of some problem", but "suddenly "the coin drops" and she can see … how the solution must go". García-Carpintero [6] (2016: 265-266), presents a case where phenomenal contrast is between realizing that a certain thought is a thought about oneself.

Now we analyse the ontological kind of the mental episodes involved in the above PCAs through linguistic tests. Works on lexical aspect in linguistics generally distinguish four kinds of aspectual classes: accomplishments, achievements, states and activities (Vendler 1957; Kenny 1963; Filip 2011). The main tests for telicity usually employed are three (Filip 2011). (1) Telic VPs freely combine with *in NP* modifiers like *in an hour* (she *drew a circle in a hour, she found the place in 5 minutes*), whereas

atelic ones combine better with *for NP* such as *for an hour* (*she has smiled for two minutes*). (2) Telic VPs are straightforwardly compatible with cardinal count adverbials, as in *she draw a circle three times* or *she found the keys twice*. In contrast, atelic VPs cannot be combined with cardinal count adverbials unless they shift to telic interpretations (**run three times*), and they accept quantifiers such as *a lot*, as in *she swims a lot*. (3) Telic VPs (in contrast with atelic ones) never sanction the implication from *x is F-ing* into *x has F-ed*: *she is drawing a circle* does not imply *she has drawn a circle*. In the literature on lexical aspect, there is discussion about how to apply the tests in some cases. However, even if the tests may well not be definitive, they are still regarded as certainly indicative of whether events denoted by VPs are durative and/or telic or not.

Analysis. The events involved in those cases were events that can be linguistically expressed by VP constructions such as *grasp (the view/solution/proposition), understand (a sentence/Chinese), apprehend (a meaning/a proposition),* and *"intellectually see" (that p is true)*. For reasons of space, we will only present on case here (see full paper for a complete and developed analysis).

Understanding a sentence. It can be complemented with *in NP* but not with *for NP*:
>   (1) Jack understood sentence S in one second
>   (2) *Jack understood sentence S for two seconds

Second, understand a sentence admits of cardinal noun adverbials but not quantifiers:
>   (3) Jack understood sentence S three times.
>   (4)*Jack understood sentence S a lot.

On the other hand, understand a sentence does not admit the progressive form:
>   (5) *Jack is understanding sentence S.

and it cannot be combined with *stop/finish* and *cautiously/attentively*:
>   (6) *Jack stopped/finished understanding sentence S.
>   (7) *Jack understood sentence S cautiously/attentively.

We then discuss the related but different examples of understanding used by Siewert, and Horgan's (2013) example of understanding Chinese, which prima facie looks like an activity. This dual nature of the meaning of *understand* explains why it passes tests both for telicity and for atelicity. We then further argue there is a way to view *understand Chinese* as an achievement. We finally analyse the case of *intuiting* or *intellectually "seeing" that a proposition is true*, for which the telicity tests seem to show that achievements are in place.

In conclusion, it is striking to notice that we find only achievements in all cases of cognitive PCAs, a question that has remained unnoticed in the literature. This fact demands some discussion and explanation. After carefully analysing what this fact can show (in the longer version of the paper), we conclude that PCAs show that there is a general achievement-like phenomenology. This implies a twist in the standard way of using PCAs and in their results, which we carefully consider.

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