

Defending epistemic indefensibility: Enrichment and the case of quasi-denial

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This work reports on “Quasi-Denial”: a class of utterances that are straightforward denials in their core semantics, yet which encode mirative speaker attitude once the interpretation departs from their truth-conditional content.

In the words of Karttunen (1972), “consider a speaker who realizes that the rain is pouring down from the sky. He cannot honestly proclaim [(1)], unless he doubts his own senses”: (1) It is possible that it isn't raining.

Such utterances, Karttunen claims, are “epistemically indefensible”. Quasi-Denials (QDs), by contrast, exploit the evidential component of epistemic modality (von Fintel & Gillies 2010; Rett 2016) to express speaker attitude toward a prejacent ϕ . Below are 2 QD flavors, differentiated by context:

CG $\models \phi$ (2) [Said of rain visibly falling onto one's head.]

CG $\not\models \phi$ (3) [Said of people with dripping-wet raincoats entering the room.]

Speaker A: a. It can't be raining. \rightarrow Speaker is surprised that ϕ .
b. # It must not be raining. \Rightarrow Speaker is surprised that ϕ .

Speaker B: Wait a minute... Surely, you can't expect it to not be raining?

Speaker A (**the defense!**): *It is perfectly reasonable for me to say so, ...*

(of (2a)): *...I examined a detailed weather analysis this morning that clearly stipulated 0% chance of rain. This rain does not conform to my expectations!*

(of (3a)): *...The weather report said 0% chance of rain. Perhaps these people got caught in the sprinklers? Seeing them covered in water is not necessarily enough evidence for me to conclude that it is (or must be) raining.*

The QD (2a) is “trivially false”, as the contextual evidence entails the truth of ϕ . Not so for (3a), where the CG merely entails the possibility of ϕ . So counter-expectation obtains independently of truth-conditional falsity, and thus begs the question: by what means is this speaker skepticism encoded?

QDs show that the meaning contributed by negated epistemic possibility modals to indicative sentences is not limited to inferential evidentiality, but also carries a signal of (*counter*-)expectation relevant to both inferential *and* contextually-supplied evidence. The facts are as such: when non-inferential evidence supports a proposition which is not contained in the S's expectation state, QDs are used *not* to outright deny the truth of the contextually-derived proposition, but to *indicate* that the speaker is bringing to bear private, inferential restrictions into casting doubt on the question of the prejacent. In discourse, the use of QDs constitutes a cooperative, inquisitive move by the S to negotiate, or accommodate, the inclusion of the prejacent into the CG.

References: • Karttunen, L. 1972. *Possible and must*. In J. P. Kimball (ed.), *Syntax and semantics*, vol. 1: 1–20. • von Fintel, K. & A. S. Gillies. 2010. *Must stay strong*. *Natural Language Semantics* 18. 351–383. New York: Academic Press. • Rett, J. 2016. *On a shared property of deontic and epistemic modals*. In *Deontic Modality*, Oxford: OUP. •