Die SOPHISTen

Speech Acts

SOPHIST Ltd. often has remarkably exacting discussions regarding the usage of words in software requirements. Our discussions demonstrate that real world applications and their intended function often hinge on extreme interpretations and minor nuances of a single word. What is clear to one may also be very clear to another – but in an entirely different way than originally intended! Language is slippery.

Zig: You owe me a dollar so you ought to give me a dollar!

Zag: why? You lent me a dollar. That is a fact. But any number of facts cannot lead to a judgment, ethical or otherwise! For example, One plus one is two. That is a FACT. Yet that FACT leads to no sort of rule about my behavior whatsoever! You said I OUGHT to give you a dollar. Perhaps you will next be telling me how I OUGHT to help little old ladies across the street, that I OUGHT not burp loudly or that I OUGHT to vote in the next election? What are you, my mother? I really can't believe the nerve that you exhibit to make such judgments! Begone, foul beast, before you proscribe upon me yet more behaviors!

Zig: You are just hiding behind your rhetoric. Are you a politician by any chance?. You owe me a dollar, that is a FACT and I will find a way to prove that you then OUGHT to repay me my dollar!

Zag: Good luck. I think I am going to buy one of those one buck macho-size hamburgers. Laters.

Zig: Not so fast! I had this same problem with you the last time I lent you money so I have been doing some reading. In fact I would say that you are a totally deceptive liar, thief and cheat or you are not!

Zag: Take that back now or my lawyer is going to beat up your lawyer and I'll see you in court!

Zig: But I said nothing and the complete truth, all at the same time! Let's use logic to analyze my statement! All I said is that you are X or you are not. Which is logically equivalent to you are (X or not X) Which is a tautology and tautologies are always true! Hence I spoke the truth! Is your lawyer so good as to have me arrested for speaking a logical truth? Can he also demonstrate 1+1= 3? Perhaps for large values of 1, right? Ha! Grok that! You own medicine is not so sweet, eh?

Zag: Very good, grasshopper. But your statement, while logically valid, nevertheless subtly questions my integrity. If there is nothing to discuss, then don't waste your breath with tautologies! Additionally, your tautology is actually two separate statements that you have cleverly joined together. The predicate of both of your statements raises the question of someone being a total liar, thief and cheat. And the predicate reference in both cases is me! And that will be your real logical problem! You attempted to save yourself from certain misery and a life of begging for bread by ever so marginally negating the second proposition. So I will sue you on the grounds of your fist proposition which states that I am a liar, thief and cheat – a clear attack on my character!

Zig: First of all, you can't take apart a tautology without destroying it. You'll have better luck trying to cut only the top surface of a piece of paper while leaving the other surface intact! Besides, for you to successfully sue me, you must present a bunch of facts from which the court declares that I ought to do some act as compensation for besmirching your flawless character. According to your own logic, at no time will the list of facts which you present to the court in any way necessitate my having to do anything! Ha! And since I have recorded the conversation to this point, I will request the court to use your original logic as my defense! The situations are logically identical!

Zig: Not fair! You are twisting reality here! I ought to pick on you, you shouldn't pick on me!

Zag: Don't you wish. Anyway, the errors we have both exploited in our logic are quite complex. But the multi-layered aspects of language allow these sorts of errors to be made all the time. I believe a headline in the paper recently declared, "Court to try shooting defendant." So are they going to bring the defendant to trial or are they simply going to shoot him? What ever happened to innocent until proven guilty?

Zig: Ha! They ought to shoot the bastard; he'll probably walk otherwise. He has good lawyers that can prove 1+1 may equal 3 in some cases.

Zag: There you go! You made an evaluative statement ought about the defendant! From the evidence of his crimes, you believe he ought to be killed! This is very similar to what we are arguing about! The trick

is that we are using ought in two different ways! The first way is a subjective judgment for behaviors that will exist whether the statement is followed or not such as, "one ought to eat with one's mouth closed." If I eat with my mouth open, perhaps the "rules" of polite society are being violated but I am not necessarily participating in polite society. The second use of ought is somewhat abstract, like in a game of soccer where one ought to keep the ball in bounds otherwise the other team gets the ball. By playing the game, the rules are accepted by all participants at the start. One ought to follow the rules or the game does not exist! When I claim that you ought to repay me, I am not making an evaluative statement at all. The evaluation was made by society before I ever made the mistake of lending you money. Society declares that debts ought to be repaid. We both necessarily participate in society and therefore must abide by society's rules. Hence, my ought made no judgment whatsoever; I merely repeated a rule which enables society to function. Similarly, when you want to have me thrown in jail for rumormongering and attempted tautologous assault of the third degree, you are citing societal rules for behavior which you believe I have broken! Therefore you ought to give me my dollar!

Zag: Hmmph! Tomorrow I think I will give you a dollar if you meet me on the golden mountain.

The preceding argument did or did not occur on the golden mountain. The characters may or may not be real. The idea came from John R. Searle's Speech Acts, a book about the philosophy of language. SOPHIST Ltd. ought to use his ideas in our work or this sentence is false.