

Contrastive Semantics for Deontic Modals

Justin Snedegar, USC School of Philosophy

Abstract

Several philosophers have argued that the deontic 'ought' is contrastive – that is, 'ought' claims are always relative to contextually determined sets of alternatives. For example, if we say something like "Emmy ought go to the store", we express the proposition that Emmy ought to go to the store, rather than spending all day watching television, or, less naturally, the proposition that Emmy ought to go to the store out of {go to the store, spend all day watching television}. What you ought to do out of one set of alternatives is not always what you ought to do out of another set of alternatives.

Contrastivism about 'ought' is able to solve several puzzles from the literature on deontic modals and deontic logic. In this paper, I argue that some of these same puzzles arise for the deontic 'must'. Nevertheless, philosophers who adopt contrastivism about 'ought' have not adopted contrastivism about 'must', and some have explicitly denied that 'must' is contrastive. So the first task of this paper is to show that, if contrastivism about 'ought' is well-motivated, then so is contrastivism about 'must'.

But then a problem arises. The puzzles that motivate contrastivism about 'ought' and 'must' do not seem to arise for 'may', suggesting that 'may' is not contrastive. But 'must' and 'may' are *duals*; 'must', then, is contrastive if and only if 'may' is. So the second task of this paper is to offer some motivation for contrastivism about 'may', by showing that puzzles do arise for 'it is not the case that...may...'.

After offering motivations for treating these deontic modals contrastively, I turn to the final task of the paper, which is to offer a simple, unified, contrastive semantic framework for 'ought', 'must', and 'may'. I show that, besides offering a unified semantics for this class of modals, this framework captures all of the desired relationships between them: 'must' is stronger than 'ought', and both are stronger than 'may', and 'must' and 'may' turn out to be duals. Interestingly, the standard non-contrastive duality principles fall out of the contrastive duality principles given by the framework as a special case.