



## Marxism and thought's ambiguity

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Famously Marx claimed to have shot an elephant in his pajamas, adding immediately he had no idea of what the elephant was doing there. More recently Fodor [In *Hume Variations*, Oxford: 2003 ], claimed that while we all may find this funny or obscure or both, Marx could not. The issue turns only contingently on humour. The not funny part turns on the rather unclear question of the ambiguity of thought.

One part of the paper tries to explain what is the mental mechanism that allows some disambiguation to be funny. The second part, far more speculative tries to explore what it would be for thought to be ambiguous. It assumes that speech and writing are *de facto* and *de jure* ambiguous. Such an assumption will be backed up by a taxonomy of sources of ambiguity, confronted across different lexicons.

On thought itself a tentative diagnosis will be given by examining the case, made by some philosophers, for thought itself, being essentially ambiguous because situated. This can be disputed by simply adopting an externalist notion of what counts for anchoring of features that are left as open variables by the expression of thought. However we have no reason to think that the logical form the interpretation interface computes on is the *locus* of truth values assignment.

There is one line of thinking according to which thought is ambiguous because we have indexical thoughts. Notice that Marx's joke does not need any indexicality at all to do its job. A few remarks on indexicality and thinking suffice to show that it is not altogether clear that we need to postulate indexical thoughts, while we may be forced to admit that we do not have the resources to express thought without indexicals. The issue of thought's indexicality is however peripheral to the paper itself.

The main thesis is a defense of a basic point of logic. Since we have to use thoughts to disambiguate tokens of natural languages that are ambiguous (for reasons of lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic features), thoughts themselves are not ambiguous, and could not be such, barring an infinite regress. The infinite regress itself need not be vicious, if it were not for the simple reason that it voids the very notion of ambiguity into nothing.

Arguments can be developed along two lines.  
One is purely conceptual (resumed above)

The second assumes that if thoughts are ambiguous then they remain such independently from the lexical resources brought to bear on their expression. This is not the case and it can be shown by applying translation tests even to strange cases like the joke that opens the presentation. Translating a sentence gives very often directly its disambiguation, e.g. G. Marx's quip has to be translated into French by using two different, mutually incompatible, sentences. It would appear that the very possibility of translations conflicts with the thesis of the ambiguity of thought, modulo a treatment (which isn't the focus of the presentation) of an alleged essential indexicality of thought.