How weak is your *want*?

Kai von Fintel

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1 Introduction

In 1999, I published a paper ([von Fintel 1999](#)) that among other things presented an analysis of the semantics of desire ascriptions. In a footnote, I wrote:

> with a good glass of red wine and paper and pencil it is astonishingly easy to come up with candidate analyses that are not blatantly implausible. Wouldn't it be nice if the language learner got some obvious clues about which meanings are serious contenders …?

Well, while I'm not sure how much red wine is involved, there have since then been quite an astonishing number of attempts to lay down the correct meaning of *want* (and its siblings and cousins). I'm not about to compare and contrast the whole lot of them but I would like to make a few remarks on the issue of "strength".

There is one very salient way in which my analysis differs from another, very influential, analysis: the one in [Heim 1992](#). According to my analysis someone who is truthfully described as wanting the striper dish on the menu will automatically be also someone who is truthfully described as wanting seafood (since striper is seafood). According to Heim 1992, that inference is invalid. The reason is that in that analysis, wanting seafood is a very strong property: you need to prefer any doxastically accessible seafood scenario to its most similar non-seafood scenario. In [von Fintel 2018](#), I give some reason to think that my "weaker" (and thus monotonic) analysis is preferable.

So, I'm on the record as a proponent of a weak-ish analysis of *want*. This note concerns recent contributions that argue for even weaker analyses. In the first case, I wanted just to draw attention to the work since it has not (yet?) been engaged with in even more recent contributions. In the second case, I have a skeptical remark.

2 Staniszewski 2019

In a NELS proceedings paper, Staniszewski proposes that *want* underlyingly has a "possibility" meaning that only requires that *some* of the best worlds according to the attitude holder are worlds where the prejacent is true. He argues that this weak meaning is visible in several negated contexts:

(1) a. Lena doesn't want to leave.

b. I no longer want to be called an idiot.

In (1a), we see the famous "neg-raising" property of *want*: the sentence is interpreted not as the absence of a desire to leave but as the presence of a desire not to leave. With Staniszewski's weak semantics, this meaning comes out straightwardly ($\neg\exists$ = there's no best world where she leaves).

In (1b), an example due to Homer 2015, the relevant observation is that what is presupposed is not that it used to be the case that speaker wanted to be called an idiot, but merely that the speaker tolerated being called an idiot. The latter may or may not be captured by the possibility meaning (are there really any *best* worlds where one is called an idiot?), but it is certainly grist for the weak *want* mill.

For unembedded, unnegated occurrences of *want*, Staniszewski recovers the standard necessity semantics by applying an exhaustification operator that universally quantifies over subsets of the agent's best worlds, which then means that all of those best worlds need to verify the prejacent. So, for Staniszewski, *want* is only weak in certain environments where exhaustification doesn't apply.

In work in progress, Staniszewski elaborates and extends this analysis, including for some (but not all) other modal expressions (such as *be supposed to* and *should*). For some relevant handouts, see https://sites.google.com/view/frankstaniszewski.

3 Phillips-Brown 2021 and Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming

Phillips-Brown 2021 presents a scenario that is supposed to motivate a very weak *want* even in unembedded occurrences:

> Imagine that you will be given a single ticket from a hat. Most of the tickets are worthless. Two tickets, though, have cash value, the red ticket (worth $50) and the blue ticket (worth $100). You

> want to get the red ticket, and of course you also want to get the blue ticket.

The crucial claim is that in the given scenario, "you" want the red ticket. We assume that it is assumed that "you" are a perfectly reasonable individual.

Blumberg & Hawthorne forthcoming report the scenario as well and endorse the relevant judgments:

> (2) a.   I want to get the red ticket.
>
>   b.   I want to get the blue ticket.
>
> Both [(2a)] and [(2b)] are acceptable here. In particular, [(2a)] sounds true, even though getting the red ticket clearly isn't the best outcome.

Both papers then proceed to advocate for a weak semantics for *want*, according to which the prejacent needs to be evaluated as "good enough" by the agent. Blumberg & Hawthorne actually weaken the semantics endorsed by Phillips-Brown 2021 even further by making it monotonic (persuaded by arguments that I alluded to above).

I wish to file a complaint. I for one cannot endorse (2a). If someone in the given scenario told me that they want to get the red ticket, I would respond: "Why do you want the red ticket? The blue ticket is worth more!" On the other hand, what I would endorse is a *want* with a disjunctive prejacent:

(3)   I want to get either the red ticket or the blue ticket.

Surely, any reasonable person would indeed have a preference structure where the best worlds make the red-blue disjunction true. But that doesn't mean that they want red. It means that they *are ok with* red. For me at least, *want* is not the same as *be ok with*.

4   Conclusion for now

This is just a quick note pointing out some recently surfaced interesting issues in the semantics of *want*. There surely will be more to be said, and it's not impossible that I will eventually say some of those things.

References

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