

Varieties of Alienness*

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1. Alien languages

Let a language L1 *have semantically alien kinds of features relative to* – for short, *be alien relative to* – another language L2 just in case L1 differs semantically from L2, in the following ways:

- (i) it is *structurally* different
- (ii) it is so by having *added* elements.

A structural difference is one that does not just have to do with what the language has expressions for but with what kinds of resources it has. What are the linguistic categories to which its expressions belong? What are the modes of composition?

Certainly some languages are alien relative to other languages. Some languages have kinds of resources that others do not have. Hard questions can be asked about which languages are alien relative to which others and on what grounds. But here is a relatively straightforward example. Compare a language with only atomic sentences and a language

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which also has a manifold of sentential operators, both truth-functional and not. Surely the latter is alien relative to the former.

Now, let a language *L* be *alien* – alien full stop – if it is alien relative to all familiar languages. This is no clearer than the notion of a “familiar language”. I won’t attempt a very precise characterization of that notion. Familiar languages at least include Western natural languages and the well-known – familiar – languages of logic that have been developed partly with the aim of capturing logical features of these languages. But this leaves open some questions and the notion of a familiar language can be sharpened in different ways. Which natural languages? Which languages of logic? But regardless of how we choose to answer these questions it is plausible that there are alien languages. Familiar languages use a wide plethora of different kinds of resources. It would be something of a miracle if the resources of familiar languages exhausted all the kinds of semantic resources there can be, and this would be so even if every language that any human has ever used counts as “familiar”.¹ (It may be that every coarse-grained proposition that can be expressed is such that it can be expressed in a familiar language. That is different.)

As I will get into in more detail later, this is potentially highly relevant for metaphysics. If *L*₁ is alien relative to *L*₂, then it can be that *L*₁ is capable of representing aspects of the world that *L*₂ cannot represent. If there are alien languages, then they might be capable of representing aspects of the world that familiar languages cannot represent.

The themes just briefly introduced are the central themes in my (Eklund 2024). This text serves as an introduction to those themes, and presents them in slightly different ways.

Before proceeding, let me briefly remark on some matters that I will not spend much time on here. First, we might of course be mistaken, including radically mistaken, about how

¹ Compare (Hofweber (2017, 141f).

familiar languages work.² There is an intuitive sense in which perfectly familiar languages can turn out to be “alien”: they might in fact work in ways that, if properly described, would strike us as strange. But this is not alienness in the sense characterized. And for the purposes of my discussion, I will simply assume a simple and conservative view on how familiar languages work. Second, I like the label “alien” for what I am talking about, and I keep using it. But the label “alien” might suggest that what is at issue is something *really different and weird*. And an alien language could in principle employ kinds of expressions that are *almost-but-not-exactly* like familiar kinds of expressions. This is *merely somewhat* alien, but alien all the same.³ Third, while I have been and will be talking about *language*, the underlying issue is more broad. As raised, the metaphysical question concerns the abilities of different languages to describe the world. But one might also compare languages with various non-linguistic systems of representation, for example pictures and maps, in terms of how well they represent various aspects of reality.⁴ And at least insofar as thought is not linguistic, one might also compare language and thought in that regard as well. So the underlying issue concerns how various *systems of representation*, whether linguistic or not, represent the world. I will not really discuss non-linguistic representation here, but the issue will come up briefly later, in connection with the discussion of sentences.

2. Thoroughly alien languages

The previous section concerned the possibility there are alien elements that can be *added* to an otherwise familiar kind of language. But one might further consider the theoretical possibility of alien languages that are *from the bottom up* alternatives to familiar ones.

² (Eklund 2024, 5f).

³ (Eklund 2024, 6f).

⁴ In (Eklund 2024, chap. 9), I have an extended discussion of what Elisabeth Camp (Camp 2018) says about maps, and how maps differ semantically from familiar kinds of linguistic representations.

Let a language L1 be *thoroughly alien relative to* another language L2 just in case L1 differs semantically from L2, by (i) being *structurally* different and (ii) having not just *added* elements but by having sentences built up from alien kinds of expressions *instead of* familiar ones. A language is *thoroughly alien* (full stop) if it is thoroughly alien relative to all familiar languages.

I am inclined to believe that there thoroughly alien languages. This goes beyond the general claim that there are alien languages. And the argument from the previous section to the effect that there are possible alien languages does not immediately show that there are possible thoroughly alien languages. Even if the plethora of resources found already in familiar languages provides good reason to think that there are still more possible linguistic resources in principle, that does not by itself provide reason to think that there are possible sentences built up entirely from alien elements.

What might be an example of a language that is thoroughly alien relative to another one? Here is a simple example. Problems can be raised even here, as everywhere. But at least on the face of it, a standard language of predicate logic is alien relative to a language of propositional logic, for where the former has names and predicates the latter just does not. The simple sentences are built up differently, for in the latter case the simple sentences are not built up at all.

It might be hard to envisage what thorough alienness full stop could be. To help provide a grip on this matter, let me provide two possible examples of thoroughly alien languages. My aim is not to use these examples to argue that there are such languages. Both examples are problematic, and I will stress some problems. Instead, I will use them both to illustrate what such languages might be like, and to illustrate some general difficulties that arise when one tries to adjudicate the issue of whether some given language is thoroughly alien.

Here is a first example. Peter Sullivan (Sullivan 2020) says:

[Ramsey] observed that nothing rules out propositions consisting entirely of several expressions of the same type [...] He was not suggesting that we could make sense of non-sentences like ‘Socrates Plato’ or ‘mortality senility wisdom’. Any type or category that did self-combine as those familiar ones fail to would be very different from those we employ. It would be employed in thought of a very different logical shape, and altogether alien to us.⁵

Call a language of the kind envisaged by Sullivan a *flat language*. A flat language only has subsentential expressions of one logical type.⁶

One problem with how Sullivan presents things is that we *can* easily envisage languages with sentences like “Socrates Plato” and “mortal senile wise”. The former can express that Socrates stands in a certain relation to Plato. The second can express that something is mortal, senile and wise. But unintended interpretations to the side, surely what Sullivan has in mind is a language with sentences whose constituent expressions are all of the same type, and such that the surface structure of those sentences also display how the sentences in fact work.

This is also relevant for warding off a possible misunderstanding regarding what a flat language is intended to be. There can certainly be languages with sentences like “red red” expressing something like what we would express by saying “redness is red”. But this is not without further ado be flat in the intended sense either. For even if “red” refers to the very same thing in both occurrences, something else about this sentence ensures that “red”

⁵ (Sullivan 2020, 195f).

⁶ (Eklund 2024, 24 and 74ff).

functions differently in the two occurrences. In one occurrence it serves to stand for what is being predicated, and in another it serves to stand for what this is being predicated of.

So far I have only commented on some possible misunderstandings of what I take to be Sullivan's idea. But these remarks also point to a more general and potentially deeper issue. It is *easy* to concoct *seemingly* alien languages, e.g. flat ones. The question is whether what is described is *genuinely* alien. How can this ever be ensured?

In my (2024), I refer to the issue that arises as *the disguise objection*. Here is the objection, stated in general terms. If I present you with a putatively thoroughly alien sentence " $\alpha\beta\gamma$ " and you ask me what it means, then it seems I have two options. I can either explain using familiar language and thus encourage the disguise objection, or use alien language (" $\alpha\beta\gamma$ " means that $\alpha\beta\gamma!$ "), in which case you can question whether the symbols I use really mean anything. Your dilemma is not a strong argument against the view that there are thoroughly alien languages. Note for example that the dilemma can with equal force be raised against putative examples of the *non-thoroughly* alien. But it illustrates a possible difficulty in arguing by example that there are alien languages.

The reasoning behind the disguise objection can also in principle be deployed against the example I gave of relative thorough alienness. Consider Donald Davidson's view on predication and sentence meaning:

...if we do not understand predication, we do not understand how any sentence works, nor can we account for the structure of the simplest thought that is expressible in language. At one point there was much discussion of what was called "the unity of the proposition"; it is just this unity that a theory of predication must explain.⁷

⁷ (Davidson 2005, 77).

According to Davidson, there is predication in every sentence. Other philosophers have likewise seen predication as absolutely central.⁸ Offhand, one may think that the existence of languages of propositional logic plainly refute Davidson. There is no predication in the simple sentences of those languages! But if I were Davidson, I would reply that although there is no overt predication there, these simple sentences, if they have truth conditions at all, simply have to be thought of as built up from, among other things, predicates. Again, there is the issue of what is there in disguise. I am of course not claiming that this reply on behalf of Davidson is compelling. What I am saying is just that the availability of this move complicates things.

It may be suggested that the issue underlying the disguise objection is best stated in terms of *propositions*. For example, the question regarding Sullivan's example is best stated as follows: even if a language is superficially flat in the way described, might its sentences still express propositions of a familiar kind?

Understood in the right way, and against the right background assumptions, this may be a useful way to frame the issue of whether a superficially flat language is really alien. But there are potential pitfalls regarding putting things in terms of propositions.⁹

First, putting the matter in terms of what propositions there are risks encouraging the suspicion that the question I am concerned with only arises if one accepts the existence of propositions in the first place, and depending on what one takes propositions to be, such an assumption is controversial.

Second, on some views on propositions, like the view that propositions are sets of possible worlds, the idea of there being relevantly different kinds of propositions is hard to make sense of. Are not all propositions of the same kind: sets. One can draw distinctions

⁸ Like Davidson, (Hanks 2015) and (Soames 2010) see predication as absolutely central to language and thought. However, they do not focus on sentences but on acts of predication performed by thinkers.

⁹ Compare (Eklund 2024, 18ff).

between sets, for example in terms of how many members they have, but it is hard to see how these distinctions are distinctions in kind. One can ask which sets of worlds are such that they represent the truth-conditions of sentences of a given natural language, but that does not directly correspond to a kind of sets either. The kinds of views on propositions that seem more relevant are Russellian or Fregean views on which propositions are structured entities. For Russell, the propositions have as constituents the worldly entities that they intuitively are about. This means that the existence of alien propositions becomes bound up with the existence of alien kinds of entities to serve as constituents.¹⁰ For Frege, the propositions (the “Thoughts”, in Frege’s terminology) have as constituents representational entities, at the level of “sense”, which serve to represent the entities in the world, if any, that the proposition is about. A Fregean view coupled with the further assumption that these senses can represent things of certain kinds without things of this kind existing provides the most helpful framework for discussing present issues.

Third, a related but different question about the nature of propositions concerns whether they are inherently *representational*. Do they in and of themselves have such representational properties as being true and false, or not? Compare sentences. If we conceive of sentences just as strings of symbols, they are not in and of themselves representational, even though a sentence – a string of symbols – certainly can be true/false in a given language. Consider the question of whether a proposition can have some given arbitrary collection of entities as its complete set of constituents; (say) just the natural numbers 1, 2 and 3, or just my nose and my left ear. On a representational view on propositions there is obviously *prima facie* reason to be skeptical: “how can these entities by themselves determine a truth condition?”. But on a non-representational view, the answer may be trivially yes: a structured

¹⁰ It becomes bound up with that issue, but the relationship is not completely straightforward. The alienness of a proposition need not only be a matter of the alienness of the constituents but can also be a matter of how they are related.

entity with exactly these constituents may be *treated as* representing such-and-such a truth condition. Given a non-representational view, talk of propositions is no advance over talk of sentences for present purposes. One can legitimately speak of propositions, but as with the sentence “Plato Socrates”, their surface structure need not mirror what is going on representationally in any helpful way.

The talk of propositions promises to be more helpful than talk of sentences only given a representational view. What kinds of entities and what modes of combination might be such that those entities, combined in that way, together amount to, or in and of themselves determine, a truth condition? Once it is specified that it is the representational conception of propositions that is at issue, skepticism about propositions may be even more of a live issue. Why believe that there are entities of the requisite kind?

Let me now turn to a second putative example of the thoroughly alien: so-called *feature-placing languages*.¹¹ Many philosophers – among early examples are Strawson and Quine – have discussed the possibility of languages that do not contain referential devices like singular terms and quantifiers but whose sentences are instead built up by predicates and predicate-functors.¹² There is an underlying assumption that predicates are not themselves referential devices, and do not themselves refer to any entities. A standard informal illustration is that of expressions such as “it is raining”. The “it” that occurs there is a mere dummy subject, so semantically the sentence “it is raining” can be thought to work in such a way that it can be more helpfully stated as “raining”, and hence not consist of anything more than a predicate.¹³ Are these feature-placing languages alien? As just described they are not. Some things are simply subtracted from familiar languages. The results might seem odd and

¹¹ See, e.g., (Eklund 2024, 142ff).

¹² See (Strawson, 1954 and 1959) and (Quine 1960).

¹³ I am presenting this only as an illustration. Even if the “it” undeniably is a dummy subject, one may think that at the semantic level, the sentence contains a “location ‘slot’”, left unspecified and supplied by context. (Compare constructions such as “it is raining in Vienna”.) See (Turner 2011, fn26).

unfamiliar, but as I have characterized alienness, alien languages contain added elements. (“Alien” is my label and I decide how to use it. But one may still wonder what justifies this choice. One reason is straightforward. The enterprise of seeing whether we can get by without some of the tools natural language affords us – for example singular terms, quantification, polyadic predicates – is already alive and well. Less systematic attention has been paid to the possibility of added alien elements.)

However, are the “predicates” of these languages really predicates? On some conceptions of predication, they are not. For example, on the kind of conception of predication prominently defended by Frege it is in the nature of predicates to be incomplete or unsaturated: a predicate needs to be paired with something else in order to determine a truth condition and for something to be said, and it does not have meaning on its own. So the idea of a sentence consisting solely of a predicate just does not make sense.¹⁴ If the “predicates” of a feature-placing language are not in fact predicates, the theoretical possibility is open that these languages are alien – and if these languages are alien for this reason they are thoroughly alien, since they then have built up entirely from alien kinds of resources, the so-called “predicates”. Of course, if indeed “it is raining” and its ilk are feature-placing, then feature-placing languages are still not alien in the sense characterized.

4. Predication

Both of the examples used to illustrate what a thoroughly alien language might be raise issues about predication. Consider nearby questions such as:

Do all familiar languages employ predication?

¹⁴ There are of course complications regarding the Fregean idea. Frege wants to say that predicates are incomplete in a way that names are not, but it seems as plausible that names need to be supplemented by something in order for a truth condition to be determined as that predicates need to be so supplemented. My aim here, however, is not to assess the Fregean idea.

Do all languages employ predication?

The broad question “do all languages employ predication?” can as stated trivially be answered in the negative. There are at least possible languages with only expressions like “boo”, “hello” and “ouch”. A question in the same spirit that avoids this threat of trivialization concerns whether all *fact-stating* languages employ predication. If, as I suggested early on, a language of propositional logic does not employ predication, then that example shows that not all fact-stating languages employ predication. If such a language can be deemed too rudimentary or impoverished, an improved formulation is: do all *sufficiently expressively rich* fact-stating languages employ predication?

The above questions are about predication generally. Consider also the following questions:

Are there different possible kinds of predication, such that some languages employ one kind of predication and others do not?

If so, do all familiar languages that employ predication employ the same kind of predication?

Are there kinds of predication only alien languages employ?

One possibility is that all (sufficiently rich, fact-stating) languages employ predication, but there are kinds of predication only employed by alien languages. In the previous section, I suggested that given a Fregean view on predication, feature-placing languages do not employ predication. If there are different kinds of predication, then maybe Frege is right about one kind of predication, but feature-placing languages employ a different kind of predication. Of

course, this raises difficult, and perhaps unclear, questions about what counts as a kind of predication.

Different theories of predication have been proposed.¹⁵ Discussing these questions would be easier if one could comfortably rely on an established theory of what predication is. Even if I had a favorite theory, I would be hesitant to rely on it, for I would not want to give the misleading impression that my project in any way hinges upon this particular theory. Whichever the correct theory of predication happens to be, one can raise the kinds of questions I raise.

The fact that there are different theories of predication can actually be used to motivate the idea of alien languages, and more specifically the idea of thoroughly alien languages, as follows. All theories incompatible with the true theory of predication, whichever it is, fail to describe predication. Some of these theories may fail to describe the workings of any possible language at all. But others may describe an operation employed in some possible languages. These possible languages are then alien. (There are complications, but arguably of a merely terminological nature. Let me again use Frege as an example. Suppose that Frege gets familiar languages wrong but correctly describes some possible languages. One description of this is that then Frege has failed to describe predication. Another description is that Frege has failed to describe how predication works in languages actually used, but has correctly described how predication works in some other possible languages.)

The underlying strategy here is what I call *the false theory strategy*.¹⁶ If one wants to consider what some languages different from familiar languages might be like, a useful place to look are failed theories of how familiar languages work. Many such theories have been

¹⁵ Apart from Frege's theory, see, e.g., (Davidson 2005), (Liebesman 2015) and (MacBride 2005).

¹⁶ (Eklund 2024, 97f).

proposed. Many of them are incompatible with each other. So many of them fail to describe familiar languages. But even these failed theories may correctly describe some possible languages. Some of these possible languages will likely be alien in my sense. Compare perhaps the general point: even false theories of how the world actually is may happen to correctly describe possible ways for the world to be.

Even when the false theory strategy does provide examples of the alien, it may only provide examples of what I have called the somewhat alien. The false theories, while being failed as theories of the familiar, may not be so far off as to be examples of anything more radically alien. But to repeat, the somewhat alien is also alien.

5. Familiar and alien metaphysical structure

So far I have described questions regarding the possibility of alien languages, described what alien languages might be, and discussed how one can reason about the existence of alien languages.

For me, these questions are obviously interesting in their own right. But let me anyway pause to motivate inquiry into these questions. There are different ways to motivate interest in them. Some are internal to the study of language. Philosophers are apt to make claims about the nature of language generally and possible alien languages are relevant as potential counterexamples to such claims. For example, as mentioned above, many philosophers have held that predication is essential for there to be truth-conditions at all. But they seem to arrive at their conclusions based on how we actually think and speak. To assess their general claims, one must consider what other kinds of languages there might be. Other motivations have more to do with philosophy generally. A general thought underlying for example some of the recent interest in conceptual engineering is that the concepts we have

and employ are only some of the concepts there are.¹⁷ The logical space of concepts is vast. It would be something of a miracle if we have happened upon the best concepts to use, for all the different purposes for which we use concepts; and it may be something of a miracle if we even use the right *kinds* of concepts. This thought suggests inquiring into what kinds of concepts there are. “Concepts” are here, broadly speaking, the kinds of things that can be meant by expressions. So this is inquiry into what kinds of meanings that expressions can have. This is inquiry into the issue of alien languages.

But let me here focus more on motivation coming from metaphysics, already brought up briefly early on. Metaphysicians have defended different grand theories of reality, many of them radical. But these theories seem to share a common feature: reality consists of some (one or more) *objects, having properties and standing in relations*. This is true whether or not the metaphysical view is physicalist or idealist, whether or not it is monist or pluralist, whether the view countenances ordinary objects or not, etc. What I have highlighted as a common feature is so general that it might seem anodyne and banal. However, this feature seems to mirror how such familiar languages present reality, using singular terms and predicates. Maybe we should be suspicious of this.

“Object”, “property”, etc., can be used to mean different things. But here a relevant understanding is this. Objects are the sorts of things that can be referred to by singular terms but not by predicates. Properties are the sorts of things that (also) can be referred to by predicates.¹⁸ There are different views on the reference of singular terms and predicates. Frege and contemporary higher-orderists hold that it is impossible for singular terms and predicates to corefer. Russell held that it is possible for them to do so.¹⁹ But theorists of each

¹⁷ For relevant overviews of conceptual engineering, see (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020) and (Eklund 2021).

¹⁸ (Eklund 2024, chap. 3). One may hold that predicates don’t strictly refer to their worldly correlates. They stand in another relation, sometimes called *ascription* (see, e.g., (Liebesman 2015)). I will keep speaking of reference, for the sake of convenience.

¹⁹ See (Frege 1891 and 1892), and (Russell 1903). For overviews of higher-orderism, see (Fritz and Jones 2024) and (Skiba 2021).

kind can agree on the above characterization as far as it goes. If we take into consideration the possibility of alien semantic categories whose members refer, we need to complicate the characterization of these ontological categories. Suppose there is an alien semantic category of *alienators*, and suppose moreover that alienators refer. Then one can say, for example, that objects are the sorts of things that can be referred to by singular terms but not by predicates or alienators, properties are the sorts of things that can (also) be referred to by predicates but not by alienators, and aliens (to introduce another label) are the sorts of things that can (also) be referred to by alienators but not by predicates.

I say that what I provide is a relevant understanding of “object”, “property”, etc., for present purposes. What I mean is this. There are other ways of understanding these notions, not tied to what kind of entity is being apt to be referred to by what kind of expression. For example, it might be suggested that the difference has to do with the fact that properties can be multiply located, wholly present at different locations at once, in a way that objects cannot. However, all I am after is a significant object/property-like distinction such that this distinction is drawn on broadly logical or linguistic grounds. There is no need to argue that this is the only object/property-like distinction there is, or that it is somehow more significant than other such distinctions that may be provided.²⁰

When describing what I claimed to be a common feature of the different metaphysical theories that tend to get defended, I used locutions such as “having properties”, “standing in relations”, talk on the face of it presupposing that there are such entities as properties and relations, and I have also spoken as if predicates refer. But I don’t mean to commit myself, already in the description of the metaphysical issues I am investigating, to the view that there are such *entities* as properties and relations. Talk of “being propertied” and “being related”

²⁰ This point invites the possible objection that while it may be intuitive that the world ultimately consists of objects having properties and standing in relations, it is not correspondingly intuitive that the world ultimately consists of objects *in the specific sense of “object” just characterized* having properties *in the specific sense of “property” just characterized*. I am not too worried, but the point should be acknowledged.

might be preferable to talk that seems to reify properties and relations. And even if predicates do not actually refer to entities of any kind, one can raise questions about their metaphysical contribution. Not all metaphysics is ontology.

Let *alien metaphysical structure* be metaphysical structure properly presented only by an alien language, if at all.²¹ It is a theoretical possibility that there is alien metaphysical structure. The possibility of alien metaphysical structure is highlighted by the possibility of alien languages. However, alien languages need not be possible in order for there to be alien metaphysical structure.

In the characterization of what alien metaphysical structure is, I use a piece of jargon, “properly presented”. One can go on to cash this out in different ways. One straightforward way is to understand this in terms of *truth*. Another possibility is to understand it in terms of *perspicuous representation*. The idea of perspicuous representation is controversial and I only present appeal to such an idea as a theoretical possibility.²² However, one possible reason to think that the idea of perspicuous representation is crucial is the following. The view that it is a live possibility that reality has alien structure combined with understanding proper presentation as truth has the consequence that simple familiar sentences are generally untrue, and that might in turn be thought to be unacceptable. I will get back to this motivation for looking to perspicuous representation instead of truth. But first let me say more about perspicuous representation.

The basic idea is that among true representations, some better – more perspicuously – represent reality than others do. As an illustration, consider the following sentences:

Socrates is wise.

²¹ (Eklund 2024, 7).

²² (Eklund 2024, 15f).

Socrates instantiates wisdom.

Socrates stands in the instantiation relation to wisdom.

It is true that Socrates instantiates wisdom.

It is not the case that it is not the case that Socrates instantiates wisdom.

One view one might have on these sentences is that they all concern different aspects of reality (different facts, if one is happy to speak of facts), albeit aspects that are intimately related. But a different view is that despite their differences they are all about the very same aspect of the reality. Someone embracing that alternative view might think that even if the sentences are all true, one or more of them maybe present the relevant aspect of reality better than do the others. This is where the idea of perspicuous representation enters in.

This is just a job description for the notion. What might perspicuous representation be, more specifically?

Ezra Rubenstein (Rubenstein 2024) outlines some ways of being more specific about what perspicuous representation is. Here is one way:

Following Kit Fine [...] one might view perspicuity as a matter of a truth's matching the structure of the corresponding fact. On this conception, $\langle p \rangle$ is perspicuous just in case for each representational constituent of $\langle p \rangle$, [the fact that p] has a corresponding worldly constituent, and for each structuring relation between the constituents of $\langle p \rangle$, the constituents of [the fact that p] are correspondingly related.

For example, a simple atomic truth of the form 'a is P' is perspicuous if and only if there is some object a and property P, corresponding to the name 'a' and predicate 'P' respectively, such that a instantiates P.²³

²³ (Rubenstein 2024, 1113). " $\langle p \rangle$ " stands for "the truth that p".

Given this suggestion, a truth is perspicuous iff for each representational constituent of this truth, the corresponding fact has a worldly constituent. An immediate concern is that this seems to leave very little room for non-perspicuous truths. If object *o* exists, “*o*” can refer to *o*, and then *o* is available to be a worldly constituent of a fact; and correspondingly for “*P*”. But then how can there fail to be such a fact as that *o* is *P* with worldly constituents *o* and *P*? One can say that *o* and *P* may fail to be fundamental, but why should that matter? The truth that *o* is *P* may perspicuously represent the nonfundamental fact that *o* is *P*.

Rubenstein does provide an example of how there can be non-perspicuous truths in the sense characterized, using the sentence “the average family has 2.2 children”.²⁴ This sentence is true, but there is no such object as the average family. However, Rubenstein himself notes in a footnote that when it comes to his example, “the structure of the corresponding sentence-meaning may not match that of the sentence”.²⁵ In cases like this, where, in Rubenstein’s terms, the structure of the sentence-meaning does not match that of the sentence, a sentence may well be true without perspicuously representing, in the sense characterized. But it is scarcely believable that (say) the structure of the meaning of “the emerald is grue” is different from the structure of the meaning of “the emerald is green”.

Rubenstein also describes a different approach to perspicuous representation, one he associates with Ted Sider:

Alternatively (though not incompatibly), one might understand perspicuity in terms of a subpropositional notion. Following Ted Sider [...] one might require that the constituents of a perspicuous truth are each ‘structural’. This notion extends Lewisian naturalness

²⁴ (Rubenstein 2024, 1112).

²⁵ See (Kennedy and Stanley 2009).

‘beyond the predicate’, to names, sentential operators, quantifiers, etc. Structural notions ‘carve nature at its joints’, in ways that matter for objective similarity, explanation, and confirmation, and which confer a kind of epistemic value that is independent of truth. For example, ‘is grue’ and ‘is taller than’ do not denote perfectly natural properties/relations; hence <this emerald is grue> and <Trump is taller than Obama> are not perspicuous truths.²⁶

But at least for all that Rubenstein here explicitly says about the Siderian view, it seems that something goes wrong. The perspicuity of a representation is a matter of how well it reflects the underlying reality. One may then think that even if “grue” is not joint-carving, “this emerald is grue” can well reflect the underlying reality: it perspicuously represents the fact which corresponds to it, the fact that the emerald is grue. This latter fact may well obtain even though grueness is far from a perfectly structural property.²⁷

Using Sider’s notion of being structural to cash out talk of perspicuity works better on the assumption that if “green” is structural and “grue” is not, then there is a sense in which “green” has a worldly correlate and “grue” simply does not. One way for “green” to have a worldly correlate and “grue” not is if it simply is the case that greenness exists but not grueness. But then there is no need for a distinction between structural and non-structural properties in the first place: the only properties there exist are structural. Another way is if, in addition to plain talk of existence, one can speak of what “exists in reality” or “robustly exists”, or some such thing. I will use “EXISTS”, in capital letters, for this, however best to understand it. Somehow greenness EXISTS but grueness doesn’t, even if both exist. Or that would be the idea. There are questions about how this notion of EXISTENCE is best

²⁶ (Rubenstein 2024, 1113).

²⁷ Of course, Sider’s notion of “structure” should not be confused with “structure” as I use it when talking about “alien structure”. That said, one can of course ask to what extent there are things which are “alien” in my sense that are “structural” in Sider’s sense.

understood, but the points I want to make are independent of finer details. Given the metaphysical distinction between existence and EXISTENCE, one can further hold that only EXISTENCE can do certain metaphysical jobs; for example, that only what EXISTS, and not what merely exists, can be among what is ultimately represented by truths about the world. All this involves new metaphysical assumptions in a way that goes beyond merely assuming that there is something to the general idea of joint-carving and its generalization beyond the predicate.

The point is general, and has application beyond Rubenstein's discussion of Sider. Suppose that one has a conception according to which among the things that exist, only some of them EXIST. As noted, one can then say that only what EXISTS can serve to make true various truths. One can then make sense of perspicuity of some truths by appeal to their close ties to what EXISTS. But equally clearly, what does the theoretical job is a metaphysical distinction between existence and EXISTENCE. While putting things in terms of perspicuous representation may not strictly be *wrong*, it is *misleading* to present things in such a way as to highlight a difference in how truths represent as opposed to a difference in metaphysical status (existence versus EXISTENCE). The main theoretical posit is the latter.

Alien metaphysical structure, as I introduced it, is metaphysical structure properly presented only by an alien language, if at all. As I noted, "properly presented" can be cashed out in different ways. A possible reason for cashing it out in terms of perspicuous representation instead of truth was that if we understand it as truth then saying that there is alien structure threatens to carry in its wake a seemingly problematic error theory: there is alien structure only if we fail to speak the truth when using simple sentences of familiar languages. If the notion of perspicuous representation also is problematic – and while I have not by any means argued that it is, my discussion has indicated how it could be – that spells trouble for the idea of alien structure.

I myself think that the possible concern about an error theory may not be so much of a concern after all. For one thing, it may not be so much of a problem if the sentences we happily assertively utter do not express truths.²⁸ For another, alien structure may be a *local* thing. Some aspects or parts of reality may be alien while others are not. And while it could in principle be held to be problematic to hold that familiar simple sentences are never true, saying that restricted classes of such sentences are not is less plausibly problematic. The alien aspects of reality could even be aspects of reality that no sentences we actually use even purport to describe.

I have introduced the notion of alien metaphysical structure in such a way as to highlight the possibility of metaphysical competition between familiar and alien languages. Either some familiar language gets the metaphysical structure of reality right or some alien one does (or no kind of language does). The discussion of perspicuous representation concerns how to make sense of this kind of competition. But one need not think of these different kinds of languages as being in any kind of metaphysical competition. There are ecumenical options. One such option is to take reality to be *rich*, and contain both kinds of structure side by side, globally. There is structure rendering simple familiar sentences true (as well as perspicuously representing). There is structure rendering corresponding simple alien sentences true (as well as perspicuously representing). Another possibility – if indeed, rhetoric aside, it really is a different possibility – is to take reality not to have structure of the relevant kind itself, but to be equally amenable to being described using familiar resources and alien ones. (Reality is *shapeless*.)²⁹

²⁸ See (Eklund 2005) and the reply to Dan Korman in (Eklund 2024a), but in those texts I do not relate to alien structure.

²⁹ The way that I officially characterize “alien structure”, both here and in (Eklund 2024), there is alien structure only if some aspects of reality cannot be properly presented by a familiar language. It is perfectly compatible with the richness idea that there is alien structure in this sense. It is less clear that alien structure as officially characterized this is compatible with shapelessness, but this is just an artefact of the characterization.

The three possible views that I have distinguished between correspond to familiar kinds found elsewhere in ontology. Consider for example common sense ontology and the issue of the possibility of various kinds of weird objects. On some views, ordinary objects or weird objects but not both exist. On other views, reality contains both. On other views still, we can truly describe reality as containing either but the idea that reality contains objects in itself and independently of any description is held to be misguided. So along this particular dimension considering the alien is old hat.

6. Ideological indispensability

One may think that the fact that we use familiar languages so successfully in navigating the world provides strong reason to think that the world has familiar metaphysical structure – so strong reason that the possibility of alien structure is not worth taking seriously.³⁰ Without attempting a full-scale assessment of this train of thought, let me note a few ways in which alien metaphysical structure remains a live option even assuming that the thought mentioned is on the right track.³¹

First, it is one thing to say that the successfulness of familiar languages provides good reason to think that the world's structure is *much like* the structure as such languages present it; it is another to say that it provides good reason to think that the world's structure is *exactly* as such languages present it. If the world's structure is only much like the structure as familiar languages present it then the world's structure may be alien – at least *somewhat* alien.

Second, it is one thing to say that the aspects of reality that our successful theories of the world describe have familiar structure and another thing to say that all of reality has

³⁰ (Sider 2011, 14).

³¹ (Eklund 2024, 40ff).

familiar structure. Maybe there are aspects of reality that these current theories do not describe. Here is one way to illustrate the distinction. Suppose the physical world has familiar structure and also that the aspects of mathematical reality presented by the mathematical parts of our theories of the physical world have familiar structure. There could still be alien languages of mathematics properly presenting aspects of mathematical reality with alien structure.

Third, even assuming that all aspects of the *actual* world have familiar structure, there remains the question: what about other possible worlds? Do all aspects of all possible worlds have familiar structure? The claim that some possible worlds have alien structure is much less exciting than the claim that the actual world does. But it is not without philosophical bite. For example, it problematizes the idea that one can characterize the space of all possible worlds simply in terms of recombinations of familiar entities such as objects and properties.

7. Beyond sentences

The discussion so far has concerned the possibility of sentences with different subsentential structure than familiar ones. One might also broaden the scope of the discussion. Are there, somehow, alternatives to *sentences*? I will go on to briefly mention some avenues that can be explored. This is yet another variety of alienness. I started by describing the alien. I then introduced the idea of the thoroughly alien. While alienness of the kind introduced can in principle have to do with alternatives to sentences, the discussion has focused on the subsentential. The subsentential is a natural starting point when thinking about the possibility of alien languages. But one can also question sentences and that is what I will now turn to. There is a distinction regarding alternatives to sentences that is parallel to the distinction between the thoroughly alien and the non-thoroughly alien. A language can use something

else instead of sentences, or it can go beyond sentences through having something in addition. What I go on to discuss will illustrate both these things.

Above I mentioned the possibility of raising the questions that I raise not as concerning alien languages but as concerning alien *propositions*. I also mentioned some complications regarding framing the issue that way. What is now being considered presents yet another complication. Propositions are the correlates of sentences. They are what sentences express. If we should consider alternatives to sentences, then we should likewise consider alternatives to sentence correlates.

How could there be alternatives to sentences in the relevant sense? Let me first very briefly mention, only to set aside, two avenues that in principle might be explored but which I will not say much about here. First, one might look to pictorial representations such as maps and pictures, argue that these things represent the world but without having anything corresponding to individual sentences. This would show that representation without sentences is possible.³² Second, on some idealist views, for example associated with British idealism, individual sentences can never properly present the world, somehow being the wrong “size” for that: anything describing anything less than the world as a whole, including all its aspects, fails to properly present the world.³³

Another avenue to explore is this. Sentences, or our practice of using sentences, (sort of, somehow) aim at truth.³⁴ But then if there are alternative *truth-like* notions, there can be sentences or practices of using them that stand to them as our sentences/assertoric practices stand to truth. Where in ordinary uses of sentences we express that a truth condition is satisfied, the alternative uses of sentences are such that it is expressed that a truth* condition is satisfied. Many questions can be asked about this suggested avenue. An immediate

³² (Eklund 2024, 223).

³³ (Eklund 2024, 221f).

³⁴ This is debatable and there is more to say. But I think that all that the suggestion that I describe in the text demands is that there is a kernel of truth to this idea. (Which perhaps also can be doubted.)

question is: what might these alternative truth-like notions be? But here might again make use of the false theory strategy. Many different, and incompatible, theories of what truth is have been proposed. The vast majority of these fail as theories of truth: they don't correctly describe what truth is. But some or many of these theories may still be correct descriptions of some other possible notion we could employ; and unless the theories are too far off there could be a practice whose aim is truth* rather than truth.

Suppose that there are these alternatives to truth. Then, intuitively, the question can be raised: do true* representations or true representations more perspicuously represent the world? This is not how perspicuous representation is actually discussed in the literature. There the focus is rather on logical form. But this invites the question of whether the proposed characterizations of perspicuous representation are sufficiently general to capture the underlying idea.³⁵

A completely different avenue to explore is this.³⁶ Consider the following story from the linguist Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy (Carstairs-McCarthy1999). It involves an Earthling explaining human languages to a Martian:

The Earthling...might start by explaining that syntactic units called noun phrases are typically used to refer to objects or events in the world, and are typically combined with other units called verb phrases to form sentences, one of whose functions is to make statements about the objects or events referred to. She might add that statements can be true or false, according to whether they fit the world or not, and that reference too can be either successful or unsuccessful, according to whether the would-be referent exists or not...

³⁵ (Eklund 2024, 226ff).

³⁶ (Eklund 2024, 223ff).

The Martian might now reply: ‘OK, I get the idea. A noun phrase has one kind of relationship to the world: successful or unsuccessful reference. A noun phrase is combined with a second kind of syntactic unit called a verb phrase to form a third kind of unit called a sentence. A sentence has a second kind of relationship to the world: truth or falsity. Presumably, then, a sentence is combined with a fourth kind of syntactic unit to form a fifth kind of unit, which in turn will have a third kind of relationship to the world, and these relationships can be seen as forming an ordered set such that any odd-numbered syntactic unit n will have relationship $(n+1)/2$ to the real world.’

At this point the Earthling interjects: ‘No! Nothing so elaborate! We stop at sentences. We can indeed combine sentences in various ways, but combinations of sentences still just make more elaborate statements, which are either true or false.’³⁷

The question that Carstairs-McCarthy raises is: Isn’t there in principle an ascending hierarchy, where noun phrases and sentences just occupy the first two levels (even of familiar languages don’t make use of it)? If not, why not? These seem to be very good questions, whatever the answers turn out to be. If there is an ascending hierarchy of the kind envisaged, what if anything is objectively special about the level of sentences?

Metaphysical questions are raised. Might languages with alternatives to sentences, or going beyond sentences, present reality (or some aspects thereof) better than familiar languages do?

Maybe one can imagine the hierarchy ascending at least somewhat.³⁸ We might think of proofs or arguments as being more complex constructs out of sentences which are not sentences themselves, and as constructs which have different success criteria than sentences

³⁷ (Carstairs-McCarthy 1999, 27f).

³⁸ Thanks here to Yannic Kappes.

have – soundness being an obvious candidate. But proofs and arguments are naturally thought as subservient to sentences. While proofs and arguments are important, they are means to establishing the truth of sentences. A question suggested by Carstairs-McCarthy’s story is: might there be a way of ascending that doesn’t merely involve something which is thus subservient to sentences? Also, ascending to proofs and arguments means ascending one level, and does not provide a hierarchy. Is there anything more like a hierarchy?

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