

# Epistemic Modals and Apparent Contradictions: Taking Discourse Context Seriously

Wilson Mendonça

In progress

## Abstract

Since Yalcin (2007) brought the issue to the forefront, sentences like *Joe is in Boston, but he might not be in Boston* have been treated as genuine contradictions, semantically equivalent to  $p \wedge \neg p$ . These “Yalcin sentences” contrast with “Moore sentences”, such as *Joe is in Boston, but I do not believe that he’s in Boston*. The standard explanation for the defectiveness of Moore sentences is *pragmatic*: they can be meaningfully embedded in suppositional contexts, such as *Suppose it’s raining, but I don’t believe it’s raining* or *If it’s raining, but I don’t believe it’s raining, then I’ll be a laughingstock*. This suggests that Moore sentences are semantically correct but pragmatically defective. Yalcin, however, argues that Yalcin sentences require a semantic explanation, as they cannot be embedded in suppositional contexts. This implies that their infelicity is not merely pragmatic but fundamentally semantic. Any semantic account of this defectiveness comes at a theoretical cost. The claim that Yalcin sentences are genuine contradictions can be formalized as  $\Phi \wedge \Diamond \neg \Phi \models \perp$ . Classical logic validates the inference from  $p \wedge q \models \perp$  to  $q \models \neg p$ . Consequently, in classical logic,  $\Phi \wedge \Diamond \neg \Phi \models \perp$  entails  $\Diamond \neg \Phi \models \neg \Phi$ , which is clearly false, since possibility does not entail actuality. Thus, treating Yalcin sentences as genuine contradictions necessitates rejecting classical logic and developing a non-classical entailment relation suited to epistemic modality. My central claim is that an independently motivated truth-conditional explanation of epistemic modalized sentences does not support the classification of Yalcin sentences as genuine contradictions. Rather than assuming their contradictory nature and pursuing a radical revision of logic, I propose a classical-logic-friendly, possible-worlds-based, discourse contextualist approach to epistemic modals. This approach seeks to account for the “phenomenology of contradiction” associated with Yalcin sentences in pragmatic terms, avoiding the theoretical costs of prevalent revisionary semantic explanations.