The Meanings of "Right" and "Wrong"

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1. Introduction

In English, the orthographic form "right" occurs as a verb, a noun, and an adverb as well as an adjective. In each case, the orthographic form has at least two senses and in some cases several more. To illustrate, consider the following pairs of senses associated with the verbal, nominal, and adverbial forms, respectively:

One can right a ship.¹
One can right a wrong.

A driver can take a right.
A government can take a right away.

One can do something right.
One can do something right in front of you.

The focus of this paper is on the orthographic form "right" in its adjectival occurrences. I submit that there are at least five adjectives "right." In the next section, I distinguish these five adjectives, and in the process provide semantic and grammatical considerations in support of the distinctions. For reasons that will become clear, I will refer to the five adjectives "right" as "directional," "political," "geometrical," "healthful," and "normative" respectively.

Subsequently, I will focus on normative "right," which is the most philosophically important adjective "right." In discussing the semantics and grammatical properties of normative "right," I will also compare it with the adjectives "correct" and "true."

2. Five Adjectives "Right"

One adjective "right" has a directional sense:

The index finger on her right hand is swollen.

Directional "right" has an antonym, directional "left":

The index finger on her left hand is swollen.

¹ Throughout the paper, I use Arial font for linguistic examples offset from the main text.
Directional "right" and "left" are grammatically constrained. They cannot occur as predicates:

* That finger is right/left.

Here, I follow the convention in linguistics of prefixing an asterisk to an expression to indicate that it is syntactically unacceptable.

A second adjective "right," apparently derived from the directional sense,\(^2\) has a political meaning; its antonym is also "left":

These are the opinions of the far right/left wing of the party.

Political "right" and "left" are also grammatically constrained in that they cannot occur as predicates:

* These opinions are right/left.\(^3\)

A third adjective "right" occurs in geometry:

She constructed a right angle/triangle/cone.

Geometrical "right" does not have an antonym. But like directional and political "right," it is grammatically constrained so that it must occur in attributive position:

* That angle is right.

I will say no more about directional, political, or geometrical "right."\(^4\)

A fourth adjective "right" occurs in the following examples:

I don't feel right today.
This milk doesn't smell right.

To be clear, these instances of "right" are adjectival, not adverbial. This is confirmed by the permissibility of their substitution with other adjectives, but not adverbs. For example:

\(^2\) [Check. The fact here should be determinable.]
\(^3\) Compare the following, which seems somewhat ameliorated: ? "These opinions are far right/left." (Here, I follow the convention in linguistics of prefixing one or more question marks to an expression to note that it is to a lesser or greater degree semantically infelicitous.)
\(^4\) But I note in passing an additional adjective "left." This is the past participle of the verb "leave." Its meaning is akin to "remaining": "These are the only books that are left." Remainder "left" is awkward, if not impossible in attributive position: * "He picked up the left books." I will have no more to say about remainder "left."
I don't feel energetic today.
# I don't feel energetically today.

This milk doesn't smell fresh.
# This milk doesn't smell freshly.

Here, I follow the convention in linguistics of prefixing a pound symbol to an expression to indicate that it is semantically infelicitous.

Granted this, the adjective "right" in question is preferred in negative statements. For example, the following positive constructions are questionable:

? I feel right today.
? This milk smells right.

Here, I follow the convention in linguistics of prefixing one or more question marks to an expression to indicate that it is to a lesser or greater degree semantically infelicitous.

Contrast the adjective "alright," which is felicitous in these positive constructions:

I feel alright today.
This milk smells alright.

The adjective "right" in question does not have a dedicated antonym. For example, consider the possibility of "wrong" as an antonym here:

# I feel wrong today.
# This milk smells wrong.

Granted this, the word "wrong" can be used in alternative constructions to convey a sense akin to that of the intended sentences:

There's something wrong with me today.
There's something wrong with this milk.

However, the word "wrong" here is the antonym of a different adjective "right," which I will discuss subsequently.

The sense of the adjective "right" presently in question is related to health and healthfulness. For example, one may direct another's attention to a sickly looking plant and say:

That plant does not look right.

Here again, positive constructions are questionable:

? That plant looks right. (i.e. healthy)

Compare:
That plant looks wrong. (i.e. unhealthy)

However, again, one can convey a sense akin to the intended one by saying:

There is something wrong with that plant/with the way that plant looks.

I'll call the adjective "right" in question "healthful" "right." So, again, peculiarly, healthful "right" is preferred with a negated verb. Moreover, as the examples above indicate, often that verb is of perception: "feel," "smell," "look." Granted this, healthful "right" does not require a verb of perception; it may follow a negated copula:

That plant is not right.
This milk is not right.

Note now that in the constructions above, "smell" and "feel" occur as copulative verbs. So, healthful "right" either requires or at least prefers a copulative verb and moreover a negated one:

* It does not smell to be right.
* I do not feel to be right today.

Contrast the following construction:

This does not look/seem/appear to be right.

Here, the matrix verb admits an infinitival complement. But I suggest that the instances of "right" are not of healthful "right." For instance, consider the following sentence, assuming that healthful "right" is employed:

? The plant does not look to be right.⁵

In contrast, imagine a situation where a team of movers has been hired to transport a large palm tree. Arriving at the pick-up location, they find only a small potted plant that a single individual could easily lift. One of them might then say:

The plant does not look to be right.

Here, the healthfulness of the plant is not in question, but some other feature of it. In other words, the sentence is felicitous, but it does not employ healthful "right."

One further grammatical constraint on healthful "right" is that it cannot occur in attributive position:

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⁵ Perhaps this is due to the fact, noted above, that healthful "right" is questionable as the complement of a non-negated copulative verb.
*/# You should throw away the not right milk.

Ostensibly, this constraint simply owes to the fact that the nominal construction "not adj noun" itself is grammatically unacceptable. However, observe that the positive construction is semantically infelicitous as well:

# You should keep the right milk.

Regarding the semantics of healthful "right"— if one is not feeling right, one is not feeling as one should feel. If milk does not smell right, it does not smell as it should smell. And if a plant does not look right, it does not look as it should look. So, the meaning of healthful "right" is normative in some way. Precisely, I suggest, the normative meaning of healthful "right" is related to the normativity of healthfulness. Typically, something that is not healthful is not as it should be. Consequently, it is to be avoided or destroyed or remedied.

The following two sentences exemplify a fifth adjective "right":

That is the right way to tune the instrument.
She gave the right answer.

This adjective "right" has "wrong" as its dedicated antonym:

That is the wrong way to tune the instrument.
She gave the wrong answer.

Both the adjective "right" in question and its antonym can occur as predicates as well as in attributive position:

That way of tuning the instrument is right/wrong.
Your answer is right/wrong.

So, the adjective "right" in question is not grammatically constrained as the other four adjectives "right" are. Moreover, the adjective "right" in question is acceptable in both negative and positive constructions:

That way of tuning the instrument is not right.
Your answer is not right.

Like healthful "right," the adjective "right" in question has a normative meaning. But, evidently, its normativity is not limited to that of healthfulness. When one gives the right answer, one gives the answer that one should give. But neither the answer itself nor the giving of it need be healthful. Likewise, when one gives the wrong answer, one does not give the answer that one should give. But neither the answer itself nor the giving of it need be unhealthful. Assuming that the adjective "right" in question has a relatively broad normative meaning, I will simply call it "normative" "right."
I will now attempt to clarify the meaning of normative "right." In doing so, I will drop the modifier "normative" unless needed for disambiguation.

3. The Non-Gradability of "Right"

Adjectives are distinguished as gradable and non-gradable. A necessary condition on a gradable adjective is that it admit a comparative form. In English, adjectival comparatives are formed in one of two ways: by suffixation to the adjective of the bound comparative morpheme "-er" (so-called suppletive or synthetic formation) or by modification of the adjective with the preadjectival free comparative morpheme "more" (so-called periphrastic or analytic formation). For example, the adjectives "tall," "full," and "clean" are gradable. The first has a suppletive comparative form; the second and third have both suppletive and periphrastic comparative forms:

Toby is taller than Sloan.
This bottle is fuller/more full than that one.
These sheets are cleaner/more clean than those ones.

"Right" does not admit a comparative form:

# Your answer is more right/righter than mine.

Another necessary condition on gradable adjectives is that they admit so-called equative constructions, that is, constructions of the form "x is as adj as y"; for example:

Toby is as tall as Sloan.
My bottle is as full as yours.
These sheets are as clean as those pillowcases.

Contrast "right":

# Your answer is as right as mine.

Gradable adjectives also admit so-called degree intensifiers such as "very" and diminishers such as "pretty"; for example:

Paolo is very tall.
These bottles are pretty full.
These sheets are very clean.

In contrast, "right" does not admit such degree modifiers:

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6 Gradable adjectives themselves are subdivided into two categories: relative and absolute; with absolute gradable adjectives sometimes themselves divided into two sub-categories: partial and total absolute.
# These answers are very right.
# That way of tuning the instrument is pretty right.

Clearly, then, "right" is a non-gradable adjective.

 Granted this, "right" does admit some adverbial modifiers that seem to imply gradability and therefore that warrant comment. For example, consider the following:

- The report is right to some degree.
- The report is partially right.
- The report is right in some respects.
- The report is mostly right.

The gradability in these sentences is explicable as follows. The entity denoted by the term of which "right" is predicated, namely the report, is distinguishable into parts, each of which may itself be right or wrong. And the degree or extent to which the report is right is a function of the number of discrete parts of the report that are right. Accordingly,

- The report is right to some degree.

entails:

- Some parts of the report are right.

And vice versa. Likewise:

- The report is mostly right.

entails:

- Most of the parts of the report are right.

And vice versa.

4. "Right" and Purposiveness

"Right" is applicable to a wide variety of things; for example:

- This is the right water buffalo.

This sentence could be felicitously uttered in the following context. A particular water buffalo is to be vaccinated; and a park ranger is indicating the buffalo in question to a veterinarian who is to perform the vaccination.

- That is the right smudge.
This sentence could be felicitously uttered in the following context. Several people have deliberately smudged a person's fur coat with various colors of lipstick to protest the wearing of fur. In a law court, a prosecutor may ask the owner of the coat to indicate a particular smudge in order to identify one of the assailants.

That is the right shadow.

This sentence could be felicitously uttered in the following context. Students in a drawing class are learning the principles of chiaroscuro. They are presented with several images in which light falling on an object is casting a shadow. Only one of the images represents an accurate depiction of the direction of the shadow given the angle of incidence of light. The instructor is indicating the depiction in question.

I propose that for something to be right, it must serve a purpose. In the three examples, the purpose is to indicate a particular water buffalo, smudge, and shadow, respectively. I note in passing that in all three cases, these ostensions or identifications serve further purposes: vaccination, prosecution, and pedagogy, respectively. But the fact that the immediate or proximate purposes serve further, perhaps ultimate purposes is not crucial to my point.

Corroboration of the claim that "right" entails purposiveness comes from the following observation. Consider the following sentence:

? Jupiter has the right number of moons.

This sentence is syntactically well formed, but semantically odd. I suggest that the reason that the sentence is semantically odd is that in our cosmos astronomical facts such as the number of moons that Jupiter has entail no purposiveness.

Granted this, assume now that the sentence in question is uttered in the following context. A student has built a model of our solar system that includes the moons of Jupiter. An observer of the model questions whether the number of moons in the model is accurate; and the questioner receives the reply: "Jupiter has the right number of moons." Here, "Jupiter" refers to the model of Jupiter, and "moons" refers to the model of Jupiter's moons. In this context, the sentence is semantically felicitous. And I am suggesting that the semantic felicity of the sentence in this context owes to the fact that a purpose is here being served, namely to accurately represent the solar system and specifically the number of moons of Jupiter.

"Right" entails purposiveness. In other words, "right" entails purpose serving. The fact that there are a wide variety of purposes explains why "right" can be felicitously applied to a wide variety of things.

5. Gradable and Non-Gradable Purposiveness

Some purposes may be gradably served, that is, served to varying degrees; other purposes are non-gradably servable. For example, assume a stage in a spelling bee. The contestants are required to spell the word "pleiotropy." "Pleiotropy" has only one spelling. Said of a successful contestant, the following utterance would be infelicitous:
# That is a good spelling of "pleiotropy."

One can only do something well, that is, do something in a good way, if that something involves a gradably servable purpose. The purpose pertinent to the spelling example is non-gradably servable. Contrast spelling a single word with the general ability to spell:

She is good at spelling.

In addition to being felicitous, this sentence admits comparative and equative constructions as well as intensifier and diminisher modification:

- She is better at spelling than he is.
- She is as good at spelling as he is.
- She is very good at spelling.
- She is pretty good at spelling.

Contrast the infelicitous use of the gradable adjective "good" in the original example of spelling "pleiotropy" with the felicitous use of the non-gradable adjective "right":

That is the right spelling of "pleiotropy."

The present considerations incidentally shed light on the semantic relation between "right" and "good." Because "right" is non-gradable and "good" is gradable, "right" cannot be, so to speak, semantically analyzed in terms of "good." Nor can "good" be semantically analyzed in terms of "right." Rather, the semantics of both terms entail purposiveness; but "good" entails gradable purposiveness, and— the principal point of this section— "right" entails non-gradable purposiveness.

6. The Polysemy of "Purpose"

The noun "purpose" is at least two ways ambiguous. One sense of "purpose" is akin to "intention"; for example:

Despite all that he has been through, Adam's purpose has not wavered.

Here, "Adam's purpose" refers to an intention that Adam has and has had. We can substitute "purpose" with "intention" and preserve the meaning of the original sentence:

Despite all that he has been through, Adam's intention has not wavered.

I will call this the "mental" sense of "purpose."

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7 The comparative form employs a distinct root "bet-." So the comparative is morphologically irregular; but it is semantically regular.
Contrast the mental sense of "purpose" with the sense that occurs in the following sentence:

Over the last twenty years, the purpose of cell phones has changed.

The sense of "purpose" here is clearly not the mental sense. If we try to force such a reading of "purpose" onto the sentence, we must treat cell phones as animate and more precisely attribute minds to them. On such a reading, cell phones would have once had aims that they no longer have. Instead, the natural reading of "purpose" in the sentence is akin to "function," "use," or "role." Observe that we can substitute "purpose" for "function," "use," or "role" and preserve the meaning of the original sentence:

Over the last twenty years, the function/use/role of cell phones has changed.

I will call this second sense of "purpose" the "function" sense. I hasten to add that I do not think that "purpose," "function," "use," and "role" are all strictly synonymous. But I maintain that they are semantically closely akin.

When I claim that the meaning of "right" entails non-gradable purposiveness, I am using "purpose" in the function sense. (Likewise, in the case of "good" entailing gradable purpose serving.)

The relation between "purpose" in the mental sense and "purpose" in the function sense is that purposes in the mental sense are one sort of provider of purposes in the function sense. For example, if Adam intends to use a rock to crack open a walnut shell, he thereby endows or provides the rock with an instrumental purpose (in the function sense).

Accordingly, I am distinguishing between mental purposes as purpose providers and purposes as functions. Intentions are not the only mental states that can provide entities with purposes as functions. Moreover, if one admits that there are biological functions or purposes, then such natural purposes as functions do not require any mental states for their existence.

In short, my purpose (in the mental sense) here has merely been to clarify the sense of "purpose" in the claim that the word "right" entails non-gradable purpose serving or purposiveness. Again, the sense of "purpose" here is the function sense. Such purposes as functions often derive from purposes in the mental sense; but they are not semantically required to. Moreover, among purpose providers that are mental states, intentions are one salient kind.8

7. Possible Polysemes of Normative "Right"

Possibly, normative "right" has more than one sense. If so, then we must recognize a distinction between a case where two adjectives have the same orthographic form— for example, geometrical and normative "right"— and a case where one adjective

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8 If, as seems prima facie plausible, most non-gradable purposes derive from human mental states, then most felicitous instances of "right" will accordingly occur in such contexts.
has two (or more) distinct, but closely related senses. In other words, we must recognize a
distinction between a case of two homonymous adjectives and a case of one two- or
more-way polysemous adjective.

To illustrate this distinction in principle, consider the following sentences in each
of which the adjectives "responsible," "sad," and "abstract" occur twice and in each
instance with a distinct meaning:

A person can be responsible for doing something, whether or not he or
she is a responsible person.

A sad film tends to make its audience sad.

An abstract painter paints abstract paintings.

In view of these cases, should we conclude that there is one adjective
"responsible," one adjective "sad," and one adjective "abstract," each of which has two
senses? If so, then "responsible," "true," "sad," and "abstract" are each (at least) two-ways
polysemous. Or should we instead conclude that there are two adjectives with the
orthographic form "responsible," two with the orthographic form "sad," and two with the
orthographic form "abstract"? If so, then "responsible," "sad," and "abstract" are each
homonymous.

In part, the questions here turn on how closely related two senses associated with
a single orthographic form must be for them to qualify as belonging to a single adjective
as opposed to belonging to two adjectives with the same orthographic form. I say "in
part," because other linguistic properties must also be considered, including other
semantic properties as well as grammatical ones. Note also that, of course, the results
relating to the examples above need not be uniform. For example, "sad" and "abstract"
might be two-ways polysemous, while "responsible" might be homonymous.

I began this paper by arguing, on semantic and grammatical grounds, that there
are at least five adjectives "right." My question now is whether the adjective that I am
calling "normative" "right" itself has more than one sense. In other words, is normative
"right" polysemous? Two sorts of examples motivate this question.

First, consider the following sentence, which employs normative "right":

You are right.

and where the meaning of this sentence is akin to:

Your opinion is right.
You have the right opinion.

Contrast the sentence "You are right," so understood, with the following sentence:

# This cartridge is right.

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9 For the sake of clarity, throughout this section I will retain the modifier "normative."
To be sure, there is a felicitous reading of the sentence "This cartridge is right" employing normative "right." For example, a technician may be identifying the cartridge that one should use for a printer. That reading is nearly synonymous with:

This cartridge is the right one.

But that reading of "This cartridge is right" does not attribute any opinion to the cartridge. So, it may be questioned whether "right" in "You are right" is a distinct polyseme of normative "right," that is, a distinct sense of normative "right," which is a polysemous adjective.

Second, consider the following sentence:

What he did was right.

Assume that this sentence is used to express an evaluation of the moral behavior of some man. In that case, the sentence may be used to convey the sense of the following sentence:

What he did was moral.

Consequently, one might think that there is another polyseme of normative "right" that has a specifically morally normative sense.

I'll assess these two considerations motivating the possible polysemy of normative "right" in reverse order.

I do not think that there is a polyseme of normative "right" that has a specifically morally normative sense. Rather, in a sentence such as "What he did was right" I believe that an adverbial modifier of "right" is implicit or at least understood on the basis of the immediate linguistic or broader context of utterance. Some corroboration of this claim derives from the fact that such a modifier may be made explicit without making the sentence redundant:

What he did was morally right.

If in the original sentence "right" had a specifically morally normative meaning, then the addition of the adverb "morally" would be redundant. Assuming that the moral sense of the original sentence is determinable from context, the explicit modifier "morally" makes the moral content explicit and perhaps emphatic, but not redundant.

Further corroboration of my point is that the sentence "What he did was right" can be used to convey that what he did was right, but in a non-moral way. For example, imagine that two surgeons are observing a third surgeon perform some complex operation. One of the observers may comment to the other on a stage of the operation by saying, "What he did was right."

Turning to the sentence "You are right," if this case were explicable in the same way as the case of "He did what was right," then some adverbial modifier of "right" would be implicit or understood; for example:
With respect to your opinion, you are right.

Or—although the expression is unnatural:

You are (opinion-wise) right.

I suggest that this is the right way to understand the sentence. Moreover, in the original sentence, rightness is being attributed to the person in virtue of that person's holding a certain opinion. Printer cartridges cannot hold opinions.

In short, I suggest that normative "right" is not polysemous. Rather, the linguistic or extra-linguistic context in which normative "right" occurs can suggest some adverbial modification of normative "right"; and this modification effectively specifies the type of (non-gradable) purpose that is being served, such as a moral purpose or the sort of purpose associated with opining.

8. "Right" and "Correct"

Talk of the attribution of rightness to opinions and those who have or hold them provides a convenient segue to consideration of the relation between the semantics of normative "right" (hereafter simply "right") and "correct." In fact, morphologically "correct" has the root "rect," from which "right" is etymologically derived.

The meaning of "right" is very similar to, if not synonymous with, "correct." For example, consider the felicity of the following pairs of sentences in which "right" is substituted with "correct":

That is the right way to tune the instrument.
That is the correct way to tune the instrument.

She gave the right answer.
She gave the correct answer.

I think that we have the right address.
I think that we have the correct address.

Furthermore, consider the incoherence of the following sentences:

# This is correct, but it is not right.
# This is right, but it is not correct.

These considerations encourage the hypothesis that "right" and "correct" are in fact synonymous. If this were true, however, it would be surprising. Natural language strongly disfavors, if not abhors redundancy, especially among common words such as "right" and "correct."
In fact, "right" and "correct" are not strictly synonymous. For example, the word "acknowledgment" has an alternative spelling: "acknowledgement." Consequently, one can felicitously say:

That is a correct spelling of "acknowledgment."

But one cannot substitute "correct" here with "right":

# That is a right spelling of "acknowledgment."

In contrast to "correct," "right" strongly disfavors modification by an indefinite article. In other words, when "right" is modified by an article, it strongly favors the definite article. This suggests that "right" strongly favors (non-gradable) purposes that can only be served in one way.

"Correct" has a dedicated antonym: "incorrect." Considering the antonyms of "right" and "correct," the preceding results encourage the hypothesis that the meaning of "wrong" is very similar to, albeit not synonymous with, "incorrect." This hypothesis is corroborated by the following consideration. "Wrong" can be modified by the definite article, but "incorrect" cannot:

That is the wrong way to tune the instrument.
# That is the incorrect way to tune the instrument.

She gave the wrong answer.
# She gave the incorrect answer.

I think that we have the wrong address.
? I think that we have the incorrect address.

Curiously, "wrong" admits the definite article in contexts where there are numerous possible things of which "wrong" may be predicated. For example, assume that a problem has only one answer and that an answer proposed is not right. It is correct to say here:

That is the wrong answer.

Contrast:

? That is the incorrect answer.

This is improved by the indefinite article:

That is an incorrect answer.

10 There are some exceptions such as: "There is a right way to do this and a wrong way."
In contrast, the following is unnatural:

?? That is a wrong answer.

[...]