

Seemings, their content and as if clauses

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IMMAGES workshop, Oct 16-17, 2025
Université de Tours, Tours, France

1 Introduction

In English (and in several other languages such as Spanish and Turkish), the predicate of seeming (*seem*) can occur with a variety of embedded-clause frames:

- | | | | |
|-----|----|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (1) | a. | It seems that the stick is bent. | THAT-CLAUSE |
| | b. | The stick seems to be bent. | INFINITIVAL CLAUSE |
| | c. | It seems as if the stick is bent. | COMPARATIVE CLAUSE |
| | d. | The stick seems bent. | SMALL CLAUSE/ADJECTIVAL COMPLEMENT |

Seemings are often discussed in connection with beliefs and justification. Philosophers have debated whether they can be reduced to other familiar phenomena, such as beliefs, sensations, or experiences (Tolhurst 1998; Cullison 2010, 2013; Tucker 2010).

In this presentation, I would like to contribute to the discussion on *seemings* by importing linguistic data. In particular, the point of departure is data of the sort in (2).

- (2) Context: You (the teacher) place a stick in water to show children that it looks bent, though you know it is not actually bent.
- | | |
|----|--|
| a. | #/?? It seems that the stick is bent. |
| b. | #/?? The stick seems to be bent. |
| c. | It seems like/as if the stick is bent. |
| d. | The stick seems bent. |

In the context in (2), the teacher places a stick in water to illustrate a visual illusion, and the stick looks bent, though she knows that it is just a visual illusion. In this setting, it is infelicitous (or at least quite odd) for the teacher to assert (2a)–(2b), clauses of seemings with a *that*-clause and an infinitival clause respectively.

In contrast, (2c), with a comparative embedded clause, and (2d), with an adjectival complement, sound perfectly acceptable.

Similar remarks apply to the examples in (3). With *that*- and infinitival complements, continuations asserting the opposite are infelicitous (3a)–(3b). With *as if*/*like* and adjectival complements, such continuations are natural (3c)–(3d).

- (3)
- a. #It seems that the stick is bent, but it is not.
 - b. #The stick seems to be bent, but it is not.
 - c. It seems as if the stick is bent, but it is not.
 - d. The stick seems bent, but it is not.

Puzzle:

- **Belief-reduction view:**

- Predicts infelicity of (2a)–(2b), (3a)–(3b) (since they would ascribe contradictory beliefs; cf. Cullison 2010; Taylor 2015).
- *Problem:* Struggles to explain the felicity of (2d), (3d).

- **Seemings-as-distinct-attitudes view:**

- Explains felicity of (2d), (3d) (seemings give *prima facie* defeasible justification; (Tolhurst 1998; Huemer 2007; Cullison 2010, 2013; Tucker 2010).
- *Problem:* Does not explain the infelicity of (2a)–(2b), (3a)–(3b).

- **Adopted position:**

- Seemings are *sui generis* attitudes, irreducible to beliefs.
- The **complement type** (clausal vs. adjectival) shapes their use:
- Clausal seemings: resist explicit defeat of the corresponding belief.
- Adjectival seemings: provide defeasible justification.

Previous linguistic work (Usonienė, 2000; Aijmer, 2009) has shown that the syntax of *seem* correlates with differences in epistemic stance: *seem/look ØP* conveys experiential appearance, while *seem to be P* introduces a propositional layer marking uncertainty or inference. Building on this descriptive groundwork, the present analysis develops a truthmaker- and object-based semantics that formally derives these contrasts through transitions between states, explaining how complement type yields differing epistemic commitments.

2 Seemings, Beliefs, Sensations

- A central question in the literature is whether seemings can be reduced to ordinary beliefs or sensations, or whether they constitute a *sui generis* mental state with distinct epistemic significance.

- In this section I discuss two influential contributions: Tucker (2010), who defends epistemic dogmatism, and Cullison (2010, 2013), who argues for a non-reductionist account of seemings as *sui generis* states with propositional content.

2.1 Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism

Both Tucker and Cullison defend versions of *Phenomenal Conservatism* (PC) or Dogmatism: necessarily, if it seems to *S* that *p*, then *S* thereby has *prima facie, non-inferential justification* for *p*.

- **Distinctness of seemings.** Seemings are *sui generis* mental states: neither beliefs nor mere inclinations/dispositions, and not bare sensations or imagery. Their phenomenal character *presents p* as true.
- **Justificatory role.** Prima facie justification from a seeming does not depend on reliability or background beliefs. Seemings confer *pro tanto* evidence, defeasible in the face of counterevidence or higher-order concerns.
- **Seeming vs. believing.**
 - One may have a seeming that *p* while suspending judgment or believing $\neg p$ (illusions, skeptical contexts).
 - Conversely, one may rationally believe *p* (on testimony or calculation) without any seeming that *p*.

Problems (from linguistic evidence).

- PC/Dogmatism requires a gap: a seeming occurs and thereby justifies *p*; belief in *p* is not guaranteed.
 - Adjectival frames (“The stick seems bent”) preserve this gap.
 - Clausal frames (“It seems that the stick is bent”) seem to behave differently, functioning like (weak) assertions. This brings up the question of whether all type of “seemings” work in the same justificatory way.
- PC/Dogmatism predicts that justification from a seeming is defeasible: at t_1 , a seeming justifies *p*; at t_2 , the justification may be defeated.
 - However, the seemings with *that*- and infinitival complements seem to be simply infelicitous. We do not observe such a process.
 - Additionally, past tense adjectival forms (“The stick seemed bent”) seem to capture this defeat of justification.
 - Clausal forms (“It seemed that the stick was bent”) are somewhat odd (compare it with *it seemed as if/like it was bent*) on the face of the justification being defeated, as if they assert *p* rather than report an appearance with respect to a past time.

- This raises doubts about whether clausal constructions can represent simple appearances with the possibility of justification, rather than something stronger.
- If PC/Dogmatism is correct, any genuine seeming should generate defeasible justification. Yet natural language data suggest that only adjectival forms transparently do so. Clausal forms instead encode commitment to *p*.

2.2 Bare seemings

The linguistic contrast between adjectival seemings (“the stick seems bent”) and clausal seemings (“it seems that *p*”) suggests a *non-subjectivist* view of seemings: the clausal frame functions much like a (weak) assertion of *p*, rather than a report of a private phenomenal state. This brings us directly to McGrath (2005)’s account.

- McGrath (2005) defends a *nonsubjectivist* semantics for bare seem-reports: to say “*it seems that p*” is, in ordinary use, to point to *what the relevant body of worldly facts supports*, not to describe one’s own seeming.
- On this view, invoking “*it seems that p*” gives a reason for *p* that is *world-involving*: some portion of the world backs *p*. That, McGrath argues, is the real point of the report.

McGrath motivates this by highlighting three phenomena:

1. **Disputes.** People can directly *disagree* over whether it seems that *p* without thereby disagreeing about anyone’s psychology (e.g., the barbecue case: “the host seemed arrogant” vs. “no, he seemed reserved”). These are disputes about the *facts*, not about subjective experiences.
2. **Clear error.** It is possible to falsely assert a bare seem-report even when everyone involved has exactly the same seeming.
 - Example: suppose we misclassify Celia’s record collection and say: “it seems that Celia likes 18th-century music.”
 - Phenomenology is constant: the collection still looks the same to us, and no one’s inner seeming has changed.
 - What fails is the *objective support*: the facts about the collection do not actually back up the claim.

Hence the report “it seems that Celia likes 18th-century music” is false, even though the same seeming is shared. Simple subjectivism wrongly predicts that it should be true in this case, showing that bare seem-reports are world-involving rather than merely psychological.

3. **Unwitnessed seemings.** We truly say things like “dinosaurs seemed destined to dominate for millennia” or the prosecutor’s “the defendant seemed unaware of the camera” even though no one actually had such a seeming. These are best explained by appeal to *facts in a perspective*, not to anyone’s mental state.

The natural-language evidence supports McGrath’s view: bare seem-reports are *world-directed*

and function as perspectival assertions about what the facts support, rather than as reports of inner phenomenology. At the same time, we still need to explain the contrast between clausal and adjectival frames: why some seemings behave like (weak) assertions, while others reflect mere phenomenology. In what follows, we build on both types of accounts and draw on syntactic differences to explain how these two characters of seemings arise.

3 Proposal

3.1 Assumptions

In this part of the presentation, I adopt a *non-reductionist* view, according to which seemings are *contentful objects*, not reducible to beliefs, inclinations, or bare sensations. I also assume a *non-subjectivist* stance about bare seem-reports: their truth is not determined solely by private phenomenology, but also by how the world is, following McGrath’s insight that such reports are *world-involving*.

My task, then, is to explain why adjectival reports such as *The stick seems bent* behave differently from propositional frames such as *It seems that p*, *NP seems to be Q*, or *It seems as if/like p*. On this basis, I will build a formal semantic system that captures these contrasts.

To do so, I follow an object-based semantics for attitudes as developed by Moltmann (2024). On this approach, attitude predicates such as *believe* are treated as complex relational entities with implicit structure, roughly of the form *have the belief*. That-clauses are then analyzed as predicates of such contentful entities (attitudinal and modal objects), specifying the satisfaction conditions of those objects.

In what follows, I will present a basic model built on this framework, which aims to capture both the phenomenological character of adjectival seemings and the assertive force of clausal seemings.

3.2 Theoretical Foundations

I adopt an *object-based semantics* for attitudes, following Moltmann (2024). On this view, attitude predicates such as *believe* are complex relational entities, roughly of the form *have the belief*. That-clauses are then analyzed as predicates of *contentful objects* (attitudinal and modal objects), which specify the satisfaction conditions of those objects.

The content of such objects is modeled in line with Fine (2017b) *truthmaker semantics*: contents are sets of states that exactly make formulas true.

- Our model M contains:
 - a nonempty set S of possible states and a partial order (\sqsubseteq),
 - a primitive relation of *exact verification* $s \Vdash \alpha$, for atomic formulas,
 - a domain D of individuals,
 - a domain \mathcal{O} of contentful objects (beliefs, seemings, etc.).

We work *unilaterally*: only exact verifiers are primitive, and falsifiers are derived from them Fine (2017a). In the phrase *have the belief*, I treat the definite article differently from Moltmann (2024). Whereas Moltmann uses an existential analysis, I adopt ϵ^f , Hilbert’s epsilon operator relativized to a contextually supplied choice function.¹

- ϵ^f behaves like ι (the definite description operator) in generating singular terms from predicates.
- Unlike ι -terms, ϵ^f does not carry a uniqueness presupposition.
- This makes it well-suited for modeling the anaphoric reference to the relevant belief later in discourse.

Finally, formulas and contentful objects are treated on a par with respect to exact verification (Moltmann, 2024). This provides a uniform framework for analyzing *beliefs*, *seemings*, and related attitudes.

- (4) Let j and m be the individuals JOHN and MARY. Then the clause for *John believes that Mary is a spy* is:

$$\llbracket \text{John believes that Mary is a spy} \rrbracket = \lambda s. s \Vdash \text{has}(j, \epsilon^f o [\exists s' : s' \Vdash \text{belief}(o) \wedge o \equiv \text{spy}(m)])$$

where the equivalence relation \equiv is defined as:

$$o \equiv p \iff \forall s \in S (s \Vdash o \iff s \Vdash p).$$

3.3 Objects of seemings

Building on McGrath’s insight that bare seeming-reports are world-involving, I now develop a formal semantics that makes this precise. Seemings, like beliefs, have propositional content. In the simple adjectival cases (2d), (3d), the sentence asserts the existence of a seeming object whose content is verified by the states in which the stick is bent:

- (5) a. $\llbracket \text{The stick seems bent} \rrbracket = \exists o [\text{seeming}(o) \wedge o \equiv \text{bent}(\iota x. \text{stick}(x))]$
b. $o \equiv \text{bent}(\iota x. \text{stick}(x))$ iff $\forall s \in S (s \Vdash o \iff s \Vdash \text{bent}(\iota x. \text{stick}(x)))$

Intuition.

- The sentence asserts only that there exists a *seeming-object* with content “the stick is bent.”
- It does not imply that the speaker actually believes the stick is bent.
- What is asserted is just an appearance that would be true iff the stick is bent.

This explains why adjectival seemings like (2d), (3d) are felicitous and non-committal. In contrast, clausal seemings (2a)–(2b), (3a)–(3b) appear to involve a commitment to the truth of the embedded

¹We will not need the ϵ -operator with seemings.

clause. I propose that these larger clausal frames encode *transition relations* from a worldly fact to a non-defeasible inference, thus carrying stronger assertoric force.

Interlude: Transitions

Definition. A *transition* is a ternary relation

$$\rightarrow \subseteq S \times S \times S.$$

We write $t \rightarrow_s u$ and read: *relative to background s , imposing t licenses outcome u* Fine (2023).

Intuition. t provides a condition whose admissible realizations, given s , are those u with $t \rightarrow_s u$.

Example. Suppose t is the state of a match being struck, s is a background state encoding that there is oxygen and combustible gas in the room, and u is the outcome in which the match lights and a fire ensues. Then $t \rightarrow_s u$ records that, relative to that background, imposing the striking of the match licenses an outcome where the match lights and a fire follows. If the background s had contained oxygen but no gas, then $t \rightarrow_s u'$ might hold where u' is just the match lighting without a fire.

Formal clause. Fix a nominal antecedent t = “the match is struck,” and let the consequent be the clause C = “the match lights.” Assume the background/path parameter s . Then:

$$s \Vdash (t \rightarrow C) \text{ iff } \exists u (t \rightarrow_s u) \ \& \ \forall u^{\max} \left((t \rightarrow_s u^{\max}) \Rightarrow \exists u' \sqsubseteq u^{\max} (t \rightarrow_s u' \wedge u' \Vdash C) \right).$$

Gloss. The clause C is guaranteed across all admissible t -outcomes given s : whenever the antecedent state t is imposed against background s , in every maximal admissible outcome u^{\max} , there is a refinement $u' \sqsubseteq u^{\max}$ in which C holds.

3.4 Seemings and Transitions

The \equiv relation alone does not guarantee a commitment with *that*- and infinitival clauses. I propose that in such cases, the meaning of a seeming is *strengthened* with the addition of *transitions*: a transition from a worldly (actual) state to the verifiers of the embedded clause. Hence, rather than a simple \equiv relation, we use a contextualized variant \equiv_c . This treatment aligns with non-subjectivist accounts (e.g. McGrath 2005) and with Tolhurst (1998)’s characterization of seemings as carrying “a felt veridicality.”

Commitment via \equiv_c

Definition.

$$o \equiv_c p \quad \text{iff}$$

- (i) $\forall s \in S (s \Vdash o \Leftrightarrow s \Vdash p)$
- (ii) $\exists t \in S^c \left[\exists u (t \rightarrow_c u) \wedge \forall u^{\max} (t \rightarrow_c u^{\max} \Rightarrow \exists u' \sqsubseteq u^{\max} (t \rightarrow_c u' \wedge u' \Vdash p)) \right]$
- (iii) $\neg(\exists t' \in S^c, \exists u (t' \rightarrow_c u \wedge u \Vdash \neg p))$

Intuition.

- (i) fixes propositional content.
- (ii) ensures that imposing t under c yields only p -verifying outcomes.
- (iii) blocks any admissible trajectory leading to $\neg p$.

Consequence.

1. Taken together, (i)–(iii) explain why clausal *seems that* p commits the speaker to p .
2. Condition (ii) guarantees: if a transition t is imposed under the live background c , then every admissible outcome of t verifies p .
3. Since t is in fact imposed (being actual and part of the context set), it follows by (ii) that p -verifiers must actually exist (from the asserter's perspective).
4. Condition (iii) further blocks any admissible trajectory towards $\neg p$.
5. Accordingly, an assertion of *It seems that* p functions as a “weak” assertion of p itself.
6. Relative to a context c , “it seems that p ” holds just in case these three conditions are met. Symmetrically, if (ii)–(iii) hold for $\neg p$, we obtain “it seems that $\neg p$ ”; otherwise the outcome is neutral (it does not seem either way).

- In illusion contexts, admissible $t \in S^c$ exist, but none stably verify p (so condition (ii) fails), and some trajectories verify $\neg p$ (so condition (iii) fails).
- By contrast, *as if/like* clauses introduce contents about appearance-states rather than p itself.
- This explains why *as if/like* clauses are felicitous in illusion contexts, while clausal *seems that* p is not.

Comparative Clauses

$$\llbracket \text{as if/like } p \rrbracket = \{ s \in S \mid \exists s' \in \llbracket p \rrbracket \ \& \ s \approx s' \}$$

A state verifies *as if* p iff it resembles some p -verifier.

$o \equiv_c \llbracket \text{as if } p \rrbracket$ iff (i)–(iii) above hold, with p replaced by $\llbracket \text{as if } p \rrbracket$.

Example. Let p = “the stick is bent.” In the demo context c , the operative visual condition t develops into substates u' that resemble genuinely bent-stick states, so $u' \in \llbracket \text{as if } p \rrbracket$. This satisfies (ii) for the *as if* content even though it fails for p itself. Clause (iii) ensures that no trajectory verifies $\neg(\text{as if } p)$.

Empirical consequence. The speaker is committed to *as if* p , not to p : continuations asserting $\neg p$ remain felicitous, while denials of the appearance are not:

- (6) a. # It seems as if the stick is bent, but it does not look like so.
- b. # It seems as if the stick is bent, but this situation is not similar to any in which the stick is bent.

4 Seemings and their propositional content

Throughout this presentation, we assumed that seemings have propositional content. In the following, I show that this assumption is not implausible. To establish this, I apply a set of diagnostics for content bearers.

Diagnostics for propositional content

D1. Compatibility with truth predicates. Content bearers can combine with satisfaction predicates such as *true*, *false*, *correct*, *incorrect*, *be satisfied*, *be fulfilled*, whereas non-content entities cannot (in the sense of conveying information).

- (7) a. The belief/rumor/supposition (that Mary is a spy) is true/false/correct/incorrect.
- b. #The vase/house/hammer is true/false/correct/incorrect.^a

D2. Predicates of information. These apply to content bearers but not to non-content bearers.

- (8) a. The hypothesis/belief/rumor contains false information.
- b. #The vase/hammer/house contains false information.
- (9) a. The argument/hypothesis/supposition/rumor/belief says that mathematics can be reduced to logic.
- b. #The vase/hammer/house says that mathematics can be reduced to logic.

D3. Parts of content entities. Parts of content bearers are *that*-clauses, whereas parts of non-content bearers are not propositional.

- (10) a. (Part of) the rumor/belief/hypothesis is that Mary is a spy.
b. #(Part of) the hammer/house/vase is that Mary is a spy.

^aHere, *correct/incorrect* are infelicitous in the truth-conveying sense. They may still convey normative correctness, evaluated against appropriateness conditions.

Note. In ordinary English, the noun *seeming* is somewhat marked, while *impression* is more natural. For the purposes of this discussion, I use them interchangeably, since both behave alike with respect to truth and information predicates.

Application to seemings

S1. Truth predicates. *Seemings* combine with truth predicates, just like other content bearers:

- (11) It seems that the stick is bent, and/but that (seeming/impression) is true/correct/false/incorrect.

S2. Information predicates. Predicates of information apply to *seemings*:

- (12) a. Our seeming/impression that the stick is bent conveys/contains false information.
b. This seeming/impression says that the stick is bent.

S3. Parts of seemings. Parts of seemings are propositional:

- (13) (Part of) my seeming/impression is that the stick is bent.

5 Conclusion

The discussion has established several key points:

1. Different syntactic frames of *seem* (*that*-clauses, infinitivals, adjectival forms, and *as if/like* clauses) show distinct felicity patterns in illusion contexts. These patterns reveal how linguistic form correlates with epistemic commitment.
2. Using object-based semantics and a transitions in truthmaker semantics, we postulated conditions (i)–(iii) that explain why clausal *seems that p* commits the speaker to *p*, whereas adjectival *seems A* and *as if/like p* do not.

These linguistic contrasts relates to debates in epistemology as well. The properties ascribed to seemings mostly appear with adjectival complements. The other frames have strengthened meanings.

3. Seemings have propositional content, but the way this content is packaged syntactically determines whether the speaker is committed to p itself, to a mere appearance, or to an informational resemblance. This explains both the felicity contrasts in ordinary discourse and the epistemic roles that different “seeming” reports can play.

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