

# Contextualism and anti-contextualism in the philosophy of language

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### **Contextualism and Anti-Contextualism in the Philosophy of Language\***

In the middle of this century so-called "ordinary-language philosophers" - most prominently Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin and Peter Strawson - put forward a new, "pragmatic" picture of language which stood in sharp contrast to the picture that had been dominant since the beginnings of analytic philosophy. Half a century later it is fair to say that the old picture which ordinary-language philosophers were opposing has been to a large extent restored to its position of dominance. To be sure, bits and pieces of the new picture had to be incorporated, and a number of pragmatic phenomena acknowledged and accounted for. But the old picture was not abandoned, as ordinary-language philosophers had urged; it was elaborated rather than eliminated.

In this paper I want to describe the central conflict between the two pictures ("contextualism" and "anti-contextualism", as I will call them), and the standard argument against contextualism. My conclusion will be that this argument, which is generally considered to have settled the issue, is in fact question-begging and should *not* have settled the issue.<sup>i</sup>

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What is the debate exactly about? The basic question, I think, is whether we may legitimately ascribe truth-conditional content (the property of "saying" something, of expressing a thought or a proposition) to natural-language sentences, or whether it is only speech acts, utterances in context, that have content. Consider the type of formal language philosophers of the first half of

the century were concerned with. In these languages, sentences are given an interpretation that is fixed and does not depend on the context of use. Natural language sentences, by contrast, express a complete thought (say something definite) only with respect to a context of utterance - in many cases at least. The linguistic meaning which is assigned to them by virtue of the semantic rules of the language does not make them semantically complete, because this linguistic meaning involves variables that have to be contextually instantiated for the utterance to say something definite. This difference between natural language and a certain type of formal language is well-known, and no one has ever attempted to deny it. But there is disagreement as to the importance of the distinction. Contextualists hold that the difference between the two types of language is all-important; natural-language sentences, according to them, are essentially context-sensitive, and do not have determinate truth-conditions. Anti-contextualists, on the other hand, believe that the difference between the two types of language can be abstracted from through a legitimate idealisation.

The anti-contextualist idealisation is based on the following claim:

- (1) For every statement that can be made using a context-sensitive sentence in a given context, there is an eternal sentence that can be used to make the same statement in any context.

To obtain an eternal sentence from a context-sensitive one, one has only to replace the indexical constituents of the latter by non-indexical constituents with the same semantic value. Owing to (1), the difference between natural languages and the formal languages in which the context of utterance plays no role turns out not to be essential. Using natural language, we could behave so as to abolish the difference - simply by choosing to utter only eternal sentences. The reason why we also (and mainly) use context-sensitive sentences is only that this enables us "to speak far more concisely than otherwise" (Katz, 1977: 20).

- Note that (1) is much weaker than another principle of effability, namely (2):

- (2) Every entertainable thought may be expressed by means of an eternal sentence the sense of which corresponds exactly to that thought.

Many philosophers have (rightly) argued against (2). For example, Sperber and Wilson write:

It seems plausible that in our internal language we often fix time and space references not in terms of universal coordinates, but in terms of a private logbook and an ego-centred map; furthermore, most kinds of reference - to people and events for instance - can be fixed in terms of these private time and space coordinates. Thoughts which contain such private references could not be encoded in natural languages but could only be incompletely represented. (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 192).

(1) is not subject to this criticism. (1) says only that every statement can be made using an eternal sentence, not that every thought can be literally expressed by an eternal sentence. Now, a statement may be of an object, in the sense that it may be about a certain object without involving a particular mode of presentation of that object. Such a de re statement corresponds to a class of thoughts, each involving a particular (and, perhaps, private) mode of presentation of the object referred to. The fact that, in the thought, there are private modes of presentation attached to the objects referred to implies that there are thoughts that cannot be totally and adequately represented by means of eternal sentences, but does not imply that there are statements that cannot be made by means of eternal sentences: statements are public objects at a more abstract level than thoughts, and as such do not contain private modes of presentation.

The contextualist denies (1), if only because he does not really believe that there are eternal sentences. Various arguments can be given in support of this denial. Let me mention some of these arguments:

- (a) It may be argued that there cannot be reference without a context - that not only indexical expressions ("I", "this") and incomplete definite descriptions ("the table", "the president"), but also proper names and complete definite descriptions are referentially context-dependent. As for proper names, they may be construed as a variety of indexicals (Cohen 1980). This view I personally find more attractive than the alternative, standard view. On the indexical view, the same proper name - say, "Aristotle" - may refer to different individuals in different contexts; on the standard view proper names are individuated (in part) by their bearers and cannot change their

reference while remaining the "same" proper name. The standard view entails that proper names are part of the language in a very strong sense: mastery of the language requires knowing, for every proper name, who or what the bearer of that name is. This seems to me much too strong. I agree that one does not know what is said by an utterance in which a proper name occurs unless one knows who or what the bearer of the name is, but this does not entail that mastery of the language (i.e., systematic knowledge of the meaning of sentence types) requires this piece of knowledge. Knowing who or what the bearer of a name is is like knowing who the speaker is: one may have to know this in order to know what is said by means of an utterance, yet this piece of knowledge is extra-linguistic - contextual - rather than linguistic. What is linguistic is only the rule which says that "I" refers to the speaker, or that a proper name refers to its bearer.<sup>ii</sup>

As for complete definite descriptions, there are two lines of argument. One may attempt to show that, insofar as they involve spatio-temporal coordinates, they necessarily involve indexicals or proper names (to fix the origin of the spatio-temporal coordinates); or one may attempt to show that the reference of a definite description always depends on the "domain of discourse" (Recanati 1987) or "mental space" (Fauconnier 1985) with respect to which it is intended to be evaluated. Think of the following case: John wrongly believes that Bush is the President of the USA. Knowing that Bush is in the next room, I say: "If he goes in the next room, John will be surprised to meet the President of the USA". Here the description "The President of the USA" refers to Bush rather than to the actual President (Clinton) because it is intended to be interpreted with respect to a world, namely John's belief-world, in which Bush is the President of the USA. (A simpler but more controversial example has John himself straightforwardly and sincerely saying "The President of the USA is in the next room" and thereby referring to Bush.) On this account, even the reference of a complete definite description (like "The President of the USA in 1993") is context-dependent, since (i) it depends on the domain of discourse with respect to which the description is to be interpreted, and (ii) the domain of discourse itself is context-dependent.

- (b) It may be argued that predication, in many cases, requires a context, because of what has been called the open texture of most empirical

concepts (Waismann 1953). On this view, the meaning of a great number of predicative expressions is not a "definition" that determines their conditions of application. The latter may change from context to context, as they are under-determined at the linguistic level. The expressions in question are typically used in talking about "ordinary" situations, and with respect to these situations they have certain conditions of application; but if one considers extraordinary situations it is not clear in advance what exactly the conditions of application of the expression will be with respect to them (Austin 1971: 67-9; see also the works by Travis and Searle listed in the bibliography). This will depend on what is considered relevant in the context of utterance.

One may accept these arguments, and still hold that there are eternal sentences. After all, a sentence such as "Some triangles are equilateral" involves neither reference to particular objects nor empirical properties. What arguments (a) and (b) seem to imply is only that there are some important types of statement that cannot be made by means of eternal sentences. However, it is possible to go further and claim that even a sentence such as "Some triangles are equilateral" is not an eternal sentence, for at least three reasons:

- (c) It may be argued that quantification always requires a context. When I say "Everybody went to Paris", there is an implicit reference to a domain of quantification (everybody in a certain group, everybody in the universe, and so on). This domain must be contextually specified, even if it is the "universal" domain, as in "Some triangles are equilateral". After all, this sentence might be used, quite literally, to say that some triangles in a relevant set (e.g. some of the triangles on the blackboard) are equilateral: the universal interpretation is only one contextual interpretation among many others.<sup>iii</sup> To be sure, the domain may also be explicitly described in the sentence, but when it is so described the description itself may refer to different domains of quantification depending on the "domain of discourse" with respect to which it is intended to be interpreted (see above). It follows that no quantificational sentence is eternal.
- (d) Even though "equilateral" is a one-criterion word that has a clear definition, still it makes different contributions to the truth-conditions of the utterance where it occurs depending on the "standards of precision"

that are considered relevant in the context of utterance (Lewis 1979). Remember Austin's famous example: "France is hexagonal". This sentence will sometimes be considered as true and sometimes as false, depending on the context of utterance ("Good enough for a top-ranking general, Austin says, but not for a geographer")<sup>iv</sup>. It follows that the truth-conditions of the utterance depend on the context. The same thing holds in the case of "Some triangles are equilateral". The same triangles - for examples those on the blackboard - will be considered "equilateral" or not equilateral depending on the standards of precisions that are contextually relevant. It follows that even the conditions of application of "equilateral" are contextually variable.

- (e) Tense is known to be indexical. An eternal sentence must therefore be tenseless. But are there tenseless sentences? Anti-contextualist philosophers claim that there is a "tenseless present", as in "Snow is white" or "Some triangles are equilateral". Does this mean that the "present tense" is semantically ambiguous between a temporal and a nontemporal (tenseless) reading? To claim that the present is semantically ambiguous would violate the methodological principle Grice called "Modified Occam's Razor": Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. Other theories, which do not posit a semantic ambiguity, are preferable, but they entail that a sentence in the (so-called) "tenseless present" is not an eternal sentence: the tenseless present interpretation, according to these theories, is highly context-dependent. Again, it follows that "Some triangles are equilateral" is not an eternal sentence.

I am fully aware that these arguments are controversial; in every case, I take it, a reply is available to the anti-contextualist. Moreover, not all arguments in the list are equally important as far as the contextualism/anti-contextualism debate is concerned. What the contextualist must ultimately show is that there could not be eternal sentences, and this conclusion is served - if at all - only by a subset of the above arguments (the arguments pertaining to domains of discourse, open texture, and standards of precision). Be that as it may I will not go into the details of the controversy here, for I merely wanted to stress that there is room for a controversy. Why, then, is the debate considered as more or less settled? In the fifties contextualism was taken for granted; nowadays it it

considered as refuted. Why? What happened that made anti-contextualism look more attractive than contextualism?

What actually happened is that Paul Grice launched a counter-attack on contextualism, a counter-attack which was very successful. But the victory thereby gained over contextualism was undeserved. As I will now try to show, the argument Grice used in his counter-attack was either fallacious or did not constitute a refutation of contextualism.

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From the anti-contextualist point of view, the "normal" case is the case in which a sentence expresses a proposition independent of the context of utterance. The cases in which it is not so (indexical sentences) are reducible to the normal case via principle (1): to use an indexical sentence is to rely on contextual features instead of using one of the eternal sentences the language provides for saying the same thing. Indexical sentences are used as convenient abbreviations for longer, eternal sentences. This habit of using abbreviated sentences containing indexical elements does not seriously affect the picture of language that emerges from an exclusive study of (putative) eternal sentences. On this picture, sentences express propositions by virtue of their linguistic meaning alone. It follows that:

*(Parallelism Principle)*

If a (syntactically complete) sentence can be used in different contexts to say different things (to express different propositions), then the explanation for this contextual variation of content is that the sentence has different linguistic meanings - is semantically ambiguous.

To be sure, another explanation for a contextual variation of content is possible (and actually preferable) when the sentence contains an indexical expression, for indexical sentences express different propositions in different contexts without being semantically ambiguous. But indexicality is taken to be a well-circumscribed phenomenon; on the anti-contextualist view, indexicality is the characteristic property of a finite class of expressions, the members of which are well-known: personal pronouns, demonstratives, tenses, some adverbs indicating location in space and time, some predicates such as "come", etc. If a sentence which expresses different propositions in different contexts does not

contain one of these recognizable expressions, or if it contains one but the contextual variation in propositional content seems unrelated to the fact that it contains it, then we may safely use the Parallelism Principle to conclude that the sentence is semantically ambiguous.

The Parallelism Principle is an essential premiss in the Gricean argument against contextualism. A second essential premiss is what Grice called Modified Occam's Razor, which I have used earlier in this paper:

*(Modified Occam's Razor)*

Senses (linguistic meanings) are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.

By virtue of Modified Occam's Razor, the analyst which observes that a sentence has two different interpretations when uttered in different contexts must refrain from considering that this intuitive difference in interpretation reflects a difference in linguistic meaning, i.e. a semantic ambiguity. She must, if possible, ascribe this difference to a property of the context of utterance rather than to an ambiguity in the sentence itself.

Together, Modified Occam's Razor and the Parallelism Principle entail that the analyst must not only refrain from considering that a contextual difference in interpretation reflects a difference in linguistic meaning, but also refrain from considering that it reflects a difference in propositional content, in "what is said" by the sentence when it is uttered in this or that context. For suppose we take the difference in interpretation to be a difference in propositional content. Then, by virtue of the Parallelism Principle, this difference in content is to be explained in terms of a difference in linguistic meaning (semantic ambiguity); but positing a semantic ambiguity is precisely what Modified Occam's Razor says the analyst should refrain from doing. It follows that the analyst must, if possible, explain the contextual difference in interpretation by a property of the context of utterance, while maintaining that the sentence itself is not ambiguous and that "what is strictly and literally said" (the propositional content) does not change from one context to the other.

A general solution along these lines has been sketched by Grice. It is based on the notion of conversational implicature. A conversational implicature is something which is communicated by an utterance and therefore belongs to its overall interpretation, but which belongs neither to the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered nor to what is said by the utterance of this sentence; it is an aspect of interpretation that is external to what is said. (Indeed, working out the

implicatures of an utterance presupposes identifying what this utterance "says".) Modified Occam's Razor and the Parallelism Principle lead one to favour an analysis that accounts for a contextual difference in interpretation in terms of conversational implicature, over an account in terms of a variation in propositional content. This is, basically, the Gricean argument against contextualism.

Contextualism holds that what is said depends on the context of utterance. The evidence in favor of contextualism is provided by indefinitely many examples in which the same sentence, which does not seem to be ambiguous, is used in different contexts to say different things. With respect to these examples, the Gricean argues that:

- (i) It is not necessary to consider that, in these examples, the sentence actually says different things in different contexts; it is also possible to account for the facts - namely, the intuitive difference between the interpretation of the utterance in one context and its interpretation in another context - in terms of conversational implicature, while maintaining that one and the same thing is said by the utterance whatever the context.
- (ii) Given Modified Occam's Razor and the Parallelism Principle, the account in terms of conversational implicature is actually preferable to an account in terms of a contextual variation of propositional content.

This argument is fallacious, because it begs the question. It involves a premiss, namely the Parallelism Principle, which a contextualist cannot accept. Certainly, for a contextualist, it is not true, even in general, that a variation of propositional content has to be accounted for in terms of a variation in linguistic meaning. The contextualist holds that the propositional content of an utterance depends on the context and not just on the linguistic meaning of the sentence. It follows that a contextual variation in the propositional content of the utterance does not entail a corresponding variation in the linguistic meaning of the sentence. The Parallelism Principle has therefore to be dropped, but if it is dropped, then Modified Occam's Razor can no longer be used to show that an account in terms of implicature is preferable to an account in terms of a contextual variation in propositional content. Modified Occam's Razor shows that an account in terms of implicature is preferable to an account in terms of semantic ambiguity, but an account in terms of contextually variable propositional content can no longer be reduced to an account in terms of

semantic ambiguity, once the Parallelism Principle is dropped. I conclude that the Gricean argument succeeds only by begging the question against contextualism.

In actual practice, the Parallelism Principle is not explicitly stated as a premiss of the Gricean argument. However, Modified Occam's Razor (or an equivalent principle of economy) is used to support the conclusion that an account in terms of implicature is preferable to an account in terms of content, and I believe that Modified Occam's Razor can be used to that effect only if one accepts the Parallelism Principle. So the latter is actually presupposed by the Gricean argument.

Let me give examples of actual uses of the Gricean argument. The first example is its use by Grice himself, against Strawson and ordinary-language philosophers. The second example is a now classical use of the Gricean argument against Donnellan's view of the referential/attribution distinction.

In Introduction to Logical Theory, Strawson claims that there is a difference between the logical formula ' $P \bullet Q$ ' and the natural-language sentence ' $P$  and  $Q$ ': while the former is logically equivalent to ' $Q \bullet P$ ', the statement made by "They had a child and got married" is not the same as the statement made by "They got married and had a child"; in the latter case, Strawson points out, the order of the clauses "may be relevant... to the truth-conditions", while the truth-conditions of ' $P \bullet Q$ ' are given by the truth-table for " $\bullet$ " and are therefore independent of the order of the clauses (Strawson 1952: 80-81). Whether the order of the clauses is actually relevant to the truth-conditions of a given utterance of ' $P$  and  $Q$ ' depends on the context. In Strawson's terminology, there are various "uses" of "and" in natural language, corresponding to different truth-conditions for ' $P$  and  $Q$ '. Sometimes a sentence ' $P$  and  $Q$ ' is used to say that  $P$  and then  $Q$ , and sometimes it is used to say something different (e.g. the same thing as ' $P \bullet Q$ '). There is no "rule" fixing the truth-conditions of ' $P$  and  $Q$ ' independent of the context, contrary to what happens in the case of ' $P \bullet Q$ '.

This is what Strawson says. Now it is commonly believed that Grice refuted Strawson, by means of the following argument:

- (i) Instead of saying that there is a difference between ' $P \bullet Q$ ' and ' $P$  and  $Q$ ', we may consider that there is no such difference and that the truth-conditions of ' $P$  and  $Q$ ' are actually the same as those of ' $P \bullet Q$ '. For example, we may consider the temporal implication in "They got married and had a child" as a

conversational implicature, external to what is said, rather than considering it as part of the truth-conditions of the utterance in a certain type of context. In this way, we are able to maintain that the truth-conditions of 'P and Q' are determined by the truth-table for " $\bullet$ ", independent of the context of utterance.

- (ii) By virtue of Modified Occam's Razor, the account in terms of conversational implicature is preferable to the account in terms of a semantic difference between 'P  $\bullet$  Q' and 'P and Q'.

This argument does not work. I accept the first premiss, but I reject the second one. By virtue of Modified Occam's Razor, an account in terms of implicature is preferable to an account in terms of semantic ambiguity (i.e. to an account that "multiplies senses beyond necessity"). But Strawson's claim may be construed as an account in terms of context-sensitivity rather than ambiguity. The difference between 'P  $\bullet$  Q' and 'P and Q', according to Strawson, is that the truth-conditions of the former are determined by the truth-table for " $\bullet$ " and do not vary contextually, while the truth-conditions of the latter depend on a number of factors and may vary with the context of utterance. Strawson's claim per se does not entail that "and" is semantically ambiguous: this implication holds only if we accept the Parallelism Principle, according to which every contextual difference in propositional content corresponds to a semantic difference in linguistic meaning. But to accept the Parallelism Principle is to beg the question against contextualism.

If premiss (ii) is rejected, as it should be, we are left with an argument (consisting of (i) only) which no longer provides a refutation of Strawson's contextualist position. What it provides is merely an alternative to that position. In other words, Grice's argument only shows that examples such as "They got married and had a child" can be handled within an anti-contextualist framework, thanks to the notion of implicature. But it does not show that these examples must be so handled. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, Strawson has not been refuted by the Gricean argument. What has been shown is that a contextualist account of examples such as 'P and Q' is not mandatory, but such an account is still possible.<sup>v</sup>

Another, more recent example is provided by contemporary discussions of Donnellan's distinction. Many philosophers argue as follows:

- (i) The difference between the referential and the attributive reading of a definite description may be considered not as a difference in the content of what is said by means of a sentence with this description occurs, but as a difference in what is pragmatically "conveyed" by the utterance. Thus, we may consider that the same proposition is expressed on the attributive and the referential readings, and account for the difference by saying that, in the referential reading, a conversational implicature combines with what is strictly and literally said, while there is no such implicature in the attributive reading.
- (ii) Given Modified Occam's Razor, this pragmatic account of Donnellan's distinction is to be preferred to Donnellan's own account in terms of a systematic difference of propositional content (of truth-conditions).

Again, premiss (ii) must be rejected. Modified Occam's Razor provides no reason to reject an account such as Donnellan's, according to which the difference between the referential and the attributive reading of a description is a difference in truth-conditions, in propositional content (Donnellan 1966); it only provides a reason to reject an account in terms of semantic ambiguity. To be sure, accounts in terms of contextually variable truth-conditions are generally equated with accounts in terms of semantic ambiguity, in accordance with the Parallelism Principle. But Donnellan cannot accept the Parallelism Principle: he holds that the difference between the two readings is a difference in truth-conditional content, but he also says that the referential/attributional distinction is not a semantic ambiguity. Clearly, this implies rejecting the Parallelism Principle. But once the Parallelism Principle is rejected, Modified Occam's Razor can no longer be used against Donnellan's position.<sup>vi</sup>

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Let me conclude. There are, in principle, three ways of handling examples in which the utterance of the same sentence has different interpretations depending on the context. One may (A) consider the sentence as semantically ambiguous, or (B) consider that the propositional content (the truth-conditions) of the utterance depends on the context, or (C) account for the difference in interpretation by positing a conversational implicature that combines with what is said in some contexts but not others. Modified Occam's Razor provides

a reason for avoiding (A) if possible. But how are we to choose between (B) and (C)?

Modified Occam's Razor does not provide an argument against (B), contrary to what is generally assumed. So we really have two possibilities. How to choose between them in a particular case is an open question, a question that has to be answered for the debate between contextualism and anti-contextualism to be settled in a non-question-begging way. Remember the contextualist arguments I mentioned earlier in this paper: they all rely on a certain way of analysing the examples, in conformity to (B), but this may not be the right way of analyzing them. For example, it is an open question whether the sentence "Some triangles are equilateral" can be used literally to say that some triangles on the blackboard are equilateral, or whether "France is hexagonal" can be used literally to say that France is roughly hexagonal. (According to some accounts, the sentences in question can be used to make the statements in question only if they are used non-literally: see e.g. Bach 1987 and Sperber & Wilson 1986.) These specific questions, or the general question of the criteria that are to be used in a particular case to make a decision in favor of solution (B) or solution (C), I take to be empirical questions.<sup>vii</sup>

The problem with the anti-contextualist framework is that, in this framework, these questions are not really considered as open questions. In practice, the anti-contextualist presupposes the Parallelism Principle and describes the case as if solution (B) was not a genuine possibility; he recognizes the possibility of solution (B) only when the sentence is a standard indexical sentence. This strategy prevents one from seriously dealing with the questions I have just raised. I conclude that, whether or not one believes that there could be eternal sentences, one should at least adhere to a weak form of contextualism, which might be called "Methodological Contextualism". Methodological Contextualism says that there is, in principle, a difference between the linguistic meaning of the sentence and what is said by an utterance of the sentence, and a correlative difference between the linguistic meaning of an expression - whatever it is - and the contribution the expression makes to the proposition expressed by the sentence where it occurs. It is only if we assume this weak form of contextualism that we can hope to be some day in a position to settle the contextualism/anti-contextualism debate.

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\* An ancestor of this paper was my contribution to the conference on The Analytic Tradition in Philosophy (Sheffield, 26-28 March 1988); later versions were read in Paris and Saarebrücken.

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<sup>i</sup> Ironically, the argument in question was first put forward by Paul Grice, who himself belonged to the group of ordinary-language philosophers and made a very significant contribution to pragmatics. Grice thought, wrongly I believe, that his important distinction between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning constituted an objection to the contextualism professed by his fellow ordinary-language philosophers. More on this below.

<sup>ii</sup> For a detailed defence of the indexical view of proper names, see Recanati 1993, chapters 8-9.

<sup>iii</sup> Of course this claim is highly controversial. Many will say that the universal interpretation is the only one that is "literal". See below.

<sup>iv</sup> Austin 1975:143.

<sup>v</sup> For a contextualist account of "and", see Carston 1988.

<sup>vi</sup> A full defence of Donnellan's position is offered in Recanati 1993, chapter 15.

<sup>vii</sup> These questions are addressed in Recanati 1989, 1993.