

Topics in Philosophy of Language

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ESSLLI 2011 - Topics in Philosophy of Language

Lecture 5

are there novel forms of context-dependence?

Semantic relativism vs. contextualism

Isidora Stojanovic

plan for today's lecture

- from "unarticulated constituents" to the contextualism/relativism debate
- time-relativity: the temporalism-eternalism debate, future contingents
- tentative ways of drawing the contextualism/relativism distinction
- applications to taste predicates, epistemic modals, gradable adjectives
- how to diagnose assessment-sensitivity vs. mere context-dependence

5.1: to be or not to be (... the value of a variable)

the debate over unarticulated constituents

What are unarticulated constituents?

Term introduced in Perry's *Thought without representation* (1986); for Perry, a constituent of a thought's content.

Idea: When I think to myself, "It's raining", my thought is about a certain place (its truth depends on the place where I am), but I do not need to *articulate* (=conceptually represent) the place in my thought.



Transposed into the realm of language, the debate was between François Recanati (for) and Jason Stanley (against); the debate is really a debate as to whether there are pragmatic processes that freely enrich truth-conditional (semantic) content, or not.

Stanley: when I say "It is raining", the location *is* articulated, because there is a variable in the logical form that picks out the place. Argument: the so-called Binding Argument:

If it is possible to apply a quantifier-like phrase to a sentence, there must be something in the sentence for the quantifier to bind. It is possible to say: "Wherever I go on holiday, it's raining". Ergo, the simple sentence "it's raining" must contain a location variable.

Is Stanley right?

More than one reason why one might be unhappy with the argument; but the most obvious one (for us) is that you can take 'it is raining' to be a sentence, and 'wherever I go' (and similar constructions) as a sentential adverbial (operator).

In other words, rather than posit a location variable, you would introduce a location parameter in the circumstances of evaluation; which is what Lewis & index-theorists did long ago.

A first connection with contextualism vs. relativism debate:

'It is raining' alone would express a content that is not true or false *simpliciter*, but is true relative to (i.e. as evaluated w.r. to) some locations, and false relative to others. Some take this to be a form of *relativism* (e.g. Lasersohn 2005 for taste).

Recanati: unarticulated constituents, free enrichment, and "truth-conditional pragmatics"

For 'It is raining', R. argued that the fact that there can be utterances of the sentence without having any specific place in mind shows that when you do refer to a specific location, it is *optional* hence an "unarticulated constituent".

R.'s scenario is far-fetched and (for many) unconvincing, but the idea of **free enrichment**, as opposed to mandatory pragmatic processes, is plausible enough. Some examples from contextualist literature:

"This apple is red". vs. "This watermelon is red.",

"Mary walked over to the cliff and jumped".

"You won't die" (to a person who mildly injured herself), etc.

5.2 relativism with respect to time

from temporalism to future contingents

the contextualism / relativism debate in one glance

- follows up on the contextualism/literalism debate; note that the sense of 'contextualism' can change from one debate to another
- MacFarlane's proposal started with future contingents; but the current topics of predilection are: epistemic modals, predicates of personal taste, and (to lesser extent) gradable adjectives and knowledge ascriptions
- still a lot of controversy on how to draw the line between contextualism and relativism (cf. the case of “non-indexicalist contextualism”)

1st attempt: contextualism vs. relativism as a difference whether you take smth to be the value of a variable (or an implicit argument) or a value of some parameter in the circumstances of evaluation

Lewis on “schmentences”

Strictly speaking, we do not need to provide both context-dependence and index-dependence. [...] Schmentences would be akin to the open formulas that figure in the standard treatment of quantification. Truth of a schmentence at an index would be like satisfaction of a formula by an assignment of values. (1980, p. 33)

Upshot: the work done by index-dependence can be done by the usual dependence on the assignment function. This would require that you view the expression 'there are dogs', as it occurs e.g. in 'It is possible that there are dogs' as distinct from 'There are dogs' *tout court* (assuming that the latter *is* closed and does not contain a free variable for the world).

What goes into a circumstance of evaluation (or an index)?

David Lewis in “Index, Context and Content”

Often the truth of a sentence in a context depends on the truth of some related sentence when some feature of the original context is shifted. 'There have been dogs' is true now iff 'There are dogs' is true at some time before now.

David Kaplan in “Demonstratives”

“By [possible circumstances of evaluation] I mean both actual and counterfactual situations with respect to which it is appropriate to ask for the extensions [and, in particular, a truth value] of a given well-formed expression.”

More from Kaplan

“If we built the time of evaluation into the contents, it would make no sense to have temporal operators. To put the point another way, if what is said is thought of as incorporating reference to a specific time,... it is otiose to ask whether what is said would have been true at another time.”

The view that takes contents (or propositions) to vary in truth value with respect to time is **temporalism** (as opposed to eternalism) and is viewed by some as a form of relativism.

Temporalists: Arthur Prior, Michael Dummett

Eternalists: G. Frege, Gareth Evans

an example



character (the most salient proximal place is the capital of Japon)

context: Tokyo, August 2011

content (Tokyo is the capital of Japan)

(14th century, actual w.)

circumstances: 21st c., actual world

True

False

contextualist (reductionist) vs. non-contextualist temporalism

On both approaches, contents can have different truth values wrt different times, but one approach works with the monadic notion of **sentence-truth-in-context**, and the other only with the dyadic notion of **sentence-truth-in-context-at-time-t**

Contextualist temporalism (collapses the two parameters):

S is true in context c iff $[[S]]_{c, t(c)}^M = T$, where $t(c)$ is the time of c

Non-contextualist temporalism:

S is true in context c, with respect to t, iff $[[S]]_{c, t}^M = T$

In other words, a view that treats sensitivity to some feature f by introducing f as a parameter of evaluation (rather than a value of an indexical) is still contextualist if it endorses the idea that a sentence is true in a context iff it is true in that context as evaluated at the circumstances fixed by the context.

(That'd be what MacFarlane calls non-indexical contextualism.)

Note that a view such as Kaplan's, which is a temporalist view, is contextualist in this respect. Further, this distinction is related to the one between **two notions of validity**: S is valid iff S is true in every context (for which 'I am here now' is valid) vs. S is valid iff S is true in every context and w.r. to every circumstance

first observation:

- the **variable vs. parameter of evaluation** dispute is (arguably) not so interesting from a *semantic* point of view: *what you can do with variables & quantifiers, you can do with (sufficiently sophisticated) indices & modal operators*. Cf. results from modal logics (e.g. equivalence btw S5 and monadic predicate logic; e.g. Kuhn 1980 for general results; Stojanovic 2007 applies them to the case of Lasersohn 2005's proposal for taste predicates to argue that, from a purely semantic standpoint, the choice btw an implicit argument vs. a taste parameter can't be well motivated)

second observation:

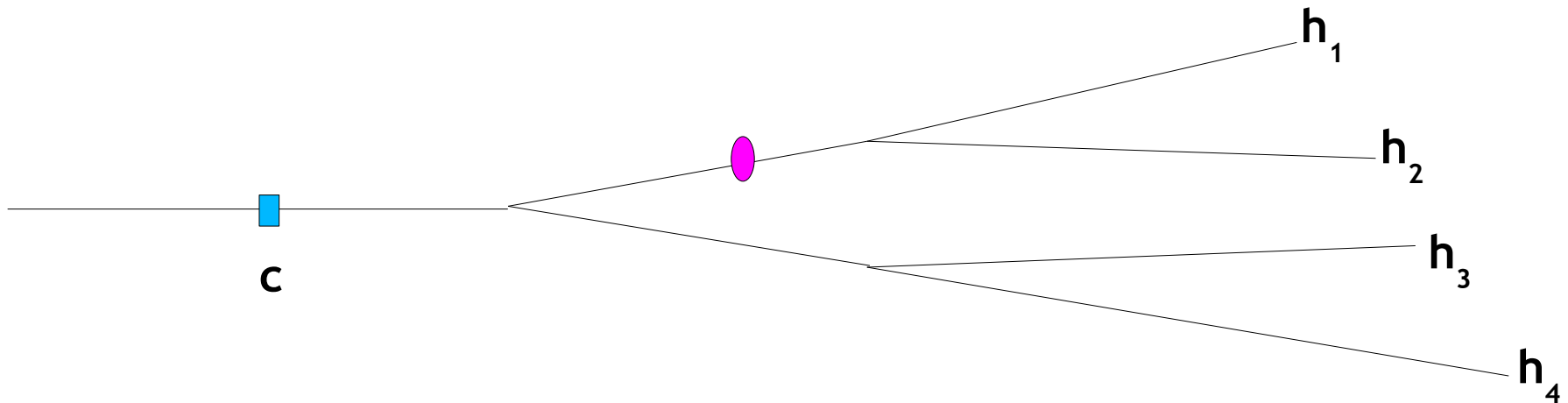
- the **quantificational vs. tense-logical** treatment of tenses and temporal expressions in natural language is still alive (e.g. Jeff King 2003); but regardless of that, there seems to be a problem with non-contextualist temporalism:

If I say now, "I am sitting", and I stand up, the truth that I express doesn't thereby turn into a falsehood.

A very different kind of time-relativity arises with future contingents compare with: "Tonight I will be sitting."

history-relativism for future contingents

(Belnap & al. 2001 – *Facing the Future*)



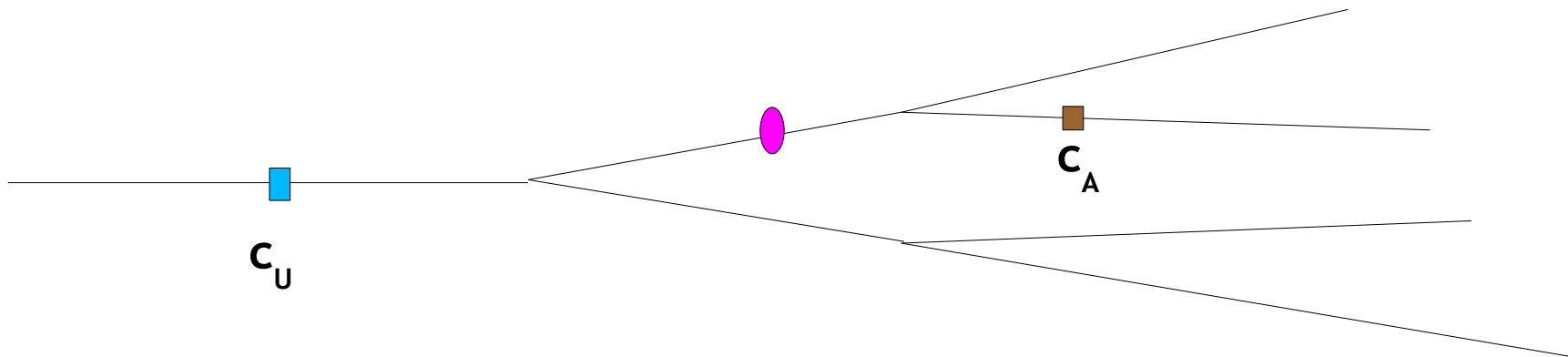
Truth is defined for **context-history** pairs:

'It will be p' is true in context c and history h, if there is time later than c on history h at which p is true

'It is settled that p' is true in context c is 'It will be p' is true at every pair (c, h) such that h goes through c

assessment-relativism for future contingents

(MacFarlane 2003)



'It will be p' is true in contexts c_U and c_A iff (for p temporally specific)

p is true at every point m/h where m=the time of c_U and h is a history that passes through m and through the time of c_A

From “standard” relativism to assessment-relativism

Standard relativism (e.g. Lasersohn):

S is true in context c at point i iff $[[S]]_{c,i}^M = T$

Assessment-relativism (MacFarlane):

S is true in context-of-utt. c at context of assessment k iff
 $[[S]]_{c, a_1(c), \dots, a_n(c), p_1(k), \dots, p_m(k)}^M = T$

where $i := (a_1, \dots, a_n, p_1, \dots, p_n)$, a_i s are context-of-utterance-sensitive parameters (e.g. world, location) and p_i s are assessment-sensitive.

5.3

contextualism vs. relativism

what we have noted so far

- literalism, on the one hand, and contextualism and relativism, on the other, yield different predictions of truth value; but contextualism & relativism, suitably construed, yield the same truth value predictions
- even in the contextualism/relativism debate, there aren't two well-delineated positions, but rather, several different issues that thereby give rise to several positions, some of which can equally well be classified as contextulist or as relativist, depending on one's criteria

what we are going to examine next

- whether there are any well-designed *tests* to decide what kind of treatment can be best applied to a given expression
- we'll start by looking at some examples, to get a sense of the debate

Knowledge Attributions



Isidora knows that the bus is going to town.

contextualism: the truth value of the report depends on the context: it's false in a context with high standards (e.g. under discussion of the possibility of a brain in a vat), and true in an ordinary context.

relativism: even if uttered in a context with low standards, the report can be false if re-evaluated from a context with high standards

Predicates of personal taste



This stew is
delicious.

contextualism:

the truth value depends on a contextually specified agent/group

relativism:

the truth value depends on the “judge”, i.e. the person who assesses or evaluates the claim, and on their taste

Is contextualism about a given parameter p the view that a given value for p is part of *what is said* (by utterances sensitive to p)?

"The contextualist takes the subjectivity of a discourse to consist in the fact that it is covertly about the speaker (or perhaps a larger group picked out by the speaker's context and intentions). Thus, in saying that apples are "delicious", the speaker says, in effect, that apples taste good to her (or to those in her group)" (MacFarlane 2006: 18).

"On this view, 'It's wrong to cheat' involves ellipsis, or a place holder indicating a set of standards, a code, whatever. What [its] use says depends on what has been elided or what is being assigned to the place holder." (Richard 2008: 89).

In Egan et al. (2005), contextualism is similarly understood as a view that models the relevant parameter p upon the implicit arguments associated with 'local' and 'nearby' or with gradable adjectives ('old' and 'slow'). The emphasis, in their objections to contextualism, is on reported discourse:

1) Mary (in Bloomington): “The local bars are awful.”

1') (in Paris): “Mary is saying that the local bars are awful.”

2) Mary (ignorant of where John is): “He might be in Prague.”

2') (John, in Paris): “Mary is saying that I might be in Prague.”

The main problem for this sort of argument is that the data from reports of *what is said* are tricky and complicated.

Also, nothing commits to the view that the location value (viz. the place to which the bars are local) is part of *what is said*. Furthermore, (1') itself is ambiguous; though it is true that (2') lack the same sort of ambiguity.

how to distinguish assessment-sensitivity from other forms of context-dependence?

tentative tests showing (lack of) assessment-sensitivity

Disquotation in reported discourse

Take a sentence *S* with the expression that we are testing for (but fix the remainder of the sentence in such a way that it becomes context-insensitive). Let *S* be uttered by speaker *A* in context *c*, and consider the sentence "A said that *S*" uttered in an arbitrary context *c'*. The expression isn't assessment-sensitive if there are contexts in which the report is false.

Disquotation in reported discourse: some examples

1. John (from camp A): The enemies will attack.

(In camp B): John says that the enemies will attack.

ambiguous

(in camp B): John says that the allies will attack.

2. John: This stew is delicious.

John says that this stew is delicious.

ok

NB: success at the test needn't mean that it is assessment-sensitive

- for it can simply be inssensitive.

Invariance with respect to what is said

Take a sentence containing the expression that we are testing for (again, fix the remainder so that it is context-insensitive), and let the sentence be uttered by speaker A in context c and by speaker A' in context c'. The expression isn't assessment-sensitive the test if there are contexts in which the report "A and A' said the same thing" is false (and not ambiguous).



Retrospective reassessment (present-tensed and past-tensed)

Let S be a sentence containing the expression that we are testing for (but keep the remainder context-insensitive) and suppose that, uttered at time t , it has truth value v . The expression is assessment-sensitive

i) if there is a later time t' at which the sentence “That is (now) false”, as uttered in reference to the utterance of S that was made at t , also has truth value v ;

ii) if there is a later time t' at which the sentence “That was (then) false” (or “I was wrong”) as uttered in reference to the utterance of S that was made at t , also has truth value v .

example for retrospective assessment



Mary might
be in Paris.

...John learns that
Mary is in Asia...



I was
wrong.

That's false.

Third-party reassessment

Suppose that sentence S (containing the expression tested for), as uttered by speaker A, has truth value v . The expression is assessment-sensitive if it is possible that the sentence “That's false”, as uttered by speaker B in reference to A's utterance of S, has also truth value v .



Deniability

Let a sentence be uttered by speaker A, and let speaker B reply to A: “No, that's not the case.” Then the expression is assessment-sensitive if the felicity of such a dialogue is compatible with A's and B's utterances having the same truth value.



Final remark: Deniability ≠ Faultless Disagreement



defenders of faultless disagreement (Kölbel, Richard, Lasersohn):

- If John finds the stew delicious, he's saying something true.
- If Ken doesn't find it delicious, he too is saying something true.
- Boris and Jean are competent speakers who understand each other.
- Boris and Jean disagree, and they do so rationally.

That's it!



Thank you for attendance

For any remaining questions,
don't hesitate to contact me:

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