Explanations in context

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Abstract

Proposal: 250 words

Keywords: explanations; counterfactuals; pragmatics

Background

Causal Selection

Hesslow (1988) discusses the issue of *causal selection* as a seperate task from *causal attribution*. The latter determines whether a condition can truthfully be considered a contributing cause. The former determines, of possible contributing causes, which is the best *explanation*.

Hesslow claims that an explanation must always explain why an effect occurred in the actual situation but did not occur (or would not have occurred) in some contextually-specified comparison class of situations. He uses this account to unify many previously proposed criteria for causal selection. The relevant comparison class must depend on the interlocuters' knowledge of what alternative situations are possible, and on the topic of their conversation. Under some topics, the utility, moral acceptability, temporal proximity, typicality or stability of the different alternatives might matter to the generation of the comparison class.

Hilton (1996) desribes an informal model of Gricean pragmatics in explanations. Hilton distinguishes between causal "discounting" and causal "backgrounding". Causal discounting, where one cause becomes a less good explanation as a result of an alternative cause gaining salience, seems to be an effect of changes in the underlying generative model or in the question under discussion. Causal backgrounding, where a cause becomes a less good explanation as a result of becoming especially predictable, seems to happen as a result of changes what common knowledge is assumed between the interlocuters.

References

Hesslow, G. (1988). *The problem of causal selection.* Harvester Press, Brighton.

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