Issues in Pragmatics

PLIN3001 – PLING204

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Lecture 4: Context Shifting Arguments

Overview

Last week, we looked at the debate between ideal and ordinary language theorists, taking debates over definite descriptions as a case study. Ordinary language theorists argued that apparent variation in what is said commits ideal language theorists to the view that many sentences of natural language are implausibly ambiguous. Grice offered an alternative view, on which the apparent variation concerns what is implicated rather than what is said. But this also seems implausible in many instances. We saw that, once we draw the distinction between linguistically controlled and linguistically free pragmatic processes, we can recognise a third view, **contextualism**, on which the variation *does* arise at the level of what is said but does *not* involve positing ambiguities all over the place, but is instead the result of linguistically free pragmatic processes.

We looked at contextualist analyses of attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions, like 'Smith's murderer'. We can also characterise a general thesis:

> **Contextualism**
>
> There is no level of meaning which is both (i) propositional (roughly: truth-evaluable) and (ii) *minimalist*, i.e. unaffected by "top-down" (linguistically free) pragmatic processing.
>
> (Recanati 2004, p. 90)
>
> (Compare this with the essentialism thesis we looked at in week 2.)

Insofar as what is said is propositional — which *almost* everybody accepts[1] — it follows that what is said is always at least partly determined by free pragmatic processes.

This week, we will look at arguments for contextualism, and some experimental work.

[1] The exception is Kent Bach. See his (1994) and (2001).

1 Arguments for Contextualism

The Background

John Searle argues that propositions can only be expressed against the background of a set of unarticulated assumptions:

> The literal meaning of a sentence only determines a set of truth conditions given a set of background practices and assumptions. Relative to one set of practices and assumptions, a sentence may determine one set of truth conditions; relative to another set of practices and assumptions, another set; and if some sets of assumptions and practices are given, the literal meaning of a sentence may not determine a definite set of truth conditions at all.
>
> (Searle 1980, p. 227)

To argue for the view, Searle offers various examples:

> Suppose I go into a restaurant and order a meal. Suppose I say, speaking literally, 'Bring me a steak with fried potatoes.' ... I take it for granted that they will deliver the meal to my house, or to my place of work. I take it for granted that the steak will not be encased in concrete, or petrified. It will not be stuffed into my pockets or spread over my head. But none of these assumptions was made explicit in the literal utterance.
>
> (Searle 1992, p. 180)

In his (1980), he discusses the case of 'cut':

(1) Bill cut the grass.

(2) The barber cut Tom's hair.

(3) Sally cut the cake.

(4) I just cut my skin.

(5) The tailor cut the cloth.

Though the word 'cut' is unambiguous, it makes different contributions to the truth-conditions of these sentences, as they would ordinarily be understood:

> The sort of thing that constitutes cutting the grass is quite different from, e.g., the sort of thing that constitutes cutting a cake. One way to see this is to imagine what constitutes obeying the order to cut something. If someone tells me to cut the grass and I rush out and stab it with a knife, or if I am ordered to cut the cake and I run over it with a lawnmower, in each case I will have failed to obey the order. That is not what the speaker meant by his literal and serious utterance of the sentence.
>
> (Searle 1980, p. 223)

We might think that the differences are somehow the result of an interaction between the meaning of the word 'cut' and the meaning of the expression that is its direct object ('the grass' 'Tom's hair' etc.). But Searle points out that, in some circumstances, 'cut' can make contributions to truth-conditions, e.g. of 'Bill cut the grass', that it doesn't make in ordinary circumstances:

> it is easy to imagine circumstances in which "cut" in "cut the grass" would have the same interpretation it has in "cut the cake", even though none of the semantic contents [JM: i.e. the encoded meanings] of the words has changed. Suppose you and I run a sod farm where we sell strips of grass turf to people who want a lawn in a hurry. ... Suppose I say to you, "Cut half an acre of grass for this customer"; I might mean not that you should *mow* it, but that you should *slice* it into strips as you could cut a cake or a loaf of bread. But this meaning involves no change in any of the literal meanings of the components of the sentence.
>
> (Searle 1980, p. 224-5)

In other words, which propositions we express depends not just on the encoded meanings of the words we use to express them, but further, non-linguistic facts about the context (in particular, what Searle calls the background practices and assumptions).

Sometimes, given our background assumptions and practices, the meaning of the word 'cut' seems to make *no* contribution to truth-conditions. Consider 'Jane cut the sun'! Without further information about the context, does this say *anything*? Still, the word 'cut' presumably has the same encoded meaning in this sentence as it always does.[2]

Travis Cases

Searle's examples provide the materials for **context shifting arguments** — also called **Travis cases**, after Charles Travis, who provides many examples. Consider Pia's leaf:

> Same sentence uttered: 'This leaf is green'
>
> Same leaf, in the same painted condition.
>
> What Pia says is true in Case 1 (photographer) but false in Case 2 (botanist).
>
> So: 'green' makes different contributions to truth-*conditions* in each case.
>
> (Travis 1997)

Other Travis cases:

[2] This raises the question: what *is* the encoded meaning of the word 'cut'? Is it the sort of thing that can be specified by a truth-conditional semantics? If not, how can it be specified? This is essentially the problem I mentioned at the end of lecture 1.

Milk

The fridge is empty, except for a small puddle of milk.

Case 1: Hugo is dejectedly stirring a cup of black coffee. Odile utters: 'There's milk in the fridge'.

Case 2: Hugo has been given the task of cleaning the fridge. Odile utters: 'There's milk in the fridge'.

(Travis 1989, pp. 18–19)

What should we say about the contribution of 'milk' in these cases? Is it modulated in case 1, to yield something like 'milk appropriate for adding to coffee'? What about case 2? Does it contribute its unmodulated literal meaning? Or is this also modulation?[3]

Weight

After months of dieting, Hugo steps on the scale and it reads 80 kilograms. Later, dressed in a heavy coat but having not eaten anything, he is such that if he stepped on a scale, it would read 84 kilograms.

Case 1: Hugo and Odile, wearing their heavy coats, are discussing the results of Hugo's diet. Hugo utters 'I weigh 80 kilos'.

Case 2: Hugo and Odile, wearing their heavy coats, come to a bridge and a sign saying that it can only bear 80 kilos. Hugo utters 'I weigh 80 kilos'.

(Travis 1985)

Keith DeRose (2009) and others have offered similar cases designed to show that knowledge claims — claims of the form 'S knows that P' — are context-sensitive. Consider:

Knowledge

Keith and his wife are driving to the bank on a Friday afternoon to deposit their paychecks. They notice that the lines inside are very long.

Case 1: It's not urgent that they deposit the paychecks, so Keith's wife suggests coming back the next day (Saturday), and asks if the bank will be open then. Keith utters: 'I know that the bank will be open tomorrow. I was there two weekends ago and checked their opening hours.'

[3]The choice has important implications for truth-conditional semantics — the problem from lecture 1 again. If the literal meaning of 'milk' determines an extension — portions of stuff that count as milk independently of context — then our semantics will reflect that with an appropriate axiom, specifying this extension as the meaning of the word. But if so, our semantics will only be concerned with a proper subset of what is said with sentences containing the word: it will need to capture the truth-conditions in case 2, but ought to ignore the truth-conditions in case 1. So the distinction between what is said and what is implicated won't be the crucial distinction for semantics after all. And if the literal meaning does *not* determine an extension — and both cases are cases of modulation — then what sort of thing is the *un*modulated literal meaning of 'milk'? Can it be specified by a truth-conditional semantics?

> Case 2: As before, except that it is very important that Keith and his wife deposit their paychecks before Monday morning. If they don't, their mortgage check will bounce and they'll lose their house. Keith utters: 'I don't know that the bank will be open tomorrow. They may have changed their opening hours since I checked two weeks ago — we'd better make sure.'
>
> (DeRose 2009, pp. 1–2)

Intuitively, what Keith says is true in **both** cases, even though the sentence he utters in Case 2 is the negation of the sentence he utters in Case 1. Given this, however, it seems that 'know' must make different contributions to truth-conditions in each case.[4]

2 Experimental Design

- Do contextualists' intuitions about Travis cases conform to neutral speaker-hearer intuitions? Recently, practitioners of **experimental philosophy** (X-Phi) have reported that attempts to experimentally test intuitions in 'knowledge' cases have not supported contextualism (Buckwalter 2010).
- Is the method — describing a case that is typically preceded or immediately followed by a statement such as 'utterance of sentence S in context C is true/false' — problematic?
- Is the restriction to a binary choice (true or false) overly restrictive? Are our actual judgements more equivocal or fine-grained?

Hansen and Chemla (2013) tested the contextualist predictions, comparing:

- Knowledge scenarios ('Keith knows the bank is open')
- Colour scenarios ('This leaf is green')
- Miscellaneous scenarios ('There is milk in the fridge', 'I weigh 80 kilos')

They ran an online test in which participants read a series of stories on a computer screen. Participants were asked to assess the truth-value of some character's claim appearing in boldface, given the context offered in the rest of the story.

They were told that their judgement may be subtle, and were offered a continuum of possible answers, ranging between false and true, which they could set by placing the right end of a red line between those two extremes:

[4] In fact, there's an important complication here. Clearly, what Keith knows can vary over time, according as Keith's relationship to the relevant facts changes. But one might also suppose that one's relationship to the fact that P can change according as the question whether P varies in practical consequence for one. **Subject Sensitive Invariantists** try to exploit this idea to give a non-contextualist account of the variation in **Knowledge**. For discussion and references, see (DeRose 2009, Ch. 1 and 2, and *passim*).

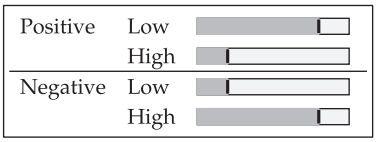
Responses were coded according to the percentage of the line filled in red: 100% corresponds to an unambiguous TRUE response, 0% to an unambiguous FALSE response.

To eliminate possible truth-bias (bias towards judgements that claims are true), four different variations were tested. The following variations were tested for 'knows', e.g.:

- Two sentences:
  - Positive sentence: I know the bank will be open tomorrow
  - Negative sentence: I don't know the bank will be open tomorrow
- Two contexts:
  - Low standard context: not important that check is deposited by Monday
  - High standard context: important that check is deposited by Monday

The contextualist predicts the following pattern of responses[5]:

	'Low'	'High'
Positive	TRUE	FALSE
Negative	FALSE	TRUE



Consider **Milk**, for example. The contextualist expects:

- Positive ('there's milk in the fridge') + low standard (presence of any milk): T
- Positive + high standard (milk suitable for coffee): F
- Negative ('there's no milk in the fridge') + low standard: F
- Negative + high standard: T

The results of the experiment are represented in the following table::

		Knowledge	Color	Miscellaneous
⊕	Low			
	High			
	Statistical diff.	$F(1,37) = 1.4, p = .24$	$F(1,38) = 42, p < .001$	$F(1,31) = 4.8, p < .05$
⊖	Low			
	High			
	Statistical diff.	$F(1,36) = .75, p = .39$	$F(1,36) = 6.7, p < .05$	$F(1,30) = 20, p < .001$
	Stat. interaction	$F(1,35) = .05, p = .82$	$F(1,36) = 50, p < .001$	$F(1,61) = 22, p < .001$

[5]This was the pattern of responses exhibited by the **control scenario**. This scenario tested the sentences 'You are quite tall' (positive) and 'You are quite short' (negative) in contexts in which Jane is addressing Bill, who is either 7' tall (low) or 5' tall (high).

Summarising the main results:

- Clear contextual effects of varying degrees of strength across all types of scenario.
- Contextual effect is significantly weaker for knowledge scenarios than others.

Are the contextual effects as strong as the contextualist would predict? Compare the results for 'colour' and 'miscellaneous' cases with the results from the control scenario.

Explaining the variation in contextual effect:

- Differences between identifying what is said and judging truth-value?
- Element of reflection: participants' awareness of gap between linguistic meaning and communicated meaning?
- Variation in strictness with respect to judgements of truth or falsity?

3 Summary

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read Hansen and Chemla (2013).

Questions

1. Consider the words 'open', 'drop', 'stop', 'happy', 'upset' (compare these with 'cut'). Think of examples where these would communicate different things on different occasions. How would you account for these different uses?
    - Multiple ambiguity (polysemy)?
    - A single encoded meaning (what would this be?) plus implicatures for the specific communicated meanings?
    - Modulation/enrichment affecting what is said/explicature?
2. The apparent contextual variation displayed by 'know' in DeRose's **Knowledge** case might be accounted for in various ways:
    - Ambiguity: strict and loose uses both encoded.
    - Contextualism 1: underdetermined, but made specific in context.
    - Contextualism 2: strict use is encoded, but often loosened by modulation.
    - Implicature: strict use is encoded, and loose use is often implicated.

- Ignorance of the meaning of 'know'
- Some combination of the above?

How might you choose between these options?

3. Does the following dialogue support or rule out any of the options in 2.?

   A: Do you know where your car is?

   B: Yes, I know where it is: I parked it on the drive as usual.

   A: But it might have been stolen since you've been in here.

   B: You're right. I don't know where it is.

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