Issues in Pragmatics
PLIN3001 – PLING204

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Lecture 5: Varieties of Contextualism

Overview

Last week, we looked at some of arguments for **contextualism**, the view that there is no level of meaning that is both propositional and unaffected by top-down processes, and some experimental work investigating the intuitions underlying these arguments. This week, we'll look at different varieties of contextualism, each responding to the observation that, if contextualism is true, the encoded meaning of an expression is often distinct from the **concept** (propositional constituent) it expresses on a particular occasion:

(1) Harry is a real **bachelor**

(2) Sally **cut** the cake/her finger/the grass

(3) This steak is **raw**

This observation raises an important question: what sort of thing is the encoded meaning of an expression? Is it a concept? Is it something that underdetermines a concept? If so, what is it — a constraint on or instruction for retrieving a concept? Or are expressions associated with entirely different sorts of things — things that do not qualify as 'meanings' at all? From most to least conservative, the positions we will explore are:

- Encoded meanings are concepts:

    (i) Quasi-contextualism

    (ii) Pragmatic composition

- Encoded meanings are not concepts:

    (iii) Wrong format views

    (iv) Meaning eliminativism

(Recanati 2004, pp. 136–153)

1 Quasi-Contextualism

According to **Quasi-Contextualism** (sometimes called **Strong Optionality**), expression meanings are concepts, which can contribute directly to the proposition expressed (truth conditional content) or can be pragmatically modulated. On the Relevance Theoretic view (Sperber and Wilson 1995), the concept encoded by an expression is associated with two other types of information (besides lexical): logical and encyclopaedic.

For example, the expression 'bachelor' encodes the concept BACHELOR (I'll use words in capital letters to denote concepts).

Logical entry for BACHELOR: HUMAN, ADULT, MALE, UNMARRIED.

Encyclopaedic entry: information about different kinds of bachelors — the young, irresponsible type; the elderly, solitary, misogynous type; the young eligible type who are ready for marriage etc.

Modulation involves **narrowing** and **strengthening** (Carston 2002, p. 326).

Narrowing

Consider:

  (4) Hopefully we'll meet some bachelors at the party

Suppose that it is common knowledge between speaker and hearer that the speaker is interested in marriage. Assumptions about the third kind of bachelor will be highly activated, and used to construct the **ad hoc** concept BACHELOR*.

More generally, narrowing involves elevating an encyclopaedic property of the encoded concept, e.g. ELIGIBLE FOR MARRIAGE, to logical status. (It is called "narrowing" because it is a narrowing of the set of objects that fall under the encoded concept.)

Loosening

Loosening is a matter of dropping or suppressing a logical property, e.g. HAS HAD NO COOKING in (3), 'This steak is raw'. (This typically results in a widening of the set of objects that fall under the encoded concept.)

Often, modulation involves a combination of narrowing and loosening. Consider 'angel' used metaphorically. The encoded concept ANGEL is loosened to include non-supernatural beings, but narrowed to exclude dark angels (like Milton's Satan).

2 Pragmatic Composition

On the **Pragmatic Composition** conception, expression meanings are also concepts, but the process of composing them with the meanings of other expressions in a sentence forces pragmatic modulation. Consider:

(5) The city is asleep [either 'city' or 'asleep' must be modulated]

(6) I hear the piano

(Recanati 2004, p. 34)

On both views, modulation is *optional* in the sense that it is not the meaning of the expression that itself triggers modulation. (Think of the contrast here with indexicality.) The difference between the two views is that Quasi-Contextualism assumes that encoded meanings can figure in the proposition expressed (what is said/explicature/etc.), albeit perhaps rarely, while Pragmatic Composition does not. Proponents of Pragmatic Composition will take cases of lexical coercion — cases like (5) and (6) — as evidence against **minimal propositions** resulting from saturation and disambiguation.

3 Evidence that Encoded Meanings are Not Concepts

On both the Quasi-Contextualist and Pragmatic Composition views, encoded meanings are concepts. But there is some reason to think that encoded meanings are *not* concepts.

i. Modulation is Ubiquitous   Although Sperber and Wilson maintained that word meanings are concepts, they acknowledge that all words behave as if they encoded what they call **pro-concepts** — where a pro-concept is something like a schema or instruction for building a concept. (The view that encoded meanings *are* pro-concepts is a form of Wrong Format view, discussed below.)

ii. Abstract, General Nature of Word Meanings   Many word meanings seem too abstract and general to be the components of thoughts: 'happy', 'cut', 'open' (Searle).

iii. Productive Polysemy

'stop' is highly polysemous. You can stop writing; you can stop a burglar; you can stop a check; you can stop a nail hole with plaster; you can use your fingers to stop the holes of a flute; you can stop a poker into the fire; you can stop the tide by anchoring your boat. You can come to a stop; there can be a stop in your speech; you can can include a stop in a telegram; you can put a stop on a camera; you can pull out all the stops on an organ.

(Rayo 2013, p. 673)

'window':

- The bay windows are a beautiful feature of the house.   [glass pane and frame]

- The cricket ball smashed my study window.   [glass pane]

- She crawled through the upstairs window.   [open space in the wall]

'novel':

- a literary form

- a text

- a publication

- a physical object

Combinations are possible: 'Peter loves the novel he found on the bus' (Bosch 2007).

Productive polysemy raises similar questions to the ubiquity of modulation, most centrally the question, which of the multitude of possible senses, if any, are encoded? The problem is that there does not seem to be any principled way of deciding the answer.

iv. Compositionality Considerations   Language does not seem to be compositional in the required sense; only thought is. The encoded meanings of expressions do not seem to the sorts of entities that compose — or at least, that compose truth conditions.

We will return to the question of compositionality in later weeks.

4 Wrong Format Views

According to **Wrong Format** views, word meanings are not the sort of thing that could figure as constituents of propositions: they don't have the right (i.e. conceptual) format. We first encountered such a view in connection with contextualism about definite descriptions in week 3. We considered the idea that the encoded meaning of a definite description is an instruction to find an individual concept, whether descriptive or *de re*.

On this view, modulation is **mandatory** in the sense that it is needed for the recovery of a proposition. (This raises a problem: how, if at all, is it to be distinguished from saturation? See Recanati 2004, §6.6 on where Indexicalism and Contextualism meet.)

Wrong Format views are often distinguished according as they treat word meanings as **too abstract and schematic** to constitute concepts (propositional constituents), needing fleshing out in order to arrive at a determinate content, or **too rich**, consisting, e.g., of a large store of encyclopaedic features, most of which must be suppressed in context.

(a) Word Meanings as Too Abstract and Schematic

There are a wide range of possibilities here. One is that word meanings are Sperber and Wilson's **pro concepts**, schemas or instructions on how to fill the gap. For example, 'cut X' would have some very general content (perhaps EFFECT A LINEAR SEPARATION AFFECTING INTEGRITY OF X BY MEANS OF AN EDGED INSTRUMENT) plus an instruction to recover a more specific concept corresponding to a particular manner of cutting. (This more specific concept may often be determined by properties of the direct object.)

Problem: the context-specific meanings that result from modulation of a given word meaning vary in arbitrarily many ways. Contrast here the systematic context-sensitivity of indexicals: we can *specify* what they contribute in context, as well as the parameters with respect to which that contribution varies across contexts. It's not clear we can specify the contribution made in context by words like 'cut', or how that contribution varies across contexts.

See Carston (2012, p. 619-20) for some discussion of other Wrong Format options.

(b) Word Meanings as Too Rich

Cohen (1993) offers a view on which the meaning of a word is a single lexical item with a rich set of features, with a specific interpretation arising as the result of cancelling some of those features. Consider 'plastic flower', 'paper tiger', 'chocolate heart':

1. 'flower' has ORGANIC feature cancelled.
2. 'tiger' has ANIMATE feature cancelled.

Problem: how much of this vast amount of contingent encyclopaedic knowledge can be considered linguistic meaning? Does this view collapse into a version of **Meaning Eliminativism**?

5 Meaning Eliminativism

Meaning Eliminativism is the view that words as such do not have anything like meanings in the traditional sense; only specific tokens of words have meanings. Searle's arguments about the Background to utterance comprehension and thought provide some motivation for the view: a sentence only has a determinate meaning (expresses a determinate thought) against a set of largely unrepresented background assumptions and practices. (Does this run together the notion of a sentence's *meaning* with that of the *thought* or *proposition* that the sentence expresses?)

On the traditional view, word learning is a process of abstraction from contextualised senses. The meaning of a word, thus learnt, can then be modulated on occasions of use to give its contextualised sense on that occasion. Recanati (2004, p. 147) offers the following diagram:

contextualized senses → (abstraction) *linguistic meaning* → (modulation) *contextualized senses*
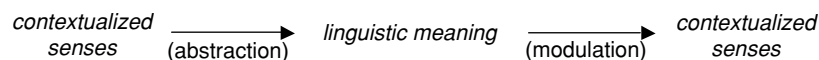
Figure 9.1 Abstraction and modulation

According to Meaning Eliminativism, the contextual sense communicated on an occasion is computed *directly* on the basis of the contextual senses the word had on previous occasions.
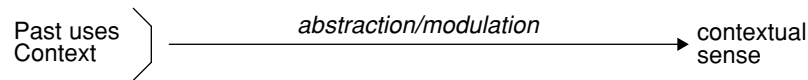

Figure 9.2 A single process of abstraction/ modulation

(Figure from Recanati 2004, p. 148)

Obviously something must be stored. But what? Some possibilities:

1. One possibility invokes the notion of a **memory trace**, the evidence left by an experience that has passed through awareness. The trace preserves the properties that constituted that experience. The idea is that what is stored are memory traces of previous utterances of an expression: the linguistic form, the contexts in which it was used, and the interpretations that were derived in those contexts. In new uses of the expression, memory traces of past uses are differentially activated according to context and expectations of relevance. New contextual senses are then constructed from this activated material. For more on this approach to concept learning and retrieval, see Hintzman (1986).

2. Another possibility is Rayo's **Grab Bag Model**.

> With each expression of the basic lexicon, the subject associates a 'grab bag' of mental items: memories, mental images, pieces of encyclopedic information, pieces of anecdotal information, mental maps, and so forth. With the expression 'blue', for example, a subject might associate two or three particular shades of blue, the information that a paradigmatic instance of 'blue' is the sky on a clear day, a memory of a blue sweater, and so forth. Different speakers might associate different grab bags with the same lexical item.
>
> (Rayo 2013, p. 648)

In the case of 'stop', for example, there is no need for different grab bags for its different grammatical categories (noun vs. verb). There could be just one grab bag containing a few key items — representations that bring to mind interfering, obstructing, preventing, and closing — and context-specific interpretations can be constructed from these 'by exercising sensitivity to context and common sense' (*ibid.*) — i.e. by pragmatic inference.

6 Some Questions

- How does one move from a collection of memory traces or a 'grab-bag' to a concept? How does this process differ from processes of narrowing or loosening described in §1?

- There is a strong intuition that many words have literal meanings. Perhaps that is why it seems to make sense of talk of narrowing/loosening a word's encoded meaning, and making a word's meaning more/less specific. How is this intuition to be explained?

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read Carston (2012).

Questions

1. Proponents of Wrong Format views and Meaning Eliminativism offer expressions such as those in (a)–(f) as evidence against the view that word meanings are concepts that can contribute constituents of thought. Do you agree? What would be linguistically encoded by each of these words on (i) a Wrong Format view and (ii) a grab bag account?

    (a) open
    (b) stop
    (c) window
    (d) book
    (e) city
    (f) asleep

References

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