Issues in Pragmatics
PLIN3001 – PLING204

Jonny McIntosh
jonathon.mcintosh@ucl.ac.uk

Lecture 10: Minimalism and Relativism

Overview

As we've seen over the last few weeks, the case for contextualism typically begins with examples like the following. I am in Edinburgh, where it is raining, and you are in London, where it is not. If I utter the sentence 'It is raining' and you utter the same sentence at the same time, I will say something true and you will say something false.

The contextualist then goes on to argue as follows. Since what I say is true and what you say is false, we do not say the same thing with the sentence 'It is raining'. Since we both utter the same sentence, the difference in what we say must be due to context. Since our contexts are alike with respect to all the features that are relevant to determining the linguistically controlled content of 'It is raining', the difference must be due to linguistically free processes—e.g. of enrichment by unarticulated *location* constituents.

We saw last week that **indexicalists** like Jason Stanley resist this sort of argument at the last step. They claim that our contexts are not alike in all relevant respects, arguing that they differ with respect to a feature, e.g. location, which is relevant to determining the linguistically controlled content of a hidden indexical in the sentence's logical form.

One might try to resist the argument in other ways. For example, one might try to resist at the very first step, and deny that we say things with different truth values. As we saw in lecture 4, experimental work suggests this isn't very promising, however.

This week, we will look at attempts made by proponents of **minimalism** and some proponents of **relativism** to resist the argument at an intermediate step. Whilst allowing that I say something true and you say something false, these theorists try to maintain that we nevertheless say the same thing—that it is raining! This allows them to insist, against the contextualist, that there *is* a level of meaning that is both propositional and unaffected by top-down processing without incurring the indexicalist's commitment to a host of hidden indexicals in sentences' logical forms.

1 Minimalism

But hang on... How *can* they maintain that we say the same thing? If I say something true and you say something false, doesn't it follow that we say *different* things? According to the relativist, it doesn't follow. This can seem rather puzzling, but let's set it aside for now and first concentrate on the less puzzling position of the minimalist.

According to the minimalism espoused by Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore (2005), it does follow that we say different things: I say that it is raining in Edinburgh while you say that it is raining in London. But we both *also* say something further: that it is raining—*punkt!* In uttering a sentence, Cappelen and Lepore claim, "indefinitely many propositions are said, asserted, claimed, stated" (p. 199). This is **Speech Act Pluralism**.

One of these propositions, they claim, is the **minimal proposition**, which is essentially the linguistically controlled content of the sentence uttered, relative to the context:

> 1 The most salient feature of Semantic Minimalism is that it recognizes few context sensitive expressions, and, hence, acknowledges a very limited effect of the context of utterance on the semantic content of an utterance. The only context sensitive expressions are the very obvious ones [...] plus or minus a bit.
> 2 It follows that all semantic context sensitivity is grammatically (i.e., syntactically or morphemically) triggered.
> 3 Beyond fixing the semantic value of these obviously context sensitive expressions, the context of utterance has no effect on the proposition semantically expressed. In this sense, the semantic content of a sentence S is the proposition that all utterances of S express (when we adjust for or keep stable the semantic values of the obvious context sensitive expressions in S).
>
> (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, pp. 2–3)

Since, according to minimalists, there are no hidden indexicals, the minimal proposition expressed by my utterance of 'It is raining' is the same as that expressed by yours.

a. The main motivations for minimalism relate to its ability to explain the results of certain indirect speech reports. Even if Herman is in a very different context to either of me, he may be able to correctly report my utterance by uttering 'Jonny said that it is raining'. Similarly, he may be able to correctly report your utterance by saying 'X said that it is raining'. And even though my context differs from yours, he may be able to correctly report both of our utterances by saying 'They both said that it is raining'.

Minimalism offers a neat explanation of these data: the reason why all these reports are correct is that both of our utterances share a common content, the minimal proposition that it is raining, and the different indirect speech reports all correctly report this.

b. But minimalism suffers from an obvious problem. The minimal proposition is supposed to be a *proposition*, and so be truth-evaluable. So is the minimal proposition that is the alleged common content of our utterances of 'It is raining' true or false? C&H admit that this is an interesting question, but not one that falls within their remit—it's a metaphysical question about the nature of the property of raining, they claim.

But this just presses the issue. The indirect speech report data seems to show that we can often correctly report an utterance by reporting its linguistically controlled content. But why should we think that this content is fully propositional? Second, even if we do, why should we suppose that it is always expressed? After all, there seem to be contexts in which it is *not* possible to correctly report my utterance of 'It is raining' with the sentence 'Jonny said that it is raining'. (Suppose, e.g., you are in Moscow, someone asks you what the weather is like there, and you utter 'Jonny said that it is raining'.)

2 Relativism

Relativism offers the prospect of a different response. What's relativism? We usually think that propositions can vary in truth value over possible worlds, or ways for things to be. Put crudely, relativism is the view that they can also vary in truth value over other parameters—times, locations, standards of taste, moral sensibilities, etc.

How might this help? We could say that our different utterances of 'It is raining' express the same proposition (the proposition that it is raining) and that this proposition varies in truth value over some parameter which differentiates our contexts (location). We could then say that, while it is true relative to the value of that parameter which is operative in my context (Edinburgh), it is false relative to the value operative in yours (London). And *that*, or so the thought might go, would enable us to grant that what I say is true and what you say is false while denying that we say different things.[1]

2.1 Motivations for Relativism

a. Predicates of personal taste: 'tasty', 'fun', 'beautiful', etc.

> A: Rollercoasters are fun.
>
> B: No, rollercoasters are not fun.

<div align="right">

Lasersohn (2005)

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On the one hand, A and B seem to be disagreeing with one another. On the other hand, they also seem to be expressing their own personal preference, what is fun *for them*.

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[1]For further discussion of this idea, see Predelli (2005), MacFarlane (2007) and (2009).

This raises a dilemma. If we assume that what A says is that rollercoasters are fun *for A*, and that what B says is that rollercoasters are not fun *for B*, we give a role to the perspectival parameter, but lose the disagreement. If we instead assume that what A says is that rollercoasters are fun *punkt*, and that what B says is that rollercoasters are not fun *punkt*, we capture the disagreement, but seem to lose the perspectival parameter.

This is known in the literature as a case of (apparent) **faultless disagreement**. Relativism offers a solution: assume that what A says is that rollercoasters are fun *punkt*, and that what B says is that rollercoasters are not fun *punkt*, but that these propositions vary in truth value over a **standard of taste** parameter: what A says (that rollercoasters are fun) is true relative to A's standards of taste and false relative to B's, while in the case of what B says (that rollercoasters are not fun) the situation is reversed.

b. Epistemic modals: 'might', 'must', etc.

> Suppose a man is approaching both of us. You are standing over there. I am further away. I can only see the bare outlines of the man. In view of my evidence, the person approaching may be Fred. You know better. In view of your evidence, it cannot possibly be Fred, it must be Martin. If this is so, my utterance of (5) and your utterance of (6) are both true.

> (5) The person approaching might be Fred.
> (6) The person approaching cannot be Fred.

> (Kratzer 1986, cited by von Fintel and Gillies 2008, 78-9)

This dialogue gives rise to a similar problem. If I utter (5) and you utter (6), we seem to be disagreeing. But given our epistemic situations, we both seem to be right. The relativist solution: you are denying the proposition that I am affirming (that the person approaching might be Fred), capturing the disagreement, but this proposition is true relative to my epistemic state and false relative to yours, capturing the faultlessness.

c. Future contingents.

> Suppose that the world is objectively indeterministic. In some possible futures, there is a sea battle tomorrow. In others, there is not. How should we evaluate an assertion (made now) of the sentence 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow'?

> (MacFarlane 2003, p. 321)

If utter the sentence 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow' today, some reason to think that what I say is not (yet?) true or false. But at the close of play tomorrow, we will want to say that it is (or was?) true or false, depending on whether or not a sea battle

occurred. The relativist solution: what I say, namely that there will be a sea battle on day x, varies in truth value over time; it lacks a truth value today, but gains one—truth or falsity depending on whether there is or isn't a battle—by the end of tomorrow.

2.2 Relativism and Unarticulated Constituents

Consider our utterances of 'It is raining' again. Could we say that we both express the same proposition (that it is raining) but that this proposition varies in truth value over locations (and possibly times)? This doesn't seem to be a case of faultless disagreement.

Recanati (2007): is the location cognitively significant? Are you thinking about London as opposed to somewhere else when you utter the sentence 'It is raining'? Is it plausible that the thought you or your audience entertain is IT IS RAINING IN LONDON.

> Consider a small isolated group, living in a place we call Z-land. Z-landers do not travel to or communicate with residents of other places, and they have no name for Z-land. When a Z-lander sees rain, he will say to others not in a position to look outdoors, 'It is raining'. His listeners then act appropriately to there being rain in Z- land: they close the windows in Z-land, cancel plans for Z-land picnics, and grab umbrellas before going into the Z-land out-of-doors. They have no other use for 'It is raining'. They do not call their sons in far-off places, or listen to the weather news, or read newspapers with national weather reports.
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> <div align="right">(Perry 1986, p. 144)</div>

It is not clear that this is genuine relativism, involving *propositions*—as opposed to mental representations—varying in truth value over locations. Can we get any clearer?

2.3 Contexts of Use and Assessment

If relativism is the view that propositions can vary in truth value over different **circumstances of evaluation**, i.e. n-tuples of parameters, what is it for a proposition to be true *punkt*? John MacFarlane, e.g. in his (2009), distinguishes two options:

- The proposition expressed by an utterance is true *punkt* IFF it is true relative to the circumstances of the context of **use**, i.e. the context in which the proposition was expressed. Nonindexical contextualism/(Recanati 2007)'s moderate relativism.

- The proposition expressed by an utterance is true *punkt* IFF it is true relative to the circumstances of the context of **assessment**, i.e. the context in which the proposition is evaluated. Assessment sensitivity/(Recanati 2007)'s radical relativism.

In (McIntosh forthcoming), I discuss a challenge purporting to show that, in the case of relativisation to times (temporalism), the latter form of relativism is incoherent and the former implies that propositions have the same truth values relative to all times. If that

challenge is successful, and it works in the same way in the case of locations, the Recanati/Perry proposal *cannot* be understood as a genuine form of relativism: it is not the *proposition* that I express with the sentence 'It is raining' that varies in truth value over locations, but something else—perhaps a mental representation of that proposition. If so, **relativism** doesn't offer a way of resisting the contextualist's argument after all.

Back Up Reading and Questions

There are no back ups next week, but for further reading on this week's topics, you might try MacFarlane (2007) and, for more on relativism, Kölbel (2008, §§1–5).

References

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