

ESSLLI 2011 - Topics in Philosophy of Language

Lecture 4

recent debates over context-dependence

the semantics/pragmatics distinction

Isidora Stojanovic

some lingering remarks from yesterday

- Stalnaker's idea of context-change & its influence on what would become *dynamic* semantics
- Situation theory developed in different directions; influence on what would become *event* semantics

the plan for today

- Perry's 2001 *Reference & Reflexivity*
- Semantics vs. pragmatics: contextualism vs. literalism
- a very first stab at the contextualism/relativism debate

3.1: relational theory of meaning

Perry's Reference & Reflexivity (2001)

John Perry's Reflexive-Referential Theory (2001)

A Kaplanian heritage & the Situations & Attitudes heritage

- Perry 1977's belief-state vs. belief-content distinction is often assimilated to Kaplan's character-content distinction
- S&A: the object of study are utterances rather than sentences; the relational theory of meaning

The reflexive turn

“The binary distinction is too simple... An utterance has as wide a variety of contents as we may find useful to isolate, for particular purposes of description and explanation.”



I met Prof. Perry last year.

- u is true iff the speaker of u met Prof. Perry the year preceding the time of u ---> *reflexive content*
- given that Bahia is the speaker of u and that u takes place in 2011, u is true iff Bahia met Prof. Perry in 2011 ---> *referential content*

- u is true iff the speaker of u met the individual determined by the naming convention for 'Prof. Perry' exploited in u, the year preceding the time of u

- given that John Perry is the person referred to by 'Prof. Perry', u is true iff the speaker of u met JP the year preceding the time of u

- given that Bahia is the speaker of u, u is true iff Bahia met Prof. Perry the year preceding the time of u

- given that Bahia is the speaker of u and that u takes in August 2011, u is true iff Bahia met Perry in 2010

- given all of the previous, and the fact that X can meet Y iff X and Y are at the same place, u is true iff Bahia met Perry in 2011 and she and him were, at the time of meeting, at the same place

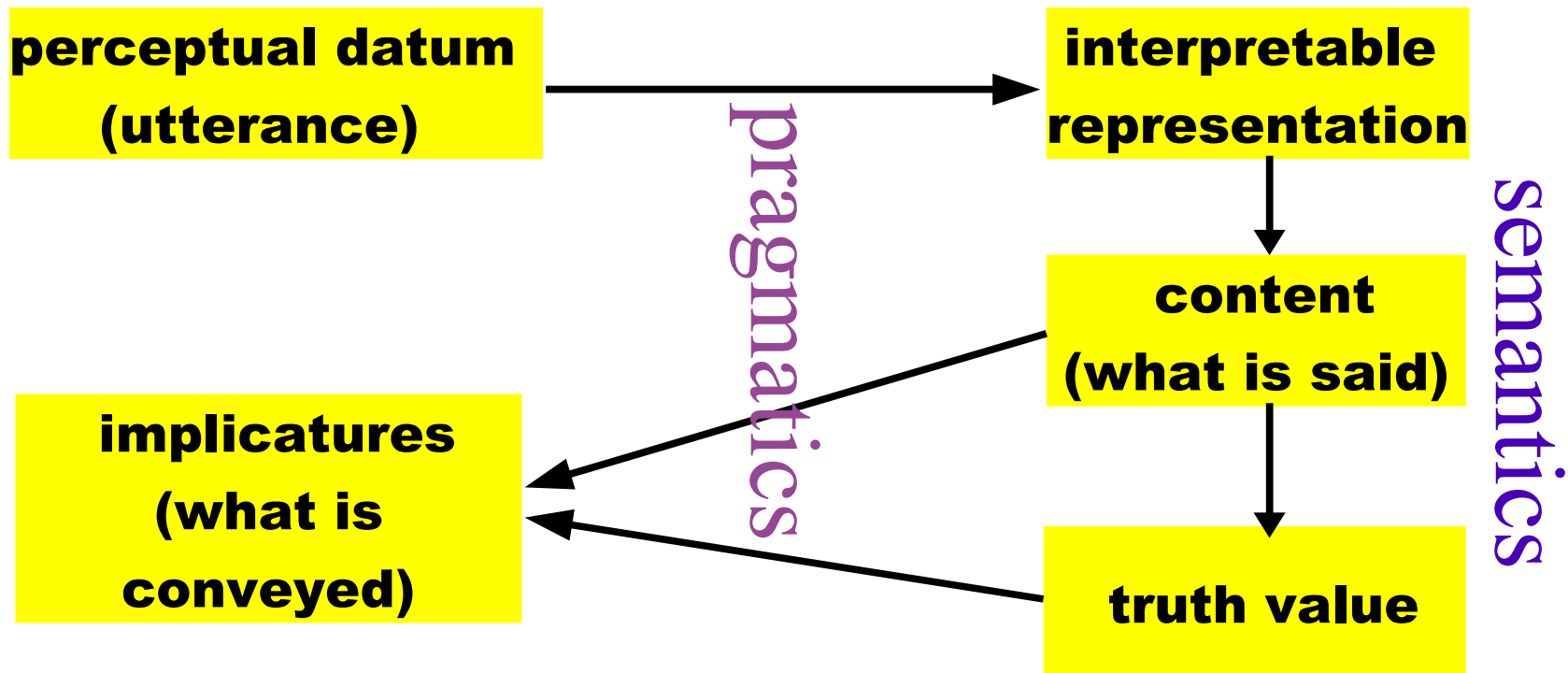
Some important features of Perry's new account

- the bearers of truth value are not sentences-in-context (or even sentences-at-a-context-and-at-and-index), but utterances, which are concrete spatio-temporal events.
- Kaplanian characters correspond, in Perry's framework, to properties of utterances. Compare with Situation theory, where meanings arises as a uniformity across (utterance) situations, and with Stalnaker's diagonal propositions.
- plurality of contents, none of which is *the* semantic content

3.2

Semantics vs. Pragmatics

The standard picture



The debate between literalism (incl. minimalism) and contextualism simultaneously bears on two issues:

- **how much is done in semantics vs. in pragmatics**
(*semantic* contextualism makes incorporates more phenomena into semantics, literalism passes them on to pragmatics)
- **whether the standard picture is correct**
(*radical* contextualism holds that there is *pragmatic intrusion* into semantics, and pragmatic effect on *truth value*)

Terminological problem:

what counts as 'contextualism' in the first debate will count as 'literalism' in the 2nd (example: Stanley & Szabo on q-domains)

Crucially, contextualism (of either sort) & literalism (of the first sort: i.e. minimal semantics & no backward pragmatic effects) diverge on truth value predictions. Examples:

Quantifiers



Every student should turn in a course summary.

literalism: true iff every student *in the world* should turn in a summary.

By saying something obviously false, I can convey smth true, namely, that every student *in this course* should turn in a course summary.

contextualism: true iff every student *in the contextually specified domain* (e.g. this course) should turn in a summary.

Further examples:

Incomplete definite descriptions



The projector
isn't working.

literalism:

The utterance is literally false (because there exists more than one projector) but I manage to convey something true.

contextualism:

the truth value depends on the context (for some, this is just a special of the quantifier domain restriction).

Further examples:

Gradable predicates



Audrey Tautou is rich.

literalism:

that's determinately true or false (or borderline), regardless of the context

contextualism:

the truth value depends on the comparison class (e.g. true in comparison to average French, false in comparison to famous Hollywood actresses), and on a threshold within that class.

Further examples:

Implicit arguments



My colleague is late.

literalism:

the role of the context is to fix the time parameter, and determine the speaker (and perhaps the reference of 'my colleague') but that's all

contextualism:

the truth value depends on the event of which she is talking (late for their rendez-vous, late for the project submission deadline, etc.)

Further examples:
**Belief reports and the *de re*
- *de dicto* distinction**



Ortcutt believes that his
next door neighbor is a
spy.

Literalism: The truth value is set independently of the context.

contextualism: the truth value depends on the context: false on the *de dicto* reading, true on the *de re* reading. But controversy where the dependence lies: the definite description; the scope relations; or the belief reports itself. Compare:

Ortcutt believes that Cicero was a great writer, but he doesn't believe that Tully was a great writer.

Further philosophically important examples:

Knowledge attributions



Isidora knows that this bus is going to town.

Literalism (or **invariantism**, or absolutism):

scepticism: the knowledge report comes out false

moderate invariantism: the knowledge report comes out true.

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

Further philosophically important examples:

Predicates of personal taste



This stew is delicious.

invariantism:

that's determinately true or false, there is a matter of fact whether the stew at stake is delicious; context is only needed for the demonstrative

contextualism:

the truth value depends on a contextually specified agent or community and on their taste standards (which fix what counts as delicious)

Further entire areas of discourse:

Aesthetic: Rachmaninov's Third Symphony is a masterpiece.

Moral: It is wrong to cheat. / You ought not to cheat..

Epistemic: Mary might arrive later. / The murderer must be the butler.

A related (complicated) debate on semantics vs. pragmatics:

Scalar 'implicatures': John has four children. (\rightarrow *not more than 4*)
Some students have turned in their homeworks. (\rightarrow *not all of them*)

Not quite the same as the literalism/contextualism debate, but the issue is whether the scalar inference derives from grammar (=semantic), or is merely an implicature (=pragmatic).

Let us take stock:

The literalism-contextualism divide is semantically relevant, to the extent that semantic accounts yield **predictions of truth value**, and that the two precisely diverge over truth values.

What will settle the debate?

Given each area, evaluate which account gives more accurate truth predictions, i.e. those that informed competent speakers would intuitively assign to the utterances at stake.

Verdict (at a first blush):

Incomplete definite descriptions: clearly support contextualism
Quantifiers, gradable predicates: strongly support contextualism
Belief & knowledge reports, taste predicates, etc.: unclear

Literalists' response:

Speakers' intuitions are not a good guide to semantic *theory*; consider e.g. verbs of motion and relativity theory.

Other ways of settling the issues:

Experimental pragmatics

Measure the time it takes to process the sentence:
the sort of methods used in the ever-growing literature on scalar implicatures, but hasn't been applied (to my knowledge) to other areas under dispute

(cf. Week 2, Developmental pragmatics, by N. Pouscoulos)

Metatheoretic considerations

What gives you a more attractive overall picture of language

Let's end with something to which we'll come back tomorrow

Predicates of personal taste



This stew is
delicious.

Set aside invariantism, and assume that the same sentence (in reference to the same stew) may be true as said by me (who find the stew's taste delicious), and false as said by you (who find it insipid).

Several questions arise:

whether my sentence, as uttered by me and *evaluated* by you, is true;
what are the mechanisms responsible for fixing the truth value;

etc.

So much for today.

Thank you for your attention.



Questions? Objections? Suggestions?