The Multiplicity of Meaning
Lecture 2: Plural Signification and Semantic Plasticity
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Formal appendix: `https://bit.ly/3clhH7Y`
Yesterday's handout: `https://bit.ly/2HiOHCh`

> *Plural Signification* Almost always, when x bears a semantic relation to y, x bears that relation to many other entities similar to y.

1 Context-relative expressing

Objection Five

> Monism about *context-relative expressing*[1] is needed in order to state explanatory generalisations connecting the semantic properties of complex expressions with the semantic properties of their constituents.

Explanandum: (1–3) express only necessary falsehoods, whereas (4) expresses both truths and falsehoods.[2]

(1) Princeton is big and Princeton is not big.

(2) Princeton is huge and Princeton is not huge.

(3) Princeton is huge and Princeton is not big.

(4) Princeton is big and Princeton is not huge.

The complete truth about which propositions 'Princeton is big' and 'Princeton is huge' *express* can't explain this. But given monism about context-relative expressing, we can do so by saying that the proposition expressed by 'Princeton is huge' relative to any context entails the one expressed by 'Princeton is big' relative to that context.[3]

Response: theorise directly about a family of *co-expressing* relations, between n linguistic expressions and n entities of appropriate categories (relative to a language/linguistic community and, if you want, a context).[4]

Sample generalizations:

- If sentences S_1, S_2, S_3 co-express p, q, r, and S_3 is the result of combining S_1 and S_2 with 'and', then $r = p \wedge q$.

[1] *Context-relative expressing:* linguistic expression a expresses item x in the language of community z relative to *context c*, where contexts $\approx \langle$person, time, world$\rangle$ triples.

[2] To accommodate the fact that one could utter (1–3) without saying anything false, perhaps better to say that they all express both truths and falsehoods, but (1–3) only *uniformly express* necessarily falsehoods whereas (4) uniformly expresses both truths and falsehoods. Let's understand 'express' as 'uniformly express' throughout.

[3] One might try to do the same work by relativizing not to contexts but things like *interpretations of the whole language* or *global assignment functions*. But these are metaphysically problematic.

[4] *Expressing* is just the special case where $n = 1$.

- If name a, predicate F, and sentence S co-express x, Y, p, and S is the result of concatenating F to a, $p = Yx$.

The theory C (see Formal Appendix) proves, for each sentence that is a theorem of higher order logic (e.g. (1) and (2)), that it expresses only truths (and expresses at least one truth).

Picture: the propositions expressed by a sentence in your context are all *available* to be asserted, but which ones you actually assert will depend on your purposes, which will in turn depend on how *plausible* the different propositions are in the light of your evidence.

2   Semantic plasticity

Argument Four.[5]

> Given the vast number of propositions extremely similar (at least in non-semantic respects) to those we assert, only pluralism can reconcile the following theses:
>
> *Robustness* Often, when someone says that p, there was a substantial chance, well in advance, that they would say that p.
>
> *Parity* When propositions are extremely similar, they have similar chances of being asserted.

Response: The case for Parity seems like another iteration of the bad Problem of the Many reasoning from Argument One.

Argument Five.[6]

> If pluralism is false, there are nearby possibilities where our modal reporting practices lead to error, undermining much of our actual *knowledge* of modal reporting facts.

Consider a long series of worlds close enough that each is actualized at the next. At each one, Sally utters

(5) Salad is delicious

By the end, she's not saying that salad is delicious. Let w_0 be the last world where she is. At each world, Fred utters

(6) Sally robustly[7] says that salad is delicious.

[7] It is robustly the case that $p := p$ holds at every *nearly-actualized* possible world
  w is *nearly actualized* := for every particle x, x is a particle at w; for any two particles x and y time t, and real number d such that the distance between x and y is d metres at t, at w the distance between x and y at t is within one nanometre of d; there are no new particles at w; and every law of nature is true at w.

- The monist can avoid saying that Fred is making a mistake at w_0 by saying that 'say' shifts before 'salad' and 'delicious', so that when Fred utters (6) at w_0 he doesn't say that Sally robustly says that salad is delicious.

But now add Isabel, who at every world utters

(7) Fred robustly says that Sally robustly says that salad is delicious.

Let w_1 be the last world where Fred says that Sally robustly says that salad is delicious.

Claim: given monism, Isabel is making a mistake at w_1. She says that Fred robustly says that Sally robustly says that salad is delicious, and she is wrong.[8]

What's wrong with accepting these possibilities of error? (i) It's repugnant in itself. (ii) It threatens our actual claims to knowledge about what people would be likely to say under various counterfactual circumstances.[9]

Argument Six

> To solve metaphysical Tolerance Puzzles[10], we need to posit so much semantic plasticity in ordinary count nouns that unless pluralism is true, our cross-world reporting practices are radically error-ridden *in the actual world*.

Tolerance: Every bench on my roof is *bench-tolerant*.[11]

Non-hypertolerance: Neither bench could have been originally composed by the six planks that in fact originally composed the other bench.

(i) Given Tolerance and Non-hypertolerance, there must be a largest number $0 < n < 6$ such that each bench could have been a bench made of any n of its actual planks together with any $6 - n$ of the other planks.

(ii) If one of the benches were a bench made of n of its actual planks together with $6 - n$ of the other bench's actual planks, it would not be bench-tolerant, since it couldn't have been originally composed by collections comprising $n - 1$ of its actual planks and $7 - n$ of the other planks.

(iii) That could easily have happened.

(iv) But I would still have been disposed to utter Tolerance (the sentence). And surely I wouldn't have been making a mistake.

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[8] By contrast, pluralists can say that Isabel utters fewer of the propositions her sentence expresses than Fred does, and all the ones she asserts are true.

[9] In response to (ii) one could stick to one's guns, setting the errors aside like mere "sceptical possibilities": see Kearns and Magidor 2008. But this seems extreme!

[10] See Dorr, Hawthorne, and Yli-Vakkuri, unpublished.

[11] b is bench-tolerant := b is a bench on my roof, and for any six planks $p_1 \ldots p_6$ on my roof, if at least five of $p_1 \ldots p_6$ are parts of b, then it is possible that $p_1 \ldots p_6$ originally compose b while b is a bench on my roof and the collection of all planks on my roof is the same.

(v) So in such worlds, I wouldn't have thereby asserted that every bench on my roof was bench-tolerant. Our view: my use of 'bench' in uttering Tolerance would not have referred to *being a bench*.[12]

(vi) But that use of 'bench' would have referred to *some* property *B*, and wouldn't have been a semantic outlier: if any property is referred to by typical uses of 'bench' in these worlds, *B* is such a property.

(vii) So, *given monism*, it's false that *being a bench* is referred to by typical uses of 'bench' in these worlds. Result: rampant *actual* errors in claims like like 'I would likely have said that every bench on my roof was six feet long no matter how I had grouped the planks'.

Even pluralists have to posit a *little* error, since we're initially inclined to think that I'd have said that *every bench my roof was bench-tolerant* no matter how I had grouped the planks, this is wrong. But such mistakes need not be pervasive and can be avoided without radical revision.[13]

[12] Context: a "plenitudinous" ontology where every concrete object coincides with a vast horde of others, with a whole spectrum of different modal profiles.

[13] *Typical* uses of 'bench' in the worlds in question, as in 'Every bench on my roof is six feet long', refer to *being a bench* as well as to the properties whose instances are tolerant.

There is a good case that those uses refer to *all* of the many properties that would be referred to by uses of 'bench' in Tolerance-speeches made in worlds with different plank-arrangements.

References

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