VALUE DISAGREEMENT AND TWO ASPECTS OF MEANING

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Overview

Early Wittgenstein on Truth Conditions

> *'To understand a proposition means to know what is the case,*
> *if it is true. (One can therefore understand it without knowing*
> *whether it is true or not.) One understands it if one*
> *understands its constituent parts.' (Tractatus, 4.024)*

This well-known quote summarizes two central ideas of truth-conditional semantics:

1. the linking of truth conditions to understanding
2. semantic compositionality

⇨ In this talk, I will primarily be concerned with the first one, that to understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true.

Refinements

Historically, truth-conditional semantics in the proper sense, i.e. including compositionality, evolved out of the adoption and sometimes also the rejection of neo-Fregean reformulations of Frege's ideas about semantics and parallel developments in higher-order logic and categorial grammar. Early examples:

- Montague: *Universal Grammar* (1970), *English as a Formal Language*, and *The Proper Treatment of Quantification in Ordinary English* (1974)

- Cresswell: *Logics and Languages* (1973)

- Kaplan: *On the Logic of Demonstratives* (1978), *Demonstratives* (1989)

- Lewis: *Index, Context, and Content* (1980)

- Barwise & Perry: *Situations and Attitudes* (1983)

Semantic Contextualism

Kaplan (1978; 1989)

A proposition is true/false in a model with respect to some context and the circumstances of evaluation (index; CEs) in a two-layered model:

Linguistic Meaning   +   Context   ⇒   Semantic Content
Semantic Content   +   CEs   ⇒   Extension

Lewis (1980)

A proposition is true/false in a model with respect to some context and the circumstances of evaluation without layering:

Linguistic Meaning   +   Context   +   CEs   ⇒   Extension

Purpose of Context and CEs

Context and CEs fulfill different roles:

- The context provides the deictic center for the truth-conditional contribution of indexicals (saturation): e.g. the past tense, 'tomorrow, 'here', 'now', etc.

- Elements of the CEs are shifted by modal expressions (implicit quantification): e.g. 'it is possible that', 'always', 'presumably', etc.

↪ Differences between Lewis and Kaplan matter for this talk. Lewis rejects the notion of semantic content (intension) and thus does not use two layers, but a theory with semantic contents is more expressive.

Semantic Relativism

Relativism in the sense understood in this talk is a recent form of contextualism defended by Lasersohn, MacFarlane, Egan and many others in which context and index are decoupled:

- The context provides the deictic center for the truth-conditional contribution of indexicals (saturation).
- Elements of the CEs are shifted by modal expressions (implicit quantification).
- *Additional* elements of the CEs relativize truth-in-a-model independently of the context.
- Instead of using two parameters, just as well three could be used.

↪ According to contextualism and nonindexical contextualism additional feature are located in the context or derived from the context to the CEs according to fixed rules. According to relativism, additional parameters *need not* be derived from the context.

Assessment Relativism

Assessment Relativism
A proposition is true/false relative to a context and CEs, where
some of the elements of the CEs such as world and time are
initially derived from the context, but the CEs *additionally* contain
an assessor or relevant features of an assessment.

- The difference to other forms of contextualism is that
  according to relativism the semantic content of an utterance is
  true/false relative to an assessor *independently* of the context.
- Hence: It is possible that speaker of context $\neq$ assessor of the
  utterance.

Direct Value Disagreement

Not problematic is *content-based direct disagreement*:

Example

(1)   a.   John: Capitalism is good.
        b.   Alice: No, it isn't.

Suppose John's criteria for goodness are $C_1, \ldots, C_n$ and Alice agrees with using these criteria but believes that capitalism does not satisfy $C_1, \ldots, C_n$. Then they directly contradict each other, i.e., the semantic content of Alice's utterance is the negation of the semantic content of John's utterance.

⇨ John and Alice are in direct, content-based disagreement.

Sometimes Disagreement Is Not Direct

Examples due to Plunkett & Sundell (2013) unless marked otherwise:

(2)   That chilly is spicy.

(3)   Tomato is a fruit.

(4)   Secretariat is an athlete. (Ludlow 2008)

(5)   Lying with the aim of promoting human happiness is sometimes morally right. In fact it often is!

(6)   Waterboarding is torture.

⇨ Discourse participants may associate different criteria with the respective predicate. But how does this non-content based, indirect disagreement work?

The Problem

If discourse participants disagree about the criteria associated with a given predicate, then aren't they just talking past each other?

- John: $\text{Good}_1(\text{Capitalism})$;
  $\text{Good}_1(x) := C_1(x) \ \& \ \cdots \ \& \ C_n(x)$
- Alice $\neg\text{Good}_2(\text{Capitalism})$;
  $\text{Good}_2(x) := D_1(x) \ \& \ \cdots \ \& \ D_n(x)$
- There appears to be no real disagreement here. The DPs attitudes do not exclude one another.
- Alice might even believe that $\text{Good}_1(\text{Capitalism})$!

Content-based disagreement doesn't seem to adequately explain such examples. Some other explanation is needed. Or so, it has been argued.

Ambiguity Is Another Problem

But doesn't 'good' have many different readings anyway? – Yes, but this does not help much with explaining partly metalinguistic disagreement.

(7)   a.   John: Capitalism is good$_1$.
       b.   Alice: No, capitalism isn't good$_2$.

(8)   a.   John: I'm going to the bank$_1$ [the river bank].
       b.   Alice: That's pointless, the bank$_2$ [financial institution] has already closed.

Within the same conversational context, resolving an ambiguity in a way that does not match the speaker's intention is a mistake that results in communication failure. Such a case may occur for 'good', too, but it doesn't have to occur; dialogues like (1) do not always exemplify a mistake or communication failure, they are often perfectly normal.

Relativist Semantics

In a relativist framework, it would be hard to make criteria or full lexical decomposition explicit, but it does reflect a relativist understanding of value disagreement, of course. Faultless disagreement:

Assessor	Sentence	Content in c	Extension in c, CEs
John	Capitalism is good.	p	true
	Capitalism is not good.	$\neg p$	false
Alice	Capitalism is good.	p	false
	Capitalism is not good.	$\neg p$	true

⇨ Obviously, this would only make sense for expressions such as predicates of personal taste for which a relativist semantics is justifiable. Many value predicates are not of this kind.

Primitivism

- Primitivism states that once ambiguities and other obvious contextual factors are resolved, no further lexical decomposition is possible.

- Value terms stand for primitive concepts.

- In *Capitalism is good*, 'good' stands for a primitive concept of goodness that cannot be further analyzed.

- Moore: the many questions argument, the paradox of analysis.

I reject this position as a *general* solution in the article, because it (a) is empirically inadequate, and (b) philosophically dubious.

Social Externalism as the Only Response

- Social externalism: There is a linguistic labor division. Experts 'fix' the meaning of many expressions.
- Suggestion: Neither John's nor Alice's criteria/lexical decomposition might matter. What matters is only what their particular use of 'good' means according to experts on goodness.

⇨ Plunkett & Sundell acknowledge that this stipulation might sometimes be justified, but it cannot be a general solution. As a general error theory, this approach seems wholly implausible. There may be no experts on 'good' at all, there is disagreement about who counts as expert, and purported 'experts' on goodness disagree about the concept among each other.

Not Pinning Disagreement on Content at All

- The disagreement could be about presupposed content, implicated content or other types of pragmatic speech act content.

- For example, de Sa (2008) argues that relativist intuitions about PPTs can be explained pragmatically as disagreement about the presupposed degree of commonality.

- There might be other 'philosophical workarounds': Stipulating types of disagreement as an attitude that need not even be rational, e.g. talking about appropriate or fitting belief, attitudes towards utterance+content or towards the speaker, etc.

⇨ Perhaps many forms of disagreement are indeed not based on semantic content. However, it seems that 'going pragmatic' is more like an attempt to explain away a phenomenon rather than addressing the philosophical worry.

Metalinguistic Negotiation

Plunkett & Sundell have argued that the dialogues discussed so far are examples of *metalinguistic negotiation*.

- The disagreement may be about the terms involved.
- This does not indicate that the dispute is insubstantial or not worth having.
- The MN analysis also passes Chalmer's test for not involving 'merely verbal' disputes, because it survives paraphrasing.
- The discourse participants negotiate the appropriate use of a term or concept which must fit existing social and linguistic practices associated with this term.
- They negotiate which meaning fits the existing functional role, because there is something '...substantive at stake in how the relevant terms are used in the context [...] and the speakers recognize this fact.' [P&S: 25]

Critique of the Metalinguistic Approach (1)

P&S do not explain in sufficient detail what makes the above disputes *negotiations*.

- Case 1: Existing social practices determine the correctness of a given MN interpretation.
  - That makes MN disputes factual and possibly rest on the wrong kind of facts.
  - Example: In a society in which waterboarding is normal and generally not considered torture, waterboarding is not torture.
- Case 2: Existing social practices do not determine the correctness of a given MN interpretation.
  - Then what is the correctness criterion?
  - We fall back to talking past each other, like in a contextualist view.

Critique of the Metalinguistic Approach (2)

- Case 3: A mixed approach.
  - MN interpretations must somehow loosely fit/match the existing social role of terms, but borderline cases can become genuine value disputes.
  - So they are partly factual, partly value disputes and the latter presumably makes them substantial.
  - But this does still not explain what is negotiated. Negotiation still seems too arbitrary.
  - Alice could reply to John: Fine, waterboarding is $torture_2$. But it is still not $torture_1$.

This seems to be on the right track. But why do we (often, normally) assume that a general term denotes one concept when people persistently disagree about its lexical decomposition?

The Dual Aspect Approach

Word meaning concerns three different issues:

Core meaning: Shared meaning on which speakers of a linguistic community loosely converge ('bundle view', truth-conditionally incomplete) by virtue of being competent speakers. It is the common denominator.

Noumenal meaning: What individual speakers (ideolects) and groups of speakers (jargon, sociolect) consider the *real* meaning of an expression. What 'X' really means. / What really is *X*.

The noumenon: That actual or imaginary aspect of reality that an expression is supposed to capture.

The noumenon is not a meaning-constituting entity and it may or may not exist, may or may not be real. Hence the term 'dual aspect semantics'. N.B. a superficial similarity to DATs for propositional attitudes from the 70s, but this one has almost the opposite purpose.

The Roles of the Aspects

- Core meaning serves for successful communication when agents need to cooperate. It need not be truth-conditionally complete and only 'match' reality insofar as reality is relevant for successful cooperation. Example: Water is a transparent colorless drinkable liquid essential to all life on earth.

- Noumenal meaning represents what speakers and groups of speakers consider the 'real' meaning of an expression, how they *intend* to capture an aspect of reality. Example: Water is H_2O, plus sometimes a few minerals and other impurities.

- A noumenon is that purported aspect of reality that a given noumenal meaning is supposed to capture. Example: H_2O (or XYZ, or whatever water *really* is)

Putnam's Meaning Vectors

Putnam made similar suggestions in *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* and *Is Semantics Possible?* A meaning vector contains:

Internalist Components:

- Semantic and syntactic markers: e.g. proper noun with a given gender, mass term
- Stereotype: e.g. transparent colorless drinkable liquid

Externalist Component:

- Extension: H_2O (or a correct description thereof?); fixed indexically; investigated by experts

N.B.: According to Putnam (1975), a competent speaker does *not* need to have implicit knowledge of the extension!

How DAT Applies to Value Disputes

- We use *every* expression *as if* it captured an aspect of reality that goes beyond a mere need to cooperate, unless it is explicitly marked as standing for something that doesn't exist or is not real.

- Example: We use 'good' as if there was something in reality (e.g. an absolute value or a social fact) to which the use corresponds in the given conversational context.

- Compare: We used 'Vulcan' as if there was something in reality to which it corresponds in the given conversational context – until we found out that the planet does not exist.

- Alice and John agree about the core meaning and disagree about the noumenal meaning.

- The dispute is metalinguistic insofar as noumenal meaning is concerned, but based on a prior shared agreement about the core meaning that determines existing social practices.

Summary

- The above value disputes are not substantially different from other disputes about the noumenal meaning of terms.

- Disputing the noumenal meaning of an expression on the basis of its core meaning is a normal function of natural language.

- Such a dispute may be substantial because it affects the core meaning (e.g. prior social role), but it may also be substantial because it concerns whatever speakers believe concerns reality.

- It is based on the constant strife to adjust our conceptual network to reality, going beyond what is required for coordination of behavior.

- The existence of noumenal meaning and the assumption of a corresponding noumenon does *principally not* imply that such a noumenal entity exists or is real in any other sense.

- Any reductionist position is compatible with DAT.

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