

Seminar on Context-Sensitivity

Week Five

1 Unfinished business

1.1 Losing Innocence?

A proposal sometimes taken seriously: there is context-sensitivity in “that” clauses when they occur as part of attitude reports, but not in simple sentences.

Q: is there context-sensitivity in expressions of the form ‘the proposition that *P*’? If not, that’s bad. If so: Does this context-sensitivity occur *only* in sentences where these expressions are used as arguments to ‘believes’ etc.? If so, what will we say about sentences like

- (1) The proposition that Superman flies is contingent. It is also believed by Lois.

If not: shouldn’t it turn out that sentences of the form

- (2) The proposition that *P* is semantically expressible by ‘*P*’

express only true propositions? But then the several admissible *referents* for ‘the proposition that *P*’ are all semantically expressible by ‘*P*’, so ‘*P*’ is context-sensitive after all.

1.2 “Direct reference” and Fregean contextualism

- (3) For some *x*, the proposition that Superman flies = the proposition that *x* flies.
- (4) For every *x*, the proposition that *x* flies is a singular proposition.
- (5) The proposition that Superman flies is a singular proposition.
- (6) ? ‘Superman flies’ semantically expresses the proposition that Superman flies.
- (7) ? ‘Superman flies’ semantically expresses a singular proposition.

2 Russellian versus Fregean contextualisms: arguments

2.1 A problem for Russellian contextualists: one report, two names

- (8) Lois doesn’t know that Clark Kent is just as strong as Superman.
- (9) Lois doesn’t believe that (either Superman wears glasses, or Clark Kent flies).

The Fregean contextualist will say that the true interpretations of these sentences are nonuniform ones. The Russellian contextualist doesn’t seem to be in a position to say that.

First option: whether one bears the relevant “belief” relation to a proposition with several singular arguments depends on whether one has a thought that deploys appropriate notions *in the right order*. But then we’ll be licensing weird speeches like

- (10) Although Lois knows that either I fly or I wear glasses, she doesn’t know (and isn’t even in a position to infer) that either I wear glasses or I fly.

(said by Superman).

Second option: bearing the relevant “belief” relation to a proposition of the form *x flies* requires thinking of the subject “Clark-Kentishly”, while bearing it to a proposition of the form *x wears glasses* requires thinking of the subject “Supermannishly”; similarly for *x flies or x wears glasses* and *x wears glasses or x flies*. But then we’ll be licensing weird speeches like

- (11) Even if Lois were to learn that I fly and that everyone who flies wears glasses, she wouldn’t be in a position to conclude that I wear glasses.

Could one escape by letting oneself say ‘The true interpretations of (10) and (11) count as *nonuniform interpretations* despite the fact that they don’t have to involve assigning different semantic values to any repeated constituent’?

2.2 A problem for Fregean contextualists: nested attitude verbs

- (12) Lois doesn't realise that she knows I fly.
(13) Lois doesn't know that everyone knows I am the strongest superhero.

The Russellian will say that the true interpretations of these sentences are nonuniform ones. The Fregean doesn't seem to be in a position to say that.

The "hierarchy of senses".

Can we run an argument similar to the one in the previous section by imagining Superman saying things like

- (14) Lois knows that I am the strongest superhero, and knows that the strongest superhero is an x such that everyone knows that x is the strongest superhero, but doesn't know (and isn't even in a position to infer) that everyone knows that I am the strongest superhero.

Not obviously. Perhaps, in this context, it's hard for attributions of knowledge in quantified propositions about knowledge to be true too.

- (15) Lois doesn't know that $\exists x$ everyone knows that x is the strongest superhero.

2.3 "Too few propositions"

Joe: Superman flies!

A speech (by Superman) which any kind of contextualist must allow to be capable of expressing true propositions:

Thanks to my cunning disguise, no-one believes that I fly. In fact, few people have even heard of me, so few people are even in a *position* to believe that I fly. Likewise, few people are in a position to bear any other propositional attitude to the proposition that I fly. And this goes for assertion too: few people are in a position to assert that I fly. For example, Joe didn't assert that I fly just now.

Fregean continuation:

... What he asserted was a different proposition: one necessarily equivalent, and structurally isomorphic, to the proposition that I fly, but differing from it in that the conditions for bearing attitudes to it are less demanding.

Russellian continuation:

... In fact he didn't assert anything at all. (!?)

Another strange speech by the Russellian Superman:

'Superman flies' is context-insensitive in English, and semantically expresses the proposition that I fly, despite the fact that few English speakers who utter it thereby assert that I fly. [So it is not generally used literally?]