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Pragmatic presupposition and unarticulated constituents

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Abstract

There is a tradition of purely semantic identification of variables within the logical/syntactic level, which understands the meaning of sentences as only fully linguistically complete depending on the context. However, this article argues that the meaning of our natural language loses its epistemic relevance if we only refer to a semantically context-sensitive analysis, since speakers are the ones who mean things with words and not language by itself.

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It is usual that speakers employ an expression with the intention of talking about some objects of the world and their properties. In this case, language has a cognitive role, and can be seen as an act of identifying certain entities: It is employed referentially. There are a number of different devices that speakers may utilize to exploit this function of language, from demonstratives and indexicals to proper names and definite and indefinite descriptions, which capitalize on the truth-conditional content of these linguistic elements. Some of these linguistic mechanisms determine and admit truth-values for one and all occurrences of the sentences where they appear, by means of what Mill referred to as the method of “concomitant variation.”¹

There are other cases, however, where intention in referring to an object and its properties may exist, nonetheless the speaker does not employ any of these mechanisms, or rather there is no explicit word to determine the actual referred object, and meaning should be inferred from the context of utterance: The background. These instances are called “occasion sentences,”² since their truth-value may change and would depend upon the particular circumstances of, as

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¹ “Whatever phenomenon varies in any manner whenever another phenomenon varies in some particular manner, is either a cause or an effect of that phenomenon, or is connected with it through some fact of causation” (Mill, 1843:470).

² There are at least two different conceptions of the notion of “occasion sentence.” The first one is due to P. Grice, and basically claims that the meaning of a sentence shall be determined according to the specific intentions of the speakers on the specific occasion of utterance of the sentence (cf. Grice, 1989). This is a causal interpretation of “occasion sentence,” since what is meant will be determined depending on what is said. The second conception of the notion of “occasion sentence” was championed by Quine, who established a behaviorist interpretation in which the meaning of a particular (utterance of a) sentence depends upon the “expressions that we have learned to associate with publicly observable concurrent circumstances” (Quine, 1977:178). As it will be shown, Martí’s position is based on an intentional Gricean-like interpretation while my own alternate view grounds upon the Quinean, conventionalist notion of “observation sentence.”

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Quine (1977:178) said, “what is going on in the neighborhood.” The current non-Gricean preferred solution to the truth-value determination problem for this kind of sentence is based on “unarticulated constituents.” Given the knotty history of this notion, “unarticulated constituents” as a topic and, as a result, their nature, structure, and function in language, if any, is a wide-spread area of research. With highly sophisticated proposals in favor and against, with diverse positions, a number of linguists and philosophers of language have made distinctive contributions to the topic with the purpose of deepening and sharpening the understanding of this phenomenon and its consequences for truth and meaning.

The main aim of this article is, therefore, to provide an explanation of unarticulated constituents in terms of pragmatic presuppositions analyzed in maximally local scenarios to mediate in those polemics and proffering a different pragmatic approach to unarticulated constituents based on two different but related theses. On the one hand, a voice of caution is raised against purely semantic strategies. The reason is that assuming the existence of a unique, literal meaning in each sentence, besides its apparent context-sensitivity, internally determined by the semantic content of its components eliminates any role speakers and audience have when determining meaning. Given the risk of psychologism based on the speaker's intention or “sharable” meaning, on the other hand, skepticism toward personalist/intentionalist and relativist positions is defended with a solution in favor of contextual, conventional non-linguistic elements that provide the appropriate truth conditions for each utterance of the sentence in question. My solution embraces the existence of “unarticulated constituents” based on an externalist but pluralist explanation supported by Stalnakerian pragmatic presuppositions, which preserve the speaker's epistemic relevance in language, while explaining the externalist and conventional nature of language and meaning behind Quine's “observation sentences.” The final conclusion is that, as will be demonstrated, speakers mean things with the words they employ, and not words by themselves, because speakers display the values and means of the concrete speech community to which they belong and/or endorse.

The article structure is as follows. Section 1 introduces the notion of “unarticulated constituents.” Section 2 presents my novel proposal about unarticulated constituents based on pragmatic presuppositions as a solution to the variation problem in the special cases of occasion sentences described above. To do so, I provide an explanation of pragmatic presupposition (in terms of propositional attitudes) and context (in terms of common ground), where common ground must be understood as the amount of information which the participants in a communicational exchange share in maximally local terms. Section 3 analyzes some of the most relevant semantic and non-semantic solutions to the phenomenon, many of the later based upon “unarticulated constituents,” and proves that all fall short in providing an accurate explication for the problem. Section 4 compares the new account this article presents with F. Recanati's proposal regarding variation and establishes its difficulties and disadvantages. Section 5 assesses L. Martí's “middle ground account” based on the Gricean notion of implicature. As it will be proven, even though I believe her approach does an excellent job explaining the behavior of certain linguistic elements, it only provides some generalizations about the occasion sentence phenomenon but not substantial reasons for accepting hidden variables in language. Section 6 provides additional details about the conventionalist, pragmatic explanation of the phenomenon this article promotes, and states its major points to make a unique contribution for approaching meaning variation in occasion sentences from a pragmatic and conventionalist standpoint, as the analysis of some presupposition cases shall show. Section 7 recapitulates the main theses of the article.

1. Introducing unarticulated constituents

As stated before, the discussion about unarticulated constituents is placed in a broader polemic concerning the meaning of “occasion sentences.” An occasion sentence includes, for instance, an indexical expression. Examples of indexical words are “I” and “now,” and sentences including them are necessarily context-dependent because they can only refer to the speaker and the moment of utterance, respectively. It is for this reason that, since at least Pierce's works, many indexical expressions are considered “words or sentences which reference cannot be determined without knowledge of context of use... [they] cannot be considered either true or false independently of the context of use” (Montague, 1970:142).

Nonetheless, as Carnap (1937) states, indexical sentences may show transformability. That is, it is always possible to rephrase indexical sentences into a context-invariant form without loss of information. The problem with this thesis, however, is that it cannot be assumed, for example, that sentences including psychological verbs (or, as are commonly known, propositional attitudes, such as i.e. “I believe that...”) presuppose a fixed relation between a subject and a proposition, understanding the later as the bearer of truth conditions. And the same follows for sentences containing purely indexical words. If this is so, sentences with such expressions actually must covertly include variables in their logical form that, once semantically determined, will provide with the literal meaning for such a sentence. The reason is

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