



The future of the proposition

Arthur Sullivan*

Memorial University, Philosophy Department, Arts + Adminn Building, St. John's, NL A1C5S7, Canada



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 19 November 2014

Keywords:

Semantics

Pragmatics

Proposition

ABSTRACT

A primary aim of this research is to show that the foundational term 'proposition' tends to be used in different ways by different factions, in recent debates surrounding the semantics/pragmatics interface. First, I give a brief sketch of some relevant background terrain. Next, I investigate the extent to which different senses of the term 'proposition' are associated with differing theoretical orientations toward the S/P interface.

I close by bringing these lessons to bear toward the end of disentangling terminological from substantive differences, in the case of certain ongoing disputes.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

There continues to be considerable disagreement among experts when it comes to exactly how to divide up the labor between semantics (the study of linguistic meaning) and pragmatics (the study of language use). To be sure, we can point to some uncontroversial paradigm cases in which semantic content is (relatively) cleanly separable from pragmatic implication, and the latter is straightforwardly calculable from the former – for example, [Grice's \(1975\)](#) letter of reference semantically expresses that Mr. X has a good command of English and attendance record, while pragmatically implicating that Mr. X is no good at philosophy. However, to the contrary, an illustrative (but by no means remotely exhaustive) list of phenomena whose relation to the S/P interface is a matter of ongoing controversy might include: metaphor, irony, focus, deferred interpretations, expressives (including especially pejoratives), gradable adjectives, conventional implicatures, domain restriction, and referential uses of quantified noun phrases. More globally, there is even controversy as to whether semantics and pragmatics are, in general, discretely separable,¹ which may count among its effects the spurring of undue pessimism regarding whether any such disputes could possibly be settled by anything other than brute stipulation.

This state of controversy is exacerbated by the proliferation of distinct theoretical orientations toward the S/P interface. The extreme poles on this issue, **minimalism** (roughly, linguistic meaning generally determines truth-conditions) and **contextualism** (roughly, pragmatic enrichment is generally required in order to determine truth-conditions²) are relatively well-known, tracing their roots back to the mid-20th-century formal semantics and communication-intention traditions (respectively). However, the last two decades have seen the development of some innovative intermediate positions which aim to be distinct from both of those old war-horses. Some of the main contenders here include **indexicalism** (roughly, an enhanced notion of linguistic meaning suffices to determine truth-conditions), **radicalism** (roughly, linguistic meaning

* Tel.: +1 7098648333.

E-mail address: arthurs@mun.ca.

¹ Cf., e.g., [Carston \(2002, 2009\)](#), [Recanati \(2004, 2010\)](#).

² This conception of 'contextualism' has some precedent in the literature, and is a useful one for this introductory framing of the terrain, but it is not the one that is taken as fundamental in §2. There I take the distinctive claim of contextualism to be that semantic contents generally vary with the context of utterance, as opposed to this weaker claim that pragmatic enrichments generally affect truth-conditions. While this latter, weaker claim does give you a general, identifiable contrast between minimalism and contextualism, as I will explain in some depth in §2, it blurs pertinent distinctions between indexicalism, radicalism, relativism, and contextualism.

commonly falls short of determining truth-conditions – in certain distinctive sorts of case, and for a specific sort of reason), and **relativism** (roughly, truth-conditions must be understood as relativized to certain non-classical parameters).³ The inevitable result of this proliferation of theoretical orientations is that, to some extent, the aforementioned ongoing controversies lack for focused, mutual engagement, because differing conceptions of the S/P interface are one ingredient tacitly mixed in, along with substantive differences of opinion as to how certain object-level phenomena ought to be classified.

Another complication obfuscating the terrain is that there is no one single point of contention which divides these distinct orientations toward the S/P interface, and so one gets a different map of the terrain depending upon what one takes to be the crucial diagnostic question.⁴ For example, Cappelen and Lepore (2005) classify Stanley's indexicalism as a variety of contextualism, because they take the crucial diagnostic question to be 'How prevalent is context-sensitivity?', and indexicalists are clearly a bit extreme in how prevalent they take context-sensitivity to be. In contrast, if we take the crucial diagnostic question to be 'To what extent is free pragmatic enrichment generally required in order to determine truth-conditions?' (as do, say, Neale (2007) or Borg (2012)), then Stanley's position is much closer to minimalism than to contextualism.⁵ Indeed, Stanley gives a firm statement of something very close to the core minimalist thesis at (2007: 6): "... there is no gap between the linguistically determined content of a sentence, relative to a context, and the proposition it intuitively seems to express". Where indexicalism differs from minimalism, down this avenue, is over exactly what counts as "the linguistically determined content of a sentence". (More on this in §2.3.)

Further, as we will see, similar things can be said about relativism – approached down some avenues it can be seen as a variety of contextualism (i.e., as further showing up the gap between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions), while approached down some others it rather seems to be a refined descendent of the formal-semantics, minimalism stream (i.e., as engaged in the sophisticated, self-conscious resistance against the unruly encroachment of free pragmatic enrichment prior to determining semantic content).

As for radicalism, here a prevalent charge is that, despite its protests to the contrary, there is just the merest terminological difference between radicalism and contextualism.⁶ Given that the proponents of radicalism do not see it that way, it seems that here again we have an underlying difference between radicalists and their opponents when it comes to the question of precisely what ought to be taken to be the crucial diagnostic question.

One primary aim of this research is to make some progress concerning one of these sorts of stumbling blocks, which serve to reinforce the state of stalemate at the S/P interface: namely, that the foundational term 'proposition' tends to be used in different ways by different parties. First, I will give a brief sketch of some relevant background terrain. Next, I will investigate the extent to which different senses of the term 'proposition' are associated with differing theoretical positions at the S/P interface. I will close by bringing these lessons to bear toward the end of carefully disentangling the terminological differences from the substantive differences, in the case of certain ongoing disputes.

1. The propositionalist tradition in semantics

1.1. Brief overview

Our focal issues may be helpfully seen as situated within a longstanding program in the philosophy of language which Braun and Sider (2006: 669) call "the propositionalist approach to semantics". This program:

... sets as a goal for philosophical semantics an assignment of entities – semantic contents – to bits of language, culminating in the assignment of propositions to sentences. Communication, linguistic competence, truth conditions, and other semantic phenomena are ultimately explained in terms of [these] semantic contents.

Propositions are sentence-sized semantic contents, which are a function of the semantic contents of their parts and the way in which they are combined. They are essentially ways of categorizing utterances and attitudes into equivalence classes,

³ Each of these views will be further elaborated below in §2. For defenses of minimalism, see Borg (2004, 2012), Cappelen and Lepore (2005). Influential proponents of contextualism include Searle (1978), Travis (1989), Carston (2002, 2009) and Recanati (2004, 2010). (Though it is fairly common to see relevance theory classified as a version of contextualism, this is controversial, and may ignore some significant distinctions. Though, for the most part, I will not get into relevance theory at all in this paper, it might be more happily classified (in the terms of §1.4 below) as rejecting the propositionalist tradition, as opposed to making a contextualist move within that tradition.)

Important works in the indexicalist program include Stanley (1998), Stanley and Szabo (2000), and King and Stanley (2005). For the development of relativism, see Kolbel (2003, 2008) and MacFarlane (2005, 2008). Varieties of radicalism are developed by Bach (2005, 2006, 2011), Soames (2005, 2008, 2010), and Neale (2007).

⁴ Cf. Stojanovic (2008: 2), Borg (2012: 19–21, 28–9) for discussions of this complication.

⁵ For an indexicalist, there is a crucial distinction between weak and strong pragmatic effects. Weak pragmatic effects (e.g., disambiguation, saturation) are generally conceded to be truth-conditionally relevant. However, like minimalists, indexicalists deny that strong ("free", "optional", "top-down", etc.) pragmatic effects are truth-conditionally relevant. Contextualists and relativists unequivocally reject this claim, and radicalists would question the pre-suppositions undergirding any simple two-fold, 'weak'/'strong' bifurcation.

⁶ Cf. Cappelen and Lepore (2005: Part 1), Stanley (2007: 235–6), Carston (2009: 324–9). Note that the distinction drawn in note 2 between the two senses of "contextualism" is most pertinent here.

As a further illustration of these distinct non-equivalent ways of carving up this terrain, Bach's radicalism is explicitly classified as a variety of minimalism by some (e.g., Borg (2012)), but as a variety of contextualism by others (e.g., Cappelen and Lepore (2005)).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/934904>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/934904>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)