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Publication date
2019

Published in
Thought: a Journal of Philosophy

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dobler, T. (2019). Occasion-sensitivity: sensitivity to questions or goals?. Manuscript submitted for publication

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Occasion-sensitivity: sensitivity to questions or goals?

April 15, 2019

Abstract

In this paper I discuss a recent approach to explaining occasion-sensitivity as question-sensitivity, and argue that, instead of (implicit) questions, what matters in order to figure out what is said are contextually salient domain goals. The main idea is that, out of a number of possibilities that a sentence denotes, only those that are *more conducive* to the salient domain goal than others are ‘visible’ to speakers in a given context.

1 Introduction

Many theories of context-sensitivity have as their primary empirical focus simple declarative sentences such as *Steel is strong enough*, *Tipper is ready*, *The leaves are green* or *Smith weighs 80 kilograms*. According to one recent account (Schoubye and Stokke 2015), the context-sensitivity of such sentences should be explained as *question sensitivity*: what is said by a sentence in a context is determined relative to the *question under discussion* (QUD), and is identified with an answer to a QUD (Roberts 1996, 2004, 2012). This approach, however, leaves one important issue unanswered: since the contents of *interrogative* sentences are

also underdetermined and occasion-sensitive, which features of context determine what is expressed by interrogatives? It is not immediately obvious how the account that appeals to questions as a way to explain the context-sensitivity of assertions can also be used to explain the context-sensitivity of questions.

This paper provides an analysis that can uniformly explain context-sensitivity in both sentential forms without appealing to questions as a means of explanation. Whilst an utterance can be relevant or not with respect to a QUD, the content intuitively expressed by an utterance of a declarative or interrogative sentence in a context is determined relative to the *domain goal* (Roberts 1996) that is salient in that context. The main idea is that, out of a number of possibilities that a sentence denotes (as a function of its standing meaning), only those that are *more conducive* to the salient domain goal than others are ‘visible’ to speakers in a given context¹.

2 Contrasting cases

2.1 Declaratives

Consider the following sentences:

- (1) The leaves are green
- (2) Smith weighs 80 kilograms
- (3) Sid is a welder

On the face of it, (1)–(3) are semantically complete (modulo the demonstratives) so we should be able to compositionally assign them truth-conditions. However, many contextualists have argued that these and similar sentences actually don’t have context-invariant truth-conditions but (often) have to be pragmatically

¹For a full account and formal model see **the Author**

enriched in order to determine their truth-conditional contents (Recanati 2004, 2010, Pagin and Pelletier 2007, Carston 2002). In support of this view, Charles Travis (Travis 1978, 2000, 2008, 2009) uses “the method of contrasting pairs” showing that the same sentence used on two different occasions (but in which the verifier is the same) intuitively says different things and prompts different truth-value judgements. In the literature, these examples have come to be known as “Travis cases” and the phenomenon *occasion-sensitivity*². Consider a couple of such cases.

The leaves are green

Pia’s Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Pia paints them green.

- (4) (a) *Zoe needs green leaves for her artwork* (henceforth, *the artist context*). Pia says: These leaves are green.
- (b) *Zoe is a botanist seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry* (henceforth, *the botanist context*). Pia says: These leaves are green

Sid is a welder

Sid is currently CFO of Amalgamated Metals, spent his whole working life in the boardroom, far away from a welding torch.

- (5) (a) *Selecting a representative of the metal industry for a steering committee*. Pia says: Sid is a welder.
- (b) *A ship is sinking and someone is urgently needed to weld the damaged part*. Pia says: Sid is a welder.

²The type of context-sensitivity captured in Travis cases differs, e.g., from the context-sensitivity of (hidden) indexicals in that the latter semantically behave as variables that are saturated by context. Furthermore, occasion-sensitivity seems not to be limited to a particular class of expressions but it occurs in most non-functional categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions etc.)

Notice that in each of these cases there is a contrast between contexts in (a) and contexts in (b) in terms of whether one would judge a sentence to be true. For example, whilst in 4(a) it is acceptable to say that the leaves are green, in 4(b) it's not. Ditto for the other case.³

2.2 Questions

Consider again the contrasting cases discussed above but now using interrogative instead of declarative sentences:

Are the leaves green?

Pia's Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Pia paints them green.

- (6) (a) *The artist context.* Zoe asks: Are your leaves green?
- (b) *The botanist context.* Zoe asks: Are your leaves green?

Is Sid a welder?

Sid is currently CFO of Amalgamated Metals, spent his whole working life in the boardroom, far away from a welding torch.

- (7) (a) *The steering committee context.* Pia asks: Is Sid a welder?
- (b) *Repairing a ship.* Pia asks: Is Sid a welder?

Evidently, the same phenomenon observed in (4) and (5) also occurs in (6) and (7). In other words, the content of an interrogative sentence – what is asked by uttering it – seems equally sensitive to the occasion on which the sentence is used. Accordingly, intuitively correct answers in contexts (a) and (b) will be different.

³For some experimental evidence on intuitions concerning occasion-sensitivity and Travis cases see Hansen and Chemla (2013)

3 Occasion-sensitivity as question-sensitivity

Which feature(s) of context explain contrasting judgements in Travis cases? According to Schoubye and Stokke (2015) what is said in a declarative sentence is a function of its meaning and a contextually salient *question under discussion*. In their words,

the truth conditional meaning of a sentence in a context, or what is said by a sentence in a context, is partly determined by the question under discussion (QUD), cf. Roberts (2004, 2012). More specifically, according to our proposed view, what is said by a sentence in a context is the answer that it provides to a relevant question that is antecedently accepted as the topic of discussion (Schoubye and Stokke 2015: 760).

For instance, the sentence *Sid is a welder* can be an answer to different questions.

- (8) (a) Can you recommend a welder to sit on the steering committee?
(b) Sid is a welder
- (9) (a) Who can operate a welding torch?
(b) Sid is a welder

Intuitively, despite it being the same sentence, 8(b) and 9(b) say different things. Namely, as also indicated in example (7), what is said in 8(b) would not be a good answer to 9(a). For Schoubye and Stokke (2015), the content of *Sid is a welder* depends on which question is being answered.

Although the proposed analysis works for examples like (8) and (9) where the questions are sufficiently specified, identifying the contextually salient question will not always work as a method for determining the content of a declarative. Consider, for instance, the following dialogue:

- (10) (a) Is Sid a welder?
(b) Sid is a welder

Notice that the question in 10(a) is equally “underdetermined” or occasion-sensitive as the answer in 10(b); so *this* question cannot be used as a method of determining what is said in 10(b), not without further contextual cues helping determine what is actually asked.

3.1 Implicit questions and topics

Schoubye and Stokke (2015) observe that many discourses don’t contain explicitly stated questions; nonetheless it is always possible to work out which *implicit* question is at stake from the context. In their words,

There are numerous ways of implicitly raising a question and in most given contexts it will be inferable from various contextually available cues which specific question is the topic. (Schoubye and Stokke 2015: 771)

Notice that, on this account, a question, whether implicit or explicit, is supposed to introduce the *topic* of discussion. But why think that the topic of discussion *has* to be given in a form of a (implicitly raised) *question*? For surely it can also be described by declarative or imperative sentences, or implicitly introduced in the shared knowledge about the situation. That this is a plausible possibility can also be seen from an example Schoubye and Stokke (2015) use. Namely, in explaining how the intended content of *Steal is strong enough* is determined in context, the authors ask the reader to consider the following dialogue:

- (11) (a) Mike: The space shuttle must be able to carry 35 tons of cargo, endure extreme temperatures, and be capable of withstanding severe

cyclonic dust storms. So, what material for the shuttle is sufficiently strong?

(b) Carl: Steel is strong enough.

The proposed analysis is that “Mike’s utterance introduces a QUD, namely the question [What material for the shuttle is strong enough for carrying 35 tons of cargo, enduring extreme temperatures, and withstanding severe cyclonic dust storms?]” (Schoubye and Stokke (2015): 777). But notice that in (11a) Mike utters two sentences, one declarative, another interrogative following it. The informative content of the preceding declarative sentence helps in specifying what Mike’s question aims at. This example thus only illustrates that certain contextually relevant information may play a role in specifying what is said (asserted or asked), not that this information needs to come in the form of a question.

4 Goal-sensitivity

4.1 Domain and discourse goals

Instead of (implicit) questions, I suggest that what actually matters in order to determine what is said by an occasion-sensitive sentence is a contextually salient *domain goal* (see Roberts 2012). A domain goal is a practical goal such as repairing a ship, making an experiment, forming a committee, furnishing an office, hiding shoes, helping an impoverished student, or avoiding something unwanted etc., that agents strive to achieve in a certain situation, and around which a conversation is structured. For instance, in the dialogue in (11), the domain goal is to build a space shuttle that must be able to carry 35 tons of cargo etc etc.. Besides a discourse goal (to settle a given QUD), interlocutors also strive to achieve these broader domain goals. According to Roberts (2012),

we can characterize sincere, competent and cooperative interlocutors as holding two kinds of goals at any given point in a discourse, their discourse goals—aiming to address particular questions in the QUD—and the rest, their domain goals—intuitively, those things they want to accomplish in the world (as opposed to their narrowly discourse goals). (Roberts 2012: 6)

Schoubye and Stokke (2015) take discourse goals as guiding the interpretation of declarative sentences. I instead suggest that there is a connection between a *domain* goal that agents strive to achieve on an occasion and how they understand both what is asserted and what is asked. A domain goal – practical things that people want to accomplish in the world – informs both the topic of discussion and which issues should be resolved to achieve it. In this respect, knowing a domain goal (e.g. decorating vs. experimenting, steering committee vs. handling a welding torch) helps us identify which issue is raised in an interrogative sentence, as well as which information is expressed in a declarative sentence.

4.2 Goal-conduciveness

On the current view, not all possibilities that a sentence denotes as a function of its standing meaning are equally conducive to a given domain goal. In this way domain goals create *preferences* for certain possibilities. As a result, in a conversation, interlocutors selectively attend to those possibilities that are *maximally conducive to the goal* (see also Smith 2010). For instance, we are practically motivated not to count Sid, the CFO, as a welder if we want to keep a boat afloat. Similarly, the leaves being non-naturally green *is* a way for the leaves to be green – hence a possibility that *The leaves are green* denotes. Still, this way of them being green is not conducive to the botanist’s goal, and so it

doesn't count for us as such on an occasion where this goal is salient. That is, as a way for the leaves to be green, its *prominence* amongst other such ways is very low.

Some domain goals will be less demanding and thus less exclusive of possibilities than some others: if our goal is to sort out the leaves that look green from those that look red, then, intuitively, it won't matter whether they are naturally or only painted so as long as they look green or red. But this distinction (i.e. between natural and non-natural green) will matter if our goal is to experiment on the leaves' chlorophyll, as it is indicated in the Travis case in (4).

4.3 Interpretation as a form of bias

On the view I sketched above, the interpretation of occasion-sensitive sentences is a form of *bias* in that our judgements as to when they are true are taken to be influenced by the things we aim to achieve in the world. This is indeed a sort of *error theory* since agents are argued to be 'blind' to those possibilities which are less conducive to contextually salient domain goals (see Dobler 2017). Where goals don't require particular possibilities, or when they are not specified, our judgements will also be less constrained (resulting in more true sentences). But a sort of semantic blindness introduced here is pragmatically justified: in as much as saying 'true' things that are useless or misleading doesn't facilitate projects that we are set to achieve, it is rational to ignore their compositionally determined semantic values whenever our shared goals so require.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I discussed one recent approach to explaining occasion-sensitivity as question-sensitivity by Schoubye and Stokke (2015). I argued that instead of (implicit) questions what matters in order to figure out what is asserted or asked

are contextually salient domain goals. Depending on a goal, we are inclined to expect those possibilities that are most conducive to it, and we systematically disregard less conducive ones. Although the present account saddles competent speakers with a sort of semantic blindness, the phenomenon is, nevertheless, pragmatically justified.

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