"Now that you mention it, I wonder..." : Awareness, attention, assumption

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Acknowledgements

One doesn’t write a book every day, and I probably won’t write another anytime soon, so I take the opportunity to publically discharge some longstanding debts of gratitude. First under this heading must come my parents, Hennie, Paul, and Brian: for years of love and support, and for (in their various ways) setting high standards. Ethically, aesthetically, spiritually, and politically, they are still asking me tough questions (whether they realise it or not), and I am still learning from trying to answer them.

In my academic career I seem to have been handed along a chain of mentors, the lack of any of whom would have prevented this dissertation from appearing. Alistair Knott, teaching at Otago University in New Zealand, got me excited about the connections between artificial intelligence and language, and paid me good money for bad programming: my first research position. Without Ali I probably would have settled for a programming career (terrifying thought). Hans van Ditmarsch, also at Otago, showed me the muddy children problem and pointed me at the Master of Logic programme in Amsterdam. This in turn introduced me to the ILLC and the rich interdisciplinary approach to logic favoured here; I suppose there are few other places in the world where a Java programmer could pick up the basics of analytic philosophy of language while writing a masters thesis on algorithm analysis and set theory.

My MSc thesis supervisor Benedikt Löwe is also an essential link in the chain: he is almost singlehandedly responsible for the fact that I neither starved to death in Amsterdam nor had to return penniless to New Zealand after missing the application deadlines for every possible scholarship at the end of my first year. Benedikt found me part-time typesetting work that kept the wolf from the door, and I presume it was he who put my name forward as a possible recipient of the ILLC Scholarship; without that financial support I could not have stayed in the Netherlands to finish my MSc. He also encouraged me in my typographic interests, which (I’m afraid) will remain with me long after the set theory has faded.

Henk Zeevat was my official academic mentor for about three weeks at the beginning of the MoL programme, and thereafter a friend who incidentally was supposed to give me advice when I needed it. Most of the time I didn’t need it (as a substitute he taught me to ski, and —less successfully— to ice-skate), but he came through in the best possible way near the end of those first two years.
Acknowledgements

When I had no attention for anything but writing up, he pointed out to me an upcoming PhD position at the ILLC; when I dragged my heels he pushed me into making an application; and he gave me what must have been a glowing reference (since I had never taken classes with the fellow offering the position, and indeed not many in the area of research he was pursuing).

Which brings me to Robert van Rooij, supervisor of this dissertation, whose PhD student position I was applying for. I owe Robert thanks for many things, but the first (chronologically speaking) is that he told me at the start of my interview, “We’ve already had a candidate with a very strong application, so I have to tell you that you probably won’t get the job.” This left me with nothing to prove, so to speak, and so we ended up having a wing-ding argument about (if I remember rightly) whether game-theoretic models are suitable for representing real human cognition; since I didn’t have to impress him to land the job I anyway wouldn’t get, I loosened up, got opinionated, and disagreed with most of what he had to say (probably not on particularly strong grounds, in retrospect, but in any case with feeling). Apparently this made an impression: when the strong candidate accepted another offer, I was second in line and took the position.

Robert’s project ran for four years and funded two PhD positions; the other position was taken by Michael Franke, another MoL graduate. Micha has gone from competitor (when all we knew was that there were two positions and who-knew-how-many applicants) to officemate to friend and collaborator. He is also my yoga teacher. We have bounced ideas off each other so hard they hurt; we have stood on our heads together on the office floor; we have written joint papers and critiqued each others’ work; we have hollered and whooped down a Polish ski-slope.

I am not an easy person to work with. I am stubborn, quick to jump to conclusions, and rhetorically flexible enough to defend them in the face of near-overwhelming evidence. My voice gets louder as I retreat to shakier ground. Micha is the very opposite: quiet-voiced, unfailingly careful in both his rhetoric and his conclusions, and always considering the feelings of whoever he is debating with. He is also, though, in his own way stubborn: on the many occasions when his quietly-held opinions have been right and my loudly-asserted ones have been wrong, he has patiently reeducated me. I am enormously grateful that he has stuck to doing this, even outside our explicit collaborations. Parts of this dissertation grew out of joint work with Micha, but also much that does not explicitly bear that notice is the result of conversations with him or (as in the chapter on Sobel sequences) the working out of ideas that originate with him.

Micha is also largely responsible for my surviving the last months of writing up without lasting psychological damage: without the weekly yoga classes my
state of mental health would have been much worse. He even gave me a mat, to encourage me to practise daily at home.

Those last months wouldn’t have been so stressful if I hadn’t changed the direction of my research, and the topic of the dissertation, rather further through the project than was really advisable. Robert gets another round of thanks here, for allowing the change of direction (away from his own research interests) and for his support and help especially in the final stages. Robert’s style is more like mine than Micha’s: loud, quick, and argumentative. Unlike me, he has learned restraint; I am sure he has been as frustrated (on occasion) with my fast-and-loose style as I have been (on occasion) with his, but he has never called me on it. (I, on the other hand, have done — and have had to apologise, when careful reflection has proved me wrong.) He has put up with me telling him that his ideas are stupid, and also with my coming back triumphantly, weeks later, with those same ideas dressed up in alternative notation as my latest contribution to the project.

In the last months and weeks, both he and Remko Scha (my promotor, the professor officially responsible for my PhD confirmation) read far too many drafts and redrafts, giving enormously valuable advice (ranging from “these words are misspelled” through “this definition doesn’t make any sense” to “you should rewrite this chapter the other way up”, and taking in “why don’t you link $x$ with $y$ and call it $z$, instead of linking $x$ with $p$ and calling it sort-of-but-not-quite $c$?”, as well as the essential “so-and-so already did this/proved this is wrong, read these papers” accompanied by a flurry of references). In other words, I have been blessed with hands-on supervisors, and the thesis is infinitely the better for it. (That it is not still better is of course my responsibility; especially it has suffered from the time pressure caused by my last-minute course change, and —perhaps more importantly— my habit of procrastination. I should also acknowledge that Robert has spent roughly three years warning me about this very danger.)

Besides the academic community, I owe grateful thanks to some Amsterdam folk who have helped me keep a life outside the office.

Ralph, Pippa, Ella and Bea were my prosthetic family on my first arrival in Foreign Parts. Pippa is the twin sister of a friend of one of my mother’s neighbours, by reason of which intimate connection the family virtually adopted me: they fed me wholesome meals and invited me to jam sessions and took me out boating and gave me a place to stay when I needed it.

Similarly generous in virtually adopting me were the Dialogue Drinkers: Marijn, Tom, and Frans. These guys are responsible for the first Dutch I learned: they took me to the pub, then refused to speak English or to respond if I used any. (“Dialogue Drinkers” because our first get-together was to celebrate finishing Henk’s course Dialogue Systems. Five years later we’re still celebrating
the same thing, another lasting effect Henk has had, albeit indirectly, on my Amsterdam experience.)

Stefan Bold shared his house, his library, and his love of sci-fi series television; also his cooking knives and his soup-and-curry expertise.

The Hermeneutic Heideggers get somewhat ambivalent thanks for helping in my various flirtations with depression, alcoholism, and tattooed strangers. I am grateful (wholeheartedly, for the most part) that none of these flirtations bore any fruit, but I’m not sure what balance of blame and credit to assign to the HHers.

A number of people have given me specific suggestions about this project; not all of these have made it into the text, but all have had an influence on how I think about the material. In roughly chronological order (and taking for granted the pervasive influence of Micha, Robert, and in the late phases Remko), I offer grateful thanks for the following help: Edgar Andrade-Lotero raised a tricky problem; Yanjing Wang solved Edgar’s problem, and pointed me at valuable related work; Floris Roelofsen likewise brought related work to my attention, and let me argue with him about data semantics — in addition, Floris shared an office with Micha and myself and accepted with our strange behaviours and noise, and my clutter; Jeroen Groenendijk also passed on interesting related work; Emmanuel Chemla had a lovely suggestion about “must” which I still have not managed to pin down; Martin Stokhof discussed Wittgenstein with me (I regret that I did not have time to pursue this connection, which I think may go much deeper than the treatment I give it in passing); Maria Aloni and Paul Égré gave me the chance to apply my ideas to their problem, and then put up with my cranky co-authorship; Anton Benz generously invited me to present these ideas at the ZAS in Berlin, where we had an inspiring discussion; Katrin Schulz discussed the cutting-edge version of her theory of counterfactuals with me; and Frank Veltman and Oliver Board both offered comments on draft versions of chapters of the dissertation. Doubtless there are people I have forgotten to mention (my notes for the months immediately preceding my deadline are particularly sparse, while the help I received was anything but), to whom I hereby offer my apologies and thanks.

Finally I would like to offer my love to Olga, and my thanks especially for her support and presence in the penultimate stage of writing (when she took care of me rather as one takes care of a sufferer of senile dementia: reminders to bathe and to eat, preparing meals, making sure I went out wearing a raincoat and not a dressing gown) and for her support and absence in the ultimate stage (which she spent in Greece, leaving me with a guaranteed supply of Greek coffee and the freedom to not clean up after myself for the crucial month).

To all those named and mentioned above: Thank you. Without you, my dissertation would not be what it is; without many of you, it would not be at all.

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