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

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Abstract/Samenvatting

Abstract
This dissertation applies the notion of unawareness to problems of formal semantics and pragmatics. Unawareness is an epistemic attitude that has recently raised a lot of interest in epistemic logic circles, as well as in what we might call “formal epistemic economics”. Informally it is closely related to inattention: an (epistemic) agent may attend to possibilities (that is, consciously represent them and reason about them in deliberation) or be unaware of them (not give them conscious representation; not have them play any role in deliberation). While unawareness implies lack of knowledge, it differs from previous notions of uncertainty in its formal and conceptual properties; most importantly, an agent unaware of some proposition \( p \) does not know that \( p \), but he also does not know that she does not know that \( p \).

In Chapter 1 I describe the informal notions of unawareness and inattention and give some examples suggesting their applicability to formal semantics and pragmatics; these use a notion of assumption that does not feature in the existing formal theories. I give a short survey of existing models, and argue that none such is appropriate for the linguistic problems; the rest of the dissertation tries to fill the resulting gap in the market.

In Chapter 2 I introduce the formal terminology of unawareness/inattention and assumption, and a simple logic with a static possible-worlds semantics. Chapter 3 gives a dynamic semantics, allowing us to describe changes in awareness, and argues that this is the most relevant framework for linguistic applications of the notions. Chapter 4 is a case study, applying unawareness to so-called “Sobel sequences”, a long-standing puzzle concerning the semantics of counterfactuals.

Chapter 5 takes a different tack, developing a decision-theoretic apparatus enhanced with a representation of unawareness and assumption. The aim is to extend the range of decision-theoretic pragmatics, which describes various forms of pragmatic inference as rational behaviour according to decision-theoretic norms, to cover unawareness phenomena.

Chapter 6 gives a rather different unawareness model, based on data semantics. This captures various kinds of defeasible inference which owe their defeasible nature to unawareness (typically inference from evidence to “must”-statements, which are only justified under limited awareness of the domain of possibility).

Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the approach here presented and offers some speculation about possible future extensions of the ideas.