

Why speaker intentions aren't part of context

Kent Bach

It is widely though not universally accepted what speakers refer to in using demonstratives or "discretionary" (as opposed to "automatic") indexicals depends on their intentions. Even so, people tend not to appreciate the consequences of this claim for the view that demonstratives and most indexicals refer as a function of context: these expressions suffer from a "character deficiency." No wonder I am asked from time to time why I resist the temptation to include speaker intentions as a parameter of context. So I thought it would be a good idea to compile some of the scattered statements of my main reasons for this evidently radical view.

These include what I'll call the *one-intention* argument, the *role-of-context* argument, and the *asymmetry* argument. Recently, Schiffer has also offered a version of the role-of-context argument and Fodor and Lepore a version of the asymmetry argument, and so I'll include them. I also have an argument against utterance semantics, which is often sneaked in as a substitute for sentence semantics once the role of speaker intentions is acknowledged.

from "What does it take to refer?"

Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language, Lepore & Smith, eds. (2006), pp. 516-554.

one-intention argument:

In choosing a singular term to use, the speaker does so with the audience in mind. One chooses it to enable one's audience to think of or focus on the intended object. So I question whether speakers have referential intentions that are not part of their communicative intentions. As I see it, a speaker has one referential intention which is essentially audience-directed, an intention to use a certain expression to refer his audience to a certain thing. Indeed, part of what enables them to think of or focus on what one intends them to do so is the pragmatic fact that one is using that expression. This information is not carried by the expression itself, not even in a context-relative way. (521)

role-of-context argument:

What Perry describes as "public contextual facts" is not context in the narrow, semantic sense but context in a broad, cognitive or evidential sense. It is the mutually salient common ground, and includes the current state of the conversation (what has just been said, what has just been referred to, etc.), the physical setting (if the conversants are face-to-face), salient mutual knowledge between the conversants, and relevant common background knowledge. Its role is epistemic not constitutive, pragmatic not semantic. Because it can constrain what a hearer can reasonably take a speaker to mean in saying what he says, it can constrain what the speaker could reasonably mean in saying what he says. But it is incapable of determining what the speaker actually does mean. That is a matter of the speaker's referential intention and his communicative intention as a whole, however reasonable or unreasonable it may be. (544-5)

Stephen Schiffer's version of the role-of-context argument:

Meaning-as-character may initially seem plausible when the focus is on a word such as 'I', but it loses plausibility when the focus is on other pronouns and demonstratives. What

“contextual factors” determine the referent of the pronoun ‘she’ in a context of utterances? ... Evidently, the meaning of ‘she’ (very roughly speaking) merely constrains the speaker to refer to a female. We do not even have to say that it constrains the speaker to refer to a contextually salient female, since the speaker cannot intend to refer to a particular female unless he expects the hearer to recognize to which female he is referring, and the expectation of such recognition itself entails that the speaker takes the referent to have an appropriate salience. What fixes the referent of a token of ‘she’ are the speaker’s referential intentions in producing that token, and therefore in order for Kaplan to accommodate ‘she’, he would have to say that a speaker’s referential intentions constitute one more component of those n-tuples that he construes as ‘contexts’. The trouble with this is that there is no work for Kaplanian contexts to do once one recognizes speakers’ referential intentions. The referent of a pronoun or demonstrative is always determined by the speaker’s referential intention. (Stephen Schiffer, “Russell’s theory of descriptions,” *Mind* Oct 2005, p. 1141)

asymmetry (or epistemological) argument (incorporates the role-of-context argument)

The speaker’s intention is not just another contextual variable, not just one more element of what Kaplan calls “character.” Demonstrative and most indexicals suffer from a *character deficiency*. Context does not determine reference, in the sense of *constituting* it, of making it the case that the reference is so-and-so; rather, it is something for the speaker to exploit to enable the listener to determine the intended reference, in the sense of *ascertaining* it. (544)

[...]

The fact that the speaker’s intention picks up the slack in determining reference might suggest that the specification of the meaning of a discretionary indexical or a demonstrative contains a parameter for the speaker’s intention. However, I am unaware of any direct argument for that. There is talk about how the reference of indexicals and demonstratives is “determined by context” but no argument as to why the speaker’s referential intention should count as part of the context. I think there’s reason to think that it shouldn’t. If context were defined so broadly as to include anything other than linguistic meaning that is relevant to determining what a speaker means, then of course the speaker’s intention would be part of the context. But if the context is to play the explanatory role claimed of it, it must be something that is the same for the speaker as it is for his audience, and obviously the role of the speaker’s intention is not the same for both. Context can constrain what the speaker can succeed in communicating given what he says, but it cannot constrain what he intends to communicate in choosing what to say. Of course, in implementing his intention, the speaker needs to select words whose utterance in the context will enable the hearer to figure out what he is trying to communicate, but that is a different matter. (546)

[...]

If you say, referring to your desk lamp, “That is black,” your audience does not figure that you are using ‘that’ to refer to your lamp by way of determining that ‘that’ refers to it. Rather, they figure out what you could plausibly intend and reasonably expect them to be using ‘that’ to refer to. So even if, contrary to what I am suggesting, ‘that’ does refer to the lamp, this would play no role in how your audience recognizes what you’re using ‘that’ refer to. Except perhaps for the case of pure indexicals, semantic reference by singular terms is an otiose property. Attributing this property to singular terms across the board commits a version of what Barwise and Perry call the “fallacy of misplaced information,”

that is, “that all the information in an utterance must come from its interpretation” (1983, 34), and ignores the essentially pragmatic fact that the speaker is making the utterance. (549)

Fodor and Lepore’s version of the asymmetry argument

There is an inherent asymmetry between the epistemological situations of the speaker and the hearer with respect to the role of contextual information in the disambiguation of an utterance: the hearer can use such information but the speaker can’t. That’s part and parcel of the fact that the speaker, but not the hearer, has immediate (privileged, non-inferential) knowledge as to which disambiguation is the right one. It’s clear how this could all be so if disambiguation supervenes on the speaker’s intentions since, for better or worse, one’s intentions just are the sort of things to which one’s access is typically privileged. But how could a speaker (or anybody else) have immediate, non-inferential access to, as it might be, the fact that elephants don’t wear pajamas?

If, in short, disambiguations supervene on facts about the background, then it would seem that one’s disambiguating interpretations would always be inferences from one’s grasp of such facts. But Groucho’s access to the truth conditions of his utterance isn’t inferred from what he knows about the background; indeed, it isn’t inferred at all. That’s all as it should be if disambiguation supervenes on the intentions of speakers, but we can’t see how to make sense of it on any other assumption.

So, then, unless disambiguation is atypical of interpretation at large, the moral would seem to be that, since the speaker’s access to the interpretation of his utterance is epistemically privileged, nothing about the background of an utterance is metaphysically constitutive of its interpretation. The function of background knowledge in interpretation is (only) to provide premises for the hearer’s inferences about the speaker’s intentions. If the resolution of ambiguity is typical of interpretation at large, then what has content is not speech-in-a-context but speech as its speaker intends it. (p. 10)

[Later in this section Fodor and Lepore argue that the same things apply to the interpretation of indexicals and demonstratives.]

(Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore, “Out of Context,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA*, 78:2 (2005), excerpt from Sec 4, “The Asymmetry Argument”)

from “Context ex machina”

Semantics vs. Pragmatics, Zoltán Szabó (ed.), Oxford University Press (2005), pp. 15-44.

against utterance semantics:

The only respect in which an utterance has content over and above that of the uttered sentence is as an intentional act performed by a speaker. And in that respect, the content of an utterance is really the content of the speaker’s communicative intention in making the utterance. In other words, the only relevant linguistic content is the semantic content of the sentence, and the only other relevant content is the content of the speaker’s intention. Focusing on the normal case of successful communication, where the listener gets the speaker’s communicative intention right, can make it seem as though an utterance has content in its own right, independently of that intention. But this is illusory, as is evident whenever communication fails. In that case, in which the speaker means one thing and his audience thinks he means something else, there is what the speaker means and what his listener takes him to mean, but there is no independent utterance content. (23-4)

role-of-context argument:

It is often casually remarked that what a speaker says or means in uttering a given sentence “depends on context,” is “determined” or “provided” by context, or is otherwise a “matter of context.” That’s not literally true. Assume that by context we mean something like the mutually salient features of the conversational situation. Does context determine what the speaker says? Suppose he utters an ambiguous sentence, say “Gina wants to belong to a golf club.” Presumably he is saying that Gina wants to belong to a group of golfers, but given the ambiguity of ‘golf club’, he could be saying, however bizarrely, that Gina wants to belong to a thing that is used to hit golf balls. Context doesn’t literally determine that he does not.

And context doesn’t constrain what a speaker actually means. It can constrain only what he can reasonably mean and reasonably be taken to mean. That is, it constrains what communicative intention he can have in uttering a given sentence and reasonably expect to get recognized. So suppose someone says, “Harry has a happy face.” Presumably what he means is something to the effect that Harry has a facial expression indicating that he’s happy. Even so, he could mean, however strangely, that Harry’s face is itself happy (as if faces can be in different moods on the sadness-happiness scale). Similarly, a speaker who says, “Many investors lost every dollar,” presumably means that many investors in some particular deal each lost every dollar that they respectively put into that deal, even though that goes well beyond the meaning of the sentence. But it is not literally context that determines that this is what the speaker means in uttering the sentence. (36)

character deficiency of demonstratives and most indexicals

The reference of so-called pure indexicals, such as ‘I’ and ‘today’, is determined by their linguistic meanings as a function of specific contextual variables (this is context in the narrow, semantically relevant sense). However, the reference of other indexicals and of demonstratives is, as Perry puts it, “discretionary” rather than “automatic,” and depends on the speaker’s intention, not just on “meaning and public contextual facts” (2001, 58-59). That is, the speaker’s semantic intention is not just another contextual variable, not just one more element of what Kaplan calls “character” (1989a, 505). The fact that this intention determines the referent does not imply that the specification of the meaning of a discretionary indexical or a demonstrative contains a parameter for the speaker’s intention. Rather, given the meaning of such an expression, in using it a speaker must have some intention in order to provide it with content relative to the context in which he is using it.

It is a separate question whether the audience can identify the referent (assuming the speaker is using the expression referentially). In order to ensure that, the speaker needs to take mutually salient contextual information into account in forming his intention. He must exploit such information in deciding what expression to use to refer to a certain individual. He would thereby intend his audience to rely on such information in order to identify that individual, and to take him as intending them to rely on it in so doing. In the course of forming an intention to refer to something and choosing a term to refer to it with, to make his intention evident a speaker exploits what is antecedently salient in the speech situation or else makes something salient by demonstrating it or with the words he uses (the gender of a pronoun, the nominal in a demonstrative phrase, or even predicate in the sentence). The communicative context (context broadly construed) enables the audience to determine (in the sense of ascertain) what he is referring to, but it does not literally determine (in the sense of constitute) the reference. Of course, in order for his referential intention to be

reasonable, he needs to utter something in that communicative context such that his audience, taking him to have such an intention and relying on contextual information that they can reasonably take him to intend them rely on, can figure out what the intended reference is.

So neither sort of context, narrow or broad, determines the references of demonstratives and discretionary indexicals. Unlike pure indexicals, they do not refer as a function of the contextual variables, the narrow context, given by their meanings. Nor does the broad, communicative context determine the reference, in the sense of making it the case that the expression has a certain reference. That merely enables the audience to figure out the reference. So we might say that demonstratives and discretionary indexicals suffer from a *character deficiency* — they do not refer as a function of context. Accordingly, it is only in an attenuated sense that these expressions can be called ‘referring’ expressions. Besides, they have clearly non-referring uses, e.g., as proxies for definite descriptions and as something like bound variables. (39-40)

from “Regressions in Pragmatics (and Semantics)”

Noël Burton-Roberts (ed.) *Advances in Pragmatics*. Palgrave Macmillan (2006), pp. 24-44.

role-of-context argument:

[It is often supposed] that if a sentence expresses a minimal or an incomplete proposition and the speaker means more than that, then context fills the gap – by “supplying” the sentence with additional or more specific content. So, according to this idea, the context somehow manages to fill out, restrict, or complete the “proposition expressed” by “providing” needed constituents or by tightening, loosening, or otherwise modulating concepts expressed by particular constituents of the sentence.

The trouble with this idea is that context is incapable of doing these things. It can play the limited semantic role of fixing the references of whatever pure indexicals occur in the sentence, but otherwise it cannot endow a sentence with additional semantic content, content not derived from the semantic values of its constituents in accordance with its syntactic structure. As mutually salient information, context can play merely the pragmatic, epistemic role of providing information for the *hearer* to use to infer what the speaker means in uttering the sentence. This first idea conflates the broad, pragmatic role of context with its limited semantic role, by confusing being determined (= ascertained) in context with being determined (= constituted) by context, and thus credits context with something it is incapable of. (33)

asymmetry argument

[Another common supposition is] that the gap, construed as a gap in sentence semantics, is filled by the speaker’s communicative intention and, further, that since context, if restricted to mutually salient information, can’t fill the gap, context must include the speaker’s intention. Since context so restricted is not fit to do that, it must be the speaker’s intention is, and so the intention is part of context, now more broadly conceived.

The trouble with this idea is, first, that the speaker’s communicative intention can’t endow sentences or particular expressions with semantic contents. (I’m not talking about the speaker’s linguistic intention to use an ambiguous expression in one of its senses rather than another. But even that intention does not endow the expression with a meaning – it just makes operative a particular meaning the expression already has.) Nor is the intention

part of the context. After all, this intention is what the hearer has to figure out, partly on the basis of the semantic content of that very sentence (along with mutually salient contextual information, given the presumption that the speaker uttered the sentence with an intention the hearer is to recognize). The speaker's communicative intention can't add to the information the hearer needs to identify that very intention. Its identity is the conclusion, not a premise, of the hearer's inference. Moreover, the sentence doesn't acquire additional semantic properties just by being uttered. Rather, it is by uttering the sentence with the semantic properties it already has that the speaker provides the hearer with the linguistic semantic part of his basis for figuring out the speaker's communicative intention. (33-34)