

WHY NOT CONTEXTUALISM

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What is (Semantic) Contextualism?

Types of motivating data

Sentences whose semantic contents seem to differ in different contexts, in virtue of containing expressions of such sorts as the following (there may be others):

- indexicals/demonstratives: [tense], *I, today, now, here, we, you, she, they, then, there, that, those*
- relational terms: *neighbor, fan, enemy, local, foreign*
- perspectival terms: *left, distant, up, behind, foreground, horizon, faint, occluded, clear, obscure*
- gradable adjectives, both relative and absolute: *tall, old, fast, smart; flat, empty, pure, dry*
- philosophically interesting terms: *know, might, necessary, if, ought, free*
- prepositions: *in, on, to, at, for, with*
- certain short verbs: *put, get, go, take*
- possessive phrases, adjectival phrases, noun-noun pairs: *John's car, John's hometown, John's boss, John's company; fast car, fast driver, fast tires, fast time; child abuse, drug abuse; vitamin pill, pain pill, diet pill, sleeping pill*
- implicit temporal, spatial, and quantifier domain restriction
- weather and other environmental reports: (*It is*) *raining, humid, noon, summer, noisy, eerie*
- ostensibly unary expressions (when used without complements) that denote binary relations: *ready, late, finish, strong enough*
- "predicates of personal taste": *fun, boring, tasty, cute, sexy, gross, cool*
- miscellaneous: *and, or, cut, (is) green*

What semantic contextualism isn't

1. Contextualist platitude: Many sentences, even with all their constituents being used literally and even factoring out ambiguity, can be used to mean different things in different contexts. (This doesn't entail that there's anything context-sensitive in or about the sentence itself.)
2. Anti-compositionalism: Many (declarative) sentences semantically express propositions that are not completely determined by the semantic contents of their constituents and their syntactic structure.
3. Unarticulated Constituentism: Many sentences semantically express propositions some of whose constituents are not the semantic contents of any of the sentence's constituents.
4. Anti-propositionalism: Many (most? all?) sentences do not semantically express propositions, even in contexts (because of lexical underspecificity, phrasal underdetermination, or propositional incompleteness).
5. Psychological Anti-semanticism: The compositionally determined semantic content of a sentence, whether or not fully propositional, plays no role in the psychological processes involved in communication (on either the speaker's or the hearer's side).
6. Outright Anti-semanticism: Many (most? all?) sentences do not have (compositionally determined) semantic contents at all.
7. Utterance "Contextualism": The semantic content of almost any given sentence, whether or not it is fully propositional, falls short of the "intuitive content" of a likely utterance of the sentence because its semantic content is too sketchy, abstract, or otherwise nonspecific to be what the speaker means.

Semantic Contextualism

The semantic contents of many (most? all?) sentences vary with context of utterance and are partly determined *by context*.

Three forms of SC (each can be stronger or weaker as to range of application and role of context, and perhaps different versions apply to different classes of expressions):

1. Indexical Contextualism: The semantic contents of many sentences vary because they contain "non-obvious" indexical expressions whose contents are determined *by context*.
2. Variable Contextualism: The semantic contents of many sentences vary because they contain expressions that have variables associated with them whose values are determined *by context*.
3. Modulational Contextualism: The semantic contents of many sentences vary because they contain expressions whose senses (and/or phrases whose modes of composition) are "modulated" *by context*.

Contextualist Fallacies

Context Fallacy

What is done in context is done by context.

• Obvious *non sequitur*. An account is needed of what context is and how it manages to do ("provide" or "determine") whatever it supposedly does. Appealing to such properties as relevance, salience, or appropriateness doesn't help, since these can play only evidential, not constitutive roles.

Intention Fallacy

When all else fails to do what context is supposed to do (fix the variable content of a sentence), it must be the speaker's communicative intention that does it.

• The speaker's communicative intention is not part of the context and cannot play the putative semantic role of context. This intention doesn't endow an expression with a content-in-a-context just because of how the speaker uses the expression. It merely determines how the speaker is using the expression. Even if it did fix semantic content, it would play no role in communication: being what the hearer has to identify, it can't contribute to the information the hearer needs to identify it.

Utterance Fallacy

Since many (declarative) sentences do not semantically express propositions/are not true or false, since semantics concerns "the proposition expressed" by an utterance (its truth-evaluable content), and since utterances (of sentences) do express propositions (are truth-evaluable), semantics concerns utterances, not sentences.

• This changes the subject from the linguistic meanings and semantic contents of sentences (and sub-sentential expressions) to the contents of acts of uttering them, i.e., from semantics to pragmatics. Propositionally incomplete sentences still have semantic contents (propositional radicals). Besides, utterance contents are not linguistic – they reduce to contents of speakers' communicative intentions.

Intuition Fallacy

Since "our" intuitions about "content" (and "truth-values") are indicators of "the proposition expressed" in a given context, they target the semantic content of the sentence as used in that context.

• Intuitions typically target what the speaker is likely to mean in uttering the sentence (presumably while using its constituents literally, even though not using the sentence as a whole literally).

Plausibility Fallacy

If the most plausible use of a sentence in a likely context is to convey a certain proposition, then that proposition is the sentence's semantic content in that context.

• Many sentences are used to convey implicatures (pragmatic enrichments of their semantic contents in the context). Also, many sentences are too nonsensical or just too long to have (plausible) uses, but they still have semantic contents.

Explicature Fallacy

If what a speaker means is an enriched version of the semantic content of what he utters, then this is its explicit content, the "explicature."

• If something is implicit, it is not explicit, though of course it can be *made* explicit.

Self-explicative Fallacy

A word may be used to explicate its own use. For example, the semantic content of 'ready' in a context is something like 'ready to leave', and that of 'late' is something like 'late for dinner'.

☛ 'Ready' doesn't mean *ready to leave* in 'ready to leave', and 'late' doesn't mean *late for dinner* in 'late for dinner'.

Variable Fallacy

If an expression's use needs to be more specific than its meaning provides, or if its scope needs to be restricted somehow, it has a variable (or slot) associated with it, whose value is "supplied by context."

☛ Such variables would proliferate beyond belief. And what they are posited to explain (leaving aside the fact that how they get their values would still require a pragmatic explanation) can be explained pragmatically anyway.

Metaphysical Fallacy

If to be *F* is to be *F* relative to something (of a certain type), then the lexical entry for '*F*' must associate a variable (or slot) with '*F*'.

☛ This assumes that metaphysics, indeed correct metaphysics, is somehow built into the lexicon.

Counts-as Fallacy

If what a relative predicate '*F*' applies to can vary with context, then something can be *F* in one context and not-*F* in another, and what it is to be *F* can vary with context.

☛ This requires that a relative predicate expresses the same property in any context but that this one property be different properties in different contexts. Such predicates express property *functions*.

Relativist Fallacy

If something cannot be just plain *F* (tall, tasty, tempting) but *F* only relative to some standard or perspective, then the proposition that '*a* is *F*' expresses cannot be true or false full stop but true or false only relative to a standard or perspective.

☛ This assumes without argument (beyond appealing to intuitions about truth and falsity) that '*a* is *F*' fully expresses a proposition.

Proposition Fallacy

Since (declarative) sentences are the linguistic items that can semantically express propositions (and be true or false), every (declarative) sentence semantically expresses a proposition (and is true or false), at least in a context or relative to a context.

☛ Some sentences are propositionally incomplete, and that's not the same as being context-sensitive.

Some Outstanding Questions

1. What sorts of evidence justify positing lexically (not: metaphysically) mandated variables or slots?
2. What tests distinguish cases of propositional incompleteness from mere cases of conversationally insufficient specificity?
3. How widespread are such phenomena as lexical underspecification, phrasal underdetermination, and sentential propositional incompleteness?
4. What tests settle whether an expression is semantically ambiguous, polysemous, or underspecified and, in any case, whether or not a given use of the expression is literal?
5. How do speakers manage to come up with a sentence to convey something other than what the sentence semantically expresses with a reasonable expectation of being understood?
6. How do hearers manage to figure out propositional contents of speech acts that are not semantically expressed by what the speaker utters?
7. Could virtually all declarative sentences be propositionally incomplete? If so, how could thoughts still be expressed and successfully communicated? Or we just flapping our gums?

Some Dangerous Semantic/Pragmatic Ambiguities*

semantic

- pertaining to or a matter of linguistic meaning
- pertaining to or a matter of truth conditions

reference

- by an expression to an object
- by a speaker with an expression to an object

meaning

- linguistic meaning: sense of an expression (word, phrase, or sentence)
- speaker's meaning: what a speaker means

speaker's meaning

- what a speaker means by a sentence (or phrase) when using it
- what a speaker means (tries to communicate) in uttering a sentence (or phrase)

utterance

- what is uttered
- act of uttering

utterance meaning

- meaning of an uttered sentence
- speaker's meaning in uttering a sentence

say

- perform a locutionary act
- state or assert, especially in using a declarative sentence without using any of its constituent expressions nonliterally

what is said

- the content of a locutionary act (or equivalently, the semantic content of sentence, relative to a context of utterance)
- the content of the assertion made in using a declarative sentence without using any of its constituent expressions nonliterally

context

- set of parameters whose values fix or delimit the semantic values of expressions with variable references
- set of salient mutual beliefs and presumptions among participants at a stage in a conversation

determine

- make the case (constitutive determination)
- ascertain (epistemic determination)

interpretation

- assignment of semantic values
- inference to speaker's communicative intention

demonstrative reference

- reference by a demonstrative
- speaker's reference by means by demonstrating

use (a term) to refer

- use a term that refers
- use a term and thereby refer

*from "Context ex Machina," in Zoltán Szabó (ed.), *Semantics vs. Pragmatics* (OUP 2005), pp. 15-44.