WHAT'S DONE IN CONTEXT IS NOT DONE BY CONTEXT (GENERALLY)

Kent Bach (handout, Context and Communication Workshop, San Francisco, Sep 18-20, 2009)

Various kinds of supposedly context-sensitive expressions

Expressions of at least the following sorts are often thought to be context-sensitive, meaning that sentences containing them have semantic contents that can vary with context or have different truth values in different contexts:

- indexicals/demonstratives: [tense], *I, today, now, here, we, you, she, they, then, there, that, those*
- relational terms: *neighbor, fan, enemy, local, foreign, noon, summer, stationary*
- 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, probable, necessary, if, ought, free*
- implicit temporal, spatial, and quantifier domain restriction
- weather & other environmental reports: *(It is) raining, hot, humid, windy, noisy, eerie, crowded*
- ostensibly unary expressions (when used without complements) that denote binary relations: *ready, late, finish, strong enough, legal, eligible, incompetent, experienced, applicable, relevant, difficult*
- terms for "response-dependent" properties: *edible, poisonous, scary, nauseating, comfortable*
- "predicates of personal taste": *fun, funny, boring, tasty, tasteful, cute, sexy, cool*
- miscellaneous: *and, or, cut, (is) black*
- 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*

Claims, some more plausible than others, that are often confused with, or thought to support, claims that classes of expressions are in some sense semantically sensitive to context

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. Unarticulated Constituentism: Many sentences semantically express propositions some of whose constituents are not the semantic contents of any of the sentence's constituents.

3. Anti-compositionalism: Many (declarative) sentences semantically express propositions that are not completely determined by the semantic contents of their constituents and their syntactic structure.

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 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 propositionally incomplete, too abstract, or otherwise not specific enough to be what the speaker means in uttering the sentence.

Ten cautionary notes (to consider before claiming that expressions of certain classes are context-sensitive)

1. Don't assume that what is done *in* context is done *by* context.

☛ If you appeal to context, explain just what context is and how it manages to do ("provide," "supply," "determine") whatever it supposedly does, i.e., fix the contents or extensions of the expressions in question. Appealing to such properties as relevance, salience, or appropriateness doesn't help, since these can play only evidential, not constitutive roles.

2. Don't assume that if nothing else does what context is supposed to do, the relevant aspect of context must be the speaker's communicative intention.

☛ The speaker's communicative intention is not part of the context and does not do what context is supposed to do (play the semantic role that context is supposed to play). The speaker's 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. If it took the speaker's communicative intention to fix the semantic content, this content would play no role in communication: the speaker's communicative intention, being what the hearer has to identify in context, can't contribute to the information needed by the hearer to identify it.

3. Don't assume that since many (declarative) sentences are propositionally incomplete (do not semantically express propositions/are not true or false), context must fill the gap.

☛ Propositional incompleteness is not context sensitivity. Propositionally incomplete sentences still have semantic contents (propositional radicals), built up in the same way as the contents of sentences that do semantically express propositions/are true or false.

4. Don't assume that "our" (i.e. your) intuitions about contents or truth-values target "the proposition expressed" in a given context (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 (and using its constituents literally), but in many cases the speaker does not make what he means fully explicit.

5. Don't assume that 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 implicitures (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.

6 Don't assume that 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.

7. Don't assume that 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'*.

☛ You need to show that metaphysics, indeed correct metaphysics, is built into the lexicon.

8. Don't claim that a word is context-sensitive if you use it to explain its own uses, e.g. that in some contexts the semantic content of 'ready' is *ready to leave,* and that of 'late' is *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'.

9. Don't assume that 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, hence that what it is to be *F* can vary with context.

☛ This requires the supposition that a relative predicate expresses the same property in any context but that what counts as possessing this property can vary relative to different contexts. This sounds suspiciously like the incoherent claim that this one property be different properties in different contexts. A less paradoxical alternative is to say that such predicates, when not complemented, univocally express property *functions*.

10. Don't assume that if something cannot be *F* (tall, tasty, tempting) full stop but *F* only relative to some standard or perspective, then the proposition that a sentence of the form *'a is F'* expresses cannot be true or false full stop but true or false only relative to a contextually provided standard or perspective.

☛ This takes for granted that a sentence of the form '*a is F'* fully expresses a proposition and that the intuitions about truth or falsity that an utterance of it prompts pertain to *its* truth or falsity.

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. Under what conditions can a speaker reasonably expect to communicate a thought successfully without making some constituent of it explicit?
6. 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?
7. How do hearers manage to figure out propositional contents of speech acts that are not semantically expressed by what the speaker utters?
8. Are virtually all declarative sentences propositionally incomplete? If so, how do we manage to express and successfully convey our thoughts? Or do we?

Some Dangerous Semantic/Pragmatic Ambiguities*

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

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

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

use (a term) to refer
- use a term that refers
- use a term and thereby refer

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

utterance
- what is uttered
- act of uttering

utterance meaning
- meaning (or semantic content in context) of an uttered sentence
- speaker's meaning in uttering a sentence

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

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 roughly 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

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