

Disarming Context Dependence

A Formal Inquiry into Indexicalism and Truth-Conditional Pragmatics

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Abstract

In the debate about semantic context dependence, various truth-conditional frameworks have been proposed. Indexicalism, associated with e.g. Jason Stanley, accounts for contextual effects on truth conditions in terms of a rich covert syntax. Truth-conditional pragmatics, associated with e.g. François Recanati, does not locate the mechanisms for context dependence in the syntactic structure but provides a more complex semantics. In this dissertation, the hypothesis that indexicalism and truth-conditional pragmatics are empirically equivalent is explored. The conclusion that the hypothesis is correct emerges, when claims and accounts in the debate are made formally precise, within the framework of model-theoretic semantics.

The dissertation shows that the frameworks of indexicalism and truth-conditional pragmatics allow for the formulation of two similar, but yet sharply distinct, formal semantic accounts of a set of linguistic examples central to the debate. The semantic accounts are model-theoretic, in the tradition of event semantics. The indexicalist and the truth-conditional pragmaticist semantics are applied to the following linguistic phenomena: quantifier domain restriction, transfer, binding, colour adjectives, meaning negotiation and enrichments of thematic roles. For each linguistic phenomenon, one indexicalist account is put forward, and one truth-conditional pragmaticist account. It is concluded, on these grounds, that indexicalism and truth-conditional pragmatics are empirically equivalent.

The formal accounts are also developed to accommodate a broader range of linguistic phenomena. In particular, context-dependent dimensions of the English present perfect are examined. An indexicalist account of this puzzling linguistic phenomenon is provided, as well as a truth-conditional pragmaticist variant. The dissertation also develops a previously underdeveloped combination of Reichenbach's and Jespersen's early accounts of the present perfect. The proposal provides further evidence that indexicalism and truth-conditional pragmatics are empirically equivalent, but it also enhances our understanding of the present perfect and tests the viability of the model-theoretic, event semantic accounts.

The dissertation ends with a discussion of the results. It is argued that central aspects of alternative accounts of context dependence – relevance theory, radical contextualism and semantic minimalism – are in fact compatible with indexicalism and truth-conditional pragmatics. In addition, questions about simplicity, and how far the hypothesis about equivalence can be generalized, are addressed.