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Towards a Sound Contextualism: Applying Peircean Ideas at the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface

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1. Introduction

The conceptualization of the semantics-pragmatics-interface is fiercely discussed in linguistics and philosophy today. One important point of departure of this discussion lies in Grice's writings on meaning (cf. Grice, 1989). Grice argues that meaning in natural language is not homogeneous, but consists of different genera and species. In his famous William James Lecture on *Logic and Conversation* (1967), he discerns in the total signification of an utterance (1) the conventional sentence meaning, (2) "what is said," and (3) "what is implicated." He discriminates between (a) conventional and (b) conversational implicatures, and he distinguishes (i) generalized conversational implicatures from (ii) particularized conversational implicatures (cf. Grice, 1967). Today, Grice's adherents and successors try to complete the picture which remained sketchy in Grice's writings. They examine and propagate different stratifications of meaning in utterances. They strive to find out what separates literal from non-literal meaning, what language itself contributes to the meaning of utterances, and what is determined by contextual, pragmatic factors. The solutions offered are many, but they differ with regard to one factor: the emphasis put on pragmatics. More or less radical pragmaticists, also called contextualists (cf. Récanati, 2004, p. 3), maintain that pragmatics "infects" semantic content in a substantial way (cf. Borg, 2007). "Literalists," on the other hand, intend to hold off any, or too much pragmatic intrusion. Literalists admit that nat-

ural language sentences are context-dependent to become truth-evaluable to a certain degree: They admit that indexicals and other variables in the sentence need contextual assignments of values. The conventionalists of this camp perceive the variables to be functions from context to content and therefore dismiss pragmatics (cf. Kaplan, 1977). The minimalist literalists go one step further and acknowledge that pragmatic processes are involved; yet they maintain that these processes are triggered by the grammar of the sentence (cf. e.g., Stanley, 2000). All in all, the field is divided and heavily mined: Contextualists are dubbed the “natural enemies” of the literalists, and Katarzyna Jaszczolt states sardonically that literalists are in need of good ammunition against the contextualists because it seems that contextualists are winning the battle (Jaszczolt, 2007, p. 5; cf. Borg, 2007).¹

2. Contextualism in philosophy and linguistics

The central claim of contextualism is that a sentence *S* is unable to provide conditions under which *S* is true, that *S* does not provide the proposition expressed by *S*, and that *S* fails to specify what intuitively is (literally) said. Another claim is that pragmatic processes are not only triggered by the syntax of a sentence, but that they are caused by the structural indeterminacy which inheres in every sentence. For contextualists, pragmatic processes are endemic. This is intuitively plausible, as many examples show. Imagine sitting down for lunch with a friend, asking her whether she is hungry, then getting the following answer:

(1) *I've had a large breakfast.*

Taken literally, the sentence uttered is inappropriate: It only expresses that the speaker has had a large breakfast sometime in her life. In order to evaluate (1), you have to enrich it to *I've had a large breakfast this morning*. Otherwise you cannot grasp what contextualists call the intuitive truth-conditions of the utterance, and you cannot compute the implicature of the utterance. The enriched part of the utterance, the “unarticulated constituent,” is considered to be part of the statement, but corresponds to nothing in the sentence (cf. Perry, 2000; Récanati, 2002, pp. 300–1).² Now imagine someone stating (2):

¹ Accounts of the various factions are given by Cappelen and Lepore (2005b, pp. 46–7); Récanati (2004, 2005), and Borg (2007).

² Another famous example necessitating a bridging inference is: *Mary took out her keys and opened the door*, meaning... with that key.

(2) *I am parked out back.*

You would not take the speaker to be a car, but you would transfer the predicate in order to make sense of the sentence. Of course, advocating processes of free enrichment and predicate transfer does not turn a philosopher or linguist into a contextualist yet. Nevertheless, it leads her towards contextualism (cf. Bach, 2005a; 2005b).³ ‘Real’ contextualists assert that we always need to adjust word meaning because it is underdetermined, as e.g. (3) shows:

(3) *While Jane cut the grass, Jill cut the cake.*

The word *cut* is not ambiguous, as homographs or homonyms are, but there is a big difference between *cutting the grass* and *cutting a cake*: The word makes different contributions to the truth-conditions of the respective utterance (cf. Searle, 1980, pp. 222–3). Adherents of the “wrong format view” declare that word meanings are either too schematic, or too abstract, or too rich, and that it always undergoes a process of determination, of fleshing out, or feature-cancellation in order to contribute to truth-evaluable meaning. According to this view, compositionality of sentences alone is not sufficient. Meaning eliminativists even go one step further. They deny that there is anything like linguistic meaning: Word types cannot be associated with abstract conditions of applications, but they are always connected to particular applications, and they are always used another first time (cf. Récanati, 2005, pp. 189–90).

Philosopher contextualists find their combatants in linguistics under the banner of relevance theory (cf. e.g., Carston, 2002; Sperber and Wilson, 1996), and default semantics (cf. Jaszczolt, 2005). To buttress their theories of communication, cognition, and natural language, linguist-contextualists use experimental psychological research methods. What else can they do after having abandoned the idea that sentences bear meaning, or, if they are eliminativists, given up the idea that truth-conditions for utterances can be found? They proceed inductively, design experiments, and hope to reveal one day how people understand utterances (cf. e.g., Noveck, 2006; Papafragou and Musolino, 2003). There is a trap attached to this methodology, though: It surrenders to the plurality of meaning phenomena, as a quote of Jaszczolt demonstrates:

Some presumed meanings are context-free, some are not. Some are automatic, some appear to use some minimal inference. Next, some

³ Cappelen and Lepore (2005a) consider Bach to be a contextualist, Borg (2007) thinks he is heavily leaning towards contextualism. Bach (2005a) claims that this is wrong.

are local, some are global (albeit on some accounts only accidentally global, when the relevant expression falls at the end of the sentence). Some come from the lexicon or grammar, others come from the way humans think or the way they construct their social and cultural reality. There seems to be no compelling argument for their unitary analysis. It appears that it is this diversity of salient meanings that the research has to turn to first. Jaszczolt, 2006

Obviously, linguist contextualists have not found a sound methodology compatible with their favored theory of language yet.

This looks different in the other camp: Literalists do not have to abandon the idea of a theory which accounts for the compositionality of natural language, its productivity, and the systematicity of linguistic comprehension and use. They can even work with formal methods and remain close to the goal of linguistics, which should not be reduced to collecting and classifying data (cf. Borg, 2007) – at least not in the field of semantics and pragmatics. However, literalists are removed from linguistic reality. The way to proceed would be to adapt a contextualist philosophy, but a methodology as rigid as a literalist one. To find ideas and principles for such an undertaking, contextualists might turn to Peirce.

3. Peirce's contextualist conception of natural language

To dub Peirce a “contextualist” means committing an anachronism, although a legitimate one. That Peirce estimates pragmatic processes as important is already evident in his triadic, functional definition of the sign (cf. e.g., MS 637:31). Even closer parallels to contemporary contextualism can be found in his conception of natural language. A contextualist conception of natural language is based on the idea that the type of a word and the syntax of a sentence do not solely contribute to truth-evaluable meaning. Peirce argues similarly: He describes the connections between a word and its different dimensions of meaning as complex, and he highlights how difficult it is to draw a line between word, object, and interpretants. Nevertheless, he is convinced that distinctions have to be made, even if they appear to be slight (cf. MS 292:20–2). He describes these differences as different rules governing the meaning of a word on the one hand, and its replication as a token of a type on the other hand (cf. CP 2.292; Short, 1984, pp. 20–2).

Of course, this does not turn Peirce into a contextualist yet. As the conventionalist literalist shows, assignments of values can be conceptu-

alized without acknowledging the importance of pragmatic processes (cf. Kaplan, 1977). Yet Peirce does not neglect these processes. This becomes obvious in his treatment of linguistic indices:

The most interesting aspect is that Peirce consistently develops his conception of linguistic indexicality out of an investigation of the functioning of dialogues. In MS 409, he distinguishes between (1) direct objective indicatives, (2) direct personal indicatives, (3) relative pronouns, and (4) adverbs and prepositions. Direct objective indicatives, e.g. demonstrative pronouns, “do not exhibit anything; they only show in the sense of directing the hearer where to search for the thing meant” (MS 409:18–9). Therefore, calling them demonstratives is wrong: They demonstrate nothing. On the other hand, direct personal indicatives do not need associated demonstrations to indicate their objects: They are what could be called “Peircean pure indexicals.” This set is rather small and consists only of the personal pronouns *I*, *we*, and *you*, the pronouns to denote the participants of a dialogue. *He*, *she*, and *they* are not so easily interpretable in communication and therefore belong to the set of direct objective indicatives (cf. MS 409:19). Similar to current research, Peirce places adverbs and prepositions near either the category of direct objective indicatives, or the category of direct personal indicatives. Adverbs and prepositions in need of accompanying gestures, e.g. *left* and *right*, are “closely allied to ‘demonstrative pronouns’,” or to “*direct objective indicatives*.” Others, e.g. *here* and *now*, are similar to personal pronouns. The items of the last set of linguistic indices, anaphora, “direct us to observe, not outward objects, but the words that have been used, and their meanings” (MS 409:19); they “directly refer, and need only refer, to the images in the mind which previous words have created” (CP 2.305). In a similar way, Peirce defines *every*, *whatever*, *whoever*, *some* as selectives (cf. MS 1135:11), and he perceives two subdivisions, universal and particular selectives. Universal selectives are terms such as *anybody*, *nobody*; particular selectives are expressions such as *some*, *something*, *somebody*. Selectives prompt their interpreters to actively look for their objects (cf. SS 1:209–10).⁴

According to Peirce, every sentence contains symbols, or general terms, but also indices, or at least grammatical subjects functioning as indices. This has consequences for his conception of sentence meaning. If every sentence contains indices, and if interpreters must actively resolve the in-

⁴ This treatment of quantifiers has been elaborated and made rigorous in game-theoretic semantics, and Jaakko Hintikka and Risto Hilpinen repeatedly pointed out that Peirce can be interpreted as a precursor of this specific program. Cf. e.g. Hilpinen (1992); Hintikka (1997).

dices of the sentence by way of finding the objects meant in order to interpret the sentence as so connected with the object (cf. Houser, 1992, p. 494; Pape, 1991, p. 173), then a sentence becomes only meaningful when interpreted by an interpreter and when applied in a specific context (cf. CP 3.868; EP 2:279).

Yet does the claim that interpreters have to do something in order to resolve linguistic indices put Peirce in the contextualist camp? There is another aspect of Peirce's theory of language which makes the categorization of Peirce as contextualist more plausible. According to Peirce, terms as symbols are general, and their exact meaning depends on their use in a specific situation (cf. EP 2:220). Peirce is a precise observer of communication, and he realizes that symbols are in need of narrowing because their meaning potential is rich. Symbols grow out of experiences, they evolve, semiotically speaking, through icons and indices (cf. e.g., EP 2:264). On the basis of every symbol is a "composite photograph," (EP 2:21) a sort of picture of what I experienced as being alike (cf. SS 3:206). Whenever I interpret a symbol, e.g. the symbol *dog*, I make use of the general idea of dogs which also contains, as Peirce succinctly writes, "general ideas of dogs' ways, of the law of caninity, some of them invariable, so far as I have observed, such as his frequent napping, others merely usual, such as his way of cycling when he is preparing to take a nap" (EP 2:223; cf. MS 318, pp. 202–03; MS 641:30). Moreover, as symbols are grounded in experiences, they cannot have but an encyclopedic character: They are connected to a wealth of other symbols (cf. also CP 5.505–05). Therefore, word meaning is not determinate. Peirce also writes:

In another sense, honest people, when not joking, intend to make the meaning of their words determinate, so that there shall be no latitude of interpretation at all. That is to say, the character of their meaning consists in the implications and non-implications of their words; and they intend to fix what is implied and what is not implied. They believe that they succeed in doing so, and if their chat is about the theory of numbers, perhaps they may. But the further their topics are from such presciss, or "abstract," subjects, the less possibility is there of such precision of speech. In so far as the implication is not determinate, it is usually left vague; but there are cases where an unwillingness to dwell on disagreeable subjects causes the utterer to leave the determination of the implication to the interpreter; as if one says, "That creature is filthy, in every sense of the term."

EP 2:351

This paragraph is important evidence that Peirce is in fact a contextualist philosopher of natural language (cf. also Pietarinen, 2006, pp. 392ff.). Peirce is convinced that natural language is not precise, perhaps not even as technical language which is used to talk about precise objects. He believes that sentences uttered in everyday conversation are underdetermined. Therefore, the meaning of a sentence is never just given compositionally. Moreover, a sentence may bear a heap of implications. Some of these implications could be explicated by the speaker. Others will be left vague, sometimes for strategic reasons because being vague gives the speaker the possibility to imply things she did not say. Definite determination is left to the interpreter. This sounds almost Gricean; Grice defined the content of conversational implicatures as having “various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open” (Grice, 1967, p. 40).

Peirce’s classification of interpretants in MS 318 helps to sustain the claim that he is a contextualist. Peirce distinguishes here three different interpretants: the emotional interpretant, the energetic or existential interpretant, and the logical interpretant. The emotional interpretant is defined as the sense of how to use a word, “a sense of comprehending the meaning of the sign,” (MS 318:79) or “a feeling of recognition” (MS 318:156). The emotional interpretant belongs to the phenomenological category of Firstness and is only a possibility, waiting to be actualized in an actual interpretation. Peirce also compares this interpretant to the familiarity with the usage of the word (cf. MS 835:2). It is not farfetched to equate this interpretant with the lexical and grammatical meaning of words and syntactic constructions of natural language sentences. The actual interpretations are realized as efforts of the interpreter, as the “energetic interpretants”. Realized in the outer world, they are actions; realized in the inner world, they are inhibitions, or the self-restraints, “which make so large a part of the effort to pay attention” (MS 318:36). Energetic interpretants are an intermediate step. They can be interpreted as what contextualists call “modulations” of the word meaning (Récanati, 2004, pp. 131ff.). They lead to the truth-evaluable content of a sentence, the logical interpretant, the “thought” (MS 318:89). Yet this is not the final step. This thought is still “general in its possibilities of reference (i.e. refers or is related to whatever there may be of a certain description)” (MS 318:89). Therefore, it has to be applied to a situation, and this is done by resolving the indices. Interpreting a sentence uttered presupposes the modulation of the linguistic content and the resolution of indices. Both processes work hand in hand towards the construction of the logical interpretant and its contextual evaluation.

4. A sound contextualism

To impute Peirce a radical contextualism would be implausible. Yet his realism does not prevent him from being a contextualist of the “wrong format view”. Although his theory might seem sketchy, Peirce has ideas to offer which could help to refine contextualist approaches, and which could lead linguists and philosophers out of methodological dead-ends.

Ahti Pietarinen’s criticism that the post-Gricean tradition of communication research neglected the role of the interpreter of utterances completely is clearly justified (cf. Pietarinen, 2006, pp. 399f.). On the one hand, it is astonishing that this tradition did not focus on the interpreter. Do contextualists’ arguments not hinge on insights in underdeterminations of sentences and necessities of pragmatic processes? On the other, it is probably not surprising. Post-Griceans claim that truth-evaluable meaning of a sentence uttered depends on speaker’s intentions, and this emphasis on speaker’s intentions might have led to a neglect of the role of the interpreter. Yet bringing the interpreter into the game of language is necessary to develop a sound contextualism. It does not blur the picture but helps to see clearer. A way to introduce the interpreter without raising psychological notions is sketched in Peirce’s semiotics: It is the notion of the interpretant. The interpretant can be understood as the result of a “phenomenological reduction” of the interpreter (cf. MS 318:52ff.). Moreover, Peirce proves in his Existential Graphs that the analysis of interpretants arising in different contexts can be conducted in a rigorous, formal, and logical framework. Of course, he did not develop his Graphs to conduct linguistic research. Yet Peirce pointed out that there is equivalence between the graphs and “familiar language” (MS 484:12–4), and that it is the job of the logician and mathematician to reveal the logical form of sentences to linguists in order “to render them more intelligible” (MS 654:5). As Peirce implemented pragmatic factors in his Existential Graphs, they can be interpreted as a very early approach to formal pragmatics (cf. also Sowa, 1997a, Sowa, 1997b):⁵ The sheet of assertion represents the universe of discourse, which “must be well known and mutually known to be known and agreed to exist, in some sense, between speaker and hearer, between the mind as appealing to its own further consideration and the mind as so appealed to, or there can be no communication, or ‘common ground,’ at all.” (CP 3.621).

⁵ Therefore, he can be interpreted as a precursor of Discourse Representation Theory (DRT). For a critique of Peirce’s graphs from a formal pragmatic point of view cf. Rellstab (2007, pp. 307–9).

The sheet of assertion is not only a logical notion, but also a pragmatic one because it includes background assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (cf. also MS 614:1–2). The dots in the graphs indicate the individuals denoted by the indices of the sentence, and the line of identity, together with the depiction of negation, the so-called cuts, traces the resolution of anaphora in sentence and discourse (cf. e.g., CP 4.403–06, MS 478:115ff., Roberts, 1992, p. 645). The graphs do not depict indices, or variables, and possible relations. They show denoted individuals and interpreted relations. They are not representations of the syntactic structure of sentences, but representations of post-pragmatic meaning structures of the interpreted sentences. They do not represent the cognitive structure located in the mind of an individual, but they are iconic representations of a logical interpretant of a sentence in a specific situation, therefore a depiction of the actualized meaning potential of a sentence. Although not psychologically meant, they are nonetheless cognitively plausible.

The goal of contextualists is to find out how linguistic structures and pragmatic processes work together. Although Peirce does not present a complete contextualist theory of natural language, or a methodology readily applicable to the analysis of natural language, his work must impress linguistics and ordinary language philosophers alike. He shows that a contextualist must not abandon the search for precise means to represent meaning in context, but that she has to invent a richer logic which helps to analyze the relationship between the context, the syntactic structure, and the semantic potential of a sentence uttered in a specific context.

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