The Contextualist Surprise

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Abstract

This essay discusses the relationships between contextualism and the traditional semantic approach to natural languages. It concludes that the classic contextualist examples are naturally accountable from the traditionalist viewpoint, and that the forms of contextual dependence stressed by the contextualists are semantically unsurprising. The final section explains how the analysis defended here does not involve implicit concessions to the contextualist cause, and does not demand any radical revision of the classic semantic take on natural language.

Keywords: context, indexical, semantics, meaning, content.

The surprise is half the battle. Many things are half the battle, losing is half the battle. Let’s think about what’s the whole battle. (The Untouchables, 1987)\(^1\)

The interpretation of the occurrence of an English expression within a communicative exchange depends on the context in which that exchange takes place. This much is an undisputed, and in all its vagueness utterly uninteresting truism. The interpretation of the occurrence of an English expression within a communicative exchange depends in surprising ways on the context in which that exchange takes place. If the dependence in question is surprising in the sense that it

remains unexplainable from the viewpoint of the traditional approach to language, this claim, far from being an unexciting triviality, would be cause of deep concern for the semantic establishment. The contextualist challenge to the paradigm in natural-language semantics consists in the defence of a claim of the latter sort, that is, in unveiling patterns of contextual dependence that remain allegedly unaccountable within the customary paradigm in natural-language semantics.²

The evaluation of the contextualist challenge thus depends on the analysis of the forms of context-dependence unquestionably recognized within the traditional approach to semantics, and on the extent to which they suffice for the study of the use of language within communicative exchanges. I discuss some of the traditionally acknowledged forms of contextuality in Section 3.1, where I focus on ambiguity, indexicality and contingency. In Section 3.2, I pause on some prototypical examples emerging from contextualist quarters, and I explain how the contextualists’ evidence remains, from the traditionalist viewpoint, eminently unsurprising. Section 3.3 concludes with a closer assessment of the relationships between contextualism and the view put forth in Section 3.2.

3.1 Semantics and Context

Traditional natural-language semantics aims at the systematic assignment of appropriate semantic values to expressions. This project is achieved in two stages: the syntactically simple expressions in the language under study are assigned a suitable semantic profile, presumably reflecting the relevant aspects of their conventional meaning, and the syntactically complex expressions are evaluated on the basis of their syntactic structure, and of the semantic effects achieved by their components. The identification of the appropriate stock of simple expressions within a language, and the choice of a syntactical apparatus able to reflect the semantically relevant effects of structure, are notoriously vexing questions, which fortunately need not be solved, in their general form, at this stage. One particular topic related to these issues, that is, ambiguity, is however worthy of consideration, before confronting other forms of traditionally acknowledged context-dependence.