

Call for Registration – AHRC Pervasive Context Conference, University of Reading

25th-26th June 2016

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Speakers and abstracts:-

Eliot Michaelson (King’s College London): ‘Almost Minimal’

Borg (2004, 2012) develops what I take to be the richest and best-motivated version of 'semantic minimalism'. This view offers some very serious benefits: among others, it holds out the prospect of explaining the relationship between semantics and psychology, and it offers a principled way of preserving an interesting explanatory project for semantics. While I am sympathetic to both the motivations and indeed many of the commitments of this view, I shall argue here that Borg's considerations regarding reference-fixing constitute a serious weakness in the view---and one which suggests a related, but substantially different, way forward. In particular, I shall argue that Borg's view goes wrong when faced with speakers who are sufficiently confused about the world. After considering some potential fixes, I offer a different way forward, one which bifurcates between a revised notion of 'character' and 'content'. Complex, sentence-level characters, on this sort of view, fulfil many of the roles that Borg hoped for semantic contents to fill. But they are not themselves the proper bearers of truth-values. By understanding the relationship between these two different types of semantic values, I hope to derive a view that can preserve most of the explanatory virtues of Borg's own position while also offering an account of reference capable of handling the sorts of messy situations we find when considering the full range of real-world speakers.

Josef Stern (University of Chicago): ‘Quotation and Pictures’

Quotation (q-)marks “ ‘... ’ ” are currently used in two main ways: to quote someone’s utterance or inscription (e.g., “Trump said: ‘I will make America great!’”) and to mention words (e.g., “‘Love’ is a four letter word”). Over the last 50 years there has been an explosion of work by philosophers and linguistics on q-marks but almost all of it has focused on their use in mentioning, either ignoring or assimilating quotation to mentioning. In the first parts of this paper I trace the disjoint histories of q-marks in the two practices to identify the explanandum of quotation and I propose that the q-marks “ ‘... ’ ” are homonymous. For the rest of the paper I concentrate almost entirely on the use of q-marks in quotation, present the semantic problems raised by sentential and sub-sentential (so-called mixed) quotation, and, drawing on an analogy between pictures and quotations—frequently mentioned but rarely used in the literature—show how quotations can be best analyzed using three notions taken from the theory of pictures. What emerges from this analysis is a conception of quotation that locates it on the boundary between linguistic competence proper and the non-linguistic—and in one sense, contextual—symbolic skill of picturing.

Luca Sbordone (University of Cambridge): ‘Vagueness, Contextualism and Assessment-sensitivity’

Most natural language predicates such as ‘tall’ in example (1) are notoriously problematic for traditional formal semantics approaches in that they typically show the characteristic and

puzzling features of vagueness: borderline cases, lack of clear boundaries, susceptibility to the Sorites paradox.

(1) John is tall.

In recent years, several authors have pursued the intuition that the vagueness of most natural language predicates goes hand in hand with their context-sensitivity and developed contextualist theories that typically aim at tracing back the puzzling properties of vague expressions to features of the context in which these expressions are used. Nonetheless, such contextualist theories of vagueness (Kamp 1981, Raffman 1994, 1996, Fara 2000, Shapiro 2006) have encountered forceful objections in the literature, on the ground that, allegedly, vagueness and context-dependence are two demonstrably independent phenomena: hold the context fixed – so the standard objection goes – vagueness still arises. Based on such a simple reasoning, other authors have insisted that the widespread recognition that typically vague words are in need of contextual specification only points in the direction of "an empirical correlation, not an a priori law" (Williamson 1994: 214).

I shall argue that this conclusion is not correct. I will show that the presumed force of the objection is based on a restrictive understanding and formalization of the notion of context. Particularly, I shall develop a new contextualist theory of vagueness according to which, in order to make sense of the idea that vagueness is a form of context-sensitivity, we need to acknowledge that the context-dependence of vague words is two-fold: the meaning of vague expressions is not only sensitive to the context of use, but it also shows a previously unrecognised form of context-sensitivity which, following MacFarlane (2003), I shall call sensitivity to the context of assessment. Within a broadly Kaplanian framework, I propose that expanding the operative (two-dimensional) notion of context so as to include the entirely new level of the context of assessment helps building a version of the contextualist theory of vagueness that is immune to the standard objection. Building on the analogy between vague predications and utterances of future contingent statements, I will argue that the assessment-sensitive semantics allows capturing the seemingly incompatible intuitions about the meaning and use of vague predicates. At the same time, it explains why the Sorites paradox is logically invalid but psychologically so compelling.

Jumbly Grindrod (University of Reading): ‘QUDs and Context Sensitivity’

It has variously been argued that discourse can be modelled as an attempt to answer questions (Roberts 1996, Ginzburg 1996). This is called the question under discussion (QUD) framework. In recent years, it has been thought that this pragmatic framework could provide the basis of an account of the context-sensitivity found in natural language. In particular, Schoubye & Stokke (2015) and Stokke (2016) have argued that the QUD can be utilised to provide a systematic account of how what is said is freely enriched across different contexts. In doing so, they aim to provide a clear role for minimal, context-invariant content in determining what is said. In this talk, I will present two objections to their view. First, there are several cases of free enrichment that their account fails to capture. Furthermore, the divide between those cases of free enrichment that their account does capture, and those that it does not looks to be arbitrary. Secondly, on their account there is no obvious way for what is said to be the input for relevance implicature derivation. Schoubye & Stokke (2015) and Stokke (2016) do provide differing responses to this objection. However, I argue that both responses fail.

Dan Zeman (University of the Basque Country): ‘Relativism about Predicates of Personal Taste and Perspectival Plurality: Some Solutions’

In this paper we discuss a phenomenon that has been largely unnoticed in the current debate between relativism and contextualism about predicates of personal taste. This is the phenomenon of “perspectival plurality”, whereby the truth value of a sentence containing more than one such predicate may depend on more than one perspective. Prima facie, perspectival plurality constitutes a problem for relativism and an argument for contextualism. In the paper we first introduce the phenomenon, then the problem it poses. In the last section, we explore several possible solutions for the relativist.

Michael Blome-Tillmann (University of Cambridge/McGill University): TBC

Qilin Li (Peking University): TBC

Nausicaa Pouscolous (University College London): TBC

This conference is part of the AHRC Pervasive Context Project:

<https://www.reading.ac.uk/pervasive-context/> This project aims to create an international network of researchers to investigate and explore the theoretical developments and positions regarding pervasive context-sensitivity in natural language. The network primarily consists of a research link between the University of Reading and Peking University.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council.