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Seminar: Relative Truth and the Language of Value

Week 1: The Intuitions and the Standard Account

1. The issue: Evaluative sentences

- what is special about evaluative sentences?
- what is their meaning, in relation to other kinds of sentences?
- what do they describe or state?

‘The new relativism’:

Certain sentences, including evaluative sentences, require a notion of relative truth, that is, the proposition expressed by those sentences must be relativised to a context including not only the world of evaluation (and a time of evaluation), but other contextual parameters as well (such as a ‘taste parameter’ or an agent).

MacFarlane, Koelbel, Richard, Lasersohn, Egan/Hawthorne/Weatherson

an example

(1) A: Walking in the park is nice.

B: No I disagree, walking in the park is not nice.

A and B disagree without either being at fault (subjective evaluation)

‘faultless disagreement’ (Koelbel)

similar intuitions with epistemic modals:

(2) A: It is possible that John is in Paris.

B: No, this cannot be. I know he left Paris this morning.

A and B are both not at fault because they are in different epistemic states.

crucial questions about evaluative sentences:

the question of truth value

Do evaluative sentences have truth value?

alternative:

expressivism: sentence simply expresses subjective state of the speaker (but then how can speakers disagree?)

the question of meaning:

traditional notion of sentence meaning: the notion of a proposition:

- Propositions are mind- and language-independent entities that have truthconditions essentially.
- Propositions are the meanings of sentences and the objects of propositional attitudes.
- conceptions of propositions: sets of possible worlds – structured objects

the question of what evaluative sentences about:

- What are values, norms?
- What distinguished the description of values from an expression of emotion, subjective experience?

arguments in favour of evaluative sentences having truth values and meanings like other sentences:

1. agreement / disagreement, as with other utterances

2. negation:

- (3) a. Walking in the park is not nice.
 b. It is not the case that walking in the park is nice.

uniform semantics of negation

2. coordination:

- (3) a. Walking in the park is nice, but it is raining today.
 b. Because walking in the park is nice and I have a free day, I will spend my day in the park.

uniform semantics of conjunction

3. embedding under operator shifting context of truth evaluation:

- (4) a. It might be that walking in the park is nice (I have never done it)
 b. Walking in the park was / used to be nice.

uniform semantics of context-shifting operators

4. embedding under truth-directed propositional attitude /speech act verbs:

(5) a. John believes that walking in the park is nice.

b. John claimed that walking in the park is nice.

uniform semantics of attitude/speech act verbs (always take propositions as arguments)

the question of the context dependence of evaluative sentences:

Evaluative sentences involve a ‘subjective’ contextual component. How does this compare to other kinds of context dependencies?

relativist theories of concept dependence:

The truth value of the proposition expressed by a sentence must be relativized to the context of the assessor – the agent evaluating the sentence as true or false

contextualist theories of context dependence:

The proposition expressed by a sentence is expressed relative to a context of utterance.

the crucial question giving rise to the new relativism:

How can one account for the possibility of faultless disagreement?

two notions of relativism:

[1] propositional relativism: it is possible that the same proposition expressed by a sentence (in a context) is true and false relative to different contexts of assessment

[2] factual relativism: it is possible that the proposition a sentence expresses is true and false relative to different facts / sets of facts / worlds / fragments of the same world

2. The intuitions of relative truth

[1] faultless disagreement

Koelbel (2003): Faultless disagreement consists in a situation in which two agents disagree about the truth of a proposition, with neither apparently being at fault.

usual examples: with predicates of personal taste

In what situations can faultless disagreement arise?

- overt disagreement among two interlocutors involved in a conversation
- intuitions about two agents being involved in different conversations (MacFarlane, ms)
- intuitions about two agents' beliefs (Koelbel 2003).

important:

Faultless disagreement is not only a phenomenon involving utterance situations, but also one involving just the content of mental states.

Where faultless disagreement does not arise:

[1] the 'judge' or epistemic agent is made explicit:

(6) A: For me it is fun to walk in the park.

B: For me it is not.

A and B do not disagree.

(7) A: For all I know, John might be in Paris.

B: For all I know, John might not be in Paris.

[2] the speech act / propositional attitude is not truth-directed:

speechact is expressive

propositional attitude is purely 'evaluative': *find*, certain uses of *think*

truth-directed: *believe*

(8) A: I find / think that walking in the park is fun.

B: I find / think that walking in the park is not fun.

(9) A: Walking in the park is so much fun!

B: ? No it is not.

(10) A finds that the wine tastes good.

B does not find that the wine tastes good.

?? A and B disagree.

(11) A believes that the wine tastes good.

B believes that the wine does not taste good.

A and B disagree.

important:

Distinguish propositional contents giving rise to faultless disagreement from contents that are purely subjective, either because the ‘subject’ is made explicit or because the intentional context is a purely subjective one.

[2] retraction of previously asserted propositions

usual examples: with epistemic modals

The content of an utterance ‘This might be John’, once appropriately and truthfully asserted might be withdrawn later, in view of further knowledge.

The content of an utterance ‘Walking in the park is nice’, once appropriately and truthfully asserted, might be withdrawn later, in view of more experience.

retraction: ‘faultless disagreement’ involving the same agent at different times

note: Also indicative conditionals allow for retraction (observation of Eglington, before the ‘New Relativism’)

[3] sharing

of propositional contents of agents involved in different contexts of assessment

note: sharing not a phenomenon discussed in the recent relativist literature

one manifestation of sharing:

the validity / invalidity of certain inferences showing sameness of propositional content:

valid:

(12) a. A thinks the wine tastes good (A is a connoisseur)

B thinks the wine tastes (B is not a connoisseur at all)

A and B think the same thing (namely that the wine tastes good)

b. A thinks it might rain (because the whether forecast does not exclude it).

B thinks it might rain (because the cloud formation does not exclude it).

A and B think the same thing (namely that it might rain – but for entirely different reasons).

invalid:

(12) c. A thinks that Mary is there (in the US)

B thinks that Mary is there (in France).

A and B think the same thing.

Sharing does not hinge on the use of the expression *same thing*:

other linguistic tests showing sameness of propositional content:

- relative clauses:

(13) A believes what B believes, namely that the wine tastes good.

- attitude / speech act verbs involving two different events:

(14) a. John convinced Mary that the wine tastes good.

b. John agreed with Mary that the wine tastes good.

c. John shares Mary's view that the wine tastes good.

- coordination:

(15) (The two people) A and B believe that the wine tastes good.

other criteria for sameness of propositional content:

content plays same functional role (Schiffer criteria (Schiffer 'Meaning and Value', 1990)):

for example: - involves same way of learning content

- plays same role in guiding behaviour, triggering emotions, leading to actions

the range of expressions showing intuitions of relative truth

besides evaluatives and epistemic modals:

- sentences expressing contingent future (MacFarlane)

- the verb *to know* (MacFarlane)

- relative adjectives like *rich* (Richard)

3. Relativist and contextualist accounts of context-dependence

contexts defined by their different semantic roles:

utterance context:

since Kaplan: helps determine the proposition a sentence expresses

No faultless disagreement, no retraction, no sharing, as different contexts would determine different propositions

context of evaluation:

Contexts that can be shifted by the presence of an operator:

temporal operators: shift times of evaluation

modal operators: shift world of evaluation

MacFarlane's notion of a context of assessment:

Context relative to which the truth a proposition needs to be evaluated, where such a context is not just a world or time of evaluation.

for MacFarlane: parameters of taste, epistemic states

(16) MacFarlane's relativist account

The proposition expressed by a sentence S is true or false not only relative to a world (and a time), but also relative to another parameter p (specific to the expression in question).

(17) a. [*Chocolate tastes good*](c) (the proposition expressed by *chocolate tastes good* in the utterance context c) is true / false relative to a world w (and a time t) and a taste parameter t.

b. [*John might be in Paris*](c) is true / false relative to a world of evaluation w (and time t) and an epistemic state s.

MacFarlane: context is always the context of the agent assessing the truth of a proposition.

Could a context of assessment be a context of evaluation?

Yes, on some views

'given anyone's taste'?

'given anyone's knowledge'?

operators quantifying over or shifting contexts of assessment:

(17) a. It is fun for me / for John to walk in the park.

b. It is fun for everyone to walk in the park.

Stephenson: 'for me' as an operator shifting context of evaluation/of assessment

(18) For all I know, John might be in Paris.

Next time:

- questions for MacFarlane:

What to make if truth as the aim of assertion *and* of truth as the aim of belief

Why taste parameters, epistemic states, and not just an agent?

Compare MacFarlane's account to Egan/Hawthorne/Weatherson (to appear).

- What is the difference between self-locating propositions and relative truth à la E/H/W?

- Stalnaker's critique of Lewis' account of *de se*, does it carry over to propositions involving relative truth?

- How can one conceive of the object of belief on a relativist account?