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Radical Contextualism and Indexicalism: Towards a Synthesis?

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Outline

- Contextualism vs. semantic minimalism
- Indexicalisms?
- Indexicals/non-indexicals: argument from self-reference
- Flexible index, fluid character
- Default Semantics
- Examples of fluid characters
- Conclusion: towards a synthesis?
Two options for a theory of meaning

(1) to dissociate conversational practices from a theory of meaning and take the latter to pertain only to the language system and to sentences as abstract units

→ semantic minimalism (minimal role of context)

(2) to capture speakers’ intuitions about meaning in communication, at the same time retaining the commitment to the underlying compositionality of meaning.

→ contextualism (substantial role of context)
Contextualism advocates all-pervasive context-dependence of meaning. Meaning is propositional, its analysis is truth-conditional, but it is rich in contextual contributions.

‘You can have chicken or fish.’

>> ‘You can have chicken or fish but not both.’
Contextualism is compatible with minimalism

Contextualism, the standard picture

• Enrichment can be ‘top-down’, or ‘free’, as contrasted with ‘bottom-up’, or ‘syntactically controlled’ (e.g. Recanati 2004, 2012a).

“[a]ccording to Contextualism (…), there is no level of meaning which is both (i) propositional (truth-evaluable) and (ii) minimalist, that is, unaffected by top-down factors.” Recanati (2004: 90)

“[w]ithout contextual modulation, no proposition could be expressed” Recanati (2005: 180).
Modification of the truth-evaluable representation goes beyond...

- personal and demonstrative pronouns;
- adjectives ‘actual’ and ‘present’;
- indicators of temporal reference;
- possibly some (but very few) other expression types

Cappelen and Lepore’s (2005: 144); see also Kaplan’s (1989) list
The meaning of every expression can potentially be affected in a top-down manner, and hence *not* being affected (i.e. retaining the basic, ‘linguistic’ meaning) is a special case. (Recanati 2012c: 137)

>> absolutely *every expression* of a language can potentially undergo modulation – which leads to *radical contextualism*.
Wittgenstein (1953): words are used in ‘language games’ in which they acquire their meanings.


“…words may have any of many semantics, compatibly with what they mean. Words in fact vary their semantics from one speaking of them to another”.

“Truth and falsity seem to correspond to understandings words may have, rather than to the words themselves.”
Indexicality >> Indexicalisms

- **Indexicalists**\textsubscript{1} (Stanley, e.g. 2000) place the modifications of sentence meaning in the structure of the sentence:
  
  ‘Every bottle is empty.’

- **Indexicalists**\textsubscript{2} (Recanati, e.g. 2012b) place this variability of utterance meaning on the indexical nature of elements entering the composition process:
  
  ‘The city is asleep.’
Blurring the distinction between indexicals and non-indexicals

‘Peter is holding a gun.’ (toy gun)

‘Peter is a rising star.’ (promising young scholar)
= the first step towards

the radical contextualism/indexicalism synthesis
But...

...once we go that far, we in effect obliterate the difference between indexical and non-indexical expressions: every expression can be treated as a springboard for some context-driven modification
The provenance of this meaning can be modelled differently, for example as

- free *tout court* (Travis 2008)
- free but algorithmic (Jaszczolt 2005)
- free within the bounds of grammar-driven composition (Recanati 2012b; Stanley 2000).
Example:

First-person indexical

(an unexpected case for radical contextualism?)
‘I am happy.’ (indexical)

‘Kasia Jaszczolt is happy.’ (non-indexical)

But:

Japanese and Thai first-person markers have the characteristics of both a pronoun and a noun; pronouns and nouns do not constitute morphologically different categories.
- Neither nouns nor pronouns form a closed class;
- Both nouns and pronouns form the plural form by adding a plural morpheme;
- Pronouns are not, strictly speaking, indexicals (e.g. honorification – a compulsory social aspect of their meaning).
Cf. other languages of Southeast and East Asia (Burmese, Javanese, Khmer, Korean, Malay, or Vietnamese).

Words for ‘slave’, ‘servant’, royal slave’, ‘lord’s servant’, ‘Buddha’s servant’ are used there for self-reference, often to indicate self-denigration while addressing a person who is higher in the social hierarchy.

Thai: **27** forms for first person (Siewierska 2004: 228);

Japanese: **51** (Tanaka 2012).
Spatial deixis can also be employed for self-reference (e.g. Thai \( phōm_1 nīi_2 \), ‘one male this’; Japanese \( kotira \), Korean \( yeogi \), and Vietnamese \( hây \), ‘here’.

The use of reflexives (Japanese \( zibun/jibun \), Vietnamese \( mình \)).

Acoma (New Mexico) and Wari’ (Brazil): no personal pronouns (Heine and Song 2011).
Outcome:

→ The indexical/non-indexical distinction does not universally apply in the domain of first-person reference.

→ This could in principle signal that there is no pure universal concept of the self that can be detached from other meanings.

see Jaszczolt (2013) and *Expressing the Self: Cultural Differences and Cognitive Defaults*, The Leverhulme Trust Project, University of Cambridge
A stronger hypothesis:

- The indexical/non-indexical dichotomy does not stand up to scrutiny in the case of any natural language in that admixtures of other aspects of meaning that take the deictic term beyond the bounds of pure, direct reference can always be attested.

Even the English first-person pronoun ‘I’ can (albeit occasionally) serve purposes other than that of self-referring (Jaszczolt 2013).
Referring to oneself displays different properties depending on the circumstances.

‘I am in pain.’

*immunity to error through misidentification* (IEM, Shoemaker 1968; see also Prosser and Recanati 2012).

vs.

‘I am wearing a red scarf.’ (no IEM)
Properties of self-ascription cannot be generalized about.

Names or descriptions may take on the role of first-person pronoun:

*Child to mother:* ‘Sammy wants a biscuit.’

*Johnny to a friend:* ‘Johnny the car mechanic will fix it.’
First-person reference is often achieved through the use of non-pronominal expressions,

while

pronominals convey other functions in addition to those specific for indexicals.
Languages also employ devices for signalling a degree of self-reference, such as English generic *one* (French *on*, German *man*)

‘One can see the hotel from the window.’
“[g]eneric one is a pronoun that (...) expresses generalizing detached self-reference. It is a first-person oriented generic pronoun, in the sense that it does not stand for the speaker’s actual person, but rather for a range of individuals that the speaker identifies with or simulates.”

Moltmann (2010: 440)
The arbitrary (non-controlled) PRO also conveys detached self-reference:

‘It is easy [PRO] to see the hotel from the window.’
The semantic category of the first-person indexical does not correspond bi-uniquely to a morphosyntactic category.

The category of indexical expressions is not well supported on the conceptual level.
What is the unit that undergoes such a pragmatic-compositional analysis?
Recanati (2012b): flexibility vs. compositionality

- word meaning is flexible: it varies depending on what other words it combines with (*lateral influence*), as well as depending on what complex meaning words produce on a particular occasion (*top-down influence*).
Although Recanati does not go as far as claiming that all words are indexical, he proposes that non-indexical expressions in context have properties that make them somewhat akin to indexicals: they have ‘modulated’, occasion-sensitive meanings.

These meanings are not unlimited in kind or number because context itself is always finite.
Problems with Recanati’s all-pervasive indexicality

- This solution seems to mean nothing more than saying that such occasion-sensitive meaning can be computed when one knows the context.

- Potential circularity with ‘lateral influence’: if a word affects other words in a manner that can be captured as a function (cf. a meaning of a word varies “as a function of the other words it combines with”, Recanati 2012b: 176), then those other words that provide an explanation (explanantia) are themselves objects to be explained (explananda). In short, when one tries to reduce compositionality to the composition of modulated words, the modulation of these words remains unexplicated.
How are all these elusive elements of the composition process to be identified?

Recanati: they belong to the compositional contents only if they fit in the conception of a ‘grammar-driven composition’.
“The modulated sense of an expression $e$ (in context $c$) results from applying the contextually appropriate modulation function $\text{mod} \ (e,c)$ to its semantic interpretation $I(e)$:

$$M(e)_c = \text{mod} \ (e,c) \ (I(e))$$

Recanati (2012c: 147)
“Is semantic interpretation a matter of holistic guesswork (like the interpretation of kicks under the table), rather than an algorithmic, grammar-driven process as formal semanticists have claimed? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

On that issue I am happy to part company with the most radical contextualists – the ‘sceptics’ who would go for the holistic guesswork answer…”

Recanati (2012c: 148)
More problems:

• ‘Holistic guesswork’ is not what has to ensue when we adopt pragmatics-rich composition of utterance meaning but drop the requirement that it be grammar-driven.

cf. Discourse Representation Theory (Kamp and Reyle 1993) and its offshoots (Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (Asher and Lascarides 2003); Default Semantics (Jaszczolt 2005); cognitive semantic theories founded on the concept of a construction, conceptual structure (Langacker 1987, 1991; Croft 2001)
• “Contextualism: No” is grossly misleading.

• Contextualism has many faces and allows for many degrees, from modest to radical (covert variables in the LF >> free enrichment >> free merger of information).

• Recanati seems to ‘part company’ only with those who rest with unwieldy, unsystematic meanings. Presumably, these people are late Wittgenstein and Travis.
What is the unit that undergoes such a pragmatic-compositional analysis?
Towards the synthesis

Flexible indexicals, fluid characters
Fluid characters: towards a synthesis?

Processes in DS operate on **units of different length**.

‘Some of the lectures were worth attending.’

‘Some people say you are presumptuous.’

*or* ‘or shall I say…’ (‘innymi słowy’)

*if* ‘if you like’ (‘powiedzmy’)

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'If I remember rightly you had jaundice, didn’t you?’
‘Very short skirt on if you don’t mind me saying.’
Units of the *merger representation* in Default Semantics

Default Semantics (Jaszczolt 2005, 2010, *in progress*) – a radical contextualist approach that emphasises the fact that the composition of meaning requires information about components of meaning that come from various, linguistic as well as extra-linguistic, sources.

This conceptual representation is called *merger representation*.
Fig. 1: Sources of information contributing to a merger representation $\Sigma$

- world knowledge (WK)
- word meaning and sentence structure (WS)
- situation of discourse (SD)
- stereotypes and presumptions about society and culture (SC)
- properties of human inferential system (IS)
Merger representation $\Sigma$

- Primary meanings are modelled as *merger representations*.
- The outputs of sources of information about meaning merge and all the outputs are treated on an equal footing. The syntactic constraint is abandoned.
- Merger representations have the status of mental representations.
- They have a compositional structure.
Sources of information for $\Sigma$

(i) world knowledge (WK)

(ii) word meaning and sentence structure (WS)

(iii) situation of discourse (SD)

(iv) properties of the human inferential system (IS)

(v) stereotypes and presumptions about society and culture (SC)
Sources operate on an equal footing, logical form can be overridden:

A: Shall we have lunch?

B: I have eaten. >> B doesn’t want to have lunch.

>> B has eaten lunch today.
sources of information  ⇄ types of processes
Primary meaning:

combination of word meaning and sentence structure (WS)

social, cultural and world-knowledge defaults (CD)

world-knowledge defaults\_pm (SCWD\_pm)

conscious pragmatic inference\_pm (from situation of discourse, social and cultural assumptions, and world knowledge) (CPI\_pm)

Secondary meanings:

- Social, cultural and world-knowledge defaults\_sm (SCWD\_sm)
- conscious pragmatic inference\_sm (CPI\_sm)

Fig. 2: Utterance interpretation according to the processing model of the revised version of Default Semantics
Mapping between sources and processes

- WK $\rightarrow$ SCWD or CPI
- SC $\rightarrow$ SCWD or CPI
- WS $\rightarrow$ WS (logical form)
- SD $\rightarrow$ CPI
- IS $\rightarrow$ CD

DS makes use of the processing model and it indexes the components of $\Sigma$ with a subscript standing for the type of processing.
Compositionality is an empirical assumption:

Compositionality should be an empirical assumption about the nature of possible human languages.

Szabó (2000)
Boundary problem?

‘Jan zjadł zupę.’ (>> łyżką)

‘Klient dostał stek.’ (>> surowy)

“Nie wiadomo, jak wytyczyć granicę między tym, co wchodzi w skład znaczenia ‘stek’ przy danej okazji, a tym, co w skład tego znaczenia nie wchodzi.” Odrowąż-Sypniewska (2013: 180)

Default Semantics: the boundary differs from one model situation to the other.
How ‘radical’ is radical contextualism?  
How ‘radical’ is Default Semantics?

**Radical**

Meaning eliminativism (Wittgenstein, Travis).

Meaning is not only context-dependent (Kaplan’s *context as an index*) but it is also circumstances-of-evaluation dependent (Travis: Japanese maple with russet leaves painted green (see also Predelli 2005a,b))
Radical$_2$

Contextualism can be dubbed ‘radical’ when it stipulates that there is no other level of meaning that can be legitimately postulated apart from the level of meanings that have undergone a top-down modification (Recanati).

It differs from radical$_1$ in assuming a perspective according to which literal meanings are special cases of modulated meanings. To compare, on the radical$_1$ view, there is no modulation because there is nothing to ‘modulate’.
Radical\textsubscript{3}

Radicalism of a contextualist stance can be measured with respect to the degree to which it allows for the semantic representation to depart from the logical form of the sentence.

Radical\textsubscript{3} = the highest degree (DS, Jaszczolt)

Default Semantics moves directly to the main message (primary meaning) intended by the Model Speaker and recovered by the Model Addressee, independently of whether this message corresponds to the literal content, literal enriched content, or some indirect speech act (implicature).
Example: Conditional utterances (Elder & Jaszczolt 2013)
Σ for the PM of ‘If you’d like to put on your helmet.’ (PM: ‘Please put on your helmet.’)

x  y  e₁  e₂

the addressee (x)
helmet (y)

e₁: [the speaker requests e₂]_{CD, CPIpm}
e₂: [x put on y]_{WS}
Σ for ‘If you leave the tea on a wobbly table…’

x y z e₁ e₂

the addressee (x)
tea (y)
wobbly table (z)

[e₁ → e₂]_{CD, CPIpm}

[ACCΔ_{tf} e₁]_{WS}
[ACCΔ_{rf} e₂]_{CD, CPIpm}

e₁: [x leave y on z]_{WS}
e₂: [x spill y]_{CD, CPIpm}
Summary and a Way Forward

• In view of the flexibility of word meaning, there is no clear indexical/nonindexical distinction;

• Indexical expressions are best understood as ‘flexible’ (with ‘fluid characters’), differing in length from one situation of discourse to another;

• There is no cross-linguistic support for the indexical/nonindexical distinction in the domain of first-person reference;

• Radical\textsubscript{1-3} contextualism seems to be the only framework that can account for the fact that words mix up indexical and non-indexical properties in one simple unit.


