The Metasemantics of Contextual Sensitivity

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I. Supplementives

A. What is the mechanism by means of which a given supplementive secures a semantic value in context?

B. Is the mechanism the same for all supplementives?

II. Kaplan’s answer(s) for demonstratives

A. The demonstration account: the lexical semantics of a demonstrative requires it to be completed by a demonstration and the demonstratum is the semantic value of the demonstrative in context.

1. Arguments against this

a. What is a demonstration anyway?

b. Vague demonstrations.

c. Precise demonstrations “demonstrating” more than one thing.

B. The intention account (at least for “perceptual demonstratives”)

1. Arguments against this.

a. What about non-perceptual demonstratives?

i. Carnap/Agnew

b. Poor or no demonstration (in any obvious sense): “She is athletic.”

C. The hybrid account

1. Intentions combine with demonstrations to secure semantic values in context in case of vague gestures, precise non-unique gestures but cannot get Carnap as referent in Carnap/Agnew.

2. Arguments against this

a. “She is athletic.” again

III. The Coordination Account: First Pass

A. The intuition that there is no semantic value secured in context in “She is athletic” cases is driven by the fact that the audience has no chance of figuring out what the speaker intended to be the semantic value in context.

1. The speaker fails by not rising to the level of being understandable by her audience.

B. This suggests that we build into the conditions required for a speaker to secure a semantic value for a demonstrative expression in context that the speaker is understandable to her audience.

C. Coordination Account Metasemantics (first pass: *Bad Intentions*)

A speaker S’s use δ of a demonstrative expression in context c has o as its semantic value iff 1. S intends o to be the semantic value of δ in c; and 2. a competent, reasonable, attentive hearer H who knows the common ground of the conversation at the time S utters δ, and who has the properties attributed to the audience by the common ground at the time S utters δ would know[[1]](#footnote-1) that S intends o to be the semantic value of δ in c.

1. Role of demonstrations according to the Coordination Account.

2. Condition 2 and deferred ostension (common ground): Glenn case

3. Condition 2 and talking to oneself, young children etc. (properties attributed to audience by common ground)

D. Carnap/Agnew

1. Version 1: audience does not know there had been a picture of Carnap where there is now a picture of Agnew.

a. No object satisfies conditions1 and 2: The object o the speaker intends would not be recognized by an idealized hearer to be the object the speaker intends.

i. Also, really no object uniquely satisfies condition 1, since the speaker unbeknownst to him intends two different objects: Carnap’s picture and the picture behind him

b. Hence demonstrative has no semantic value.

2. Version 2: audience *does* know that there had been a picture of Carnap where there is now a picture of Agnew.

a. No object uniquely satisfies condition 1.

b. Hence demonstrative has no semantic value.

c. But Kaplan will have *conveyed* to his audience the proposition that the picture of Carnap is a picture of one of the greatest…

3. Points in favor of the view that there is no semantic value in either version.

a. In both versions intuition that Kaplan said something about what he demonstrates is weakened if the demonstrated object is not a picture (sconce, clock).

b. In both versions of the case, it will seem odd for someone to report that Kaplan had said that a picture of Carnap was a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century or that a picture of Agnew was if he or she is apprised of all the details of the case.

i. Version 1: really weird to say Kaplan said that the picture of Carnap…

ii. Version 1: also seems infelicitous to say that Kaplan said that the picture of Agnew…without saying anything further.

iii. Version 2: same is true here.

iv. If Kaplan’s demonstrative didn’t have a semantic value, we explain this because he didn’t say anything.

c. Agreement data

IV. Extension of the Coordination Account to other supplementives.

A. Expressions that take implicit arguments: ‘Cindy is ready.’

1. In “good” cases, speakers seem to have the kinds of intentions the Coordination Account requires: they intend to talk about some specific thing Cindy is ready for.

a. The sentence can’t mean: Cindy is ready for something (cf. ‘John ate.’)

b. In cases where the speaker lacks the relevant intentions or fails to reveal them, ‘ready’ doesn’t seem to have an argument in context.

c. In a case where speaker intends a specific thing and successfully reveals her intention, very plausible to say that relevant thing is the semantic value in that context.

B. Similar remarks apply to quantifier domains, possessives, and ‘only’

C. A fly in the ointment?

1. With quantifier domains, often it is clear what property the speaker intends to further restrict the quantifier.

2. But in some cases there are multiple equally good candidates to be the further restricting property.

3. I think of these cases as ones in which there is a *range* of properties intended by the speaker (or consistent with the speaker’s intentions).

4. If the idealized hearer would recognize more or less the range intended by the speaker, we don’t get infelicity.

5. That there are such intentions present is indicated by speakers’ dispositions to respond to sentences of the form “Do you mean the beer that…?”

6. My idea here is that it is somewhat indeterminate exactly what you said and you “put a bunch of propositions in play” (cf. Gillies and von Fintel 2012)

7. I think this phenomenon arises with all supplementives, though some allow it more easily than others (see below and my ‘Strong Contextual Felicity and Felicitous Underspecification’)

D. Gradable adjectives: the worry

1. The standard account (Chris Kennedy)

2. Adjectives denote *measure functions*: functions that map individuals to degrees on a scale (type <e,d>).

3. In the positive form (‘is tall’), the adjective combines with a null morpheme *pos*. Hence, syntactically, the adjective with degree morpheme looks as follows:

1. [DegP[[Deg*pos*] [APtall]]]

4. The semantics for *pos* is: ||*pos*||c = *λgλx*.*g*(*x*)>*s*(*g*).

a. *s* is determined in context and will be a function from adjective meanings to degrees on the scale appropriate to the adjective’s meaning (*g* ranges over adjective meanings; and *x* ranges over individuals).

b. Thus ||[DegP[[Deg*pos*] [APtall]]]||c = λ*x*.**tall**(x)>*s*(**tall**).[[2]](#footnote-2)

c. An individual o has this property just in case the height **tall** assigns to o is greater than the height the contextually determined function *s* assigns to **tall**.[[3]](#footnote-3)

5. The contextual sensitivity here is a result of the fact that the function *s* from adjective meanings to degrees on the scale given by **tall** must be determined in context.

6. I take it that Kennedy’s view is that the meaning of *pos* is such as to require saturation in context by a function from adjective meanings to degrees.

a. On this way of understanding Kennedy, *pos* is the supplementive here.

7. Thus if my coordination account applies here, and if *s* is determinedin context, the speaker must intend that *s* be the value assigned to *pos* in the context; and an indealized hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation, etc. must know that the speaker intends *s* to be the value.

8. Michael Glanzberg complains that this could not be so, because ordinary speakers and hearers do not have intentions or thoughts about functions from adjective meanings to degrees on the relevant scale.

a. That seems right.

E. Gradable adjectives: the attempted fix for ‘tall’

1. Instead of the semantics for *pos* proposed by Kennedy above, I propose the following: ||*pos*||c = *λgλx*.*g*(*x*)>*d*c, where *d*c is a degree on a scale determined in context.

2. In turn, ||[DegP[[Deg*pos*] [APtall]]]||c = λ*x*.**tall**(x)>*hc*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

3. I claim that the height *hc* is determined in context in accordance with the coordination account.

4. Suppose I am in a context c where I have a pretty clear intention to count people six foot two and up as tall, and an idealized hearer who knew the common ground of the conversation would know that I intended this.

a. Then *hc* is six foot two.

F. Gradable adjectives: a new problem—‘smart’

1. The account above for ‘tall’ works because we have identified heights with degrees on a scale, and assumed speakers can have intentions about “cut off” heights for ‘tall’ in contexts.

2. So the speakers’ intentions determine a height degree very directly by being intentions that have heights (numbers) as their objects.

3. But what about other gradable adjectives where speakers will not have intentions with numbers as their objects in using them, as with, say, ‘smart’?

4. Here I think we are going to have to say that the speaker has an intention whose object *determines* a degree, with the result that the relation between the intention and the degree is less direct than the relation between an intention and the semantic value of a demonstrative or the semantic value of *pos* when combined with ‘tall’.

a. Suppose that in using ‘smart’ I intend that a certain *kind* of person as regards intelligence provides the cutoff for being smart.

b. People of that kind as regards intelligence and anyone smarter count as smart.

c. Call the kind of person I intend here the *object of my intention*.

d. Suppose an idealized hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation would recognize my intention.

e. Since the kind of person I intend has a degree of smartness, the object of my intention, and an idealized hearer’s recognition of my intention, determine a degree of smartness in context.

f. Here the connection between the intention and the degree will be a little more indirect than in cases where numbers *just are* the objects of my intention.

V. The Coordination Account: specific semantic values in context vs. *ranges* of values

A. Above, I talked about cases in which the Coordination Account mechanism determines a *range* of properties that further restrict a quantifier instead of delivering a unique property.

1. In at least some such cases, the sentence containing the quantifier will still be felicitous.

B. Felicitous Underspecification (FU): cases in which a sentence containing a supplementive is felicitous in context even though the supplementive does not have a unique semantic value in that context.

1. In MCS I gave examples of felicitous underspecification involving quantifiers, gradable adjectives, plural demonstratives, relational expressions taking implicit arguments (‘enough’, ‘local’), singular demonstratives and singular pronouns.

2. In ‘Strong Contextual Felicity and Felicitous Underspecification’ I argue that all supplementives allow FU.

VI. Bratman on intentions

A. A Bratman style view of intentions as plans

1. The crucial feature of the view I want to focus on is the claim that plans are formed out of *hierarchically structured intentions*, with plans themselves being, as Bratman picturesquely puts it, intentions writ large.

a. As such, in what follows, I’ll use ‘plan’ and ‘intention’ interchangeably.

2. The hierarchical nature of plans is closely related to their at least initial *partiality*.

a. To take an example, suppose I intend to go to Los Angeles in June.

i. My intention to go to L.A. is obviously a very partial plan, as I have not yet settled on the means for going, exactly when I will go, etc.

ii. Hence, at some point, I need to start filling in the details of my plan to go there.

iii. I need to fix a time, decide on my length of stay, decide on the means to get there and so on.

3. In this way, more general intentions (go to L.A. in June) embed more specific ones (go to L.A. from June 7 to June 21); and intended ends (be in L.A. in June) embed intended means (fly there on Virgin America) and preliminary steps (look over flight schedules).

4. The idea, then, is that when one forms a general intention e.g. to go to L.A. in June, this will be the input over time to means-ends reasoning and the formation of further intentions concerning means and “preliminary steps”.

5. Obviously, this means-ends reasoning and reasoning concerning preliminary steps will invoke beliefs about related matters (what airlines at my local airport fly to L.A., etc.).

B. Kaplan’s plan in Carnap/Agnew version 1 in words

1. First, Kaplan forms the intention to say something about the picture of Carnap.

2. Then, engaging in means/ends reasoning, he forms the intention to use a demonstrative expression to do so by making the picture of Carnap its semantic value in context.

a. His belief that because the picture is in the room he is in, he could reasonably hope to secure it as the semantic value in context of a demonstrative will figure into this reasoning.

3. Again, engaging in means/ends reasoning in conjunction with the belief that the picture of Carnap is behind him, Kaplan forms the intention to have the picture behind him be the semantic value in context of his use of a demonstrative expression.

4. He then utters ‘that’ with this intention.

5. For uniformity of representation let’s represent all intentions we are considering as intentions that the F be the semantic value of the demonstrative in question; in the *de re* case where o is the object of the *de re* intention, we’ll let ‘the F’ be ‘the x: x=o’.

a. So in this case, Kaplan has the (*de* *re*) intention that the F (the picture of Carnap) be the semantic value of his demonstrative *and* the (*de dicto*) intention that the G (the picture behind him) be the semantic value of his demonstrative, where the F ≠ the G.

b. It is in this sense that his intuitions *conflict* (though see below).

C. Kaplan’s plan in Carnap/Agnew version 1 schematically:

1. Int(say something about picture of Carnap) + Bel(can have picture of Carnap as semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)—(means/ends reasoning)🡪

2. Int(picture of Carnap be semantic value of use of demonstrative expression) + Bel (picture of Carnap= picture behind me)---(means/ends reasoning)🡪

3. Int(picture behind me be semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)

The intentions and beliefs involving the picture of Carnap are all *de re*. The intentions and beliefs involving the picture behind Kaplan are all *de dicto*.

D. Now the crucial point is that the intention in line 3 is the one that provides the *means* for executing the intentions in lines 1 and 2 (and the intention in line 2 provides what we might call *the intermediate means* for executing the intention in line 1).

1.We might call the intention at line 1 the *initiating intention* and that at line 2 the *intermediate intention*.

a. Call the intention at line 3 the *controlling intention*.

2. The thought is that Kaplan utters ‘that’ with this intention controlling his use.

a. After all, he has arrived at this intention as the means for executing the others.

b. Further, it seems clear that the intention Kaplan is trying to get his audience to recognize in pointing behind him is in the first instance the intention to have the picture behind him be the semantic value of his use of the demonstrative.

3. So the claim is that it is this intention, and this intention alone, that is relevant to the satisfaction of conditions 1 & 2 in the Coordination Account metasemantics.

4. Given the hierarchical structure of the intentions on the present picture, we have found a principled reason to single out the intention at line 3 as the unique intention relevant to the satisfaction of conditions 1 and 2.

5. Hence, the fact that the intentions on e.g. lines 2 and 3 conflict is simply irrelevant to the question of whether those conditions are satisfied.

VII. The Coordination Account: Second Pass

A. To implement the above ideas, we need to make some changes in the way we have formulated the Coordination Account metasemantics.

1. For that metasemantics assumed that the intentions in question were all *de re*, whereas in the Carnap/Agnew case variant 1 we are now assuming the relevant intention of Kaplan’s is *de dicto*.

B. So let’s define the *object of an intention* (of the relevant sort) as follows: the object of the (*de re*) intention that the x: x=o be the semantic value of a use of a demonstrative expression in context c is o; the object of the (*de dicto*) intention that the F be the semantic value of a use of a demonstrative expression in context c is the object o that is the unique F in c (if there isn’t one, the intention has no object).

C. We reformulate the coordination account metasemantics as follows:

Coordination account metasemantics II (second pass: *Best Laid Plans*)

A speaker S’s use δ of a demonstrative expression in context c has o as its semantic value iff 1. o is the object of S’s controlling intention in using δ in c; and 2. a competent, reasonable, attentive hearer H who knows the common ground of the conversation at the time S utters δ, and who has the properties attributed to the audience by the common ground at the time S utters δ would know that o is the object of S’s controlling intention in using δ in c.

D. This account predicts that the picture of Agnew is the semantic value of Kaplan’s use of ‘that’ in variants 1 and 2 of the Carnap/Agnew case.

1. In both cases, Kaplan’s controlling intention is the *de dicto* intention that the picture behind him be the semantic value of his use of the demonstrative and an idealized hearer would recognize that this is so.

E. The Manley/Elbourne case[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Suppose I form an intention to say something about David Manley, whom I have met but don’t know very well (false, but let it go) and whom I take to be at a conference I am attending.

a. Looking across the room, I spot Paul Elbourne, whom I take to be Manley. I say ‘He is smart.’ pointing at Elbourne in broad daylight.

b. It appears here that I have conflicting intentions: I intend the x: x =Manley to be the semantic value of my demonstrative *and* I intend the x: x=o to be the semantic value of my demonstrative, where o is the person I am currently perceiving (=Elbourne).

c. Obviously, the x: x=Manley ≠ the x: x=o.

2. My plan:

1. Int(say something about Manley) +Bel(Manley is at the conference I am at)—

(means/ends reasoning)🡪

2. Int(Manley be the semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)+ Bel(object o

(=Elbourne) I am perceiving= Manley)—(means/ends reasoning)🡪

3. Int(o be the semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)

3. Here the intention at line 3 is the controlling intention since it is the means to execute the initiating intention at line 1 and the intermediate intention at line 2.

4. The intentions at lines 1-3 are all *de re*.

5. So o (Elbourne) is the object of my controlling intention in using ‘He’ as I did and a competent, reasonable, attentive hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation at the time I uttered ‘He’, and who has the properties attributed to the audience by the common ground at the time I uttered ‘He’ would know that o is the object of my controlling intention in using ‘He’.

6. Hence, o (=Elbourne) is the semantic value of my use of ‘He’.

7. Here, the intention on line 2 conflicts with the intention on line 3, since Manley≠o

VIII. Two remaining cases

A. In the Carnap/Agnew case the initiating intention was *de re* and the controlling intention was *de dicto*.

B. In the Manley/Elbourne case both intentions were *de re*.

C. It is worth considering the other two possible cases of conflicting intentions of the sort under consideration: initiating intention *de dicto* and controlling intention *de re*; and both intentions *de dicto*.

D. Initiating intention *de dicto* and controlling intention *de re*

1. Suppose I form the *de dicto* intention to say something about the IT Director at my university, whom I have never met but take to be hostile to my department.

2. I am in a room where a meeting is about to start, I know he will be attending and there are name cards with titles in front of each seat.

3. I spot a man sitting at a seat whose name card reads ‘IT Director’ but who is actually the Dean of Humanities.

4. Forming the belief that the man is the IT Director, I form the intention to make him the value of my demonstrative expression.

5. He gets up from his chair and as he is walking across the room, I whisper to a colleague and point at the man saying ‘He is hostile to our department’.

6. My plan:

1. Int(say something about IT Director) + Bel(IT Director is in the room I am in)—

(means/ends reasoning)🡪

2. Int(IT Director be the semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)+Bel (object

o I am perceiving = IT Director)---(means/ends reasoning)🡪

3. Int(o be the semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)

a. o is the object of my controlling intention (line 3).

b. So here, assuming that a competent, reasonable, attentive hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation and who has the properties attributed to the audience by the common ground would know that o is the object of my controlling intention in using ‘He’, o is the semantic value of my demonstrative expression.

c. The intentions at lines 1 and 2 are *de dicto;* that at line 3 is *de re*.

d. Again here, the intention at line 3 conflicts with that at line 2, since o≠ the IT Director.

E. Initiating intention and controlling intention are both *de dicto*

1. Suppose as in the previous case I form the *de dicto* intention to say something about the IT Director.

2. Again, I am at a meeting that is about to start and that I know he will attend.

3. I receive a text from a colleague who is outside the room but sees me inside saying ‘IT Director standing right behind you!’

4. I believe the text and without turning around, I point behind myself and say to my colleagues ‘He is hostile to our department.’

5. In fact, the Dean of Humanities is standing behind me.

6. My plan:

1. Int(say something about IT Director) + Bel(IT Director is in the room I am in)—

(means ends reasoning)🡪

2. Int (IT Director be semantic value of use of demonstrative expression) + Bel (IT

director = the person standing behind me)—(means/ends reasoning)🡪

3. Int (the person standing behind me be semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)

a. All intentions and beliefs here are *de dicto*.

b. The object of my controlling intention (line 3) is the Dean of Humanities = o.

c. Presumably, a competent, reasonable, attentive hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation and who has the properties attributed to the audience by the common ground would know that o is the object of my controlling intention in using ‘He’.

d. Hence o is the semantic value of my demonstrative expression here.

e. Again, the intentions at line 2 and 3 conflict, since the IT Director ≠ o.

IX. What is a case of conflicting intentions?

A. For all I have said to this point, cases of conflicting intentions are cases in which it seems true to say that I intend the F to be the semantic value of my use of a demonstrative expression and that I intend the G to be the semantic value of my use of the demonstrative expression, where the F≠ the G.[[6]](#footnote-6)

B. But I actually don’t think that is right.

1. There will be some cases of a use of a demonstrative expression by a speaker S, where it will seem true to say that S intended the F to the semantic value of her demonstrative and that S intended the G to be the semantic value of her demonstrative, where the F≠ the G and yet I will not want to say that these are cases of conflicting intentions.

2. So it turns out that there are fewer cases of conflicting intentions than one might have thought.

C. To see why this is so, suppose I am again attending a conference that Manley is also attending.

1. I am in the main conference room and believe Manley to be in the room too.

2. I intend to say something about Manley and then spot him.

3. I now intend Manley, the guy I am perceiving, to be the semantic value of a demonstrative expression.

4. Suppose further that I believe that Manley is the guy who punched me last night.

5. Then I think it will seem true to say that I intend (*de dicto*) the guy who punched me last night to be the semantic value of the demonstrative expression in question, (note that if you ask me whether I intend the guy who punched me last night to be the semantic value of my demonstrative expression I will respond affirmatively).

6. But now suppose that I was a bit drunk last night and just got things wrong: Elbourne punched me.

7. Then it seems true to say that I intend (*de re*) the x: x=Manley to be the semantic value of my demonstrative expression and to say that I intend (*de dicto*) the guy who punched me last night to be the semantic value of my demonstrative, where the x : x=Manley ≠ the guy who punched me last night.

8. But this *need* not be a case of conflicting intentions the way I understand the term.

9. For suppose my plan in using my demonstrative looks like this:

1. Int(say something about Manley) + Bel(Manley is in the same room as me)—(means/

ends reasoning)🡪

2. Int(Manley be the semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)+Bel(object o I

am perceiving =Manley)—(means/ends reasoning)🡪

3. Int(object o I am perceiving be semantic value of use of demonstrative expression)

a. As I’ve said, I think in such a case it seems true to say that I intend the guy who punched me last night to be the semantic value of my demonstrative.

b. However, this purported intention played no role in my plan in using the demonstrative in question.

c. Hence, when you look at my plan for using the demonstrative expression in question, there just aren’t any intentions that conflict.

d. The intentions at lines 2 and 3 don’t conflict, since the object o I am perceiving =Manley.

e. Call this case *Manley/Elbourne II*.

D. I want to reserve the term *case of conflicting intentions* for cases in which the plan for using the demonstrative expression *does* have intentions that conflict, as was true in all the cases of conflicting intentions previously considered.

1. After all, for a case to be a case of conflicting intentions regarding the use of a demonstrative expression, we should want the intentions that conflict to be in some sense associated with a single use of such an expression.

2. Best Laid Plans suggests that the way to make sense of two conflicting intentions being associated with the use of a demonstrative expression is that the conflicting intentions must both be parts of the plan for using the demonstrative expression in question.

3. Hence, Manley Elbourne II will not be a case of conflicting intentions as we are understanding the term.

X. “Objective” Metasemantics and an objection

1. Perhaps this is knowledge-safety. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **tall** is the semantic value of ‘tall’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here I am identifying people’s heights with degrees on the height scale. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One of the reasons Kennedy [2007] favored using the function *s* from adjective meanings to degrees in the semantics of *pos* is that he thought the meaning of an adjective played some role in determining the degree that something had to be above or below to have the adjective correctly apply. My thought is that the meaning of the adjective can still play a role here by constraining what a competent speaker intends in using the adjective in something like the way the meaning of ‘he’ constrains what a speaker can reasonably intend (males!) in using ‘he’ *and* by constraining what an idealized hearer who knows the common ground of the conversation would take the speaker to intend. I discuss this further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thanks to Francois Recanati (p.c) for a case of this sort. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I use the cautious formulation ‘it seems true to say…’ to avoid committing myself on the question of whether the intention ascriptions in question really are true. This is essentially the account Speaks [2013] gives of cases conflicting intentions. As I go on to indicate, I don’t think it is ultimately the correct account. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)