

On the meaning of context: a case study.

Semanticists often support their argument in favor of a certain analysis with the presentation of a context. In this paper I present a comparative case study on a selection of representative contexts provided in the literature for a reading of an attitude report such as (1a) known as Fodor’s third reading. [1] observed that sentence (1a) has besides the *de-dicto* reading in (1b) and the *de-re* reading in (1c) a *third reading*.

- (1) a. Adrian wants to buy a jacket like Malte’s.
b. wants(Adrian, $(\exists x)(\text{jacket}(x) \ \& \ \text{like-Malte’s-jacket}(x) \ \& \ \text{buy}(\text{Adrian},x))$)
c. $(\exists x)(\text{jacket}(x) \ \& \ \text{like-Malte’s-jacket}(x) \ \& \ \text{wants}(\text{Adrian}, \text{buy}(\text{Adrian},x)))$

A situation in which (1a) gives rise to the third reading is the following: Malte has a Burberry jacket, Adrian has seen a Burberry jacket in a shop window and formed the desire to buy such a jacket, Adrian doesn’t know either Malte or his jacket, but you know Malte and have seen his jacket, and I say (1a) to you. There is a natural interpretation of this utterance that neither (1b) nor (1c) render correctly. (1c) is wrong for this reading because the quantifier $(\exists x)$ entails that there is some particular Burberry jacket of which it is true that Adrian wants to buy it. And (1b) is wrong because it represents the description ‘like Malte’s jacket’ as part of the content of Adrian’s desire, which in the given scenario it is not. Now consider the contexts and truth-conditions in (2a) - (2c).

- (2) a. A store sells some coats that all look like Malte’s and Adrian does not know anything about Malte. Assume further that Adrian wants one of those coats and any of them is an option. Truth-conditions: $\exists!X : \text{coats} - \text{like} - \text{malte’s}(X)$ and Adrian wants to buy one of X [2, cf. p. 427]
b. Adrian’s desire is to buy some jacket or other, and the only important thing is that it be a Burberry jacket. Unbeknownst to him, Malte’s jacket is one of those as well. Truth-conditions: Adrian wants_{w₀} $[\lambda w' [a - \text{jacket} - \text{like} - \text{malte’s}_{w_0}] \lambda x_1 [\text{PRO to buy}_{w'} x_1]]$ [4, cf. p. 100]
c. Malte and Adrian do not know each other. Adrian has seen a green Burberry jacket in a catalogue and wants to buy one. Malte happens to own precisely such a green Burberry jacket. Truth-conditions: $\text{Attitude}_w(x, \langle P, Q \rangle)$ iff $\exists Q'$ (the reported property) s.t. at the w -closest worlds w' where $Q(w') \neq \emptyset$ (the reporting property): $Q'(w') \neq \emptyset$ and $Q'(w') \subseteq Q(w')$ and $\text{Attitude}_w(x, \lambda w' P_{w'}(Q'))$ is true. [3, cf. p. 395]

It is not surprising that different authors do not agree on the formal analysis of a certain linguistic phenomenon. But for the case of the third reading, it is surprising how the argumentation for one or the other approach depends on the creative stipulation of contextual information. It is even more surprising that all of the proposals are right in their own respect: the story that each author comes up to justify her own proposal is designed so as to support a certain analysis with distinct truth conditions. I argue that the type of context-dependency which a comparison of (2a)-(2c) reveals is one which goes beyond the type of context-dependency that has been identified e.g. in the *interpretation* of deixis and indexicals but pertains to the context-dependency of the *construction* of the logical form of an utterance such as (1b). That is, if the derivation of the semantic content of the third reading of (1a) is driven by context and not by (1a) itself, the context determines the meaning of the third reading of (1a) in that the context induces the truth-conditions of (1a). The paper discusses this observation from the perspective of formal semantics but the authors would appreciate feedback from a psychological and philosophical point of view.

References

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