

Context

The semantic-pragmatic interface

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I here want to explore the notion of context. To what extent does context have influence on what we communicate with our words? What is the relation between what we literally say and what we implicate in a particular context? What *is* context? It seems to me that a clear-cut distinction between semantics and pragmatics is dependent on how we understand context. And since many theories within philosophy of language is founded on a distinction between semantics and pragmatics, a clarification of the notion of context is crucial. This paper is intended as a contribution to such a clarification.

The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is usually drawn between what is literally and conventionally uttered on the one hand, and what can be added to the utterance by a context on the other. In Mort Walker's comic *Beetle Bailey* there are many examples of how one misunderstands or fails to notice this distinction, as for instance the following situation: The General looks out the window from his office and sees his secretary, Miss Buxley, on her way to work. Apparently annoyed, he says to himself: 'Here she comes, late again!' As Miss Buxley enters the office, he shouts: 'Miss Buxley! Do you know what time it is?' Miss Buxley, totally unaffected by his anger, turns to Miss Blips and says: 'When is that man going to get a watch?'¹



This way of saying one thing and communicating something else, or more, is a matter of what Grice calls (particular) conversational implicatures. He then distinguishes between the explicit, literal and truth relevant meaning of an utterance (what is said) on the one hand and the meaning inferred from what is communicated in a particular context (what is

¹ Mort Walker: *Beetle Bailey*, King Features Syndicate Inc. 2004.

implied by what is said) on the other hand. We can then say that the former is a matter of semantics, where we study the sense and reference of the signs, while the latter is a matter of pragmatics, where contextual factors have influence on what is communicated with the signs. Semantics can be said to involve the meaning that is related to truth and reference, while pragmatics is about the meaning that follows from a particular use of words in a context.

In the example above, Miss Buxley takes the General's utterance 'Do you know what time it is?' as a request for a time report. The General, on the other hand, is interested in the time from another point of view. He is packed up in work, and needs both his secretaries to assist him in getting everything ready in time. Miss Buxley is perhaps one hour late and she has probably been late several times before. The question he asks is thus a rhetorical question that does not require an answer like 'It's 9:45', but rather something like 'Oh my gosh, is it that late?' and then an excuse. By asking this apparently innocent question, the General is implicating that Miss Buxley is late. He is also performing the speech act of criticizing her lateness. Miss Buxley, however, understands his utterance in the literal sense, thereby failing to grasp the pragmatic levels of his message.

Now what would have happened if the General instead of saying 'Do you know what time it is?' had just said: 'What time is it?' First of all, the implicature 'You're late!' would not be conveyed. In order to actually get Miss Buxley to realize that she is late, he has to say '*Do you know* what time it is?' But this is not a question of Miss Buxley's epistemic capacities. The 'Do you know' has nothing to do with what she knows or not, and the General is not really wondering whether she knows. He could have said 'Do you know that you are late?' thereby making the implicature more explicit, while the speech act would remain the same. In both formulations, the 'you' is required in order to convey the implicature of a criticism. And in both circumstances would it be inappropriate of Miss Buxley to answer the question by saying 'Yes' or 'No'. In the last picture, when Miss Buxley says 'When is that man going to get a watch?' she is referring to the General as 'that man'. And even though neither we, Miss Buxley nor Miss Blips actually see him there in the last picture, we all know that she refers to the General. We understand this from the context that he was the one asking the time in the pictures before. Hence the context clearly points to the General. 'That man' is therefore not an imprecise way to refer to him, rather; it *does* open for some implicatures about her disrespect for him.

Indexical expressions such as ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’ represent a problem for the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, since they point directly from the utterance to the context; hence rendering it impossible to assign both sense and reference to them regardless of the relevant contextual elements. And since it is thus impossible to assign a truth-value to a sentence containing indexicals without taking the context into account, we seem to have a problem with identifying its semantic content. Segerdahl points out that this problem will not be solved merely by replacing the indexicals with descriptions as ‘the speaker’, ‘the place of the utterance’ and ‘the time of the utterance’, since we will still need the context in order to identify their references: “The words ‘speaker’ and ‘addressee’ are as deictic as the words ‘I’ and ‘you’ are.”² Such paraphrases of the indexicals do not identify the reference any more than the indexical expression itself, though, according to Segerdahl, the paraphrases seem more autonomous relative to use.

But this is an illusion... Nothing is gained, however, through this paraphrase. It is just another deictic vocabulary, presupposing another concrete use of words, albeit a use that applies to the speech event from the outside, that is, from another speech event.³

So if we follow the suggested paraphrase, how would the General be able to convey the implicature? ‘Does *the addressee* know what time it is?’ Here it seems like we are talking in a third person perspective, with ‘the addressee’ referring to someone else than Miss Buxley. And if we should really fill out the implicit indexical reference, we would have to say something like ‘Does the addressee know what time it is in time zone ‘GMT-5’ at 9:45 p.m. January the 6th 2004?’ in which case the whole message would be lost. The explication of the indexicals thus eliminates the possibility for asking the rhetorical question, hence conveying the particular implicature, and in the end of performing the speech act of criticizing Miss Buxley’s lateness.

But not only do certain words point directly to the context: many *statements* point to context in the way that one has to have knowledge of certain presuppositions in order to judge them as true or false. This is particularly important when a statement is true according to one presupposition but false according to another. Bach notices that this often is the case with conditionals:

² Segerdahl (1996), p. 28.

³ Segerdahl (1996), p. 28.

For instance, counterfactual conditionals are not categorically true or false but only relative to a set of implicit background assumptions. Utterances of both the following could be true if different background assumptions were held fixed:

(15) If Lincoln hadn't gone to the theater, he wouldn't have been assassinated.

(16) If Lincoln hadn't gone to the theater, he would have been assassinated anyway.

This suggests that these conditionals do not express complete propositions as they stand.⁴

So which of these conditionals one holds as true seems to depend on facts outside the conditionals themselves; facts that actually constitute the relevant context for the assertion of these statements. In stating the first conditional, one concurrently asserts that Lincoln was assassinated *because* he went to the theater, and that he was just at the wrong place at the wrong time or something like that. In the second conditional, however, one claims that he was *not* assassinated because he went to the theater, but that someone would have assassinated him at some other time and place. One then seems to claim that someone had planned to kill him, and that they would have succeeded anyway, sooner or later. In addition, both these conditionals are asserted on the presupposition that there is someone named Lincoln who was assassinated. If this presupposition was false, then, the conditionals could neither be asserted nor denied.

Barwise seems to substantiate this point when he says that he assumes that there are conditions under which conditionals and other expressions hold, and that these conditions are anchored by the context. And since the relevant context changes from time to time, the conditions under which expressions hold will change accordingly. An example will perhaps make this point clearer: Until I discovered *Kanebo* mascara, it was considered an unchallenged truth that 'If I rub my eyes when I'm out on a rainy day, then my mascara will be all over my face in no time'. *Kanebo* mascara is, believe it or not, constructed to stay on the lashes unless one uses water with a temperature above 38°C to remove it. When I started using this wonder mascara, I had to abandon my original beliefs about being out in the rain with mascara on. Based on the new condition that I now use the *Kanebo* mascara, with all its advantages, I can no longer accept the conditional 'If I rub my eyes when I'm out on a rainy day, then my mascara will be all over my face in no time' as

⁴ Bach (1994), pp. 128-129.

representing sound knowledge. The truth of the conditional has accordingly changed along with the change in contextual aspects, including scientific progress over time.

That a statement is true at one point, but false or even irrelevant at another, is not confusing or surprising to us. We constantly relate to changes, both in background conditions and in more focal matters. The neighbors' dog dies, my friend gets a new boyfriend, the summer is over and I'm buying new shoes. All these factors will influence the truth-values of a whole bunch of statements, as for instance of 'My friend Dina is single', 'Our neighbors' dog barks all night', 'It's 25 degrees outside' and 'My favorite shoes are the black and brown ones'. In this way, much of our knowledge is temporally conditioned. We know that *if* this and that happen, then this and that will change accordingly, because nothing in our world is totally unrelated to other things. Our knowledge of this potentiality is conditional, and our conditionals point to it. In this way, we can say that the conditional picks out the relevant context, and that our understanding of the context is conditional in nature.

According to Barwise, then, the context is decisive for finding out what a conditional is about. This point is however usually neglected by logicians, he says, who prefer to leave out or remove all contextual factors, in order to achieve a purely semantic approach to language:

I will call this the 'fleshing out strategy', because it assumes that sentences whose interpretation depends on some troublesome contextual element can be fleshed out to sentences where that contextual element is eliminated. I assume that this strategy is wrong-headed, that it has been shown to be unworkable, and that it should now be laid to rest.⁵

That contextual elements are regarded as philosophically troublesome is clear from the strong efforts that are made to defend a pure semantic approach to language, as is clearly indicated in Grice's theory of conversational implicatures. To distinguish between what is semantically and hence logically said and what is pragmatically implicated is the crucial point in order to defend the formal logical reading of language. And since formal logic is supposed to deal adequately with truth conditions, everything that does not coincide with

⁵ Barwise (1986), p. 22.

this interpretation has to be explained away as pragmatic implicatures.⁶ Hertzberg is critical to this distinction between what is said and what is implicated by what is said:

Now I find this move rather suspect. It seems to be connected with the inclination some philosophers have to distinguish between language as it really is and language as it enters human intercourse. This distinction in turn is bound up with the philosophical idea of language as a formal system. Obviously Grice's conversational maxims have the effect of protecting the idea of the language system from challenges involving an appeal to the ways in which language is actually used, by suggesting a way of squaring the fact that we would never actually speak in certain ways with the fact that a powerful philosophical picture entails that it should be *correct* to speak in those ways.⁷

In interpreting an utterance, we seem to be focused on what is *communicated*, what message the speaker wants to *convey*. This means that we focus on the implicature rather than the literal meaning of what is explicitly said. Uttered in a certain context, the implicature will force its way, thereby pushing the literal meaning into the background. In this way we might want to say that the implicature is an inference, made from considering what is literally said together with the relevant context of the utterance. But then how do we figure out what part of the context is relevant or even decisive for what implicature is made? How do we make sure that we do not add the wrong contextual elements to what is said, thereby inferring the wrong implicature? In short, what is the *relevant* context supposed to be?

Perhaps another look at the example with the General and Miss Buxley can illuminate this question. When Miss Buxley failed to grasp the General's implicature, what part of the relevant context was she not aware of? She failed to notice his irritation, or at least, that it was directed towards her. This would probably be clearer to her if she had heard his comment in the first picture: 'Here she comes, late again!' And probably, she did not realize that she had been late several times before, and that the General just did not mention it because he finds her so attractive. But then again, even if she knew all these things, but still had no idea that 'Do you know what time it is?' is a common way to comment on someone's lateness, she would actually not have access to the relevant context for this implicature.

⁶ I will not go into details about Grice's theory of implicatures, since I have dealt more thoroughly with this elsewhere.

⁷ Hertzberg (2001), p. 95.

According to Hertzberg, a context is “precisely that in light of which it *matters* how someone responds to what is said”.⁸ But then it seems arbitrary, or at least ambiguous, what part of the context I am supposed to focus on in order to interpret what is said and thus make an appropriate response. It seems to be Hertzberg’s view, however, that the problem is quite the opposite: that it is rather the expectation that a word or a sentence has meaning *in absence of a context* that is mistaken. And can one even say that a *sentence*, taken by itself, does or does not make sense?⁹ What meaning our words and sentences are supposed to be given outside of a context seems to be arbitrary, or at least ambiguous. This is exactly Barwise’s point when he distinguishes between sentences and statements, according to which a “sentence can be used by different speakers in different situations to make different statements”.¹⁰ Thus a sentence will have meaning only when it is given a certain interpretation as a statement. This again means that one assigns a truth-value to the statement that is *made* with the sentence, and not to the sentence in isolation.

So in order to assign a truth-value to a sentence, or rather, to a statement that is made with the sentence, one has to consider the relevant contextual elements that establish what statement is being made. This seems kind of circular, since one very well might have to know what statement is being made in order to identify the relevant context. But there may be another problem: According to Barwise, it is actually impossible to explicitly list up all the contextual elements that will be relevant for the truth of a statement, in particular with respect to conditionals:

There is simply no way to suppose that there is any way to flesh out a conditional statement to incorporate a description of the exact conditions under which the conditional holds, or even the conditions under which the speaker believes it holds.¹¹

Now, consider for instance how we perceive a human face: Do we see it as a collection of facial components such as eyes, nose, mouth and so on? And when we recognize a friend, is it because we know that she has a nose that is exactly this particular length and eyes that have exactly this particular shape and position? No! We see her face and that is it. We recognize it among all other faces. And we recognize the recognition in her face. No

⁸ Hertzberg (2001), p. 93, footnote 4. My italic.

⁹ Hertzberg (2001), p. 92.

¹⁰ Barwise (1986), p. 22.

¹¹ Barwise (1986), p. 31.

description would ever be sufficiently specific or detailed to enable us to identify this particular face and this particular reaction in her face. Even of the face of our own mother would we be unable to give a complete or even an accurate description.

In this way, the totality of context is impossible to articulate, and much of the context cannot be articulated. We are always in the context, which means that when we make an utterance, we make the *statement*, not the sentence. We are in the context, focusing on what we want to say, on what message we want to convey. The way we express this message will then be a conventional, in the sense common, way to express this implicature and perform this speech act, and pointing to these background assumptions. This means that the context cannot be considered as something that is relevant *in addition to* the sentence considered in isolation.

But then how can we make a clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics if we cannot, even in principle, account for all the contextual elements that are necessary for determining the conveyed meaning of an utterance? According to Hertzberg, there is no way telling in advance what contextual aspects are relevant for the meaning of an utterance. It is impossible to ever find out all the relevant circumstances that might have an impact on the truth or falsity of the conditional relation stated. It is always possible that some factor could have triggered or prevented a certain event, such that another conditional relation would hold instead. But these possibilities are all inexhaustible and hypothetical. As with the example about Lincoln, we would not know it, for instance, if someone had planned to shoot Lincoln two weeks after he was shot. But if someone *had* planned this, and *if* they *would have* succeeded, it *would* also be true that *if* Lincoln hadn't gone to the theater, *then* he would have been assassinated anyway. – Of course, *unless* he came to the hospital in time and was saved.

But these are lots of ifs, and we surely cannot take all of *those* into account. The “problem” is that, in dealing with the world, we have to. Nothing is unconditionally true. There are always some possible triggering or preventing factors that would alter the truth-value of a conditional. Think of any strong causal relation, as for instance between me dropping a pen and the pen falling towards the ground. Certainly this consequence can be prevented if certain conditions are altered. One could for instance drop the pen in a gravity-free zone or fill the pen with helium. In this way, the truth of the antecedent alone is never enough for

us to infer the consequent, but when we still find it sufficient to infer the consequent we do this because we consider the antecedent in the context of these other conditions being fulfilled. That is, we consider the conditional under normal circumstances; that is, according to our knowledge, culture, history and way of life in general.

Johnson-Laird gives a plausible account of how we reason with conditionals within a context: Based on our interpretation of the conditional, we construct a mental model of how things are accordingly related in the world. The use of conditionals thus presupposes that we relate to reality through models, in the sense that we understand a conditional by connecting it with a specific model of the world, based on the consideration of certain contextual aspects. This means that a conditional may be true according to one model, but false according to another. Let me give an example: I am trying to convince my friend Ada to invite our common friend Dina to her dinner-party next Saturday, so I say to her: 'If you invite Dina to the party, it will be so much fun!' However, Ada does not agree with me. I cannot understand why, since Dina is the wittiest girl I know, and we always have so much fun together. I ask Ada how she can possibly deny that inviting Dina will make the party great, and she tells me, reluctantly, that Dina was dumped by her boyfriend yesterday, and that the reason for this was the affair he's been having with Ada for the last two months. With these new contextual factors in mind, I realized that my conditional was asserted in a haze of ignorance and based on a totally irrelevant model. So it turned out that there was another context that was more relevant to this case than the one my model was based on.

In this example, there are lots of considerations with respect to how we judge the situation. For instance, we assume that certain events in the past will have influence on the future; here that Ada has been having an affair with Dina's boyfriend, which again made him eventually dump Dina and choose to be with Ada instead. These facts will have influence on the party: Probably, Dina will try to hurt Ada physically. Then the boyfriend will come between them, hence bringing up lots of emotions. The whole party will then end in a scandal. We have no trouble imagining these scenes taking place as a result of the events sketched in our new and improved model. Knowing what it is like to be a human, we immediately recognize the potential for scandals if these three people come together too soon after the break.

Johnson-Laird's approach thus seems elucidating with respect to how we actually use and reason with conditionals according to our way of life. Assuming a certain model to hold, one can expect certain conditionals to hold. If the conditionals do not hold, there is probably something wrong with the model, or another model is more relevant to that specific situation. So I may have misjudged or even missing some essential contextual factors, which again would have made me infer an irrelevant or false conditional. Hence the conditional relation is stated and justified within a model, and without a model one cannot establish any relations, which means that a conditional can be true or false *only* according to a bundle of contextual factors.

It seems clear, then, that a sentence *per se* cannot be true or false, but only understood as a statement or an utterance that is uttered in a particular context can we assign it a truth-value. Not only do we need the context to provide us with the relevant background conditions to decide the truth of a statement: Outside of a context it is not even clear what the words or the sentence as a whole refers to. If we consider a sentence in isolation of a context, we will normally give it some standard interpretation, based on the conventional meaning of the words and phrases in it. However, we still give the sentence an *interpretation*, according to a certain context that we consider to be standard or conventional. This does not mean that this is the literal meaning of the sentence as such, since any sentence can be used to express various statements that can be taken as standard interpretations within the appropriate context.

Hertzberg illustrates this point by discussing an example that one could think is a combination of words that does not make a meaningful sentence, namely 'Caesar is a prime number'. Here we would normally think of 'Caesar' as referring to the founder of Imperial Rome and '...is a prime number' as being part of an arithmetic statement. But this is a purely psychological inference, he says, based on the way in which we are normally used to hear about the notions 'Caesar' and 'prime number'. Uttered in a particular context, however, this sentence could make perfect sense for anyone who hears it. Hertzberg sketches the following context:

Let us ... imagine the following conversation between two judges at a dog show:

A: 'What are the prime contenders in this class?'

B: 'Well, Caesar is a prime number.'

A: 'Which one is that?'

B: 'It's number 53.'

A: 'Yes, you're right of course, 53 really is a prime number.'

The example, perhaps, is a little strained, but what it seems to give us is a case in which, on the one hand, [Caesar is a prime number] makes good sense, while on the other hand '53 is a prime number' is not used as an assertion in arithmetic.¹²

So the only reason why we are inclined to interpret sentences in some standard (in the sense common) way when we consider it in isolation, seems to be that we as humans share a culture, history and way of living that make us associate in some similar direction when we hear certain words and phrases. Hertzberg refers to Wittgenstein, who speaks about "the mistake of regarding the sense of a word as an atmosphere that it carries with it into every kind of application".¹³ But sometimes, as is the case with 'Caesar', he says, a word comes very close to carrying its context with it like an atmosphere, and then we are led to believe that this is its literal meaning.¹⁴

Segerdahl argues that no sentences in our language have a standard, conventional, literal or semantic meaning that can be separated from how we use the sentence in a particular context. The only reason why we would think so, is that we have a conception of language as an autonomous system, according to which language is given by its vocabulary, syntax and grammar.¹⁵ Stenlund calls this "a calculus conception of language", where natural languages are considered as being in principle formal languages.¹⁶ We are then led to believe that we can study language as it really is, separated from how it is used in particular situations. Segerdahl claims that the whole idea of an autonomous meaning is a misleading oversimplification and that the fact that a word has meaning can only be understood in terms of the concrete use of the word.¹⁷ Some words or phrases *seem* to have a standard interpretation, but only because we associate them with familiar language games in which they *do* have a standard use. This will for instance be the case in the example where the General shouts: 'Do you know what time it is?' to Miss Buxley. This is a standard way to comment on someone's lateness, but it is only standard according to a

¹² Hertzberg (2001), p. 92-93.

¹³ Hertzberg (2001), p. 92, footnote 3.

¹⁴ Cappelen and Lepore (2004) defend what they call "semantic minimalism". According to their view, only indexicals are recognized as context sensitive expressions. Apart from these, "the context of utterance has no effect on the proposition semantically expressed. In this sense, the semantic content of a sentence S is that proposition that all utterances of S express (when we adjust for or keep stable) the semantic values of the [indexicals]." Cf. p. 2.

¹⁵ Segerdahl (1996), p. 1.

¹⁶ Stenlund (1990), p. 4ff.

¹⁷ Segerdahl (1996), p. 47.

certain language game. For instance, shouting this sentence to some stranger I meet in the street will not be taken as a comment on his or her lateness. Rather, they will think that I am asking what time it is, and perhaps they will interpret my shouting as a sign of panic or even mental instability.

A problem is however that when Grice identifies what he calls conversational implicatures as something that is communicated *in addition to* what is literally said, he already presupposes a calculus conception of language. In fact, the whole system of implicatures is made for one purpose; that of protecting this conception of language as an autonomous system, based on the belief that the semantics of language is given by formal logic. According to Sægerdahl, this is the actual purpose of *all* pragmatic theory. We do not even need the distinction between semantics and pragmatics for any other reasons than for defending language as being in principle and in essence a formal system, based on the consideration of literal meaning together with certain rules of composition:

Pragmatics is an attempt to save semantic approaches to language from facts of language use which conspicuously expose the untenability of these approaches. Pragmatic theory thus makes it possible to continue traditional theorizing by placing the language-system in a hidden zone beneath an overlay of pragmatic principles: pragmatics protects semantics.¹⁸

The theory of implicatures is then just one among many maneuvers to justify the distinction between context dependent meaning and literal meaning. In fact, the theories of indexicals, speech acts, presuppositions, metaphors and implicatures are *all* pragmatic theories motivated by the aim to protect the view of language as in principle being a formal and autonomous system. A difference between these theories is however that they focus on different dimensions of context. While one in the theory of indexicals consider context basically as the time and place of the utterance, Grice seems to believe that context is an objective situation in which the utterance takes place. In speech act theories, context is taken to include everything that is constitutive for making an utterance serve as a particular speech act. A presupposition, on the other hand, is a contextual element that is necessary to make the utterance true or false.

¹⁸ Sægerdahl (1996), p. 83.

All these theories seem to isolate pragmatic aspects of language from semantic aspects, hence giving us the idea that we are dealing with two distinct levels of language. By drawing a distinction between language “as it really is” and language as it is used in communication, we are led to think that we can study language as it is *independently* of its use. Hence the whole idea of adding in contextual elements is a threat to this conception of language, and this is why we regard speech acts, presuppositions, indexicals, implicatures and other common phenomena in language as *problems*: They are all determined by context. According to Sægerdahl, however, none of these pragmatic theories can be used to demonstrate that there are such things as literal or conventional meaning that can be isolated from context. The role of context in language is the way an utterance must be understood according to certain *language games*, that again are parts of a whole range of activities, rules and ways of life in general.

But if meaning is something that is totally detached from the linguistic expressions, how can we know at all what someone means with his or her words? And how do we know that they mean anything with them at all? Do we not here end up with an extremely wide and indefinite notion of context? According to Sægerdahl, the context against which a sentence is uttered and understood must be related to the language game that the sentence is used in. This is because, when we learn language, we learn it as a part of a language game, as for instance in the language game of telling time or buying something. We do not first learn how to behave and respond in appropriate ways, and then learn to talk about these things. We recognize the utterance as a familiar way of expression within a certain language game. This is the same we do with respect to interpreting events and actions surrounding us: As Sægerdahl says: “It is like inferring that a man has bought food from the fact that he comes out from the grocer’s with two filled plastic bags. We recognize an action as a part of a wider pattern of acting.”¹⁹

This is why it is usually quite obvious to us what context is relevant for inferring the right conversational implicature from an utterance. Our utterances and actions are part of a wider pattern of living, and they reflect how we organize our lives and our world. The context is not an objective collection of facts, which any sentence can be put up against in order to determine the statement, implicature or speech act conveyed in addition to its

¹⁹ Sægerdahl (1996), p. 197.

literal meaning. Rather, the context is always organized. And the way in which it is organized is always relative to us.

At this point, it may be important to get clear about the sort of difference considering the utterance in its context makes. It does not simply mean that we enlarge the number of factors taken into consideration in establishing the sense of an utterance, as though the sense were a function of a determinate range of contextual variables in addition to the verbal ones. This would be a misunderstanding, as should be clear from the fact that there is no way of telling in advance what contextual considerations will be relevant to what a person is saying. What we respond to in the course of a conversation, it might be said, is the particular utterance in its particular context, our understanding of the utterance and our understanding of the context being mutually dependent.²⁰

Context can accordingly not be understood as some variable, consisting for instance of all true and relevant statements, that can be added to some sentence to find its meaning. If meaning is considered as a function in this way (such that $\text{SENTENCE}_{\text{Context}} = \text{MEANING}$), then context will serve merely as a reservoir for what we must presuppose. This is not an adequate theory of context. So unless one insists that context is an identifiable variable in this way, there are no *practical* or *theoretical* problems involved in acknowledging contextual elements as indeterminate parts of the utterance.

Our understanding of the utterance cannot be detached from our understanding of the context. If we try to study the meaning of a sentence apart from its use, then, we will anyway make a whole lot of presuppositions in order to come to a standard interpretation. Segerdahl points out that when an expression seems to be ambiguous before a context is added in, as for instance ‘9:45’ seems to be disambiguated by adding ‘a.m.’, this “disambiguation” consists in using another system of expression,²¹ not in enhancing the precision. Considered in connection with a particular context, the utterance ‘It’s 9:45’ is not ambiguous. That it is *possible* to have misunderstandings is not an indication of a shortcoming of our theory, rather; radical misunderstandings are fairly rare.

[In speaking and listening we] simply respond to what the other part is saying, and as long as no problem arises, we do not stop to consider whether we got her right. Of course, sometimes problems of understanding do arise, but when they do, there

²⁰ Cf. Hertzberg (2001). This quote is missing in the published version, but it appears on p. 6 in a preprint on his homepage: http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/lhertzbe/The_Sense_Is_Where_You_Find_It.doc. Hertzberg himself refers to this as a “rather crucial passage”.

²¹ Cf. Segerdahl (1996), p. 37.

is no general procedure for solving them; rather, the way we go about trying to solve them itself depends on the context.²²

So when it seems that ‘It’s 9:45’ is relative to context in another way than ‘It’s 9:45 a.m.’, where we at least know whether it is 9:45 in the morning or in the evening, this is an illusion. In order to understand that ‘It’s 9:45 a.m.’ refers to the morning instead of the evening totally depends on whether or not one actually is familiar with the terms ‘a.m.’ and ‘p.m.’ as they are used in certain parts of the world. In fact, the way we measure time *on the whole* is totally dependent on context. The only reason why we think that the measurements of time have to be in minutes, hours, days and years is that these measurements are dependent on a universal context that we all share as humans in the world. This way to measure time is related to the sun and the seasons of the year. A day is measured according to the sun, and a year is measured according to the earth’s journey around the sun. These are altogether context dependent elements of time reports, even though they are universally accepted, and therefore *seem* to be objective conditions and context independent.

We also have determinants of time measurements that are not universal, but still are generally established within a certain cultural and historic context. This is for instance the case with the way one measures time according to the birth of Christ. When we say that it is December 19th 2004, we already take part in this cultural and historical context. Furthermore, we have twelve months that are measured according to the moon and the seasons. Then we have weeks that are measured relative to the changes of the moon phases and the weekdays that have names relative to how they are placed within the week. Moreover, important days of the year also have names, as for instance red-letter days. On the personal level, we have for instance birthdays and wedding days.

On a totally universal level, we (humans) measure time according to the past, the present and the future. This is reflected in our language in the way we inflect our verbs. On the historical level, we divide the past according to important events and époques. For instance, we talk about *before*, *during* and *after* World War Two, the Stone Ages, the Middle Ages or the Antiquity. We can even speak of time according to art époques or the Olympic Games. The way we measure time says a lot about what is important to us, like

²² Hertzberg (2001), in the preprint.

the rain season or Christmas. Personally, I will measure time according to my marriage, my studies, my birthday, my parents' divorce, and so on.

We have seen that a distinction between semantics and pragmatics cannot be a distinction between context independent and context dependent meaning. Nor can it be a distinction between literal and figurative meaning. In fact, even truth has been shown to be totally context dependent. Much of context changes over time; hence forcing us to continuously adjust our models and reorganize our world. In this way, context cannot be an objective property, variable, or collection of elements. Nor can it be a bundle of chaotic impressions. The context is organized relative to our *interests*. – To *our* interests. When we perceive the world, *we* are the ones adjusting the focus. By allowing in context, we allow in ourselves, our perspective and our way of living. The alternative is accordingly not an alternative.

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