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Book review

1 Q3 Review of Stojnic's "Context and Coherence"

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4 Q4 "Context and Coherence: the Logic and Grammar of Prominence", Una Stojnic. Oxford University Press, Oxford UK
5 (2021). pp. ix + 219, ISBN: 978-0-19-886546-9, \$77.00 (USD).
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1. Introduction

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10 Una Stojnic's first book offers a new approach to context-sensitivity and considers its implications for a wide range of
11 philosophical issues. It is meticulously researched and provides a bracing defense of a bold thesis. The book is extremely rich,
12 formally and empirically – drawing heavily on theoretical linguistics, formal semantics, and computational linguistics.

13 While we will be developing some critical worries below, we begin with a strong recommendation: Experts in the field,
14 including especially pragmatists of a formal stripe, will find Stojnic's book solid, dense, challenging, and thought-
15 provoking. There is evidence here of a real force to be reckoned with.

16 Here is the game plan: First, we give an overview of the book's contents. Then we take a closer look at one case study. After
17 that, we rehearse our worries.
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2. The Book's contents

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21 The book's focus is on a long-standing question in semantics, pragmatics, and philosophy of language: What mechanisms
22 resolve context-sensitivity? For example, 'Give me that' communicates different things when Arthur says it pointing at a book
23 versus when Rob says it pointing at a cup.

24 The received view has it that this is the same sentence, but it conveys different meanings depending on context. Since
25 "grammar underdetermines content" (1), interpretation requires "extra-linguistic supplementation" (3). The latter involves
26 intellectually demanding cognitive mechanisms, including especially mind-reading and general-purpose inference; these
27 look to extra-linguistic context and infer speaker's meaning.

28 Stojnic's worry about this approach is implicit in the very first sentences of the book:

29 "Natural languages are vastly context-sensitive: what appears to be one and the same string of words can convey quite
30 different meanings on different occasions of use. Yet, we are able to understand each other effortlessly in real time.
31 What exactly determines the meaning on an occasion of use, and how are we so good at recovering it?" (vii).
32

33 The received view, thinks Stojnic, leaves us with no good answer to her psychological "how" question.

34 Her radical alternative, developed throughout the book, is that "meaning is determined entirely by grammar" (vii); that
35 "context-sensitivity resolution is a matter of linguistic mechanisms" (5). In fact, it's better to reconceive the problem, away
36 from so-called "context-sensitivity" to "prominence-sensitivity" (172), which is resolved by grammatical mechanisms
37 "encoded in the dynamic layer of meaning of a discourse" (171). These don't operate on extra-linguistic stuff, but rather on
38 entire discourses, as opposed to operating just on their constituent words and sentences.

39 Stojnic's "logic and grammar of prominence" is developed and applied to various contested semantic phenomena – first
40 and most extensively, on a comprehensive semantics for pronouns (Chs. 2–6), but also epistemic modals (in Ch. 8), the
41 challenge of non-propositionalism (in Ch. 9), and certain lines of objection to classical logic (in Ch. 10).
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3. A case study

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45 Turning now from a map of the forest to the study of some individual trees, let us look at the dialectic in finer detail,
46 focusing on the most thoroughly developed case, i.e., Stojnic's claim that the alleged "extra-linguistic, context-sensitivity" of
47 demonstrative pronouns (such as 'Give me *that*' and 'Liz poked *him*') is better thought of as a case of prominence-sensitivity,
48 resolved by "linguistic mechanisms".
49

1 An illustration of how this might work comes from the literature on "mechanisms of discourse coherence". (See Stojnic (5)
2 for references.) Consider:

3
4 [1] Phil tickled Stanley. Liz poked him.
5

6 It is uncontroversial that the second sentence can report Liz as poking either Phil or Stanley. What determines which
7 interpretation is correct, for a given case? According to the "discourse conventions" literature, if the discourse is organized
8 around a *Cause-and-effect* relation, 'him' refers to Phil; whereas if it is organized around a *Resemblance* relation, 'him' refers to
9 Stanley. The interpretation of the pronoun depends on which mechanism is operative in the context. Other sorts of discourse
10 conventions include *Explanation*, *Narration*, *Contiguity*, *Result*, *Parallel*, *Elaboration*, *Contrast* (62–6). Stojnic consistently insists
11 that such mechanisms are "linguistic" (32), "grammatical" (65) – terms that she uses more or less interchangeably in this
12 context, and often in italics. (Gestures are linguistic too (47). They are "linguistic conventions", "a part of the grammar of
13 language" (6)). Hence:

14 "... meaning is determined entirely by grammar – by rules of language that have largely been missed, and the effects of
15 which have been mistaken for extra-linguistic effects of an utterance situation on meaning" (vii).

16 "[I]t is the linguistic meaning of an expression, together with linguistic mechanisms governing contextual parameters
17 that determine the referent; no extra-linguistic supplementation is required" (171).

18 To come at the main point again: The standard view would draw a firm distinction between 'I am happy' vs. 'She is happy'.
19 Only the former is supposed to be automatic, intention-independent, determined in context by the standing meaning of 'I'; in
20 the latter case, it's supposed to be speaker intentions which fix the content (and hearer mind-reading which identifies it). On
21 the prominence-sensitive approach, in contrast, 'she' is just as linguistically determined as 'I'. Its interpretation is a function of
22 which linguistic mechanism is operative in the context.

23 The story also extends to cover the difference between the free vs. bound readings of 'she' in:

24
25 [2] A woman came in. She sat down.
26
27

28 On Stojnic's approach, it is linguistic mechanisms, not extra-linguistic field psychology, which resolve such sensitivity.
29 Accordingly, there are different prominence mechanisms at work in the formalizations of the two different readings of 'she'
30 (57).

31 More generally, in the case of pronouns:

32 "The meaning of a pronoun is simple, uniform, and unambiguous; as a first pass, a pronoun selects the most prominent
33 candidate interpretation – what's "at the center of attention" at the point in discourse in which it occurs. At any given
34 point in a discourse, the context provides a ranking by prominence of candidate interpretations for a pronoun, tracking
35 what's most prominent – that is, at the center of attention. The prominence ranking changes and updates, as the
36 discourse unfolds, as a function of the meaning of linguistic items the discourse harbors, word by word. In this way, the
37 resolution of a pronoun requires no extra-linguistic supplementation. It is linguistically determined, through and
38 through: by its standing linguistic meaning, and the *linguistically set up context*" (40).

39 And, even more generally than that, not only pronouns, but also modal operators, the antecedents of conditionals, and
40 various other phenomena are treated as paradigm cases of "prominence-sensitivity" (172). (For example, the epistemic
41 'might' operates on the most prominent one from a stack of salient possibilities, similarly to the semantics of pronouns, in
42 accord with the operative discourse convention.)

43 The resulting reorientation, according to Stojnic:

44 "... is both empirically more adequate than its competitors and ... allows for a theoretically preferable account of the
45 interaction between context and content, [of] the nature of semantic content, and ... of validity and entailment for
46 natural language discourses" (172).

4. Two worries

47 Now for some critical work of a "big picture" nature. The main question of the book is "What mechanisms resolve so-called
48 context sensitivity?" Stojnic takes herself to have offered answers which are both radically different and markedly superior.
49 Are they?

50 Start with whether prominence sensitivity is radically different. This turns out to be hard to assess because of changes in
51 what key technical terms mean. As may have been apparent already, 'linguistic context' comes to include ever so much by
52 design: e.g., the whole of the discourse record, a broad array of potentially relevant contextual parameters, plus regularities of
53 prominence/salience. 'Grammar' and 'linguistic rule/convention' encompass gestures and more in their extension. It merits
54 stressing: gestures, including demonstrations, e.g., *are part of language* for Stojnic. They are built into logical form somehow
55 ("It is, of course, easy to represent the pointing gesture in the logical form directly" (45)). This is not what her interlocutors on

1 the "received view" side of the debate mean, by 'language'/'grammar'. We are tempted to sum up her view of "the linguistic"
 2 with the infamous Derridaism "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte": everything is part of the text. She casts it as an empirical discovery
 3 that language/grammar is so expansive, but we fear that it's stipulative, such that Stojnic is talking past her alleged opponents,
 4 rather than disagreeing with them. And maybe, as a result, Stojnic's thesis may end up being less shocking than it originally
 5 seemed.

6 A second worry. We agree that one traditional view has special trouble with the ease and rapidity of context resolution. On
 7 that view, everything is done by one giant, defeasible, open-ended, general-purpose inference of the sort Grice (1975) brings
 8 to mind. If the alternatives were this option, or that things like pronoun resolution are done entirely by formally tractable
 9 linguistic context and grammar, Stojnic's book might go a goodly way towards showing that the latter is more psychologically
 10 plausible. However, this is a false dichotomy. It's not the case that the two exhaustive and exclusive options are:

- 11
 12 a) interpretation is carried out entirely by a code as per semiotics; versus:
 13 b) it is carried out entirely through abduction, based on all available evidence (including the evidence of the sounds people
 14 made), as per post-Derangement Davidson.
 15

16 There are broadly intentionalist Gricean/Kaplanian accounts of how reference et al. are figured out which are *modular* –
 17 Relevance Theory post-1995 comes to our minds. In these hybrid models, there is lots for linguistic encoding and decoding to
 18 do, and there can be much variety in the linguistic rules beyond static compositional semantics; yet there is also much variety
 19 in the non-demonstrative, non-linguistic mechanisms beyond central-system abduction and mind-reading. Our hunch, even
 20 after reading the book, is that models along these lines can withstand Stojnic's flood of evidence. So, this consideration poses a
 21 challenge to her case for the overall superiority of her prominence-sensitive approach.

22 Notwithstanding these two worries in philosophy of language, the book will impress experts with its astonishing com-
 23 mand of the literature and of its formal details, its careful and clear organization. *Context and Coherence* exhibits the virtues of
 24 good writing in philosophy (though there are too many footnotes, some of them very long!). Pragmaticians in particular will
 25 learn a great deal of formal semantics and will be pressed to ponder deep issues in philosophy of language and philosophical
 26 logic. They'll also learn, more concretely, lots of new lessons about how some kinds of pronoun resolution happen and
 27 relatedly, about unnoticed conventions governing discourse prominence.
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29 Q1 **Uncited References**

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33 **References**

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