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Introduction

Varieties of Context-Sensitivity in a Pluri-Propositionalist Reflexive Semantic Framework

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Abstract

This brief introduction to a special issue of *Disputatio* succinctly summarizes John Perry's pluri-propositionalist reflexive framework and notes some potential applications to varieties of context-sensitivity.

Keywords

comparative gradable adjectives; context-sensitivity; contextuals; fictional discourse; first-person plural indexicals; John Perry; propositions; referential-reflexive framework; Richard Vallée

1 The pluri-propositionalist reflexive framework

The pluri-propositionalist reflexive semantic framework is an original approach to philosophical semantics first developed in Perry 2001, and subsequently extended and refined by Perry (2006, 2012), Korta & Perry (2011), and Vallée (2018a), among others.[1] Perry's driving

[1] Cf., e.g., the papers collected in O'Rourke & Washington (eds.) 2007, Newen & van Riel (eds.) 2012.

idea is that if the familiar old referential contents from Direct Reference Theory (basically, Kaplan's (1977) apparatus of Russellian singular propositions) were to be supplemented with certain kinds of reflexive contents, the yield would be explanatory riches that are eminently worth exploring. The aim of this volume is precisely to continue the exploration of the framework's distinctive assets.

Originally, Perry (2001) called it the "reflexive-referential" framework—i.e., its defining feature is to posit certain kinds of *reflexive* contents, in addition to standard *referential* content. What makes some of these contents reflexive is that they are about the utterance itself. Subsequent work inspired by Perry tends to put a slightly more general spin on the framework, by emphasizing the "*pluri-propositional*" aspect, in the following sense: "… each utterance of a sentence determines many … contents, depending on what is taken into account" (Vallée 2018a: ix). Or, at a bit more length:

> In this approach, an utterance of a single sentence determines many propositions or contents, forming a variety of truth-conditions that one can identify by exploiting meaning and extralinguistic context. (Vallée 2018a: 136)

As Perry (2006) highlights—and as is no accident—the multiple levels of content are aptly illustrated with a simple case of indexicality. Consider, for example, an utterance of: 'I want pizza'. Among the contents semantically made available by such an utterance, Perry-inspired pluri-propositionalists would distinguish the following:[2]

> **[1: Linguistic meaning]** The *linguistic meaning* of the type 'I want pizza' is an instruction or rule, something like: Find the speaker S of utterance u; find the time t of u; understand the speaker to be saying about S that S wants pizza at time t.
> **[2: Reflexive content]** The *reflexive content* of a given, particular, utterance u_1 of 'I want pizza' is that the speaker S_1 of u_1 wants pizza at the (suitably extensive) time t_1 of u_1.
> **[3: Official truth conditions]** The *official truth conditions* of the utterance u_1 are given by the (non-reflexive but referential) singular proposition asserted.

The first level of meaning is what any competent speaker will glean from any and all

[2] As Perry (2006: 315) discusses, the connection between indexicality and reflexivity is a point commonly attributed to Reichenbach (1947).

utterances of the sentence-type. The next level can be reached given only knowledge of standing type-meaning and knowledge of the identity of the utterance. It does not require, e.g., knowing who *S* happens to be or when *t* is. The third level captures the good old referential contents of Direct Reference theory: {*Want*<☻, pizza>}. Or again: at both of the first two levels, the content of an utterance by JP of 'I am John' will differ from that of 'I am me' or 'John is John'; at the third level, the three are equivalent.[3]

The point of all these content-levels is this. Perry (2001) hopes to capture, in a neo-Russellian vein, the directly referential properties of many context-sensitive items, while simultaneously recognizing, with Fregeans, that an utterance of, e.g., '*That ship is that ship*' could be *a posteriori*. Perry's suggestion, put very roughly, is that context-sensitive expressions are token reflexive. Here he follows Reichenbach. However, he develops this idea in a novel way, reminiscent of Kaplan's character, to overcome familiar objections to Reichenbach's original approach, and to explain the informativeness of sentences like the one above. As with a Kaplanian character, the linguistic-meaning-rule for the type—which yields the first, neo-Fregean content—is not part of the official truth-conditions. To continue with the 'that ship' example, the first occurrence would encode 'The ship denoted by this_1 utterance' (with 'this_1' picking out the first tokening), while the second would encode the different content 'The ship denoted by this_2 utterance' (with 'this_2' picking out the second tokening). This provides an informative reflexive content. However, there is also a place in the framework for an additional Russellian content. The official content is what the directly referential theory of Kaplan, Kripke *et al*. suggest: the ship itself is, in an entirely uninformative way, the content both times.

In general, the papers in this special issue further develop and evaluate this framework, via consideration of applications of it to specific issues of context-sensitivity in natural language.

2 Background: Topics ripe for pluri-propositional treatment

There are certain obviously context-sensitive words, of the sort that Kaplan made famous: personal pronouns, whether 1^{st}, 2^{nd} or 3^{rd}, singular or plural, animate or not; also spatio-temporal locatives such as 'here' and 'now'. Equally famous are deictic demonstratives such

[3] Things quickly get more complicated, when we move on to more complex cases. Various kinds of utterances may involve multiple reflexive contents.

as 'this' and 'that'.

In his work on applying and extending Perry's pluri-propositionalist framework, Vallée (2018a) argues that there are other words which, though less obviously so, are context-sensitive in parallel ways. His now famous examples include 'local', 'neighbour', 'enemy', 'foreign' and 'imported'. These words, as a part of their encoded meaning, call out for a contextually supplied place, as if there were an unpronounced indexical slot in play—'local to *here*', 'neighbour to *us*', etc. He called these 'contextuals'.[4]

As another example of additional context-sensitivity, when a gradable adjective like 'tall' occurs in an utterance, seemingly the truth-conditions of the utterance can be quite variable. Famously, 'Marie is tall' said about a five-year-old who is well above average height for her age can be true; yet if it's said when one is selecting members for Canada's Olympic basketball team, the utterance seems false. There are many familiar approaches to this phenomenon of seeming context-sensitivity: that it's a matter of free pragmatic enrichment, that it's merely an implicature that Marie is tall compared to basketball players, that the degree comes from the context of assessment, as in relativism, as opposed to being part of what is said. Vallée provides a Perry-inspired treatment. He urges that there exists an unarticulated constituent at the level of "official truth-conditions", so that 'Marie is tall' means, in context, *Marie is tall [for a five year-old]* in a way comparable to an utterance of 'It's raining' meaning *It's raining [in Palo Alto]*.This unarticulated constituent makes it into the referential truth conditions because the reflexive truth conditions call out for it.

The first-person pronoun 'I' has drawn plenty of attention from philosophers of mind and language: Does it have a descriptive sense? Does it have a sense at all? Does it even have a proper *Bedeutung*? (See Botterell & Stainton 2018, Stainton 2018 and references cited there for discussion.) Plurals have attracted the interest of philosophers of language and linguistic semanticists: even if we have a good account of what 'pen' means in the singular, 'Pens are useful', in the plural, poses a range of puzzles about collective readings, generics, and more. (See Schein 2009 for a survey.) It is in combining these two that we arrive at a third kind of linguistic context-sensitivity which is ripe for pluri-propositional treatment. Vallée was the first theorist to bring together these two literatures—'I' and plurality—in a study of the first-person plural pronoun, 'we'. It has many interesting properties. Unlike, say, 'that' or even 'he', 'we' automatically picks up a referent from the context, without the

[4] See Vallée 2018b for a similar approach to the notorious: "It is raining".

need of intentions: 'we' will (almost[5]) always, intentions notwithstanding, include whoever the actual speaker is. Yet there's a role for intentions too when it comes to who else falls under 'we': 'We want pizza' can be Taylor Swift and I, King Charles III and I, etc. Another contrast. Whereas 'I' cannot be quantificationally bound or serve as an anaphoric pronoun, 'we' can do both as in:

> 'Every time a summer music festival comes to town, we'll form some kind of band'
> —[meaning *those of us who are around then and there will form a band*]
> '[Juanita and I]$_1$ love music. We$_1$ go to concerts all the time'

As a fourth and final example of context-sensitivity where the Perry/Vallée framework could play an important explanatory role, consider the appearance of indexical pronouns in works of fiction. The latter poses many a conundrum for philosophers of language. In what sense, if any, do fictional characters exist? What ontological category do they belong to? Are they mental representations, abstract objects, concrete material things (albeit not in the actual world), or something else again? (See Kroon & Voltolini 2019 for an excellent overview.) Vallée notices that matters are made even more complex for the philosopher of language and linguist because indexical pronouns, demonstratives, etc., get used in works of literary fiction—written ones being Vallée's focus in his contribution to the volume. Indexical words seem to refer at the level of "official truth conditions", but what do they refer to in fiction? Back-reference is possible in a novel, as in a sentence like 'Sam Spade walked into the bar. He was smoking'. But what kind of entity, ontologically speaking, is the antecedent here?

3 The papers

Brendon Gillon in "Formalizing English Contextuals" shows that there exist a wide range of contextuals: not just adjectives ('imported', 'local', 'exotic') and nouns ('enemy'), but also, for instance, verbs ('arrive', 'immigrate') and even prepositions ('Juanita came *aboard*', 'Marcel is *outside*', 'I'll be home *after*'). More deeply, using the apparatus of traditional logic-based formal semantics, he derives the properties of these contextuals from the hypothesis

[5] There is a small, circumscribed class of putative counterexamples, as Nunberg (1993), Korta (2016), and Vallée (2018a) have disccused—e.g., the nurse says to the patient 'We are having surgery tomorrow'. See Section 3.2 of Stainton and Sullivan's paper in this special issue for more on this.

that they involve optional complements across syntactic categories. The omission of the complement can (though does not always) yield an indexical construal, such that the result is like an implicit definite argument. On the one hand, Gillon does rightly recognize that syntax has a role to play in explaining the phenomenon of contextuals. After all, there are pairs of verbs whose meanings are very close, but where only one of them can function as a contextual: e.g., 'arrived' can have a null complement but 'reached' cannot (at least not in Standard English). So, optionality of the complement, and with it the potential for an unarticulated constituent, is a formal feature of particular lexical item. On the other hand, in the tradition of Tarski or Montague-style semantics, Gillon denies that the role of the grammar and lexicon is a matter of positing phonologically null elements in syntax such as unpronounced copies and PRO.

Kepa Korta, in "Comparatives in Context", first surveys a larger, more diverse range of comparative gradable adjectives than has been done before, even in the pluri-propositional camp. He addresses not just the bare positive ones like 'Marie is tall' but also, say, 'Marie is taller than Monica' and 'Nadia is tall for a teenage gymnast'. Korta also discusses not just relative comparatives like 'short' but absolute ones where there is a minimum degree above which something isn't "truly X". To explain with a few examples, 'straight', 'dry' and 'pure' are all absolute adjectives. Something can be completely straight/pure/dry; and, arguably, anything which isn't completely straight/pure/dry isn't really straight/pure/dry at all. Interestingly, even such terms admit of truth-conditional variation qua gradable comparatives. Having enriched the terrain of discussion in this way, Korta then focuses on relative adjectives in bare positive constructions, here following Vallée. He concurs that the phenomenon involves an unarticulated constituent comparable to *It's raining [in Palo Alto]*, which makes it into the official truth-conditions because the reflexive truth-conditions call out for it. What he emphasizes, in contrast to Vallée, is the centrality of internal mental states of the speaker: external factors cannot turn the trick of fixing the right comparison class, and hence the appropriate truth-conditions in context of a comparative; not even in the humblest cases. To give an example, even if Marie is playing basketball with much taller kids, a conversation with the right mental attitudes among the participants could still have an utterance of 'Marie is tall' come out true if Marie is rather taller than the norm for her age, and that's what is in the forefront of the speaker's mind. More broadly, Korta's point is that, even though Vallée is using the right pluri-propositional, reflexive approach, fixing the truth-conditions of a rubber-hits-the-road utterance is a more nuanced and complex matter than Vallée makes out.

In "Propositions, Representations and Pluri-Propositionalism", John Perry clarifies

certain features of the pluri-propositionalist framework, and defends it from certain lines of objection. Specifically, the paper is addressed to exactly which conception (or conceptions) of propositional content is (are) operative, within the semantic expanses of the reflexive-referential framework. Building from referentialism and its discontents, and moving through Vallée's extensions of the framework, Perry steers into the worry that pluri-propositionalism involves needlessly or senselessly multiplying propositions. That worry is abated with some subtle work finessing different senses of exactly what is meant by 'proposition', from Frege onwards. There are many contents, of several kinds, semantically made available by an utterance; pluri-propositionalists show them to earn their keep in parsimonious theorizing. Perry ends with the suggestion that "content pluralism" may be a more apt descriptive term for the framework, as it could avoid some of the mistaken associations with "pluri-propositionalism". (Propositions, like old politicians, carry a fair amount of baggage with them.)

Stainton and Sullivan, in "First-Person Plural Indexicals", build heavily on Vallée's underappreciated account of how 'we' (and 'us', 'our', etc.) works. They credit Vallée with identifying a host of unnoticed, complex desiderata for a theory of 'we', and for making the first major steps in the literature towards a treatment of it. Vallée's proposal, drawing on the reflexive pluri-propositional framework, is that 'we' is understood by means of linking 'we'-containing sentences to a series of pronoun-compounds: 'I and you', 'I and they', 'I and (s)he and you', etc. (This is not to say that 'we' is lexically ambiguous, as Stainton and Sullivan explain.) The direct reference aspects of 'we' arise because the pronouns are directly referential; the unique and puzzling distributional peculiarities of 'we' arise from how 'I' interacts with the other pronouns in those compounds. Finding a great deal to admire here, Stainton and Sullivan nonetheless point out some lacunae—some easily fixed, some more problematic. For example, Vallée's lists are Anglocentric. They don't even cover familiar European languages, which have pronouns like Spanish's 'nosotras' which applies only to a female speaker and her all-female coterie. And such a pronoun looks un-Vallée-able, because Spanish does not have a female-only first-person singular pronoun which could be part of his desired compound. E.g., 'nosotras' cannot mean 'Yo$_{fem}$ and ellas' because 'Yo$_{fem}$' doesn't exist! Again, Vallée's account, without careful refinement, may have trouble with collective readings of 'we': e.g., 'We encircled the fort' does not mean the compound 'I encircled the fort and they encircled the fort'. In light of these (and other) problems, the authors try to find another, more traditional, way to rescue Vallée's highly original descriptive insights.

Vallée's question in his "Indexicals in Fiction" is: how do terms like 'he' and 'I' function

inside a fictional work? He is more interested in the psychology of how readers understand indexicals in fiction than in the weighty metaphysics, and he makes a wide range of novel, insightful observations about the former. Rather than attempting a full theory that covers all kinds of fiction—historical fiction, spoken plays, autofiction, etc.—Vallée limits himself to presenting data points that any future writings on this topic must take into account, and he rejects some potential views because they cannot handle even simple narrative fiction. He rejects, for instance, the view that word like 'I' is ambiguous, with a fictional-meaning and a real-world-meaning. To the contrary, he says, when 'I' shows up in fiction, it's the very same word, with the same distributional features, the same sense, etc. To see his point, one might contrast proper names in our tri-dimensional world with a made-up fictional name. There was a real person called 'Lord Jim' who owned a hotel in British Columbia; there's also the character in Conrad's novel. In sharp contrast to 'he'/'I', here, the phonological form /lɔːrd dʒim/ does have two distinct meanings, one in the fiction, one in the real world. Here there's homophony at work, whereas there isn't in 'I', 'that', 'now', etc. Vallée simultaneously highlights puzzles that arise from this non-negotiable data point. Given it, back-reference must work the same with indexicals in fiction, but what is the back-reference to? What thing is the antecedent? It appears not to be what he labels a "tridimensional individual" whom one might bump into in the street. And with demonstratives and locatives like 'here' and 'now', whence the intention that determines both the entity and its extent in space/time ("How big is here?" "How long is now?")? Vallée ends with a novel posit, his "indexed token", which, embedded within the pluri-propositional approach, will help with some of these puzzles. This posit isn't intended to be sufficient to deal with all sundry issues raised by indexicals in fiction, but he urges that it is necessary.

To summarize the volume as a whole, the papers which follow scrutinize and further develop Perry's pluri-propositional reflexive framework, and its potential applications to varieties of context-sensitivity: e.g., to contextuals (such as 'imported', 'enemy', 'foreign'), gradable adjectives ('tall', 'rich', 'straight'), first-person plural pronouns ('we', 'us', 'our'), and certain issues in the semantics of fictional discourse. The papers also address the nature of the framework, and indeed of propositions themselves. As such, this present volume follows the lead of Vallée 2018a, which is dedicated to applying the framework to a variety of contested topics. To sum up, then, the following excerpt from Vallée could serve as a banner which unites the following investigations:

> Things look very different once a [pluri-propositionalist] perspective is adopted. … [T]he focus is put on utterances of sentences, rather than sentences, and on the linguistic meaning

> of specific lexical items with their contribution to contents, rather than complex linguistic entities like sentences. The framework, as I understand it and exploit it at different periods, gives a different angle on language … Pluri-propositionalism has actually proven to be a great tool for throwing a different light on certain lexical items whose contribution to truth-conditions is hard to account for in traditional monopropositionalism. In addition, it puts together in a single framework various ideas on lexical items, providing unity when dealing with words which … do not have much in common. (Vallée 2018a: x)

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