

“It’s raining.”

Unarticulated Constituents Reconsidered

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Semantic minimalists hold that literal meaning is entirely independent of context. Some contextualists contend that such a clear-cut distinction between literal meaning and “what is said” (communicated content) cannot be drawn. In certain cases, they hold, sentences can only express a truth-evaluable proposition if contextual features are taken into consideration. While minimalism has successfully managed to accommodate indexicals and demonstratives, a more recent challenge from the contextualist repertoire has proven more troublesome, namely “unarticulated constituents”.

Unarticulated constituents are propositional elements which do not figure explicitly in the surface structure of a sentence, but which are nonetheless necessary for the sentence to become a truth-evaluable proposition. A classic example is the location-unspecific utterance “It’s raining”, which John Perry famously considers not to be a proposition if the context does not provide a specific location at which the raining event is to take place. This essay focuses on the groundwork necessary to draw conclusions in the larger debate between minimalists and contextualists, namely evidence for the existence of unarticulated constituents. I will survey a variety of arguments against Perry’s position and attempt to refute them. Moreover I will propose some methodological revisions aimed to increase the use-value of imagined contexts in semantic analysis in general.

Introduction

Compare the following utterances:

- (1) It’s raining.
- (2) It’s raining in Paris.

Ordinarily, meteorological predicates such as “rain” are presumed to carry a location argument slot. The slot must be filled either explicitly by aid of an adverbial phrase, as in (2), or implicitly by a contextually determined location – an “unarticulated constituent”, as in (1) when uttered in a suitable context. This view goes back to Perry (1986), who introduced the problematic, and phrased his observation thus:

In order to assign a truth-value to my son’s statement [of (1)] I needed a place. But no component of his statement stood for a place... Palo Alto is a constituent of the content of my son’s remark, which no component of his statement designated; it is an *unarticulated constituent*. (1986: 206)

[The location] is a constituent, because, since rain occurs at a time in a place, there is no truth-evaluable proposition unless a place is supplied. It is unarticulated, because there is no morpheme that designates that place. (1998:9)

Perry's remarks have sparked off considerable controversy, which can be disentangled into three central strands. Firstly, there is a quest for evidence concerning the *existence* of unarticulated constituents. Secondly, if unarticulated constituents exist, their *nature* requires elucidation. Finally, the *implications* of the phenomenon of such constituents on central notions of philosophy of language and linguistics such as *literal meaning*, *what is said* and whatever else is thought pertinent to the *semantics/pragmatics distinction* have to be evaluated. In this brief paper, I will mainly focus on the first question. If time allows, I will sketch some of its implications during the talk.

1. The existence of Unarticulated Constituents

Evidence for unarticulated constituents ("UCs" for short) in Perry's sense comes in form of an answer to a very simple question: Can an utterance of "It's raining" be understood in a location-indefinite way? (Call this our *central question*, exemplifying the quest for evidence about the existence of UCs). Put differently, can an utterance of (1) give us a truth-evaluable proposition when the context does not provide a specific location at which the raining event is to occur?¹ Without the provision of a locale by the context, (1) usually gives rise to "a felt inability to evaluate the truth value of an utterance of [1]"² which might be taken as evidence for the semantic underdetermination of the sentence. Contrast (1) with (3):

(3) Mary has been dancing.

Though (3) is also location-indeterminate, no feelings of incompleteness arise and its truth-evaluability seems guaranteed. The comparison further demonstrates that the

¹ Unarticulated constituents have been postulated for a variety of linguistic expressions, e.g. the object of "notice", the state or activity undergone ("continue") or ended ("finish"), the comparison class of adjectives like "small" or "fat", the perspective of adjectives like "local", the location of "arrive" etc. For simplicity of exposition, we will primarily focus on locational UCs.

² Taylor, 2001: 53.

intuitive difference between the two event predicates cannot be explained at the *metaphysical level*. A raining event – *qua* being an event – occurs in space and time, so that at the metaphysical level a spatial component, often called a metaphysical UC, must be involved.³ If the latter necessarily required specification, we would not be content with a location-general reading of (3), but we are. The intuitive difference between “dance” and “rain” thus seems to call for an explanation either at the *semantic* or the *pragmatic level* of analysis. The surface structure of (1) does not itself indicate a location or an appropriate slot, so the unarticulated constituent must ultimately either be anchored in the depth of the semantic/syntactic structure, or else be explained away with the pragmatists’ toolkit. Such questions, pertaining to our second and third fields of inquiry, can only be addressed as soon as our central question is answered and will thus be put aside for the moment.

1.1 Positions

Does an utterance of “It’s raining” constitute a truth-evaluable proposition in the absence of a context which specifies a particular place for the raining event? There are three major positions. Perry holds that (1) does need a specific location to become a truth-evaluable proposition, and Taylor (2001) interprets this account as positing an unarticulated constituent at the sub-syntactic level of the sentence which mandates the provision of a location by the context.

Cappelen & Lepore (henceforth C&L for short)⁴ radically disagree: they call the existence of communicational unarticulated constituents a “myth”. For them (1) *can* take a location-neutral interpretation. On their view our interests in rain are location-*focused* (which is different from location-*dependent*) in ordinary situations, because these have significant pragmatic implications in our day-to-day lives.

Finally, there’s Recanati’s sophisticated middle position which holds that unarticulated constituents *do* exist, since *some* predicates contain a hidden argument

³ The literature distinguishes between *metaphysical* UCs, as just defined, and *communicational* UCs. Communicational UCs are elements drawn from the context to either *qualify* (make more specific) or *complete* (and thus make truth-evaluable) the proposition expressed by the utterance of a sentence. The latter type of communicational UCs are our focus of interest (and what I refer to by “unarticulated constituents” henceforth) because only their existence is controversial.

N.B. Considerations pertaining to time are entirely neglected for simplicity of exposition.

⁴ This is also largely the approach of Cappelen & Hawthorne (2007).

slot, be it the object of “notice”, or the location of “arrive”. However, “rain” does not have such a slot, as it can be given a location-general interpretation.

I will assess the arguments against Perry’s view (henceforth also called the “Standard View”) and show that they do not get off the ground.

1.2 Recanati

Recanati distinguishes two types of context-sensitivity potentially exhibited by expressions. *Saturation* is a “bottom-up” process “triggered (and made *obligatory*) by a linguistic expression in the sentence itself” (2002:2), e.g. the indexical “I”’s picking out the speaker, or “here” referring to his whereabouts. *Free enrichment*, by contrast, is a “top-down” process which takes place for pragmatic reasons only – it makes what is said more precise by drawing on the context. Differently put, an unsaturated variable does obstruct successful cognition of the proposition expressed, whereas the absence of potential free enrichment does not.

A comparison between different event predicates puts the distinction to work. “Arrive”, by Recanati’s lights, has a location argument slot at the lexical level, and hence requires saturation. (4) is incomplete if the context does not provide us with a specific location, it cannot be truth-evaluated.

(4) John arrived.

In contrast to “arrive”, the predicate “dance” does not have a location argument slot, the specification of a particular place is entirely optional. The provision of a locale for utterances like (3) counts hence as an instance of free enrichment. Our intuitions, which manifest a “felt inability to evaluate the truth value of [certain utterances] in the absence of a contextually provided location” (Taylor 2001: 53) in the case of “arrive”, but not of “dance”, can be made more explicit by aid of the following test, devised by Recanati (2007: 128).

(T1) *Arrive*

A: John has arrived.

B: Where has he arrived?

A: * I have no idea.

(T2) Dance

A: Mary has danced Flamenco all night.

B: Where did she dance?

A: I have no idea.

(T3) Rain

A: It's raining!

B: Where?

A: *I have no idea.

The utterance of speaker A – “I have no idea” - seems infelicitous in T1, whereas entirely appropriate in T2. According to the test, “rain” seems to pattern with “arrive” rather than with “dance”. However, as Recanati sets out to show, our intuitions are on the wrong track as regards “rain” where the location - in contrast to “arrive” - is “not a genuine implicit argument because, *if it were, it would have to be provided in every context*” (2007: 129). That this is not the case is demonstrated by Recanati’s weatherman scenario – a context in which “It’s raining” can be given a location-indeterminate reading:

I can imagine a situation in which rain has become extremely rare and important, and rain detectors have been disposed all over the territory (whatever the territory — possibly the whole Earth). In the imagined scenario, each detector triggers an alarm bell in the Monitoring Room when it detects rain. There is a single bell; the location of the triggering detector is indicated by a light on a board in the Monitoring Room. After weeks of total drought, the bell eventually rings in the Monitoring Room. Hearing it, the weatherman on duty in the adjacent room shouts: ‘It’s raining!’ His utterance is true, iff it is raining (at the time of utterance) in some place or other. (Recanati 2002: 317, 2007: 127)

Reconsider the intuition test for “rain” in the weatherman example:

(T4) *Rain in the weatherman scenario*

A (The weatherman): It's raining!

B: Where?

A: I have no idea – let's go and check.

As the weatherman example shows, there are contexts in which (1) can be understood without the speaker's, or hearer's, having a specific place in mind. Hence, and as (T4) makes obvious, in the weatherman scenario (1) does not mandate saturation. Given that such a context exists for "rain" we cannot treat it as carrying a location argument slot that has to be filled. The provision of a location in ordinary uses of meteorological predicates rather seems to be a matter of free enrichment: context often specifies a locale since we have a rather pronounced interest to keep our feet dry and the like. "Rain" patterns with "dance" in so far as the provision of a location is optional, and it differs from "arrive" which requires saturation.

A preliminary objection to Recanati's example is the straightforward complaint that he is not true to his aims, since he does in fact specify a location in his scenario, namely "the territory" or "the whole Earth".⁵ In response, Recanati distinguishes between a *narrow* and a *broad* sense of "place of rain". The former - "the place which rain actually fills" should be held separate from the broad sense, i.e. "any place that includes the narrow-place-of-rain as a sub-location" (2007: 137/138). For instance, when it rains in Mexico City (narrow) it also rains on Earth (broad) or somewhere in the universe (broad). We can quite reasonably suppose with Recanati, that the Standard View does *not* defend an interpretation of "It's raining" which is satisfied by a location in the broad sense. If it did, the broadest possible locations "somewhere on earth" or "somewhere in the universe" would just parallel an existential reading of (1), which means that the contrast between "dance" and "rain" – the central intuition of the Standard View - would be lost. Martí's objection leaves Recanati's example untouched. However, we will see in the next section that the location in the weatherman example is more specific than just any broad location.

⁵ Cf. Luisa Martí, 2006: 153, amongst others.

1.3 *What we didn't take the weatherman to know*

To begin with, consider the following scenario:

John lives in Madrid and has given notice to his family in NYC that he will pay them a visit over Christmas. Disorganized as he is, he calls them on the 23rd of December and says that he has various possibilities concerning the arrival destination, namely Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and various other East Coast airports and that he is still searching for the cheapest flight. On the 25th he calls from the airport and says “I have just arrived and am waiting for my bags”, after which the phone line breaks down. His mother reports to the family that John has arrived, and upon the question “Where?” she says “I have no idea”.

The scenario shows how easy it is to think up a location-general application of “arrive”. So the alleged contrast between the behaviour of “rain” and “arrive” is non-existent, and it is no longer clear why we should hold with Recanati that “arrive” mandates saturation, whereas “rain” and “dance” typically only involve free enrichment, if so.

What now? Abolish all hidden argument slots (at least for the predicates involved) and declare free enrichment for all? That would be too quick. Though the utterances involving “rain” and “arrive” in the constructed contexts seem to take existential form with respect to the location, in fact they do not. The mistake might arise from the observation that both locations are *geographically* broad – which suggests an interpretation like “It’s raining somewhere”, or “John is arriving somewhere”. However, the territory in the weatherman example has the property of being covered with rain-detectors; the airport of John’s arrival is not just any airport, but one that is a few hours’ train-ride away from Manhattan. So despite the fact that the locations are geographically unspecific (or “broad”), they *are* qualified: For indeterminate utterances involving “rain” or “arrive” to become truth-evaluable propositions, it seems, the locations involved need to be characterized in terms of at least one additional property on top of being the location at which the event (rain, arrival) takes place.

The insight from the examples could be generalized: When arguments need to be qualified over and above being related to their respective predicate, we can call them *minimally specific*. Minimal specificity of arguments points to the existence of a hidden argument slot set up by the predicate which mandates saturation. In the absence of a minimally specific argument, utterances involving such predicates are not truth-evaluable propositions.

But how do we detect minimal specificity, and hence what guides us to postulate the hidden argument slots (and the respective unarticulated constituents which fill them) for certain predicates but not for others? One strategy is to extend Recanati's test concerning our intuitions. Compare the following:

(T5) Rain in the Weatherman Scenario

A (the weatherman): It's raining!

B: Where?

A: I have no idea.

B: Does that mean you have *no idea whatsoever*?

A: No, it doesn't. Obviously it is raining on the territory covered by the rain-detectors.

(T6) Mary's Dance

A: Mary danced Flamenco all night.

B: Where?

A: I have no idea.

B: Does that mean you have *no idea whatsoever*?

A: Indeed. All she said was that she had a good dance. It could have been *anywhere*.

The extended test brings out the intuitive difference between "dance" and "rain", and it does so in conjunction with *minimal specificity*, here modelled as an epistemic requirement for speaker B to make sense of speaker A's utterances. "Rain" patterns with "arrive" in demanding a minimally specific location argument, they differ from "dance" which doesn't. Recanati's counterexample to the Standard View is refuted, and the mistaken intuitions it draws on are exposed and explained.

2. The Weatherman Reloaded

2.1 *The Rain-Ache Universe*

Like Recanati, Cappelen & Lepore attempt to offer a context in which an utterance of “It’s raining” can be given a location-general interpretation, which would refute the Standard View. Let us thus imagine their so-called “Rain-Ache Universe”, which differs from ours in four relevant respects: (i) Rain is never noticed by humans as wetness (and thus not annoying). (ii) Rain is not needed for the growth of food. (iii) A raining event causes headaches to all human beings, no matter how far they are away from it. (iv) Yellow hats can protect from the rain-caused headaches. To alleviate the number of headaches, rain detectors are placed around the globe and broadcast location-indeterminate warnings like (S1)

(S1) It will rain at 2pm, so make sure to bring your yellow hats. (2006: 12)⁶

The example is to show that meteorological predicates (and any other) do not involve unarticulated constituents, since in contexts like the Rain-Ache Universe they can be given a location-general interpretation. Therefore, Cappelen & Lepore conclude, “we have that feeling [of incompleteness] because of contingent features of our way of life and the role of rain in it, and not because of any feature of the verb “rain””. (2006: 13)

2.2 *Meaning Shift and a Wittgensteinian Framework*

A straightforward counter to C&L’s example revolves around meaning shift: In the above scenario the meaning of “It’s raining” has been altered, and with it the semantic properties. Meaning shifts, however, are difficult to adjudicate on, so we need a theoretical framework which allows us to explain and assess them. Since our central concern lies with the dynamic aspects of the meaning of a term, use-based accounts of meaning are the obvious choice.⁷

⁶ I am quoting from Cappelen & Lepore (2006): “The Myth of Unarticulated Constituents”, <http://folk.uio.no/hermanc/docs/Perry7.pdf>, consequently published in O’Rourke & Washington (2007).

⁷ My sketch employs the *locus classicus*, Wittgenstein. Other use-accounts like Horwich’s or Brandom’s would be equally suited.

For Wittgenstein the meaning of a word is its use in ordinary language (PI, § 43), and its use is regulated by rules of application. These linguistic rules are ultimately determined not by peculiar platonic meaning entities, or by “agreement in opinion”, but instead by our (shared) “forms of life” (PI, § 139-242). The rather cloudy notion of a life-form (*Lebensform*) – central for our purposes - needs some further clarification, not easily extricated from Wittgenstein’s work itself. A life-form of a species is best understood through whatever behaviour and practice that species exhibits. These, in turn, can be seen as determined both by the (i) *properties of the species* (e.g. its perceptive and cognitive faculties, bodily needs, biological set-up etc.) and (ii) the *surrounding conditions* it faces. A change in either leads to a change in common practice and thus in *Lebensform*. Such an alteration in *Lebensform* will consequently have an influence on language (linguistic rules) and hence on the meaning of (at least some) expressions, which are determined by the linguistic rules.

2.3 Spelling out the Objection

Now the meaning-shift objection to the rain ache universe example comes into sharper focus: In their scenario, C&L change both the surrounding conditions (radically altered properties of rain, growth of plants etc.) as well as the properties of the human species (rain causes headaches, yellow hats save us from such headaches). We would hence expect a rather pronounced change in form of life, and consequently linguistic rules, patterns of use, meaning and semantic properties. One way of checking whether this expectation is borne out comes in form of what we could call the *import/export test*. Consider the following utterances:

(8) “It’s raining, so I don’t have to water the garden tonight.”

(9) “I’ve got yet another terrible headache because it’s raining and I can’t find my yellow hat.”

Ordinary utterances from the actual world such as (8) have no application whatsoever in the rain-ache universe. Conversely, uttering sentences like (9) – imports from the rain-ache universe – in all seriousness would gain the speaker the charge of madness in our world. The import/export test in combination with the *Lebensform* account of meaning determination allow us to assess *whether*, and explain *why*, a meaning shift is involved in complex imagined contexts. The verdict is obvious in the case of Cappelen & Lepore’s scenario: There is a rather pronounced

shift in meaning, which by backwards induction can be derived from the radically altered determinants of *Lebensform*, and hence linguistic rules, patterns of use, and meaning. The change in semantic properties comes as no surprise.

In the weatherman example both the verdict of the export/import test is less decisive. This only testifies to the plausibility of the *Lebensform* framework: In the rain-ache universe both determining factors of life-form are changed, and more radically so than in the weatherman scenario, where the only major alteration is that the life-sustaining liquid becomes extremely rare. Hence, and as the *Lebensform* model would predict, the meaning shift which can be observed via the test is more pronounced in the rain-ache universe example, in which “rain” no longer classifies as a meteorological predicate in any sense familiar to us.

2.4 Adequacy Constraints on Imagined Scenarios and Semantic Platonism

I have proposed that imagined contexts employed in semantic analysis should adhere to certain adequacy constraints. Amongst others, in imagined scenarios life-form must be kept largely in line with the target culture (and language) if we want to avoid distorting repercussions into linguistic rules, meaning and semantic properties. As regards linguistic intuition, meaning and form of life, C&L take a radically different position from the one offered here. Recall the conclusion they draw from their alleged counterexample to the Standard View:

[W]e have that feeling [of incompleteness] because of *contingent features of our way of life* and the role of rain in it, and not because of any feature of the verb “rain” (2006: 13, italics added)

In a similar vein they argue that “while our communicative goals are context dependent in the extreme, *the meanings of our words are stable*” (2006: 16, italics added), from which they conclude that “our intuitions about what speakers’ saliently assert and our feeling about which propositions are expressed are *extremely poor guides to semantic content...* [and] even worse guides to what propositions exist” (2006: 16, italics added).

So according to Cappelen & Lepore, the semantic features of a word are by no means dependent on the contingent features of our way of life. This looks like blunt

Platonism: No matter what the speakers of a community are like or in what kind of circumstances they live, i.e. no matter what kind of *form of life* is involved, the “meanings” and hence the semantic features of their words are entirely independent of it. There must thus be some kind of platonic realm in which the meaning of every word, as well as the conceptual relations between them, are fixed *irrevocably*.

What’s wrong with Semantic Platonism? Roughly, according to such a conception meanings are wholly external to, and independent of, the mind. They are abstract items which are accessed in the process of understanding an expression. This approach falls prey to an “argument from queerness” analogous to Mackie’s argument against platonic moral values.⁸ Not only are these meanings *metaphysically* queer (what precisely is their ontological status?), but we also face the problem of having to postulate an equally mysterious *faculty* for their detection. Finally, even if we were willing to do this, we’re still left in the dark as in to the precise *mechanism* of latching on to the meanings, i.e. the mechanism of understanding. In other words, within any reasonable assumptions of our epistemic possibilities, it is less than obvious how to ever be sure whether our understanding of an expression coincides with its *stable* (platonic) meaning, and every instance of attempted understanding would be a mere stab in the dark.

Conclusion

In the introduction I said the debate about UCs can be disentangled into three strands, regarding (i) evidence for their existence, (ii) their semantic and syntactic nature and (iii) the implications UCs have on various core concepts of philosophy of language and linguistics. The substantial contributions of this paper are a number of rebuttals of arguments by Cappelen & Lepore and Recanati against the existence of communicational UCs relevant for the truth-evaluability of sentences. This is as much as can be done for Perry’s view, since it is not clear how a positive argument can go beyond the central intuitions he invokes himself. At the very least, our first central question – concerning the evidence for UCs – rests an open one (with a strong intuitive favour for Perry’s view) and it makes sense to proceed to aspects (ii) and (iii) of the debate.

⁸ See Mackie, 1977.

The methodological contributions of this paper consist in the provision of a framework to evaluate meaning-shifts in semantic enquiry, as well as the proposal of various adequacy constraints for imagined contexts. Finally, concerning *locational* UCs, I have argued that *minimal specificity* seems key, both as regards the postulation and explanation of the role of UCs. The next important task is to generalize this feature for other types of unarticulated constituents. I will sketch one possible approach if time allows, and briefly hint at the implications of unarticulated constituents so conceived for the semantics/pragmatics distinction.

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