Abstract of "Distributed assertion"

There are times when one wants to use a word or phrase as someone else would mean it. For example, one could say

> The ruling party has proposed "common sense tax reform".

By this you do not mean that what they have proposed *really is* common sense tax reform—that would be to *use* the quotation-mark-flagged words, in the regular way. Nor do you mean to *quote* those words—for there is nothing you are *saying about* the words, which is what we use quotation to do. What is going on is that you're doing the next best thing to dragging some guy from the ruling party into the room to complete your sentence for you. Sometimes in making an assertion, one has reason to flag some words for interpretation as if uttered by another. It is an error to try to pigeonhole this either as using the flagged words or as quoting them. In this talk I consider this phenomenon, which I call *distributed assertion*. A speaker makes a distributed assertion when she indicates (often using quotation marks) that some of her words are to be interpreted as if produced by another speaker.

First I explain how current theory *already allows* for the interpretation of distributed assertions. Part of the story is intra-assertional context shift, which I explain in terms of Kaplan's (1977) semantic apparatus. Just as the feature of context that sets the value of "now" can change while an assertion is being uttered, so too, the theory can handle an intra-assertional change in *who the speaker is*. Another part of the story is shift in language (which shift in speaker often demands). To treat part of an assertion as made in a different language from another part, one shifts which interpretative theory one is using. Applying different interpretative theories to different parts of a sentence often gives results that admit of combination. Distributed assertions are ones whose interpretation involves intra-assertional shift in speaker (and other) contextual parameters and, often, shift in interpretative theories, to handle idioms of the different speakers. From the point of view of formal semantics, then, there is nothing troubling or controversial in the idea that there are distributed assertions.

I contrast this Kaplanian treatment with one proposed by François Recanati (2000, 2001). Recanati seeks to preserve "the standard notion of the character of a complete sentence as a function from (single) contexts to propositions" (2000, 243). Standard or not, it is not a necessary part of a Kaplanian approach, and

the Kaplanian treatment that is possible when one drops this notion is rather simpler than the one that Recanati proposes, which furthermore incorporates some debatable assumptions (e.g. that context-shifting always involves pretense).

I also compare the proposal with some theories of scare-quoting. It differs from accounts on which scare-quotes do semantic work (Brandom 1994; Benbaji 2004), and from accounts on which they do post-semantic, Gricean work (Gutzmann and Stei 2011). Overall then, the idea is that the Kaplanian framework *already* gives us everything we need to handle the data that these and Recanati's account are proposed in order to explain.

Moving on from semantics, next I suggest reasons one might have for making a distributed assertion, describing two kinds of deferral in play. One has reason to engage in *semantic* deferral when one knows that someone else has a term for something but lacks the understanding required to use it oneself, and wants to use it anyway (lacking a simple co-extensive term oneself). One has reason to engage in *justificatory* deferral when one wants to put onto another the obligation to defend some commitment that attaches to some term one wishes one's assertion to contain.

The possibility, and actuality, of distributed assertion puts in question some claims about the nature of assertion. While some philosophers (Searle 1969) have conceived of assertion in a way that allows for distributed assertions, others (Brandom 1994) have not; I close with some reflections on how to reconcile the latter sort of conception to the phenomena of distributed assertions.

References

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