

# Philosophy of Language

## Lecture 5: Context and update

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# 1. Context

## 1. Indexicals

He wore a hat.

The referent of an indexical depends on the context in which it is used. Some are used with an associated demonstration (demonstratives; e.g. **this**, **that**, **then**, **there**, etc.); the others are used without such a demonstration (pure indexicals; e.g. **I**, **you**, **now**, **here**, etc.).

It is best not to think of the distinction between indexicals and non-indexicals and the distinction between pure indexicals and demonstratives as lexical. Personal pronouns have bound uses; demonstrative pronouns have uses unaccompanied by demonstrations.

# 1. Context

## 2. Anaphora

A man walked in. He wore a hat.

The referent of an anaphor depends on the context in which it is used. Specifically, it depends on what happened in the **discourse** before. This is not simply a matter of what was uttered.

A: A man walked in.

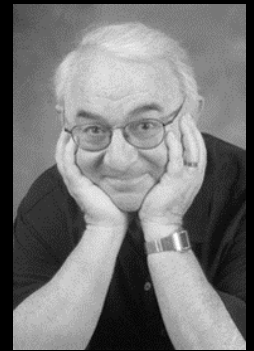
B: You are mistaken, that was a woman.

A: ?? He wore a hat.

For the anaphoric pronoun to be interpretable it must be **common ground** in the conversation that there is a most salient male in the context.

# 1. Two notions of context

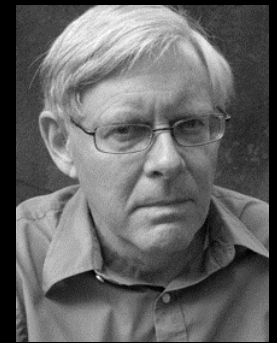
## 3. K-contexts



K-contexts are representations of those aspects of the context that are relevant for the interpretation of indexicals.

They are usually **n-tuples**; their components include at least the speaker (the referent of **I**), the addressee (the referent of **you**), the time (the referent of **now**), the place (the referent of **here**), of the context.

If the language contains expressions like **actually**, the context also contains the actual world.



# 1. Two notions of context

## 4. S-contexts

S-contexts are representations of those aspects of the context that are relevant for the interpretation of anaphora.

The simplest kind of S-contexts would be sets of **live discourse referents**. (This is what is used in Discourse Representation Theory.) But since what is and what isn't a live discourse referent is fixed by what is **common ground** in the conversation, more ambitious S-contexts model that.

Representations of common ground are needed anyway if we want a theory of **conversational dynamics**.

## 2. K-contexts

### 1. Motivation

**I do not exist.**

This sentence is false in every context where it is uttered, and yet it could be true. The proposition expressed in a certain context by an utterance of the sentence is a proposition about the speaker of the context. This proposition is true in every circumstance where that person does not exist.

**It will soon be the case that all that is now beautiful is faded.**

The occurrence of the indexical refers to the time of utterance, even though it occurs embedded within the scope of **It will soon be the case**. In general, indexicals do not shift their reference at all (except when they are mentioned).

## 2. K-contexts

### 2. Two-tiered semantics

**Character:** conventional meaning – what we grasp when we understand an expression out of context.

**Content:** contextual meaning – what we grasp when we understand an expression in context. For a sentence, it is a proposition.

Character:	Context $\mapsto$ Content
Content:	Index $\mapsto$ Extension

Variable character, fixed content:

Fixed character, fixed content:

Variable character, variable content:

Fixed character, variable content:

this queen

Elizabeth II

the present queen of England

the twelfth British Monarch

## 2. K-contexts

### 3. Three features of K-contexts

- K-contexts are **language specific**: their components depend on what sorts of indexicals are present in the object language.
- K-contexts have a **dual role**. On the one hand, they are used in interpreting the indexicals of the object language. On the other hand, they are used in defining truth – a sentence is true iff it is true at the world of the context.
- K-contexts are **non-cognitive**: they are set independently of the mental states of the participants of the conversation.



### 3. S-contexts

#### 1. Conversational acceptance

**Acceptance:** treating a proposition as true for some reason.

Acceptance is a mental state but does not have to involve anything like conscious assent. It requires acting as if the proposition is true but that may not be sufficient. (One acts, by physical necessity, as if the laws of nature hold but that seems insufficient for accepting these laws.) One can accept by **believing**, **supposing**, **pretending**, etc.

**Conversational acceptance:** acceptance for the purpose of the conversation.

The purpose of the conversation is some shared aim, which can be the **exchange of information**, but also, much else.

### 3. S-contexts

#### 2. Common ground

Let  $A$  be a propositional attitude,  $p$  a proposition, and  $i$  an individual. Then  $A_i p$  abbreviates that  $i$  bears  $A$  to  $p$ .

$p$  is **mutual** for an attitude  $A$  in a group  $G$  iff for any finite sequence  $i_1, \dots, i_n$  of members of  $G$ ,  $A_{i_1} \dots A_{i_n} p$ .

Common ground must be suitably public. For Stalnaker, this means that a proposition is common ground in  $G$  iff it is **mutually believed in  $G$  to be conversationally accepted by everyone in  $G$** .

For somber conversations where it is common ground that the participants won't accept things they don't believe common ground can be equated with **mutual belief**.

## 3. S-contexts

### 3. Three features of S-contexts

- S-contexts can be **language specific** – when they are just sets of discourse referents, they are. But when they represent the common ground they are not.
- S-contexts have a **dual role**. On the one hand, they are used in interpreting the anaphora of the object language. On the other hand, they are used in an account of conversational dynamics – how utterances change the context.
- S-contexts are **cognitive**: they are determined by the mental states of the participants of the conversation.

## 4. Do we need both kinds of contexts?

K-contexts and S-contexts represent different aspects of the same thing – the situation in which the conversation takes place. Why not have a single representation?

**Answer 1:** K-contexts are language-dependent, S-contexts typically are not.

**But ...** S-contexts could be made a component of the K-context.

**Answer 2:** S-contexts are cognitive, K-contexts are not. The referent of **I** is not Napoleon in an utterance of **I order you to withdraw the troops** uttered in a psychiatric hospital by one patient to another, even if it is common ground between them that the speaker is Napoleon.

## 4. Do we need both kinds of contexts?

But ... we can't assume that everything in the common ground is relevant for determining the reference of indexicals. Among all the propositions in the common ground the one that actually fixes the reference of **I** is the one that would have been expressed by the speaker's utterance of **I am the speaker of this** (where the demonstrative refers to the utterance).

In fact, there is a sense in which conversational participants are in a fairly tight epistemic relation with the components of the K-context: they know who the speaker and the addressee are, when and where the utterance takes place, etc. They also know the world of the context – it is **this** one.

**Moral:** keeping K- and S-contexts separate may be convenient but it is not something that is forced upon us.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 1. The simplest model

- **Propositions** are represented as sets of possible worlds.
- **The common ground** is represented by the set of propositions in the common ground. (Alternatively, by their intersection, the **context set**.)
- **Assertions** are proposals to add a proposition to the common ground. (Alternatively, to intersect it with the context set.)
- **The goal of conversation** is taken to be to include enough information in the common ground to single out the actual world.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 2. Merits and limits

The model explains that speakers normally won't assert

- what they take to be **false**, or
- what they take to be **entailed by the common ground**.

If they do assert this, that's because

- they make a mistake, or
- they no longer share the goal of conversation.

**But ...** the model does not capture that speakers won't assert what they take to be **irrelevant**.



## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 3. Question under discussion

Relevance is relative to a goal. Any truth is relevant to the goal of finding out what the world is like. But usually we want to answer a more specific question. Call it the **question under discussion**.

The question under discussion is conversationally accepted. What is it to accept a question? It is something like **seeking an answer for it**. Accepting the question who was invited is to **wondering** who was invited is roughly as accepting the proposition that Jill was invited is to **believing** that Jill was invited.

The **common query** is a question mutually believed to be conversationally accepted.



## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 4. Adding the question under discussion

- **Questions** are represented as sets of their complete answers. (Alternatively, as a partition of the set of possible worlds.)
- **The common query** is represented by the set of questions in the common query. (Alternatively, by their intersection.)
- **The goal of conversation** is taken to be to include enough information in the common ground to entail a complete answer to the common query (i.e. a single cell of the common query that includes the actual world).
- An assertion is **irrelevant** to the common query iff adding it to the common ground would not eliminate any complete answer to the common query.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 5. Presupposition

Presupposition is a **social attitude** definable in terms of the common ground: a member of a group presupposes a proposition just in case she conversationally accepts that it is common ground among the members of the group.

Suppose you and I are having a conversation; then

- i. what either of us presupposes needn't be common ground,
- ii. what both of us presuppose is common ground,
- iii. if p is common ground then it is common ground that p is common ground,
- iv. if p is not common ground then it needn't be common ground that p is not common ground.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 6. Presupposition triggers

- i. Brunei is a sultanate and the sultan of Brunei is bald.
- ii. The sultan of Brunei is bald.

Uttering the first sentence is fine, the second is problematic. This could be because **the sultan of Brunei** can only be uttered if it is common ground that there is a (unique) sultan of Brunei. Normally this is not common ground, but after it is asserted that Brunei is a sultanate it will be (provided the proposal is accepted).

Why is **the sultan of Brunei** associated with such a contextual requirement? Perhaps due to the conventional meaning of **the**. If so, the definite article is a presupposition trigger.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 7. Accommodation

While definite descriptions often sound odd when their existence and uniqueness conditions are not common ground, this is not always so. The following sentence can be felicitously used even if the hearer had antecedently no idea whether the speaker has a sister.

**I have to pick up my sister at the airport.**

This is not an isolated example: many expressions standardly classified as presupposition triggers are regularly used to convey new information. Why?

The answer is that the presupposition is **accommodated**. The phenomenon is general: often we accommodate others when we recognize their plans by removing obstacles.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

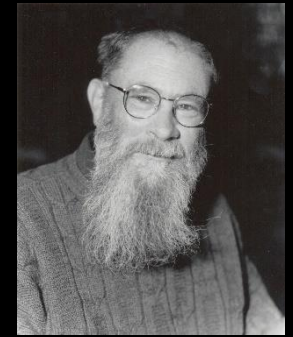
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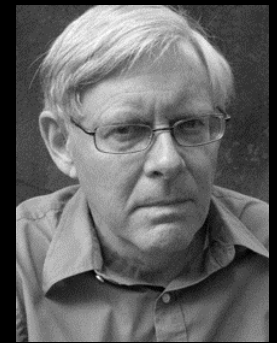
## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 8. Lewis on accommodation

For Lewis, accommodation involves **pretense**.

The speaker acts as if the presupposition had already been common ground at the time of utterance, even though she knows this is not the case.

The hearer goes along with the pretense by accepting the presupposition for the purpose of the conversation. At this point they mutually believe that they have each accepted the presupposition for the purpose of the conversation, so it really is common ground.



## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 9. Stalnaker on accommodation

For Stalnaker, accommodation normally does not involve **pretense**.

When the speaker makes the utterance she believes that the presupposition **will be** common ground, shortly after the hearer registers the utterance.

When the hearer registers the utterance she notices that the speaker has this belief she accepts the presupposition for the purpose of the conversation. At this point they mutually believe that they have each accepted the presupposition for the purpose of the conversation, so it really is common ground.

## 5. Conversational dynamics

### 10. Comparison

The advantage of Stalnaker's view is that, unlike Lewis's view, it clearly distinguishes between garden-variety presupposition accommodation from presupposition accommodation via pretense.

- Can you introduce me to that amazing woman?
- Sure. And I'll introduce you to her husband too.

The advantage of Lewis's view is that, unlike Stalnaker's view, it clearly distinguishes between assertion and presupposition accommodation. The expectation that the proposition will be common ground after the utterance is registered does not do the trick.



## 6. Summary

- Context is usually represented in semantics in two ways: as a K-context and as an S-context. The bifurcation is natural but it is not forced upon us.
- Common ground and presupposition is analyzable in terms of the attitude of conversational acceptance.
- To capture relevance, we can pair common ground with common query, representing the question(s) under discussion.
- There are two ways of understanding presupposition accommodation and to capture the full scope of the phenomenon we probably need both.

the end (for now)

