Counterfactual Attitudes and Assignment-Sensitivity

Dilip Ninan
dilip.ninan@st-andrews.ac.uk
January 20, 2011

Abstract

This paper presents a novel account of *de re* attitude reports, with particular attention to sentences that report *counterfactual attitudes* such as imagining, wishing, and dreaming.

1. (a) Ralph imagined that Ortcutt was flying a kite.
   (b) Ralph wished that she had not opened the box.

I begin by outlining the standard approach to *de re* reports in the formal semantics literature, an account first proposed by Cresswell and von Stechow (1982) and subsequently developed by others. That account is built on Lewis's influential account of *de se* and *de re* attitude content (Lewis 1979). I then show how counterfactual attitudes pose a problem both for this semantic theory and for the account of mental content on which it is built.

In response to the problem, I develop an alternative account of *de re* attitude content, one which generalizes the centered worlds treatment of *de se* content. On the account developed, 'attitudinal alternatives' (doxastic alternatives, imagination alternatives, etc.) should be represented by *sequenced worlds*, or triples consisting of a possible world, a time, and a sequence of individuals. The resulting theory of mental content is adequate for representing the content of *de re* counterfactual attitudes.

I then turn to the task of giving a compositional semantic theory for *de re* attitude reports which predicts their sequenced worlds truth conditions. The account I propose has two main features. First, all singular terms – pronouns, indexicals, and proper names – are treated as *assignment-sensitive*, i.e. their semantic values are sensitive to a variable assignment. This feature of the account is motivated by data which shows that all such expressions can be bound (cf. Geurts 1997; Cumming 2008; Heim 2008). Second, attitude verbs are treated as *assignment-shifters*, operators which shift the variable assignment. In addition to predicting the sequenced worlds truth conditions for *de re* reports, the account resolves a compositional problem facing the standard Creswell and von Stechow approach.

References

Cresswell, Maxwell J. and von Stechow, Arnim. 1982. "*De Re* Belief Generalized." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 5:503 – 535.

Cumming, Samuel. 2008. "Variabilism." *Philosophical Review* 117:525 – 554.

Geurts, Bart. 1997. "Good News About the Description Theory of Names." *Journal of Semantics* 14:319–348.

Heim, Irene. 2008. "Features on Bound Pronouns." In Daniel Harbour, David Adger, and Susana Bèjar (eds.), *Phi-Theory: Phi-Features Across Modules and Interfaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, David K. 1979. "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*." *Philosophical Review* 88:513 – 543. Reprinted in Lewis 1983, 133 - 159. Page references to are to the 1983 reprint.

—. 1983. *Philosophical Papers, Volume I*. New York: Oxford University Press.