Radical contextualism: What notion of content?

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Abstract. Radical contextualists as Searle and Travis hold a general underdeterminacy claim according to which most non-indexical sentences in natural language are such that their tokens can have different truth-conditions. Moreover, these radical views avoid assuming that underdeterminacy is restricted to natural language (as opposed to mental representations). Because of that, they do not identify the content of an utterance with a structured proposition whose truth-conditions are independent of a context of use. Here I will put forward an alternative notion of utterance content that fits these views: Austinian propositions involving a lekton and an activity. I will argue that having Austinian propositions with different granularities allows us to have both contents that are closely tied to the context of use and contents that can be shared across contexts.

Keywords. Radical contextualism, Austinian propositions, content.

1. Radical contextualism

During the last decades, contextualist views have generalized the role of context in the determination of the truth-conditions of our utterances. In this paper, I will focus on radical contextualism[1] in Searle [2] and Travis [3] style. My aim is to explore what notion of content fits these radical views.

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[1] Borg [1] calls Travis' approach 'occasionalism' and distinguishes it from contextualism. According to contextualism, pragmatic effects on truth-conditional content need not be mandated by lexico-syntactic elements. Occasionalism goes one step further and claims that there is no truth-conditional content outside a context of use, for words only have application conditions in use. Using this terminology, I will focus on occasionalism.

Radical contextualists have made their case by showing that the truth-conditions of non-indexical sentences can shift across contexts. Typically, they describe two scenarios in which a non-indexical[2] sentence S is used. In one scenario it seems that S is true, whereas in the other S seems to be false. This motivates the claim that truth-conditions are (partly) a pragmatic business. Let us call these examples Travis cases.

Here is an oft-discussed Travis case (I slightly modify Travis's [3] pp. 111-112 original example): It is winter, and Pia's tree is full of brown leaves. She is decorating the garden and, thinking that the tree looks very ugly and that green leaves are always beautiful, she decides to paint the leaves green. After doing it, she says: 'That's better. The leaves are green now'. What she says is true. Later, a botanist phones, seeking green leaves for some scientific research on the properties of green plants. Again, Pia says (this time addressing the botanist): 'The leaves (on my tree) are green. You can have them'. Now, what she says is false.

This example motivates a principle of underdeterminacy (I will call it Type-Underdeterminacy):

Type-Underdeterminacy: A non-indexical sentence S is type-underdetermined if and only if there are tokens of S that have distinct truth-conditions.

In the previous example, the meaning of the sentence uttered by Pia is adjusted so as to fit the context of use. In the first scenario, 'green' is understood as being satisfied by leaves that are superficially green. In the second, what matters is that the leaves are naturally green, or green by the effect of chlorophyll. What is said by the utterance depends on what is at stake at the context of use. In this sense, one can talk (as Searle and Travis suggest) of the sentence's truth-value being relative to a background of implicit assumptions or to the character of the occasion.

Advocates of the radical view argue that what goes for 'The leaves are green' goes for most sentences in natural language. The justification for this claim is provided by the variety of examples that have been put forward, including more specific versions of 'The leaves are green' such as 'The leaves are painted green' (if the leaves have been painted by using yellow and blue dots, does that count as 'green'?) or 'The leaves are superficially green' (How much of surface needs to be painted?). If Travis cases can be created for these sentences as well, then complexifying the sentence, i.e., adding more linguistic material so as to make everything explicit, does not seem to eliminate context-dependence.

Searle is especially clear about this: 'our examples suggest that the assumptions are not specifiable as part of the semantic content of the sentence, or as presuppositions of the applicability of that semantic content, for at least two reasons. First, they are not fixed and definite in number and content; we would never know when to stop in our specifications. And second, each specification of an assumption tends to bring

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[2] This claim has been disputed. I will not address this issue here.

in other assumptions, those that determine the applicability of the literal meaning of the sentence used in the specification.' (Searle, [2]: 214-215)

This possibility of iterating Travis cases, or of creating higher-order Travis cases, motivates Searle's and Travis's radical views, as opposed to more moderate contextualist positions. According to more moderate approaches, the list of context-dependent expressions needs to be extended in order to include, for example, colour terms. By contrast, advocates of the radical views take this strategy to be insufficient. According to their views, we cannot articulate (encode in natural language) fully determinate contents, that is, contents whose truth-conditions cannot vary across contexts of use[3]. If that is so, then Type-Underdeterminacy is a general feature of natural language.

One could argue that, whereas 'is green' does not express a constant property across contexts, there is nonetheless a context-independent property expressed in each context. Underdeterminacy would thus concern the relation between the meaning of the predicate 'is green' and the property expressed by this predicate at a context of use. Given the possibility of creating Travis cases for many sentence, the property should be conceived as non-encodable in natural language. If this option works, then Type-Underdeterminacy can be made compatible with a fairly standard approach to context-sensitivity.

As it is standardly understood following the model of indexicals, context-dependence motivates the distinction of two levels of content. On the one hand, there is linguistic meaning, the kind of content that expressions have qua types, independently of the specifics of the context in which they are used. In the Kaplanian framework, the linguistic meaning is the character of the expression. On the other hand, we have the content that an expression expresses in an occasion of use. In the Kaplanian framework, the term 'content' is reserved for this level. The content, in this second sense, of a declarative sentence in an occasion of use is usually referred to as 'the proposition expressed', or 'what is said'. Perhaps in Travis cases which proposition has been expressed is not determined by linguistic meaning, but the basic approach to content could be maintained.

However, it is not clear that this is the best way to model utterance content. One reason is that there are doubts that the non-encodable properties one would need to posit are playing any role in our cognitive lives. This is the case if Type-Underdeterminacy is not restricted to natural language sentences. Searle [2] explicitly takes it to be a general feature of intentional states. For him, mental representations, like linguistic representations, have truth-conditions relative to a background of implicit assumptions. More recently, the assumption that mental representations are unlike natural language when it comes to underdeterminacy has been challenged. Focusing on the Language of Thought hypothesis, Clapp argues that, once it is admitted that natural language underdetermines the truth-conditions of our utterances we are left with no arguments to the effect that mental representations (Mentalese sentences) are free of underdeterminacies (Clapp [4]). In a similar vein, some philosophers argue that there

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[3] Travis explicitly leaves mathematics aside.

are no reasons to assume that the concepts we token when we are in the kind of scenario described by Travis are something more precise than GREEN (Corazza and Dokic [5], Belleri [6]).

If these authors are right, then there are no reasons to model mental representations as structured propositions with non-encodable properties that escape Type-Underdeterminacy, for these properties do not correspond to our concepts. And if that is so, and assuming that are no additional reasons for accepting the existence of properties that do not behave as GREEN, then there are no reasons to model the content of our speech acts as involving structured propositions with non-encodable properties. Instead, one can go for a relativist framework in which a shift in extension as the ones motivated by Travis cases is not necessarily equivalent to there being two different properties[4]. In these frameworks, the truth-value of the proposition expressed is relative to the circumstance of evaluation.

Let me pause on a different (and equally common) notion of proposition. So far I have considered structured propositions. There is another notion of proposition, namely a set of possible worlds. Advocates of the radical view need not reject this notion of proposition. Although they reject the claim that truth-conditions are determined by linguistic meaning alone, they still take it that utterance content is truth-conditional content, and this can be conceived as a set of possible worlds[5] or as a function from possible worlds to truth-values.

I think, however, that there can be cases in which the context of utterance only determines a partial function from possible worlds to truth-values. When, in the first scenario depicted by Travis, Pia utters 'The leaves are green' it is plausible to model her utterance as being true of leaves that have been covered with green paint. However, it might be indeterminate whether a leaf that has been painted with blue and yellow dots (a leaf that only looks green at a certain distance) counts as 'green'. By contrast, in other contexts this might be determinate (for example in context where there is no green paint and the interlocutors have decided that they will paint very small blue and yellow dots instead). This motivates what I will call Token-Underdeterminacy:

Token-Underdeterminacy: A token of a sentence S is token-underdetermined if and only if for some possible states of affairs its truth-value is indeterminate (i.e., if and only if it determines a partial function from possible worlds to truth-values).

In what follows I will assume that advocates of radical contextualism as Searle and Travis are right in their general Type-Underdeterminacy claim and explore what

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[4] See MacFarlane [7] for a careful distinction along these lines.

[5] Similarly, if a property is conceived as an extension, then an advocate of the radical view can accept that that 'green' expresses different extension at different contexts.

notion of utterance content fits these approaches. I will adopt Recanati's moderate relativism and make use of his notion of Austinian propositions ([8]).

2. Austinian propositions

Recanati [8] provides the means for defining a dual notion of content that fits the radical views. Recanati's Moderate Relativism admits of two different kinds of content: the lekton and the Austinian proposition. The lekton is defined as the explicit, articulated content. Its truth-value is relative to situations of evaluation. By contrast, the Austinian proposition is the complete truth-conditional content, including the lekton plus a situation of evaluation. It has absolute truth-conditions. These two kinds of content correspond to two different kinds of linguistic items. Whereas the lekton is the content of the sentence, the Austinian proposition is the content of an utterance of the sentence. Take as an example the temporal proposition expressed by 'Socrates is sitting' (assuming time is not articulated in the sentence). The explicit content of this sentence (lekton) has different truth-values at different times. Now, an utterance of 'Socrates is sitting' at t has absolute truth-conditions: it is true if and only if Socrates is sitting at t.

 The grounds for the distinction lekton-Austinian proposition is given by two principles:

> [Duality] To get a truth-value, we need a circumstance of evaluation as well as a content to evaluate. (As Austin puts it, 'It takes two to make a truth'.)

> [Distribution] The determinants of truth-value distribute over the two basic components truth-evaluation involves : content and circumstance. That is, a determinant of truth-value, e.g. a time, is either given as an ingredient of content or as an aspect of the circumstance of evaluation. ([8]:33-34)

 Duality is a well-accepted principle. It simply states the thesis that truth-value depends both on content and on how things are. Whether a given sentence is true depends on what the sentence means together with the state of the world. Distribution introduces a different idea: some of the elements that are needed to fix the truth-value of an utterance need not be given by the articulated content of the sentence—they can be given by the circumstance[6].

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[6] Recanati follows here Perry [9].

Recanati gives an argument to the effect that utterance truth-value does not necessarily coincide with lekton truth-value, even when the articulated content is enough to get a truth-value. Here is the example he uses. I'm watching a poker game, and I say: 'Claire has a good hand'. As it happens, Claire is not among the players. Intuitively, my utterance is not true, for my utterance was about the poker game I am watching. Suppose that, by coincidence, Claire is playing poker at a different place, and has indeed a good hand. There is a sense in which what I said is true. Moderate relativism can accommodate both intuitions. On the one hand, the sentence is true, for it says that Claire has a good hand and that is the case. On the other, my utterance of it is false, for it purported to characterize a given poker game (the one I was watching) and Claire was not among the players.

The radical views provide another argument for the distinction lekton-Austinian proposition. They show that truth-conditions depend on something that cannot be articulated in the sentence. Why? Because there are reasons to think that, for most sentences, a Travis case can be generated—for 'The leaves are painted green', 'The leaves are naturally green', and so on. The reason is not that the sentence would be too complex for us to articulate, but that all the terms involved can be understood in different ways. Thus, the possibility of iterating Travis cases forces a reading of the Distribution principle that extends the need for Austinian propositions, for they suggest that no sentence is fully articulated (truth-conditions are always relative to some implicit assumptions). As a result, the radical views motivate a stronger reading of the Distribution principle:

[Distribution*] The determinants of truth-value distribute over the two basic components truth-evaluation involves : content and circumstance. Not all determinants can be fully articulated in the sentence. Some must be provided by the circumstance.

The distinction lekton-Austinian proposition can be easily adapted to Travis cases. Using Travis's terminology, we could model Austianian propositions as <lekton, occasion> pairs. The question now is: what is an 'occasion'? Or, better, what is the occasion adding to the lekton so that to make the satisfaction conditions of the predicate shift? How should we think of this second element?

Corazza and Dokic [5] use the idea that utterances concern situations in order to explain some of the examples that have been discussed in the contextualist debate, including cases of incompleteness as 'Tipper is ready', where we need to add what Tipper is ready for in order to get a complete proposition, or more Travis-style example, as 'There's beer in the fridge'. The example goes as follows. John and Jane utter 'There's beer in the fridge'. There is no bottle of beer in the relevant fridge. However, there are some stains of beer. John wants to inform Jane that there is a bottle of beer in the fridge. Jane wants to inform John that the fridge has not been cleaned.

According to Corazza and Dokic, John and Jane utterance have different truth-values because they concern different situation. On their account, the truth-conditions of

an utterance are given by relative T-sentences such as 'An utterance u of "There's some beer in the fridge" is true iff there's some beer in the fridge in the situation of u.' [4]. However, in order for this explanation to work, the notion of situation at stake must be one different from Barwise and Perry [10]. In Barwise and Perry's work on situation semantics reality is conceived as consisting in situations—parts of the world. The leading idea is that we always find ourselves in a situation: 'we see them, case them to come about, and have attitudes towards them' ([10]: 7). Individuals, properties and locations are uniformities across real situations. These uniformities will be the building blocks of abstract situations—the tools for the semantic theory. However, in Travis cases, it seems that something else must be added to the situation, for, typically, objects remain constant across the occasions described. It seems that what is doing the work here is what Travis calls 'the character of the occasion'—something having to do with the purposes of the conversation, or what is at stake. In particular, I think that the shifts in extension can be traced to the activity in which the utterance is embedded (decorating the garden, doing scientific research, etc.).

Hence, occasion-sensitivity shows that, beyond including objects, places and times, situations must be conceived as involving linguistic and extralinguistic activities— perhaps more in line with Wittgenstein's language games than with Barwise and Perry's situations. Thus, we can take the salient variation in Pia's example to be due to the activity in which the act of utterance is embedded. In the first context, Pia is painting leaves so as to match the colour they have in spring (or for decorative purposes, let's say), whereas the botanist is doing scientific research. The content of her utterances can be modeled as an Austinian proposition including a lekton (the meaning of 'The leaves are green') and an activity (decoration, scientific research).

I am using the notion of activity here because it seems like a natural way to capture the idea that what counts as green on an occasion depends on what is going on in that occasion. Alternatively, we could talk about the purposes of the conversation. I take purposes and activities here to be roughly equivalent: if the conversation concerns scientific research we can also say that its purpose is to do scientific research, and vice versa. In both descriptions, what makes it the case that painted leaves do not satisfy an utterance of 'The leaves are green' is that science is about natural properties.

3. Specificity and content sharing

Cappelen and Lepore [11] argue that the concept of what is said faces a tension. On the one hand, contextualists have it that what is said is closely tied to the context of use. On the other, we often share contents across contexts—we report what others say, have inter-contextual discussions, etc.

According to contextualists, what is said in an utterance is the result of contextual adjustment. The point that Cappelen and Lepore find problematic is that this adjust-

ment seems to be, according to contextualists, highly specific. The reason is that every small detail of a conversation might be relevant to how one understands words. Two people who have been trained in different painting traditions can understand differently an utterance of 'The leaf is green' when they are painting leaves—there can be a leaf that counts as 'painted green' for one of them but not the other. If content needs to be highly specific, then activities, as they figure in Austinian propositions, should be very fine-grained.

However, it should be possible to share content across contexts. Modeling activities too fine-grained makes it difficult. In particular, it makes most speech reports strictly speaking false. Imagine that I report Pia's utterance by saying: 'Pia said that the leaves are green. She is painting them'. In most circumstances, this report is enough for us to grasp what Pia said. We have a broad understanding of what painting consists in. Although there are different ways of painting things we know that, roughly speaking, painting consisting in applying paint to the surface so as to hide the original colour. However, if every small detail of the context matters, we should model Pia's original utterance as involving a more fine-grained activity than the one conveyed by 'She has painted them'.

As a consequence we need to find a middle course between contents that are as context-bound as Travis cases seem to call for but that cannot be shared across contexts, and contents that can be shared across contexts but that are too broad to respect the intuition that any detail might matter.

Corazza and Dokic's situated minimalism seems follow that middle course. According to them, propositional truth in cases similar to the ones I've been considering should be relativized to the situation of use. This explains the variation in truth-value and the intuition that any detail of the context might matter to what is said. But on the other hand, Corazza and Dokic are minimalists when it comes to what an utterance says, and claim that 'Two people using the same alleged underdetermined sentence can be characterized, pace contextualism, as having said the same thing even if they are not co-situated.' [5]

However, same-saying at least sometimes requires something else than sameness of linguistic meaning. Some philosophers have argued that whether two utterances share content is something that needs to be decided by taking into account not only linguistic meaning (lekton) but also some features of the context of use. Wieland [12] makes this point by focusing on indirect reports. As she argues, we rarely report what someone has said by uttering the exact same words. Instead, some additional linguistic material is usually needed. Imagine the following situation. We have a barrel full of apples. Some of the apples are affected by some fungus and we need to discard them. The fungus makes the interior of the apples red. Anne cuts an apple and says 'The apple is red'. Now imagine that the apple is left on the table. When Nelly arrives home she says that she's hungry and, since the lights are out and cannot properly see the apple asks if that's a red apple. A report such as 'Anne said that the apple is red' would be incorrect here: we need to add something else in order to capture the content

of Anne's utterance. The moral of these examples is that sharing a lekton is not always enough for same-saying.

The problem with Corazza and Dokic's account of same-saying is that a homophonic speech report, as 'Jane said that there's a beer in the fridge' is false whenever the report context is relevantly different from the original context. And it is so because the sentence 'There's a beer in the fridge' does not say the same in both occasions.

My solution to the tension will involve Austinian propositions with different granularities. Before that, let me note that conceiving Austinian propositions as including activity types, instead of particular situations, already allows us to explain some cases of same-saying without the need to identify same-saying with uttering the same sentence. Imagine a teacher teaching geography to some children. In order to make it easier for them to identify countries in a map, he tells them: 'Look, Italy is the one that looks like a boot. And France is hexagonal. You see?'. Her utterance concerns the activity of comparing countries with objects, let's say. As it happens, this teacher uses the same example every year, as do many other teachers. She says the same year after year. If we model her utterance as including the activity type 'comparing countries with objects', we can account for that.

Instead of particular situations, we can think of Austinian propositions as including situation-types. Thus, two utterances of the same sentence that refer to two different particular situations can express the same Austinian propositions, because of the particular situations being of the same situation type. The content of an utterance, then, will be conceived as a pair <lekton, activity-type>. Two different activity-tokens can correspond to the same activity-type.

Despite this, I admit that a content that is closely tied to the context of use is difficult to share across contexts. If we model the content of Pia's first utterance as including a very fine-grained activity, such as 'painting the leaves in the way Pia likes' or 'painting the leaves according to such-and-such tradition', then it is going to be difficult to have indirect reports that capture the content of the original utterance. But usually, less specific contents are good enough. For most purposes, it is enough to grasp that when Pia said 'The leaves are green' (first utterance) she only cared about the superficial aspect or, roughly, about the leaves being covered by paint (as opposed to them being naturally green).

In this sense, understanding can be said to come in degrees. When two interlocutors are co-situated and aware of each other's intentions as well as the topic of the conversation, and so on, then their understanding of each other's utterances can be very deep. By contrast, when they are not co-situated, or have only broadly grasped what the conversation is about, their understanding of the utterance will be more superficial and they will only roughly grasp what the speaker means—for instance, they might grasp that Pia's utterance has to do with painting leaves, but not whether it is important that the whole surface is covered with paint.

My proposal goes as follows. We can classify activities more or less fine-grained. My suggestion is that we allow for different ways of classifying activities, ranging from

very rough to very precise classifications in which any detail matters. If we look at the tension with this in mind, the threat will turn out not to be that serious. In the limiting case, the Austinian proposition can include the particular occasion—an activity so fine-grained that it will admittedly be difficult to share across contexts.

Given that we can class particular activities into activity-types with different fine-ness of grain, we can represent the content of an utterance as being more or less fine-grained, depending on the aim of the classification—ranging from very rough to very precise classifications in which any detail matters. Thus, we can have more or less fine-grained propositions. For example, we could have a range of propositions that could model the content of Pia and John's utterance:

P1: <The leaves are green, Decoration>

P2: <The leaves are green, Painting leaves>

P3: <The leaves are green, Painting leaves in a way that the original colour is no longer observable>

P4: <The leaves are green, Painting leaves in a way that the original colour is no longer observable and excluding pointillism>

And the limiting case:

P5: <The leaves are green, Particular occasion>

We can class a given utterance as expressing one proposition or another, depending of the purposes of the classing. If we want to model the content of Pia's utterance as being closely tied to the context of use, we can use P4 or P5. If we want to model the content that is shared across contexts (for example, in a speech report), we can use P1 or P2.

Propositions here can be understood, following Perry Korta and Perry [13], as abstract objects that are used for classificatory purposes:

> [T]he reflexive-referential theory sees propositions as abstract ob-jects that are used to *classify* events of certain types (cognitive states and utter-ances, paradigmatically) by conditions of truth (or other relevant forms of suc-cess)—used explicitly by theorists such as ourselves, and implicitly in the practice of those who have mastered the propositional attitudes and similar constructions. We do not see propositions as denizens of a third realm to which some quasi-causal relation relates us, but as devices by which we can classify events along different dimensions of similarity and difference. Differ-ent propositions can be used to classify the same act, relative to different frameworks for associating success-conditions of various sorts. ([13], p. 176-177).

Thus, the range of Austinian propositions I have described can be seen as a tool for classifying linguistic events. Sometimes, very fine-grained propositions are needed. These fine-grained propositions allow us to capture the insight that, as Travis cases suggest, any detail of the utterance context might matter to truth-conditions. On the

other hand, less fine-grained propositions can be used in classifying linguistic events that are similar enough to count as same-saying.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, I have modelled utterance content as a <lekton, activity-type> pair and advocated a form of multipropositionalism according to which we can represent the content of an utterance with different granularities, depending on whether we want to capture a content that is shared across contexts or very detailed truth-conditions. This notion of content is compatible with radical contextualism is Searle-Travis style, for it respects the general Type-Underdeterminacy principle.

I will finish by noting that the approach presented here can be of some interest for the minimalist as well. According to the minimalist, non-indexical sentences are truth-evaluable. Semantics determines classical propositions. However, minimalists typically agree that, when it comes to communication, these semantically determined propositions are insufficient[7]. A minimalist can distinguish a semantic notion of content (a minimal proposition whose truth-conditions are semantically determined) from a pragmatic notion of content, adjusted to the context of use. Thus, the notion of Austinian proposition I have put forward can be of interest in accounting for utterance content regardless of what one thinks of minimal propositions. A minimalist can have it that lekta are truth-evaluable and yet acknowledge that the truth of an utterance (not of the sentence) is relative to the relevant activity. The reason why a minimalist might find Austinian propositions useful is that of the 'Claire has a good hand' example: one thing is the truth-value of the sentence (in case it has one), another is the truth-value of the utterance. The latter arguably depends on what is at stake.

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[7] As an example, Cappelen and Lepore [14] opt for speech act pluralism.

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