From ad hoc concepts to ad hoc applications

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There are many examples of language use where to understand what someone has said by using a given sentence – and when what was thus said would be true, – one needs to look beyond what is encoded in the sentence itself (what is known simply by knowing what the sentence means). In many cases, knowing a (broader) context in which the sentence is uttered is necessary to get to what the speaker intended to say or imply (i.e. to infer the so called explicature or implicature). Still, the context-dependence of (the intended) content on context can be cashed out in various ways.

According to relevance theoretic lexical pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Sperber and Wilson 1998, Wilson and Sperber 2002, Wilson and Carston 2007, Carston 2002), the concept expressed by the use of a word in a context often diverges from the concept that is lexically encoded and represents the word’s standing meaning. On a radical version of this view (Carston 2012, Casasanto and Lupyan 2015) lexically encoded concepts are altogether eliminated; in as much as truth-conditions are supposed to be constituted solely by (the contents of) these ad hoc constructed concepts, “why insist that words encode concepts?” (Carston 2012: 617). Instead it is proposed that a word (qua type) is associated with a ‘grab bag’ of encyclopaedic information stored in the long term memory out of which a contextually constrained, ad hoc concept is constructed online each time the word is tokened. An ad hoc concept is, just like a lexical concept, understood to be an atomic metal particular with an externalist semantics (Carston 2010: 165). One radical consequence of this view is that standing lexical semantics is no longer deemed ‘conceptual’ (and a fortiori compositional) in as much as ad hoc concepts fulfil the role of constituting explicatures. Hence, their presence in the semantic theory opens a door to meaning eliminativism.

In this paper I question the motivation for introducing ad hoc concepts as a way to account for the contextually variable truth-conditions of sentences. Instead I propose an alternative account which explains intuitively shifting truthconditions by the selective attention mechanism rather than by postulating ad hoc concepts. Like relevance theoretic pragmatics, I maintain that only partial information from a long term memory that is associated with a concept is activated on an occasion of utterance and that this is the main reason for the effect of variable truth-conditions. However, this effect can be explained more conservatively without postulating ad hoc concepts. We can assume, for instance, that healthy rational agents selectively attend (see also Smith 2010) only to a portion of a concept’s extension, motivated by achieving practical goals.

My argument for practical goals requiring selective attention relies on evidence from Travis cases. As these cases illustrate, not every situation that makes the sentence true is conducive to a certain practical goal. For instance, the leaves being non-naturally green is not conducive to the goal of doing a botanical experiment with such leaves (see Travis (2008): 100). Since on different occasions different goals may be pursued, situations with higher goalconducive potential are preferred to those with lower (which are thus passed by). And with goals shifting so does our selective focus on goal-conducive situations, creating an appearance of shifting truth-conditions. However, although our attention shifts, truth-conditions, on this view, remain invariant. The proposal therefore
preserves classical conceptual (externalist) semantics: a word lexically encodes a concept whose extension remains invariant. Moreover, the apparent cross-contextual shift of a concept expressed by a word is explained as a consequence of our practically motivated selective focus on a goal-conducive part of the encoded concept’s extension.

A further support for the proposed view comes from the analysis of communication disorders. I show that my proposal is compatible with weak central coherence theories (Frith 1989, see also Happ’e 1993) that explain pragmatic language impairments (e.g. autism and social communication disorder) as inability to screen out contextually inappropriate interpretations (cf. Happ’e 1994: 100). On my proposal, pragmatically impaired individuals don’t entertain different concepts compared to pragmatically competent individuals but instead are free from contextual constraints, and exhibit behaviour that is not goal or purpose driven. In other words, on the current proposal, they are not considered semantically or conceptually incompetent (as they would be if ad hoc concepts were constituents of their explicatures) but are rather unable to ignore those truth-makers with sub-optimal goal-conduciveness potential.

References
Smith, B. (2010). What we mean, what we think we mean, and how language can surprise us.