

Comments on Paul Portner's 'Instructions for Interpretation as Separate Performatives'

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November 20, 2004

1 Overview

We are getting good at managing expressive content, but we are still fumbling after a characterization of expressive content itself.

Portner's insight about content management Sentences containing vocatives and dislocated topics are semantically multidimensional.

Portner's insight about the content itself Vocatives and dislocated topics involve speech-acts (or sentence-type meanings in the sense of Truckenbrodt, to appear).

The remaining question But what is this speech-act content itself?

Portner's answer for the remaining question Topics and vocatives contribute propositional meanings. They are made of the same stuff as regular meanings.

2 (Non-)Redundancy

[We're grateful to Peggy Speas for helping us to see the importance of this class of examples.]

Portner's semantics

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|--------------------------------|--|
| (1) Mary, what are you eating? | (2) Mary, I like her very much. |
| a. What is Mary eating? | a. I like Mary very much |
| b. I request Mary's attention | b. I request that you activate your mental representation of Maria |

Puzzle But we can use vocatives in sentences that have exactly the claimed vocative content:

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|-------------------------------------|---|
| (3) Mary, I request your attention. | (4) Maria, I request that you activate your mental representation of her. |
| a. I request Mary's attention | a. I request that you activate your mental representation of Maria |
| b. I request Mary's attention | b. I request that you activate your mental representation of Maria |

In other areas where we can more easily grasp the content of all dimensions of meaning, redundancy does arise:

- (5) #Mary, who is tall, is tall.
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| a. <i>Regular meaning</i> : Mary is tall |
| b. <i>Conventional implicature</i> : Mary is tall |

A processing perspective Using a DP seems to entail that your mental representation of the referent of that DP is activated. In general, can we gain from adding content that is entailed in the utterance situation?

Mixed evidence On Portner's analysis, one expects redundancy if the speaker already has the addressee's attention (in the vocative case) or already has activated his mental representation of the referent of the topic DP.

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|---|--|
| (6) This seems like a good prediction with respect to vocatives: | (7) But the prediction for topics does not work out as clearly: |
| A: Mary? | A: Let's talk about the party. Who should we invite? |
| Mary: Just a second. ... Okay, now I'm all yours. | B: I was thinking of Mary and John. Mary, I really like, and John is always really funny. So let's invite them for sure! |
| A:#Mary what are you doing tonight. | |

Our conclusion This doesn't impact the multidimensionality claim. It just forces us to look harder at the nature of vocative content.

3 A common problem

Nonredundancy with Japanese honorification

- (8) watashi-wa anata-o sonkei-shite masu.
 I-TOP you-ACC honor-do HON-present
- Regular meaning*: I honor you
 - Tempting honorific paraphrase*: I am speaking to you with much respect

Nonredundancy with English expressive adjectives

- (9) I hate (feel strongly about) those damn dogs.
- Regular meaning*: I hate (feel strongly about) those dogs
 - Tempting expressive paraphrase*: I hate (feel strongly about) those dogs

4 Towards a theory of dislocated-topic content

- Bittner (2001, 2003) defines a dynamic semantics that uses discourse prominence not only to track reference but also as the basic glue for putting meanings together.
- The basic objects of the theory are *stacks* (see also Dekker 1994).
- Dislocated topics have the effect of increasing the saliency of some entity. Bittner's semantics allows us to define this change in the information state by appeal to manipulation of the stacks.

Stacks A stack \top is a sequence of objects (of any type).

Projection functions

- $\mathbf{p}_a(\top)$ = the substack \top_a of \top consisting of all and only the objects in D_a , in the order they have in \top
- $\mathbf{p}_i(\top)$ = the i th member of \top
- $\mathbf{p}_i(\mathbf{p}_a(\top)) = \mathbf{p}_{a,i}(\top)$ = the i th a -type member of \top

(10)

$$\mathbf{p}_{e,2} \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{the property of being in love,} \\ \text{w} \end{array} \right) = \text{w}$$

Bittner's theory is fully dynamic. Here, we employ a version that is just dynamic enough to highlight our particular use of the theoretical framework.

- (11) $[\text{TOPIC}(\alpha)(\beta)]^\top$ is defined only if $[\alpha]$ is a member of $\mathbf{p}_e(\top)$ where defined, $[\text{TOPIC}(\alpha)(\beta)]^\top = [\beta]^\top$, where \top' is the stack that is just like \top except that $\mathbf{p}_{e,1}(\top') = [\alpha]$

For the case of TOPIC, Bittner's theory can establish the link between the topic (highest member of the stack) and the pronominals that typically appear in the complement to the topic phrase.

Example (7) The analysis does well with example (7). The plural sum consisting of only Mary and John is a different object than the entity Mary alone.

Independence The analysis seems to make good on Portner's insight that the content of the topic is independent of the content of its main-clause complement.

Multidimensionality As stated here, the analysis is multidimensional only in the very general sense that the meaning of a topic phrase is different in kind from the meaning of, say, a sentence.

References

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