

Some remarks on Mthat

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1. Introduction

In this talk I want to draw attention to a number of problems in Josef Stern's account of metaphorical representation. Their common root, I am going to argue, lies in Stern's attempt to integrate Stalnaker's notion of context into Kaplan's semantic theory. Let me then begin by rehearsing some very familiar features of Kaplan's and Stalnaker's accounts.

Kaplan's target is to provide a semantic account of indexical expressions. Included here are pure indexicals that do not require acts of demonstration, such as 'I', 'now', and possibly 'here'. For the ease of exposition it is better to focus on indexical sentences, i.e. sentences containing one or more indexicals. Now Kaplan claims that the content of such sentences—what they say—varies from one context to another. In one context the sentence:

I am hot (1)

says that Roger Federer is hot. In another context it says that Barack Obama is hot. The variation of contents is not random. Every time BO utters (1) its content is that BO is hot, and analogously for Federer. What ensures the stability is the purely lexical meaning of 'I'. Kaplan calls it 'character'.

Further, content will yield the semantic value of a sentence depending on the state of the world, or on what Kaplan calls 'the circumstance of evaluation'. If circumstances are such that BO is hot, then the semantic value of (1) is TRUE.

A tiny bit of a formal apparatus allows us to summarise the view as follows. Character is a function from contexts to contents. Its argument is a context, and its value a certain content. Contents, in turn, are functions from circumstances of evaluation to semantic values. In the case of sentences semantic values will be TRUE and FALSE, while in the case of singular terms semantic values will be the individuals referred to. The content of indexical sentences changes with contexts, so their character is represented by a variable function, whereas the character of non-indexical sentences is a constant function.

Circumstances of evaluation are arrays of parameters such as world, agent, place, and time: $\langle w, x, p, t \rangle$. Contexts are represented by a similar structure, but with an added restriction that the agent x is present at the place p at the time t in the world w . Notably the parameters in the array are not parameters of an utterance. We can assign content and truth value to the sentence (1) even if no one ever uttered it (compare the sentence 'I am silent'). Nevertheless we can instead identify them with parameters of possible utterances.

Enter Stalnaker. Like Kaplan's, his theory is supposed to describe the dependence of contents on contexts. But the setting is entirely different. We examine

the contents of actual utterances and we place virtually no limits on how a particular utterance token, a speech act, is interpreted by the addressee. By occupying himself with utterance tokens, Stalnaker envisages a situation where the addressee of my utterance (call him ‘Jacob’) interprets his sensory experience as an act of assertion. Such an interpretation is an integral part of a successful assignment of semantic values to the particular assertion, i.e. of Jacob’s presuppositions. It has several components. In the first place, it must contain some sort of a behavioural theory allowing Jacob to identify the opening of my mouth as an act of assertion, rather than as an act of clearing my throat. Secondly, Jacob should have a lexical theory associating the sequence of noises emanating from my mouth with linguistic items. When I utter a statement—say, ‘Snow is white’—Jacob’s lexical theory should tell him I utter it in English, rather than in some obscure Chinese idiolect vocally indistinguishable from English.

So we consider concrete utterance tokens, and for every such utterance token different addressees of the utterance along with the utterer himself may form different pragmatic presuppositions. These latter are nothing but propositions assumed by the speaker, who can either seriously believe in them, assume them ‘for the sake of argument’, or perhaps pretend to believe in them. Similarly to Kaplan’s account, there is a two-step procedure in place: from contexts we get to propositions which themselves are functions from possible worlds to semantic values.

2. The Cross-breeding Ploy

As Stalnaker himself emphasised on several occasions, for all their superficial similarities the two theories are very different. First, they are different in their goals. Whereas Kaplan intends to provide a semantic theory of a fragment of language, Stalnaker’s aim is to provide a model of conversation. Kaplan identifies properties of sentences (utterance types), while Stalnaker deals with utterances (utterance tokens). Second, there is an asymmetry in the explanatory order. On Kaplan’s view, indexical sentences have their content by virtue of their character. But utterances have their propositional concepts (formally analogous to characters) by virtue of their semantic contents.

Nevertheless there is one aspect in which Stalnaker’s account might be seen as a generalisation of Kaplan’s, and this is the notion of context. What if we wanted to create a semantic theory of context-sensitive expressions other than indexicals? And what if we did not have natural elements of context arrays such as time and place? There might be a straightforward solution. We may plug the agent’s presuppositions directly into the arrays of Kaplanian contexts. The ploy is to cross-breed the two approaches. We inherit the methodology and semantic machinery from Kaplan. We are looking for a *semantic* theory for a class of expression other than indexicals. Our goal is not to understand the dynamics of conversation involving that new class of expressions, but to have a theory assigning, in a given context, semantic contents and semantic values to those expressions. Unfortunately, in contrast to indexicals, there is no readily available contextual elements. We need a broader notion of context which we can inherit from Stalnaker. Contexts will contain the speakers’ presuppositions.

One might think that cross-breeding was already done by none other than Kaplan himself in the account of demonstratives (as opposed to pure indexicals). Suppose you point at the picture of Carnap and say, ‘The picture shows one

of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century.’ This is what you actually say in English. However, according to Kaplan, given the fact of demonstration your utterance must be assigned a special logical form containing the operator ‘dthat[.]’:¹

Dthat[‘the picture’] shows one of the greatest philosophers
of the 20th century. (2)

The argument of ‘dthat[.]’ is an act of demonstration, or a definite description (in its demonstrative use), or generally a singular term. The point of its introduction is in rigidifying its operand: for every context c and for every expression ϕ , an occurrence of ‘dthat[ϕ]’ in c rigidly designates the individual denoted by ϕ in c (and it designates no one if there is no such unique individual). To simplify, suppose ϕ is a definite description. Then there is the following consequence.² ‘Dthat[ϕ]’ takes an expression whose character is constant and yields an expression whose character is no longer constant: it delivers different contents in different contexts. Along the way it also converts the content of the embedded description into part of the character of the resulting dthat-expression.

At a minimum we have enlarged the previously pristine context arrays suitable for pure indexicals with acts of demonstration. But more is coming. What if my demonstration act is indistinct? I am on a visit to an art gallery standing in front of *Annunciation*. I say:

Dthis[waving my hand] is a typical Fra Filippo.

But right next to *Annunciation* there hangs *Repentant Magdalene* by Caravaggio. My demonstration may be inconclusive to determine the content of my utterance, or it may even be that I inadvertently pointed at Caravaggio’s piece. In such cases Kaplan believes the directing intention is an essential part of the context. Since I meant to refer to *Annunciation*, that is what the demonstrative designates.

Yet Kaplan cannot quite make up his mind on the matter. In Kaplan (1978) there is a well-known discussion of the Carnap/Agnew case. Suppose Carnap’s picture hangs on the wall behind me. I utter (2) while pointing at the wall behind me, fully intending to make a claim about Carnap’s picture. Unbeknownst to me, Carnap’s picture was replaced by Spiro Agnew’s picture. Then, says Kaplan:

I think it would simply be wrong to argue an ‘ambiguity’ in the demonstration, so great that it can be bent to my intended demonstratum. I have said of a picture of Spiro Agnew that it pictures one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. (Kaplan, 1978, 687)

When the demonstration is clear, then it should override any intention I might have. But he continues:

¹There is a marked ambiguity in Kaplan (1978) regarding the syntax and semantics of ‘dthat’. In one use it is an operator, but in another it is a directly referential singular term. The ambiguity is addressed in Kaplan (1989a, 579-82). Since for Stern’s purposes the operator interpretation is the only relevant one, we can ignore the singular term interpretation.

²Kaplan also argues for the ‘isomorphism’ between the semantics of demonstrations and descriptions, since we can associate character with each act of demonstration. See Kaplan (1989b, 525-27).

Still, it would perhaps be equally wrong not to pursue the notion of the intended demonstratum. . . . There are situations where the demonstration is sufficiently ill-structured in itself so that we would regularly take account of the intended demonstratum as, *within limits*, a legitimate disambiguating or vagueness removing device. (Kaplan, 1978, 687), his italics.

By the time of ‘Afterthoughts’ Kaplan’s view has drifted decisively towards emphasising the role of ‘directing intentions’ in the context. There he treats the Carnap/Agnew case as ‘rather complex, atypical’.³

How significant is Kaplan’s move, and how is it related to the Ploy? I think the answer to these questions brings us to the centre of the debate between contextualists and their opponents and will ultimately help us assess Stern’s theory. But let me pick up some details of that theory before returning to deal with the Ploy.

3. Metaphor and context

According to Stern, metaphorical sentences are both truth-apt and context-sensitive. We deploy Kaplan’s formal machinery with the following modification: contexts will include speakers’ presuppositions. At the surface level, Stern represents metaphorical expressions with the operator ‘Mthat[.]’ acting on a literal expression ϕ . So, analogous to indexicals (and demonstratives), the character of ‘Mthat[ϕ]’ is not constant: it yields different metaphorical contents for different contexts. We have:

Definition. For every context c and every expression ϕ , an occurrence of ‘Mthat[ϕ]’ in ‘ \dots Mthat[ϕ] \dots ’ in c expresses a set of properties P presupposed to be associated with ϕ in c .

For example, consider the sentence:

Juliet is the sun. (3)

To interpret this sentence we must follow several steps. We must recognise the presence of the metaphorical expression ‘is the sun’. We must assign it a variable character using the operator ‘Mthat[.]’. Analogously to (2), (3) gets transformed into:

Juliet Mthat[‘is the sun’]. (4)

What permits the transformation on each occasion of the utterance is our recognition of the context. A pagan worshipper can utter the English sentence (3) while purporting to name the sun god (compare ‘Helios is the sun’). In this case the transformation does not go through. If Romeo utters the same sentence, it should. The facts about the utterer, his beliefs, and so forth all belong to a context. Yet this is a presemantic role of the context.⁴ It allows us to assign conventional linguistic meanings to the strings of shapes and noises. Due to the same presemantic context the interlocutor realises that, e.g., (3) is uttered in English, or that someone is saying something, rather than just clearing his throat.

It is a central claim of Stern’s that the Mthat-transformation is done at this presemantic level. The logical form of the utterance of (3) is given by (4). Or alternatively, the character of that utterance is given by (4). Using the

³See Kaplan (1989a, 582).

⁴See Perry (1998).

type/token distinction, we can also say that the utterance-token of (3), given the facts of the presemantic context, instantiates the utterance-type (4).

The implications are significant. Stern rejects the view on which there is a literal meaning encoded in (3) subsequently to be transformed into metaphorical meaning. There is no place, then, for the thesis that (the vast majority of) metaphorical statements are literally false, but metaphorically true (or false). The metaphorical locution enters too early for us to be able to talk intelligibly of literally false/true statements. The literal meaning is encoded directly by (4), but, like the case of demonstratives, it cannot be assigned a truth value unless we supply a semantic context.

That semantic context is provided by metaphorically relevant presuppositions of the speaker. When we have a locution ‘ \dots Mthat[ϕ]. \dots ’, the speaker will have identified certain properties metaphorically associated (m-associated) with the expression ϕ . His beliefs about those m-associated properties will constitute the set of presuppositions for the given metaphorical sentence. How exactly m-presuppositions are selected is governed by pragmatic rules *à la* Grice.⁵ But there is a detail specific to metaphors. The set of presuppositions will divide into two subsets. One contains those presuppositions that generate each and every m-associated property of ϕ . Thus the expression ‘is the sun’ may presumably have m-associated properties ‘is bright’, ‘is extremely hot’, ‘is old’, ‘is life-giving’, ‘is magnificent’, and so forth. Not all of them are appropriate to ascribe to Juliet if the utterer is Romeo. Stern then postulates a second set of presuppositions that would serve to filter the properties appropriate in the given context. So while ‘is life-giving’ would be appropriate in the context of Romeo talking about Juliet, ‘is old’ would not be so.

4. Contextualism, minimalism, literalism

To get a better perspective on Stern’s account, it is useful to locate it in the current debate between contextualists and their opponents. The usual outline of that debate goes something like this. *Contextualists* claim that only speech acts, as opposed to sentences, should be ascribed semantic (truth-conditional) content.⁶ Now such ascriptions will be necessarily contextual: the same sentence can be used in speech acts with varying contexts and produce different contents. The idea of a context is a Gricean one. It is constituted by the speaker’s intentions, along with the clues instrumental for guessing these intentions.

Their opponents disagree. *Minimalists* claim that genuine context-dependent expressions are far and few. Among them are indexicals and demonstratives, along with a (very) limited number of other expressions. A sentence containing no such expressions will have the ‘minimal’ propositional content shared by every utterance of that sentence. Particular utterances may possess other propositional contents. And such contents do vary across contexts. Their study is naturally relegated to pragmatics.⁷

Other theorists, while no friends of contextualism, reject the idea of minimal propositions. One strategy here is to find counterexamples where the alleged minimal proposition is never asserted (as in Stanley’s ‘Every bottle is in the fridge.’). These theorists join hands with contextualists in regarding minimal

⁵See Stern (2000, 128, 135-39).

⁶See e.g. Recanati (2004, 83).

⁷See Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

propositions as somewhat mythological, having at the very least no explanatory value and being theoretically idle.

Literalists (whose chief representative I will take to be Jason Stanley) are in agreement with minimalists regarding the unique role of the narrow class of genuine context-sensitive expressions such as indexicals and demonstratives.⁸ But they are equally in agreement with contextualists on the claim of widespread semantic—as opposed to pragmatic—context-dependence. The way literalists oppose contextualist sentiments is by offering a different mechanism governing the context-sensitive production of semantic contents and the assignment of semantic values. When the sentence contains no elements from the narrow class of context-sensitive expressions, and when, on the other hand, we observe its semantic context-sensitivity, we must find a covert element in its logical form responsible for producing that context-sensitivity. So the context of course plays a major role in the explanation of context-sensitivity, but it is only one factor, the other key factor being the ‘real’ logical form of the sentence.

Where does Stern’s account fit in this debate? Minimalism is not an option. The minimal proposition associated with the English sentence (3) is the proposition of identity between Juliet and the sun. While there may be contexts in which the utterance of (3) is made and where this proposition is asserted, in metaphorical contexts this proposition, according to Stern, is never asserted. A minimalist about metaphors is likely to fall back on the Davidsonian view on which metaphorical utterances, however useful and fascinating, would have literal propositions as their semantic contents and would, therefore, be almost always false.

Stern’s view belongs in the literalist camp. Metaphorical contents are necessarily context-sensitive, but the semantic content is determined not only by the context, but also by the hidden element of the ‘Mthat[.]’ operator. That operator is not available at the level of the phonetic structure of an utterance. It should be recovered by the speakers (or rather, hearers and readers) at the pre-semantic stage of utterance interpretation. The outcome of this interpretation would be the correct logical form of the utterance in question.

A question arises whether the literalist has any independent argument against the contextualist analysis of metaphors. Stern has recently discussed this issue at length.⁹ One option available to the contextualist is to treat metaphors by analogy with sentences such as ‘Rome is covered in snow.’ The correct pragmatic interpretation of that sentence may involve the process of loosening: under reasonable assumptions, the utterance should be understood as ‘Many parts of Rome are partially covered in snow.’ Other pragmatic processes would include semantic transfer and free enrichment, but loosening seems especially well adapted to metaphorical analysis and has been the favourite candidate of Recanati and the Relevance theorists. Stern’s complaint centres on the perceived lack of analogy between the literal/loose contrast and the literal/metaphorical contrast. I think the complaint is well-taken. In the typical cases of loose talk we have the speakers ‘roughly’ or approximately expressing in words the content they intended to express. But in typical metaphorical utterances there is no approximation involved. It is plain false that Juliet is ‘almost’ the sun. There is no simple qualifier to insert for converting the literal into the metaphorical.

⁸For a concise statement of literalism see Stanley (2000, 398-401).

⁹See Stern (2006, 245-61).

For a serious discussion I refer the reader to Stern's careful examination and criticism of this strategy.

The second contextualist option is to treat metaphorical contents as a class of secondary meanings dependent on primary meanings. The metaphorical content will be inferred, in some way, from an antecedent literal meaning of the utterance. The analogy here is with conversational implicature. A colleague asks me to have lunch together. I reply, 'I've just had lunch.' What I imply, among other things, is that I have to decline the invitation. But this is not what I literally said with my words. For the hearer to correctly interpret my utterance, he must first understand what I literally said, and then, aided by the context, derive the implied content. On Recanati's view, conversational implicatures always involve such two-stage interpretative procedures. But metaphors, Recanati also believes, must have a different procedure.¹⁰ The hearers do not have to go through multiple stages. Their interpretation is 'immediate'. When I hear the utterance of (3), I do not first figure out the literal meaning (the identity proposition) and then infer the metaphorical meaning. Rather, the latter is grasped immediately.

Though Recanati provides no support for his conclusion other than citing phenomenological evidence and 'feeling', one should not deny the plausibility of the contrast he wishes to draw with typical instances of conversational implicature. Nevertheless the situation may be different with complex metaphors. Think especially of poetic metaphors. Thus Auden on Yeats:

Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

There is a metaphor here, but nothing about it is immediate. First, it is not immediately clear that there is a metaphor. And once we realise there is one, it takes some effort to get from the literal level, the one about empty vessels of Irish origin, to the metaphorical level, which is perhaps about Yeats leaving his poetry to posterity. The way to the metaphorical interpretation clearly goes through my reflection on the literal meaning of Auden's English sentence. So there must be here some form of functional determination of the metaphorical by the literal. Unfortunately, the contextualist lacks the resources to describe that determination.

The contextualist may have another move though. Granted there is no immediacy (or 'transparency', in Recanati's jargon), wouldn't this inferential procedure taking us from the literal to the metaphorical be quite dissimilar to the conversational implicature interpretation? Stern thinks that the contextualist can avail himself of a rather neat argument. The two-stage process alleged by Recanati to characterise conversational implicature involves the assignment of a semantic value to the literal content of the utterance and the subsequent assignment of a semantic value to the metaphor. But there is no assignment of semantic values to the literal content of Auden's metaphor, since there may be no truth-conditional literal content there. Within the truth-conditional semantic framework, the meaning of an utterance will have to be determined by the truth-conditions of that utterance. Or to put it differently: the speaker must know the truth-conditions of U in order for him to understand U . Now there is no sensible truth-condition attached to something like the literal utterance of

¹⁰See Recanati (2004, 74-8).

Auden's sentence. When would a vessel (what kind of vessel?) of Irish origin be empty of its (vessel's!) poetry? Similarly there is no condition in which Juliet is a massive star. But if so, there can be no two semantic stages in the interpretation of metaphorical utterances.

The argument, I think, is neat, but fallacious. The contextualist will begin by rejecting the truth-conditional semantics. It is precisely because we cannot figure out the truth-conditions of English sentences that the project of truth-conditional semantics has to be abandoned. It may be replaced by the project of truth-conditional theory of speech acts. In that theory, the lexical meanings of individual words will be only one of the factors in the assignment of truth-conditional contents to speech acts. So the initial demand that we must have semantic understanding of sentences is, from the contextualist perspective, entirely misplaced.

All this might not matter in the end. Suppose the contextualist wished to maintain the conversational implicature analogy. Then he must recognise some form of a two-stage (or multi-stage) interpretative procedure. But the Spartan menu of pragmatic processes in that procedure would again yield the same implausible option of loosening. And therefore, Stern's ultimate conclusion will be re-affirmed: contextualists recognise the dependence of the metaphorical on the literal, but they have no adequate theoretical resources to explain this dependence.

5. Another way to format the debate

The critical comments I want to make in the remainder of this paper have a shared theme: Stern has not provided us with a semantic *theory* of metaphor. To understand why, we have first to note how the methodological assumptions underlying his view are fundamentally opposed to Kaplan's.

It is clear that contextualists and their opponents disagree on many special issues. They have different stances on the role of truth-conditional semantics, on compositionality, the nature of truth-bearers, the place of context in the determination of semantic value, and so forth. Each of these issues is interesting and significant. But they may obscure a more general divide in this debate. There is, on the one hand, a belief that linguistic practices are systematic, that there is a possibility of a theory that would explain and predict linguistic phenomena. The parameters of the solution are well-known. Laying down the rules of formation, of inference, and of denotation for a given vocabulary we can predict what the semantic content of the utterance-in-*L* would be. Given facts about the world, we can further predict the semantic value of that utterance. Deviations from such theoretical predictions, while recognised, will be treated on a par with deviations of concrete physical environment from the predictions yielded by theoretical physics (say, mechanics). There are two basic premisses in this approach: that linguistic behaviour is essentially regular, and that it is not beyond human capacity to grasp these linguistic regularities.

Thus Kaplan's theory of (pure) indexicals is entrenched within this theoretical framework. Contents of indexical sentences depend on contexts, and thus are very unlike mathematical or pure scientific contents. But no matter: since that dependence is regular, we are still able to describe it. I can perfectly well predict what the content of your tomorrow's utterance of 'Today is hot' will be. Given facts about the weather, I can perfectly well predict its truth-value

too. I can similarly explain, with the most satisfying generality, the difference between the content of your utterance of ‘Today is hot’ when made today, and the utterance of the same sentence made tomorrow.

We can label this first methodological (or meta-theoretic) approach ‘neo-positivist’, without reading too much into this term. It is very clear, I think, that minimalists are neo-positivists. Their approach is expected to safeguard the predictive power of semantic theory. No matter what perverse pragmatic purpose a concrete utterance of a sentence S could achieve, the semantic content of S is always subject to a compositional calculation.

By contrast, contextualists are committed to another view of linguistic behaviour, which I label ‘neo-sceptical’. We may believe that there is little, if any, regularity in the meanings conveyed by linguistic utterances. Or at the very least we may believe that linguistic behaviour is chaotic: even if there is no conclusive reason to deny the regularity, it is too complex to be grasped by our theoretical capacities. The consequence is the same: it is not possible to create a semantic theory that would predict the meanings of particular utterances. So the utterance of the *English* sentence ‘Today is hot’ might, on occasions, convey the proposition $\langle 1/1/2000, \text{hot} \rangle$, but it might also convey the proposition $\langle 1/1/2000, \text{cold} \rangle$. And there will be no principled way to segregate the ‘correct’ contents associated with the given utterance. It is, I think, because of the same methodology that the proponents of the neo-sceptical view should also find it natural to insist on utterances as truth-bearers, as opposed to sentences. The prospects of a systematic semantic theory for sentences in L seem incomparably better than the prospects of the semantics of utterances. And even if such a theory would work for only a subclass of natural language sentences (say, those of a simple subject-predicate form), that would testify to sufficient regularity in a large fragment of linguistic practices.

Note also that, although the neo-sceptical view rejects the possibility of prediction, it does not necessarily reject the possibility of explanation. After the fact it is possible to see why the utterance had the content it actually had. Other chaotic phenomena, such as weather or stock markets, have the same feature: the persistent failure of prediction cohabits with the similarly persistent attempts at explanation. Linguistic practices have got to be intelligible, since otherwise genuine communication won’t be possible.

The idea that semantic contents essentially depend on the speaker’s pre-suppositions fits well the neo-sceptical framework. The concrete intentions of the concrete speakers, while not random, are too complex for us to discover any stable regularity in them. In different circumstance the same sentence can perform different tasks depending on the purposes the speakers want to achieve with their speech acts. There is generally no fixed rule connecting sentences with those speech-act purposes. So a theory able to generate predictions is impossible. What is possible nevertheless is a ‘typology’ of cases. People share enough physiology, background, moral character, and so forth to detect similarities in their linguistic action. The observer can therefore develop a skill of interpretation, and can also identify certain structural elements in that interpretation. The pragmatic processes attributed to the speakers are the result of this *practical* ability to get on with the interpretation.

To return once more to Kaplan, the theory of (complex) demonstratives is originally conceived, I think, in the neo-positivist mould. There is a context enriched with demonstrations, but the production of content is perfectly pre-

dictable and verifiable. We look at the demonstration, we examine its direction, we compute the content. But as Kaplan was quick to realise, we are in for trouble when demonstrations are too imprecise to pick out, e.g., an object in the group of other relevantly similar objects. The theory of directing intentions developed in the ‘Afterthoughts’ was supposed to offer a fix: such intentions will override any imprecise demonstrations. When my imprecise gesture fails to pick out the object, my intention was meant to do the job of determining the reference of the demonstrative. However, when the gesture is entirely off target, we have a wrong result. I am offered to have either pork or beef. I have a strong preference for the pork, but I clearly gesture at the beef and say ‘I’d have this.’ It seems that I said that I would have the beef, despite my prior intention to have the pork, but Kaplan’s theory predicts otherwise.¹¹

Presumably Kaplan sensed the looming trouble when he declared the Carnap/Agnew case of a rapture between intention and demonstration ‘atypical’. Perhaps he wished to limit his theory to simpler cases. Or perhaps other fixes can be offered on Kaplan’s behalf. But there is a feeling that as soon as we allowed richer contexts into our theory, we are on the way to the neo-sceptical approach. We may grant that contents are functionally determined by contexts, but we also are aware of the extreme unmanageable complexity of that determination. In the end we are left with a picture of how this determination occurs, but not with a workable theory answering the neo-positivist demands.

Now we can understand the residual problem of the Cross-breeding Ploy with which we began. The goal of a theory of pure indexicals is to have an effective procedure of computing semantic contents and to have a clear rule exhibiting the functional determination of contents by contexts. But given the contexts construed as the speaker’s presuppositions, we get neither such a procedure, nor a particular function showing the context-content determination.

6. Triviality threats

I have not said where we should put literalists in the neo-positivist/neo-sceptical divide. On the one hand, literalists believe in the possibility of a substantive semantic theory able to yield effective predictions. This would put them in the neo-positivist camp. On the other hand, I doubt they can carry out their own semantic programme. But I hesitate to make a claim of such generality. Literalists deal with specific fragments of discourse, and so any assessment of their programme must be piecemeal. The specific claim I make here is about Stern’s literalist account. It is as follows: despite Stern’s neo-positivist commitments, he has not provided us with a neo-positivist theory of metaphor.

Consider first the relation between the speaker’s *m*-presuppositions and metaphorical contents. The purpose of ‘Mthat[.]’ is to allow us to get from the literal meaning of the metaphorical expression to its semantic metaphorical content. Then, if I am given the metaphorical utterance:

$$\text{Mthat}[\text{‘My days’}] \text{ are } \text{Mthat}[\text{‘in the yellow leaf’}], \quad (5)$$

my *m*-associated presuppositions may include statements about Byron writing near the end of his life and correspondingly the belief (or make-belief) that he

¹¹See Reimer (1992).

anticipated his death, was bitter, had no appetite for life, and so forth. All this I bundle into my interpretation of the two metaphorical expressions involved. But then the content of (5) is in effect already contained in the context. So the character supposedly charged with producing contents is an identity function. Its argument is the same as its value. And then, it would seem, the semantic account of metaphorical interpretation is trivialised. (Notice here too that no such triviality is present in the theory of pure indexicals.)

In response Stern argues that the semantic account has a non-trivial role. It tells us that content depends solely on m-associated presuppositions (presumably in addition to its character). But the point of the response is not clear. What are m-associated presuppositions? They are those that are relevant for the interpretation of the metaphorical utterance. I may have a presupposition that Byron was an aristocrat, yet it does not contribute to the content of (5). On the other hand, my rudimentary botanical knowledge and my presuppositions about certain other facts of Byron’s biography are relevant to the grasp of the content of that utterance. How I select relevant presuppositions the semantic theory does not tell me, since this is a pragmatic affair. All it tells me is: select whatever relevant presuppositions there are. I think, therefore, that we haven’t got a theory. We have a methodological proposal about the role of context in metaphorical interpretation.¹²

We can go further. Here is a stronger claim: Stern’s account cannot distinguish well between metaphorical interpretation and other kinds of interpretation. Consider the following randomly chosen sentence:

Fayu bands and modern states represent opposite extremes
along the spectrum of human societies. (6)

It is rather ordinary and non-metaphorical (doubts may persist about the occurrence of ‘spectrum’). Faced with (6), you are probably going to ask the utterer: “‘Spectrum’—what spectrum? ‘Extremes’—what do you mean exactly? in what sense? Tell us more.’ An obvious way to interpret the content of this utterance is to learn more about the presuppositions of the speaker. Such presuppositions must be relevant to interpreting the occurrences of ‘extremes’ and ‘spectrum’. And our approach may well be literalist. We may hold those occurrences primarily responsible for triggering the contextual determination, though they themselves have no semantic content.

The story told about the semantic mechanism of metaphors will be paraphrased into the story of the interpretation of (6). The interpretative procedures applied to (6) and to a metaphorical sentence such as (5) will in essence be identical. To sharpen this a bit, we may ask: how should we individuate ‘Mthat[.]’? Recall the definition of ‘Mthat[.]’:

Definition. For every context c and every expression ϕ , an occurrence of ‘Mthat[ϕ]’ in ‘ \dots Mthat[ϕ] \dots ’ in c expresses a set of properties P presupposed to be associated with ϕ in c .

The problem is that there could be a range of context-sensitive expressions whose semantics would mirror the semantics of putative metaphors. An interesting case, I think, would be the class of expressions used to describe emotions.

¹²Brian Ball pointed out to me at the conference that a theory should have not only a descriptive role, but also a normative role. Stern’s clearly has such a role. That’s fair enough. But I would believe that a theory which has a normative role alone is not really a theory. It is much rather an announcement of a research programme.

Examples will include binary predicates ‘ x loves y ’, ‘ x hates y ’, ‘ x despises y ’, or ‘ x admires y ’. They have their conventional meanings to be looked up in the dictionary. But in every utterance of these expressions, unless we know what the background assumptions of the speaker are, no semantic content can plausibly be assigned to them. For each such expression we could then define a semantic operator working analogously to ‘Mthat[.]’. For consider:

Definition. For every context c and every expression ϕ , an occurrence of ‘Ethat[ϕ]’ in ‘ \dots Ethat[ϕ] \dots ’ in c expresses a set of properties P presupposed to be e-associated with ϕ in c .

The operator ‘Ethat[.]’ takes as its operand an emotion expression, such as the predicates above, and produces different properties ‘emotionally’ associated (e-associated) by the speaker with that expression on the given occasion. When the speaker says, ‘Obama loves hamburgers’, the set of properties associated with the love predicate will include the properties ‘ x enjoys the taste of y ’, ‘ x regularly eats y ’, and perhaps some other. When the speaker says, ‘Romeo loves Juliet’, there will be quite a different set of properties e-associated with the same predicate.

There are key similarities between Stern’s Mthat-theory and the just described Ethat-theory. (i) There is no semantic content generated by the bare sentence such as ‘Romeo loves Juliet.’ (ii) Semantic content is generated by the covert contextual operator acting on the character of the given expression (e.g. the predicate ‘ x loves y ’). That is: so far as character constrains the use of the contextual operator, both theories will be classified as literalist. (iii) The context is constituted by the speaker’s relevant presuppositions.

When we look closer at the two definitions, similarities look increasingly like identity. The only difference is that in one case we have m-associated properties, while in another we have e-associated properties. But neither theory anyway is supposed to tell us what those properties are. They are identified by pragmatics. So we might just as well drop the explicit mention of ‘m-associated’ and ‘e-associated’. We could simply have properties ‘relevantly’ associated by the speaker. And then the operators ‘Mthat[.]’ and ‘Ethat[.]’ will merge into one.

Now, what I have claimed may be no more than this: emotional expressions should be given a literalist treatment. The definition of ‘Ethat[.]’ was a way to express this claim. I have not shown you what the semantics of emotional expressions would be, though I may have shown what it could not be—e.g., it could not be minimalist. And this, I think, is what Stern has achieved in his treatment of metaphors. Consider the following analogy:

Solar eclipse. Suppose I am telling you that celestial bodies obey causal mechanical laws. This is not a trivial statement, so far as it rules out, for instance, that celestial bodies obey the will of Zeus. Then you ask me to use these laws to predict when the next solar eclipse will occur. I reply that this cannot be done. I do not know what these laws are. Perhaps even I *cannot* know what they are, since they may be too complex for me to describe. But with regard to the eclipse I can say two things: (i) its occurrence will be governed by those laws, (ii) I can still predict it more or less well based on many earlier observations and different relevant facts currently known to me, such as the mutual position of the Sun, the Earth, and other planets. That is, I have some limited piece of theoretical knowledge, but not a theory of celestial mechanics. And that piece

of knowledge I cannot use in practice. For all practical purposes I am using the sort of craft equally available to the people of a different theoretical persuasion.

The Mthat-theory delivers a very similar result. It gives us a nominally non-trivial piece of theoretical knowledge about metaphors. It is non-trivial so far as it rules out other accounts of metaphors, such as minimalism. When, however, it comes to showing how the semantic mechanism works it offers little help. Moreover, when we want to know what metaphorical content was expressed on the given occasion, the Mthat-theory tells us to look up the relevant presuppositions of the speaker. But this is in essence what the contextualist account would tell us, too. Of course one might keep insisting on the minute differences between the semantic mechanism postulated by one theory and the pragmatic mechanism postulated by another. But like in the solar eclipse story, this reminder should be irrelevant in any actual grasp of the metaphorical content. The art of interpretation envisaged by the Mthat-theory runs parallel to the kind of interpretation endorsed by contextualism. As long as I know the speaker's (relevant) presupposition, my interpretation of his metaphor should go through on either view.

This convergence between contextualism and the Mthat-view should be evident in the introduction of filtering presuppositions mentioned in §3. The correct interpretation of a metaphor depends on the ability to separate properties 'commonly' m-associated with the given item (say, a referent of the general or singular term) from the properties pertinent on the particular occasion. We are not given any rule for this filtering procedure. We are rather expected to be governed by our good linguistic sense. And this strikes me as a typical neo-sceptical contextualist stance. There can be no rules for understanding linguistic behaviour, but there is plenty of skill to learn that will give you a decent understanding on each particular occasion.

7. Conclusion

Let me summarise the discussion in terms of the topic with which we began. Stern's attempt of cross-breeding Kaplan's theory of pure indexicals with Stalnaker's notion of content did not yield a semantic theory answering the requirements of neo-positivism. Using speakers' presuppositions as contexts precludes (at least in the case of metaphors, or at all events, in Stern's account thereof) the possibility of giving universal rules and procedures that would form such a theory. Kaplan may have himself initiated that cross-breeding in the later theory of demonstratives, with very mixed results—even though its application was restricted to a very narrow fragment of discourse.

Now, since Stern's theory provides no actual semantic mechanism of the context-content determination, any concrete metaphorical interpretation necessarily falls back on some form of pragmatic skill of interpreting the speaker's presuppositions. But this skill is reminiscent of the contextualist approach. In the end, therefore, Stern's literalist view in its practical employment becomes indistinguishable from the rival contextualist view which has incompatible theoretical assumptions. In terms of the division suggested in §5 one could say that Stern's literalist assumptions put him in the neo-positivist camp, whereas his reliance on Stalnakerian contexts push him into the neo-sceptical camp.

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