Further Issues in Truth Conditional Semantics: Presuppositions and Expressivism

Philosophy of Language

1 Review: Implicatures

Recall our main test for conversational implicatures:

Cancelability Conversational implicatures are *cancelable*, in the following sense: if a speaker asserts S, thereby conversationally implicating p, the speaker can cancel this implicature by following up with something along the lines of: "But p is false".

E.g.:

(1) There's a petrol station around the corner. But it's closed.

Exercise: Explain how you would cancel the following implicatures:

(2) I think Jim will be late. $\rightsquigarrow$ I don't know for sure that Jim will be late.
(3) Some professors are good teachers $\rightsquigarrow$ Not all professors are good teachers.

In this respect, implicatures are importantly different from *entailments*.

Entailment: A sentence S_1 entails a sentence S_2 (written: '$S_1 \Rightarrow S_2$') if and only if it's impossible for S_1 to be true without S_2 being true.

- In other words: in any possible world where S_1 is true, S_2 is also true.

E.g.:

(4) Sue and Tiffany went to a party $\Rightarrow$
(5) Sue went to a party.

This entailment is not cancelable. If you try to cancel it, you wind up contradicting yourself:

(6) Sue and Tiffany went to a party. # But Sue didn't go to a party.

So we have a handy test for distinguishing implicature from entailment. The test is:

- Check whether it's cancelable! If it is, then it's a conversational implicature.

2   Presuppositions

Consider the following sentence:

(7)   Jenny stopped smoking.

This seems to commit the speaker to the claim:

(8)   Jenny used to smoke.

This commitment relation (which we'll denote '→') doesn't seem to be a conversational implicature. First, it isn't cancelable:

(9)   Jenny stopped smoking. # But she never smoked in the first place.

Is it an entailment, then? Some reason to think the answer is 'No':

While (4) entails (5), the negation of (4) doesn't entail (5):

(10)   a. It's not the case that Sue and Tiffany went to a party. $\nrightarrow$
       b. Sue went to a party.

By contrast, the negation of (7) still seems to commit the speaker to (8):

(11)   a. Jenny didn't stop smoking. $\rightarrow$
       b. Jenny used to smoke.

This pattern generalizes to environments other than negation:

1. *Conditionals.*

   (12)   a. If Sue and Tiffany went to a party, then they probably had fun. $\nrightarrow$
          b. Sue went to a party.

   (13)   a. If Jenny stopped smoking, her health has probably improved. $\rightarrow$
          b. Jenny used to smoke.

2. *Questions.*

   (14)   Did Sue and Tiffany go to a party? $\nrightarrow$ Sue went to a party.
   (15)   Did Jenny stop smoking? $\rightarrow$ Jenny used to smoke.

More generally, a sentence S_1 *presupposes* S_2 iff S_1 still commits the speaker to S_2 even when S_1 is embedded under entailment-canceling operations such as negation, conditionals, and questions.

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Exercise: Below are pairs of sentences, the first of which in some way commits the speaker to the second. Using the tests described above, say whether the commitment is an entailment, an implicature, or a presupposition.

(16)   a. Tanya gave a present to Jerome.

       b. Someone gave a present to Jerome.

(17)   a. It was Janet who solved the puzzle.

       b. Someone solved the puzzle.

(18)   a. Kwame thinks the class will be easy.

       b. Kwame doesn't know that the class will be easy.

(19)   a. Janet managed to solve the puzzle.

       b. Janet tried to solve the puzzle.

(20)   a. The present Queen of France is wise.

       b. There is a present Queen of France.

Do Presuppositions Cause Trouble for Truth Conditional Semantics?

Some have thought that presuppositions cause trouble for a truth conditional semantics. To see why, imagine that we inhabit a world where Jenny never started smoking. Imagine someone uttered (7) (*Jenny stopped smoking*). Is this sentence *false*?

This is controversial. But at least some people have thought that it would be odd to describe this sentence as straightforwardly false. (Cf. Frege on non-referring terms.)

More generally, some have argued that in cases of presupposition failure (that is, cases where the presupposition is false) the sentence has no truth value at all. But it is still meaningful.

One Response:
Perhaps this just shows we should revise our understanding of truth conditional semantics. Presuppositions should be thought of as preconditions on truth conditions. That is, we can formulate the meaning for a sentence like (7) as follows:

- 'Jenny stopped smoking' =

  - true at w if Jenny used to smoke at w and does not currently smoke at w
  - false at w if Jenny used to smoke at w and still smokes at w
  - neither true nor false at w if she never started smoking at w

3   Expressivism

Another issue facing truth conditional semantics is how to make sense of certain types of sentences that do not obviously have straightforward truth conditions.

Here we'll look at two examples: *taste predicates* and *moral discourse*

Taste Predicates

Taste predicates = terms like 'tasty', 'disgusting', 'delicious', 'fun', etc.

Consider a sentence such as:

(21)   Durian is tasty!

On a straightforward application of a truth conditional semantics, the meaning of this sentence is the set of worlds where durian is tasty.

Worry: Are there any objective facts about whether durian is tasty? Does it even make sense to talk about the set of worlds where durian is tasty?

- Tempting metaphysical picture: There are no facts about about what is objectively tasty or disgusting. There are only facts about what individual agents find tasty or disgusting.

A Solution?
One strategy for trying to make sense of taste predicates in a truth conditional framework is to think of taste predicates as implicitly making reference to the speaker's tastes. The idea is that if I (Bob) say (21), what I mean is that *I (Bob) enjoy the taste of durian.* And so the meaning of (21) (in my mouth) will be the set of worlds:

$\{w \mid$ Bob enjoys the taste of durian at $w\}$.

Potential Objection:
Consider the following exchange:

(22)   a. *A:* Durian is tasty.
       b. *B:* No, it's not tasty!

In this case, it's natural to view A and B as disagreeing. Such a disagreement seems to be perfectly natural. Contrast this with the following exchange:

(23)   a. *A:* I enjoy the taste of the durian.
       b. *B:* ?? No, I don't enjoy the taste of the durian!

This exchange seems to be very weird. Why? The answer seems to be that B's claim doesn't actually disagree with A's claim, which is why it's odd for B to use a negation marker (*No*). Note that this difference between (22) and (23) would be hard to explain if *The durian is tasty* simply meant *I (the speaker) enjoy the taste of the durian.*

Expressivism about taste predicates
Some have taken these worries to motivate abandoning a truth conditional semantics in favor of an *expressivist* semantics. According to expressivists, not all sentences purport to represent or describe the world. Rather, at least some sentences directly express the speaker's attitudes. Compare:

(24)   a. I'm in pain.   (describes pain)
       b. Ouch!   (expresses pain)

According to expressivists, when I utter (21), I am not representing myself (or anyone else, for that matter) as enjoying the taste of durian. Rather, I am directly *expressing* my enjoyment of durian, much as if I were to say something like, 'Yum, durian!'

Moral Discourse

Thus far most of the work developing expressivism has been focused not on taste predicates but instead on *moral discourse*, such as:

(25)   Stealing is wrong.

- *Metaethical Debate:*
    - Realists think that there are objective moral facts.
    - Antirealists think that there aren't.

Expressivism offers one way of developing an antirealist view. According to expressivism, someone who utters a moral sentence is not trying to describe the world. Rather, they are expressing states of approval or disapproval (or preferences, or desires).

- E.g. According to expressivism, someone who says (25) is expressing their disapproval of killing, much as if they had said something like 'Boo killing!'

Qs: Is there any reason to adopt antirealism over realism? Is expressivism more plausible as a view about taste predicates or moral discourse, or are they equally plausible?

The Frege-Geach Problem

Expressivists can be seen as abandoning truth conditional semantics. But doing so leads to a significant problem—what's known as the 'Frege-Geach Problem'.

The Frege-Geach Problem arises from the fact that moral discourse seems to behave like ordinary descriptive discourse in many respects. In particular, we can embed ordinary descriptive discourse in a variety of complex constructions:

(26)   It's not raining outside.   (negation)

(27)   Either it's raining outside or it's sunny outside.   (disjunction)

(28)   It's raining outside and it's cold outside.   (conjunction)

(29)   If it's raining outside, you should grab an umbrella.   (conditionals)

As we discussed previously, one advantage of a truth conditional semantics is that it provides a compositional way of determining the meanings of these complex sentences from the meanings of their parts. Examples:

- Conjunction: The meaning of p *and* q will be the set of possible worlds in which both p is true and q is true (i.e., $p \cap q$).

- Disjunction: The meaning of p *or* q will be the set of possible worlds in which either p is true or q is true (i.e., $p \cup q$).

The problem for expressivism arises from the fact that we can embed moral discourse and taste predicates in the exact same ways. To illustrate with moral discourse:

(30)   Lying is not wrong.   (negation)

(31)   Either lying is wrong or lying isn't wrong.   (disjunction)

(32) Lying is wrong and I enjoy it nonetheless.   (conjunction)

(33) If lying is wrong, then I'm in trouble.   (conditionals)

In this regard, moral discourse seems importantly different from 'yay' and 'boo' talk:

(34) ?? Not boo lying.   (negation)

(35) ?? Either boo lying or not boo lying.   (disjunction)

(36) ?? Boo lying and I enjoy it nonetheless.   (conjunction)

(37) ?? If boo lying, then I'm in trouble.   (conditionals)

So expressivists face the challenge: how can they explain the meanings of the logically complex sentences embedding moral discourse/taste predicates, if the meanings of these sentences are not truth conditional?