

A puzzle about accommodation

Rob van der Sandt (Nijmegen)

A popular view has it that presuppositions are a kind of admissibility conditions. They should be satisfied for the sentence that induces them to be uttered felicitously. However, often the relevant conditions are not fulfilled, but the inducing sentence is felicitous anyway. Here a process called accommodation comes into action. Accommodation—so the story goes—restores felicity by introducing missing information into the context of utterance. The basic intuition is this. The recipient will not allow the conversation to break down, but will instead assume that the incoming context was not quite what he thought. Apparently the speaker—due to laziness, time limitations or both—didn't make the required information explicit. The recipient—being a co-operative agent—thus revises his view on the incoming context to comply with the relevant conditions after all. On this view accommodation is not an operation which inserts the missing material in the output context. It is an operation on the *global* incoming context. It is after all the mismatch between the background information of the speaker and the recipient that has to be resolved.

This picture doesn't go very well with another popular view: the idea that meaning is to be captured by monotonic update rules or context change potentials. For, when accommodation comes into play this view seems to require a rather uncommon kind of functions: mappings which surreptitiously revise their input in case they threaten to be undefined. For a proponent of this view it thus only seems natural to relegate the mechanics of accommodation to a separate module, operating at a level which does not partake in semantic composition.

A variant of the global view has it that accommodation takes place either globally or *in situ*, i.e. at the place where the presuppositional material is induced (after all that's where we find it, don't we?). Common to both views is that they deny the possibility of accommodation at intermediate levels. And indeed, in spite of the existence of theories that can handle accommodation of this type, and that do so on a par with the global variety, it has been argued that there is no such thing as intermediate accommodation. This is puzzling.

If we compare such views with the venerable Russellian account of definite descriptions the picture of accommodation as a global (or binary) matter becomes even more puzzling. For Russell definite descriptions are scope taking expressions. When operators are iterated this predicts intermediate readings. And of course it should, as Kripke's (1979) (1) shows:

- (1) The number of planets might have been necessarily even.

Russell's account gives three possible readings. The description may outscope both modal operators. This yields a reading under which the sentence is false. Narrow scope of the description also gives a false reading. The true reading shows intermediate scope and yields truth:

- (2) $\diamond \exists!x [\text{number_planets}(x) \wedge \square \text{even}(x)]$

The account of presupposition which views presuppositions as regular anaphors gives us Russellian scope as a bonus. It encodes the descriptive phrase as a standard presupposition inducer and gives us the option of projecting the presuppositional structure to any of the three Russellian positions. However, in the above case background knowledge will block both the narrow and the

wide reading of the description. This leaves us with intermediate scope. Put more succinctly, the syntactic base generates (3-a) and the resolution algorithm maps it to (3-b):

- (3) a. $\left[\left| \diamond \left[\left| \square \left[\left| \partial [x \mid \text{number_planets}(x)] \right] \right] \right] \right] \right]$
 b. $\left[\left| \diamond [x \mid \text{number_planets}(x), \square [\mid \text{even}(x)]] \right] \right]$

Non-controversial examples which show intermediate scope are ubiquitous (iteration of attitude verbs, modal operators, logical connectives and various mixtures). Rejection of intermediate accommodation thus forces the analyst to supplement his (global) accommodation mechanism with a Russellian scope mechanism to account for cases which could be handled by intermediate accommodation straight away. Ockham certainly would object.

On the account of presupposition I just alluded to, presuppositional binding and accommodation are two sides of the same coin. Presuppositional expressions can be bound by a suitable antecedent provided that they occur in an accessible position. And, going in the other direction, they may accommodate an antecedent in any position from where it can access and thus bind the presuppositional anaphor. Since this account is implemented in a dynamic theory of meaning it gives an extra option. Dynamic theories allow for semantic binding from the antecedent of a conditional into its consequent, and from the restrictor of a quantifier into its nuclear scope. This gives an additional accommodation possibility, the restrictor of a quantifier (or the antecedent of a conditional), an option which was not yet available on Russell's 'static' account.

Examples of restrictor accommodation abound. Quine noted as early as 1941 that (4) is to not be construed as meaning that Tai is always eating and using chopsticks when doing so. It is more likely to mean that whenever Tai eats he does so with chopsticks.

- (4) Tai always eats with chopsticks.

Many more examples are found in e.g. the literature on generics and on presupposition projection. Tense behaves similarly, by the way. In (5) the temporal information, which is syntactically induced in the nuclear scope of the quantificational adverb, ends up in the restrictor.

- (5) Floppy will always be on the run.

Again, this is readily explained if we adopt Partee's (1973) claim that verb tenses are a kind of pronouns, and moreover encode the tense morpheme as a presuppositional expression consisting of an anaphoric variable and an associated temporal constraint. In the course of the resolution process the temporal information will percolate upwards along its accessibility line. But, being bound by the quantified variable, it will end up in the restrictor. More precisely, the syntax generates a structure like (6-a) which the resolution algorithm maps to (6-b):

- (6) a. $\left[n \left| [t \mid] \langle \forall_t \rangle \left[\left| \text{flop.run}(t'), \right] \right] \right] \right]$
 b. $\left[n \left| [t \mid n < t] \langle \forall_t \rangle [\mid \text{flop.run}(t)] \right] \right]$

The data thus require projection of presuppositional material to various non-global levels. The data are moreover easily and most economically accounted for when we adopt the principle that presuppositional material tends to flow upwards—generally as high as constraints on binding and accommodation allow. This percolation principle does not yet give a principled pragmatic explanation. It is moreover not compatible with the story we started with. As to accommodation this story

implied that it should be accounted for at a metalevel. It is a process—so it was suggested—that does not participate in the semantic composition of the output, but which results from co-operative behaviour of the recipient who ‘fixes’ the *global* input context in order to allow the update rules to apply. This story needs revision.

References

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