

A Cluster Theory of *Ad Hoc* Concepts: An Alternative to the 'Externalist Semantic Perspective' in Lexical Pragmatics

According to an influential theory of lexical pragmatics proposed by Carston and Wilson & Carston, pragmatic adjustment results in the construction of an *ad hoc* concept that differs in extension from the lexicalised concept involved. In this paper we provide counter-examples to this 'externalist semantic perspective' (Carston) on lexical pragmatics. Constructively, we develop and motivate a cluster theory of *ad hoc* concepts that makes room for a non-extensional understanding of pragmatic adjustment.

Consider example (1) uttered to describe a helpful but non-canonised friend:

(1) Fred is a saint.

According to truth-conditional pragmatics, here we use 'saint' to express an *ad hoc* concept, SAINT*, which contributes to the proposition expressed. The radical 'continuity hypothesis' gives a unified explanation in these terms for loose use, hyperbole and metaphor (Wilson & Carston, 2007).

Relevance theoretic work on lexical pragmatics takes an 'externalist semantic perspective' on pragmatic adjustment (Carston, 2010, p. 250). *Ad hoc* concept construction is conceived of as narrowing or broadening of the extension of a lexicalised concept. For example, SAINT* has an extension which is broader than the lexicalised concept (Fred is not literally a saint) and probably also narrower (some literal saints may be unfriendly). This perspective follows from two theses: (a) lexical pragmatic adjustment is an inferential process, and (b) neither lexicalized nor *ad hoc* concepts decompose or have conceptual constituents. We accept (a) but argue against (b) and reject the externalist semantic perspective.

We illustrate (a) with example (2):

(2) Peter: Do you want to go to the cinema?

Mary: I'm tired.

Mary implicates that she does not want to go to the cinema. As Sperber and Wilson stress, if her utterance is conveying that her tiredness is a reason from which Peter can infer that Mary does not want to go, Mary's utterance must express not just the proposition that she is tired; but that she is tired to a degree such that she does not want to go to the cinema, that is, TIRED*, which is more specific than the stable concept TIRED, and has a different inferential potential (Sperber & Wilson, 1998, p. 192). On this account, the proposition expressed together with any implicated premises logically (but non-demonstratively) warrants the implicated conclusion(s).

Sperber and Wilson, and Carston, following Fodor (e.g. 1998), hold that, in general, neither lexicalised concepts nor *ad hoc* concepts have definitions, that is, one cannot provide for them a finite and determinate list of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions (Carston, 2010, p. 248). In their view, pragmatic lexical adjustment takes us from a lexicalised atomic concept *C* to an *ad hoc* atomic concept *C**.

It follows that for these theorists an inferential account of the relations between the proposition expressed and propositions implicated cannot be syntactic. For example, if TIRED* does not have components, then there is nothing about the *form* of the proposition MARY IS TIRED* which licenses an inference to MARY DOES NOT WANT TO GO TO THE CINEMA. Therefore they use the notion of semantic consequence: the states of the world compatible with the proposition expressed (and implicated premises) are a subset of those compatible with the main implicature (assuming, as for all non-demonstrative inferences, that defeating states of the world can be ignored). They are thus committed to the view that the difference in inferential potential between an *ad hoc* concept and the lexicalised concept is due to difference in extension.

We argue that it is not true a) that *ad hoc* concepts are always narrower and/or broader than stable concepts, nor b) that distinct *ad hoc* concepts must have different extensions. We also show that the 'externalist semantic perspective' cannot be salvaged by taking concepts to denote properties instead of sets. Consider example 3:

(3) Clapton is God.

Consider 3 uttered to convey, roughly, that Eric Clapton is a very great guitar player: GOD*. It may well be that no one is as good a guitar player as the speaker and hearer of 3 understood Clapton to be. That is, GOD* is empty. And it may be that the lexicalised concept, GOD, is also empty. In that case the stable lexicalised concept and the *ad hoc* concept are both empty and therefore co-extensional.

Now consider example 4:

(4) This problem is tractable.

In the discussion of a logical problem where what is at stake is whether there is a method for determining whether a certain formula belongs to a set of formulae, the word 'tractable' is used to express an *ad hoc* concept TRACTABLE* (the property logicians call 'decidability'). In a different discussion, 4 is uttered when what matters is whether the problem could be solved by an idealised computing device, and the word 'tractable' is used to express TRACTABLE** (the property that logicians call 'computability'). Now for some formal systems at least, it is provably and necessarily the case that every decidable formula is computable. So computability and decidability are the very same property (at least for these systems). Thus the two *ad hoc* concepts here are not only co-extensional, but express the same property.

In our talk we give more counter-examples to the externalist semantic perspective and consider several possible responses, concluding that our examples cannot be explained away and therefore pose a serious problem for the externalist semantic perspective on lexical pragmatics. So what is the solution?

We propose that *ad hoc* concepts are clusters of information none of which is inessential, but all of which is occasion-specific and relevant for inference. They have constituents, so support inference based on form, but are not generally definable. As noted, on the relevance theoretic account, *ad hoc* concepts and implicatures are mutually adjusted so that there is a relation of inferential support between the proposition expressed and implicated conclusion(s). Accepting this, and the existence of utterances with an indeterminate array of 'weak' implicatures (Sperber & Wilson, 1998), it follows that there will be corresponding indeterminacy in *ad hoc* concepts. To take Sperber and Wilson's example, Mary might utter "I'm tired" discourse-initially during a museum visit, weakly implicating that her enjoyment of the visit is diminishing, and/or that she would prefer to return to her hotel instead of going on to the Duomo etc. The *ad hoc* concept that she expresses with her use of 'tired' is indeterminate to just the same degree as the implicatures it supports.

Our view is that *ad hoc* concepts are a different kind of entity from concepts proper, with a different functional role: temporary mental notes, not stable files. Concepts proper can survive changes of encyclopaedic and/or logical information since they organise information pertaining to the same things in order to make it available in different circumstances: in principle, none of the information stored under a concept is essential to its identity, as evidenced by examples due to Putnam, Kripke and others. *Ad hoc* concepts are different in this respect. Suppose 1 is used to say (roughly) that Fred is very helpful and friendly. Could you find out that he was not helpful, yet rationally maintain that he is a saint* and therefore arrive at the conclusion that SAINT* does not include HELPFUL? No, that would be bizarre. If one were to insist and say 'Fred is not helpful, but he is a saint', this utterance of 'saint' would express a different *ad hoc* concept.

It follows from our cluster theory that *ad hoc* concepts are not productive and systematic in the sense of these terms discussed by Fodor (1998, pp. 25–26). We show that this a) fits the data and b) is not pernicious, given that they do compose.

References

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