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Formalizing Context

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that have shaken the subcontinent in recent decades. The chapter is classic ethnography, meticulously carried out, written clearly and without jargon. It is a splendid piece of traditional social science; indeed, it is as traditional as its subject matter. The lives described are ones that few North Americans or Europeans would envy. Yet these women are reportedly satisfied with their lives, perhaps because they know nothing else or have no choice in the matter. But Menon and Schweder insist that the role of anthropology (or social science) is to understand, not to meddle. They comment that 'there is a transparent attempt in feminist literature to universalize women's oppression and to indulge in myth-making for political ends' (p. 107). To do this, they maintain, is to 'engage in little more than a late twentieth-century version of cognitive and moral imperialism' (p. 107).

Critical social science is, at the very least, self-consciously value-laden. To their credit, most contributors to this volume have discarded the malignant myth of value-free science, a myth that has duped social scientists for over a century into unwitting rationalization of oppression. Menon and Schweder, however, appear to be happily holding on to the myth. But the women they describe live not only in Bhubaneswar; they also live in the global capitalist economy from which there is no escape. They, if not their ethnographers, will have some day to face up to that fact.

So the book, like many edited volumes, is a mixed bag. We seem to be moving toward a critical social science, but there is, it appears, still a long way to go before we will be able to do much about the malformed relations that motivated the effort in the first place.

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Formalizing Context

CHRIS GAUKER, *Words without Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. 312 pp. ISBN 0-262-07242-4 (pbk).

Gauker presents a critique and alternative to the 'received view' of linguistic communication, the doxa undergirding much of the philosophy of language and modern linguistics. In the received view, the function of Language is to enable speakers to reveal their thoughts/beliefs to hearers. Communication is understood as semiotic mind-reading whereby speakers choose words based on their thoughts. Such thought predates speech, and thus serves as its template. Thought is independent of language. From such speech the hearer reconstructs the speaker's thoughts. This is possible because language consists of propositions whose meanings are (de)composable based on the meanings of their constituent parts. Implicit in this view are two concepts of meaning: that which the speaker intends to reveal via speech, and the shared denotations of constituent parts. In formalizing this understanding of Language, the received view internalizes in two ways: by taking its task as understanding how sentence meaning is primarily located *within* the proposition; and by locating propositional content 'in the head'. The semantic property in the 'received view' is the contribution of word meaning, when composed to form a proposition, to the truth-value of that proposition. Gauker gives close and thorough attention to this view and why it fails.

In Gauker's alternative, the function of Language is to enable interlocutors to achieve goals. Given that goals are achievable in different ways depending on the context, some behaviors (e.g. speech) *accord* with the context in that they further the accomplishment of such goals. Others do not. Contrary to the received view's internalism, Gauker looks *outside* of the proposition to explain communication, thereby rectifying some of the problems in the received view, foundational and otherwise (see below). His alternative centers on formalizing 'context'. Much of the book is about how much complexity this formalism requires.

At the core of Gauker's formalism is the 'primary context': the set of sentences that describes the accordance relation holding between meaningful behavior and a goal. Contexts, then, are 'objective' in that they are independent from interlocutors' mental states—interlocutors may be mistaken about them—instead being grounded in the exigencies of goals in context. Given such (non)accordance, with respect to a primitive context, some sentences are assertible, others deniable, and some neither. In Gauker's semantics, assertibility, and not truth-value, is the semantic property. By formulating communication in this way, he theorizes language use independently of thought and word meaning *and* solves some specific problems in linguistics and the philosophy of language: in pragmatics, the 'domain of discourse', presupposition, implicature; in semantics, problems of universal instantiation (quantification) and material implication (indicative conditionals), paradoxes arising when reasoning about truth (liar's paradoxes), as well as how best to treat belief/desire (semantically and ontologically).

Gauker's alternative is compelling and ambitious. He provides crucial insights into communication as well as possibilities for capturing such insights in an ontologically more secure formalism. However, as is to be expected in a book of this size, there remain some problems and unaddressed issues. First, I discuss issues deriving from Gauker's (dis)continuity with the received view. Second, I discuss some problematic aspects of how he conceives context.

What strikes me as important and novel is not just a critique of the received view (which has already been done) or the attempt to replace it (which has also been done). Rather, it is Gauker's point of entry. He genuinely engages in *dialogue with* the received view, not to dismiss it in its entirety, but to reform it. Gauker, like the received view, approaches language with a commitment to formalism.

However, as with the received view, there are problems. First, Gauker does not address authors outside of the discipline whose work would significantly contribute to his critique and alternative: for example, Peirce's semiotic (1992, 1998), Silverstein's (1976) linguistic anthropology and Bakhtin's (1981) critique of Saussurean structuralism come to mind. In addition to this minor point, there are questions as to Gauker's method. He reduces the heterogeneity of Language by distilling its 'primary function', formalizing this in a quasi-axiomatic system. From this only he derives and tests conclusions independently from empirical examples, relying on made-up examples and what could be called 'common sense'. This myopia allows certain empirically observable phenomena to be ignored (discussed in the second set of issues below). In spite of this, or because of it, Gauker succeeds in operationalizing his alternative *in terms* of the object of critique and not outside it, thus articulating to work in the received view.

However, the degree of such articulation is an open question. Gauker may indeed provide an alternative framework to orthodox semantics which does solve problems

that arise in the received view. But this is a different question as to whether it is a viable theory of Language in general and whether it explains those empirical relations that formal semantics solves successfully. One aspect of modern semantics that is invaluable is its interface with syntactic theory and its attention to language structure. Since at least Saussure, formalizing language structure has been achieved by ignoring other aspects of language. Gauker gives voice to these silenced aspects. Yet does he do so at the price of maintaining a connection with theories of language structure which account for connections between syntax and semantics, and structure and use? It is unclear how Gauker would deal with language structure, or theories of language structure, as he leaves the sentence totally undifferentiated. In any case, if an alternative is to replace some paradigm, it should demonstrate its ability to explain the successes of that paradigm as well as its failures. Gauker almost exclusively focuses on failures.

Here I problematize the notion of an 'objective' context. What do we mean by *objective*? For Gauker, the prime import of being 'objective' is externality to interlocutors' mental states. Yet, as should be clear, this is quite broad. It includes anything from landscape to the laws of physics to social institutions. Thus, an 'objective' context is much more complex than Gauker's formalism admits. Pushing further, what counts as a goal? What counts as an acceptable way to achieve a goal? What happens when such goals apply to *social* phenomena which, though 'objective', are able to be influenced *via conversation* (in a way, for example, that physical matter might not be)? Further, on what grounds do we base accordance with context and how stable and universal are such grounds? Are the norms of discourse deduced by Gauker's distilling of Language's essence primarily determined by context? If not, what sorts of things alter such norms of discourse *and* contexts? If a context requires that some things be classified as 'relevant' or 'pertinent' to a conversation (p. 225), how are these determined?

All of the above (goals and how to achieve them, norms of discourse, relevance) are influenced, created or undone by the following phenomena which are *objective* in Gauker's sense and yet which his alternative fails to address: 'culture', history (at multiple levels: e.g. community, between interlocutors across interactions, of an interaction itself) and speech that typifies the pragmatics of speech, often in the current conversation/context (Silverstein [1976] calls such acts 'metapragmatic'). If culture, history and metapragmatics are objective forces that shape goals and their achievement, norms of discourse, and so on, then context is dynamic and there exists a dialectic between speech and context. Context is *emergent*, not completely determinable at some time point zero. Yet culture, history and metapragmatics are not *explicitly* included in Gauker's alternative, though crucially relevant to theorizing conversation and context. Thus, we need to evaluate how his notion of context aligns with them, specifically their dynamicism.

Rather than theorizing context as dynamic and emergent, Gauker renders it static. Thus, we may fault him for simply replacing 'thought' as the independent template for speech with 'context'. We may also fault him for doing so in a way that elides the constant two-way interaction between text and context in real time, as well as for the assumption that goals and contexts predate conversation and are not formed through it. Though Gauker does provide *potential* ways of formulating context as dynamic—the multi- and meta-context (chs 8, 9)—neither formalization helps us understand *the principle or the process* by which contexts come together or the way

the unfolding of a conversation may change its own future course or the relevant context. Gauker makes such contexts teleological and static *things* existing independently of interlocutors, not emergent processes influenced via conversation by interlocutors. Context may be independent of interlocutors' mental states but not of their agency.

One might argue that Gauker's staticizing view is simply a heuristic for modeling, not to be taken literally. Yet where it still falters is in misdiagnosing, by elision, what areas of research are necessary to get a handle on context and communication. That is, to introduce assertibility as our semantic property necessarily requires also doing a sociology/anthropology of social interaction. This is not a bad thing. Unfortunately, it is not part of Gauker's framework. Instead, he presents goals and context as static entities independent of language structure, metapragmatic discourse, culture and history. These elements are central to theorizing and understanding most, if not all, of the elements in Gauker's formalism. However, they are nowhere to be seen and, more importantly, are in tension with his treatment of context.

Gauker's book is exciting and ambitious. Yet it needs to be compatible with, on the one hand, a theory of language structure and, on the other, a sociology/anthropology of social interaction sensitive to the emergent and reflexive aspects of language use. Such requirements are as ambitious as Gauker's goals, and though his book cannot be said to achieve total success, it does succeed in presenting the issues in a potentially fruitful paradigm.

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To Leap or Not to Leap from Language into the Mind?

DEDRE GENTNER AND SUSAN GOLDIN-MEADOW (EDS.), *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. 528 pp. ISBN 0–262–57163–3 (pbk).

As indicated by its provocative title, this book explores different ways of articulating language and thought, taking as its starting point the hypothesis of a tight interdependence between them (language is in the mind) or suggesting that language cannot be ignored in any account of cognition (keep language in mind). It proposes a variety of approaches to this old question, which has come back to the forefront of