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Negotiating, Accepting, and Referring

Elements of a Contractualist Theory of Semantics

Peter Stockinger

1. Introduction

In this article an interpretation of the notion of *acceptance* as the assertion of some proposition *p* by an actor (by the speaker, for instance) who *not only knows p* but also *prefers it*, with respect to some other proposition *q*, will be given. To know *p* is not a sufficient reason for an actor to accept *p*. Accepting *p* should be *a good or an appropriate proposition* for him — or at least a preferable one with respect to other, alternative propositions $\{q_i, \dots, q_n\}$.

We shall begin with an approximate description of the French expression “accepter quelque chose” (“to accept something”) and we shall continue with the expression “avancer quelque chose à quelqu’un” (“to advance someone something”). But the proposed descriptive framework constitutes only a helpful “pretext” for a more general discussion of what we call the *contractual hypothesis* in semantics.

Indeed, the principal purpose of this article is *not* to provide a systematic and subtle description of lexical expressions.

The central problem we want to deal with is what is called the *conventional dimension* of a language, where “conventional” should not be understood in a restrictive or again stipulative sense but in a more general one. It concerns the fact that people share — partially — “visions” that enable them to coordinate their actions in situations for which such an effort is required, and discuss these situations by means of verbal and non-verbal (for instance, visual) signs.

We shall argue that the description and explanation of this dimension could be based on the so-called *contractual hypothesis* which in short states that people negotiate (knowledge) *standards* or *common “views”* to which they *refer* in order to deal with a situation of reference *r* or again to revise a given standard and to (partially) substitute it for another one by means of which they “view” the same situation *r* in a more or less different perspective.

Provided we accept that sense, the contractual hypothesis also allows us to elaborate a coherent, unified, and rich theoretical framework where linguistic expressions, especially those that condense configurations of "abstract" meaning, could be identified and comparatively described.

At least for the moment we prefer to consider the contractual hypothesis as a kind of *theoretical fiction*, that is as a purely theoretical construction. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it appears, in more or less sophisticated but also divergent elaborations, in rather different research domains such as in moral philosophy [Rawls, 1971], philosophy of semiotics and language [Apel, 1981 ; Lewis, 1969], narrative semiotics and discourse analysis [Greimas, 1983 ; Stockinger, 1992], and especially in distributed artificial intelligence [Bond & Gasser, eds, 1988].

Naturally, the repeated and multiple references to some form of contractual hypothesis does not constitute *per se* an argument that the contractual hypothesis should be considered other than a theoretical fiction. Nevertheless the possibility is stressed, that it could play an important *meta-theoretical* or *epistemological* role in semantics.

2. A hypothetical schema for the description of the verbal expression «accepter»

We shall begin with the hypothesis that the description of the meaning of the verbal expression "accepter" ("to accept") has to take into account at least :

- 1) a situation of reference *r*,
- 2) a situation of negotiation *n* concerning the "viewing" of *r*, and
- 3) ordered temporal instants or periods *T* that localize *r* and *n*.

Situation *r* can be constituted by some action, event or state that happens or exists at *t_i* and for which an actor looks for a reciprocal agreement with another actor concerning a *common interpretation* of how to consider situation *r* and how to deal with it.

Situation *n* lays stress on that search for an intersubjectively shared acknowledgement of situation *r* as well as the positive or negative result of that search.

It constitutes one of the principal components for the interpretation not only of the expression "accepter" but also of an important range of others such as : "consentir à" ("to consent"), "agréer" ("to agree"), "adhérer à" ("to adhere"), "admettre" ("to admit"), "souscrire à" ("to subscribe to"), "se résigner à" ("to resign oneself"), "se soumettre à" ("to comply with", "to submit to"), "acquiescer" ("to acquiesce", "to assent"), "convenir"

("to admit", "to acknowledge"), "reconnaître" ("to acknowledge"), "refuser" ("to refuse"), "rejeter" ("to reject"), "s'opposer" ("to be in opposition to", "to strive"), "décliner" ("to refuse", "not to acknowledge"), "écarter" ("to dismiss"), and so on.

Intuitively speaking, these expressions refer to the *positive or negative result* of some kind of "*negotiation*" between two (or more) actors concerning the constitution of a common view of how to interpret or to deal with situation of reference *r*. The principal differences in the meaning of these expressions may be explained more particularly by the ("legal") *status* of the involved actors — an aspect that we shall not treat in this article.

There exists highly sophisticated theories of how to deal with the phenomenon "negotiation" — theories that cannot be discussed here (cf. for instance [Schelling, 1960]). We shall refer only to two extremely elementary configurations of negotiation, but which do have the advantage of representing the *canonical basis* of *recursively* (or *inductively*) derivable complex configurations of negotiation. The first configuration focusses *expressly* on the aspect of the *interaction* between two actors who try to establish a common view of a situation of reference :

(A)

(A1)

The actor Proposer asserts a view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(A2)

Proposer wants the actor Agreeer to assert view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(A3)

Proposer asks Agreeer to assert view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(B)

(B1)

Agreeer evaluates view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r with respect to a (given) Standard of Reference.

(B2a)

Agreeer asserts view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(B2b)

Agreeer rejects view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(C)

(C1)

Proposer and Agreeer assert jointly view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

In the second elementary configuration the possible interaction between two actors is absent. Indeed, it describes the fact that there may exist a view (for instance, a convention or a custom) which is held to be an appropriate one by an actor *A* and to which actor *B* has or wants to subscribe. Such a kind of situation is rather common : think, for instance, of "rules" of language which are examples of collective conventions to

which an individual has to adhere if he wants to communicate with the collectivity (with actor A) for which these "rules" constitute an appropriate view. Basically, the second configuration possesses the following form :

(I)

(I.1)

There is a view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r which is asserted by actor A.

(II)

(II.1)

Actor B evaluates view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r with respect to a (given) Standard of Reference.

(II.2a)

Actor B asserts view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(II.2b)

Actor B rejects view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(III)

(III.1)

Actor A and Actor B assert jointly view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

As we can see, the second configuration constitutes only a *variant* of the first one. It obliterates mainly the "dialogue" aspect of the negotiation represented in the first negotiation. Otherwise, both are identical. In that sense we can easily imagine and elaborate a variety of configurations describing situation n where each one of these configurations possesses particular effects of meaning on the constitution of a common intersubjective space between two or n -actors. Nevertheless, for each of these configurations we are able to define an *inductive or again recursive procedure of configurational formation*.

It is very important to note that both configurations are provided by a *third phase* (phase (C) in the first configuration and phase (III) in the second one) that describes the action of the joint assertion of a view by the concerned actors : it is this *third phase which constitutes, indeed, the necessary condition for the constitution of a common view*, a common "intersubjective space" between two or n -actors. The first phase as well as the second one constitute the *semantic presupposition* of the third one.

Situation of negotiation n and situation of reference r are able to be localized by means of an ordered set of temporal instants or periods. Arbitrarily, we choose instant t_j as the temporal localization point of situation n . In assuming a set T with i -instants and a linear ordering (called "succession") over the i -instants, we get the following really simple "time-line" : $t_1 < t_j < t_k$ (" $<$ " symbolizing the linear succession, that is t_j follows t_1 , and t_k follows t_j).

Naturally, we can draw a more complex time-line by introducing more appropriate ordering relations, but the strictly linear ordering of temporal instants or periods is sufficient for our purpose.

Given on the one hand the linearly ordered time-line, and on the other hand the decision to relate situation n to the temporal instant t_j , there are, formally, three possible temporal relationships between the situation of reference r and situation n :

- a) a temporal precedence (i. e. situation of reference r precedes situation n),
- b) a temporal concomitance (i. e. situation r and situation n overlap),
- c) a temporal succession (i. e. situation r follows situation n).

Given this conceptual framework of the negotiation of a common view of how to interpret and to deal with a situation of reference r , let us try, now, to interpret the following example :

Jean accepte le livre de Paul
(Jean accepts Paul's book).

In the absence of some more explicit context, this sentence can be understood in several ways :

- (a)
Paul has written a book in which he develops some ideas about a subject. And Jean accepts Paul's ideas developed in the book.
- (b)
Paul has written a book which he (or somebody else) wants to give to Jean. And Jean accepts the book as a present.
- (c)
Paul possesses a certain book (let us say Eco's *Lector in Fabula*) which he wants to give to Jean. And Jean accepts this book.
- (d)
and so on.

Let us consider more particularly example (a). What could be a more explicit interpretation of its meaning ? Following our point of view, it could be the following one.

There is some situation of reference — let us say the eight months of Ciampi's government. Paul, who is a political scientist, is writing a book about these eight months and claims that Ciampi's government has essentially achieved what has been initiated by Amato's government. This is a particular view interpreting the situation r which is asserted by Paul.

Now, following the first possible configuration representing the "logical" structure of situation n , Paul wants that Jean, his colleague, shares this view. So he invites (asks, compels, ...) his colleague to take his view into consideration. Then Jean would evaluate Paul's view with respect to a

standard to which he refers. Finally, Jean would assert or reject the view proposed by Paul.

(Note : If we interpret our example with the help of the configuration describing the adhesion of actor B to a view which is asserted by actor A, its meaning changes slightly in the sense that no "exchange" takes place between actor A — the Proposer — and actor B — the Agreeer).

There remains two obscure points to elucidate. The first one concerns the *standard* to which Jean refers, and the second one the problem of the *acceptance itself* of a standard by Jean or any other agent.

The standard to which Jean refers could be for instance Jean's own view concerning the eight months of Ciampi's government or his view of a reliable "expert". If Paul's view and Jean's view are equivalent, then Jean would assert Paul's proposed view, otherwise he would reject it — completely or partially.

But it is also possible that Jean does not have any particular idea on Ciampi's government in comparison with Amato's one. What, then, is the standard to which he could refer in order to evaluate Paul's view ? In this case, the standard to which Jean refers is a *partially complete* one : it enables him to evaluate partially the situation of reference, in the sense that it identifies for instance the governments in question as well as the fact that Ciampi's government follows Amato's one, but it does not inform him about the particular relationship between them, besides the fact that it supports some general definition or description of what it means for one government to follow another one, and for the second one to achieve the objectives of the first one during its period of legislature.

Such a (rather specialized) description or definition should not exist "in Jean's head" as such or "*en bloc*" — it can be derived from several more general, "canonical" ones.

In any case, the respectful evaluation of Paul's view by Jean with the help of his partially complete standard of reference will take the form of a *learning of partially new informations* — provided that Jean disposes of the above mentioned definition or description. Otherwise, there would be necessarily a "negotiation" — exactly similar to the hermeneutical strategy of the reconstruction of meaning [Apel, 1981] — between Jean and Paul with the purpose to constitute a common standard or a view of how to interpret or deal with the quoted definition or description.

The second point concerns, as we have already noted, the problem of the *acceptance* itself of a (proposed) standard as well as that of the mutual agreement with respect to one standard that enables a collectivity of actors to interpret a situation of reference *r* and to deal with it in a coordinated way. Indeed, as Lewis [1969] or Stalnaker [1987] have already noted, these problems lead us to the notion of "*goodness*" [von Wright, 1963] or of "*value*" of a standard, to its *more or less preferential status* in comparison with other possible standards.

In order to be able to deal at least partially with these really central notions, we have to postulate that the situation of reference — as its possible model — possesses a more complex structure than is generally admitted.

We shall postulate that a hypothetical and descriptively more adequate structure of the situation of reference is constituted by three components (that we shall call contractual components) which are the *problematic object itself*, the *objective or the goal*, and the *context*.

In that sense, a view or an interpretation of a situation of reference that should be accepted by an actor or a community of actors as an *appropriate view or an interpretation* of that situation, is evaluated with respect to :

— some *problematic object, event or state of affairs* (in our example : the decisions and the actions of Ciampi's government with respect to Amato's ones) ;

— the *objectives or the goals that the evaluating actors aim at* and for which the problematic object possesses a certain relevancy (in our example, such an objective may be Jean's wish to convince Paul that there exists a continuity in Italian politics contrary to all appearances) ; and

— an already given situation or *context* that characterizes the relationship between the evaluating actors as well as their attitudes towards the intended objective or goal and the problematic object (in our example, such a context may be defined by Paul's reticences about the actual political situation in Italy, Jean's more positive appreciation of the same situation, the relative importance of Paul's opinion on the situation in Italy, and so on).

We have the impression that this approach can be more or less directly compared with the rhetorical tradition in discourse studies (see for instance [Lausberg, 1990]).

3. The Procedures of Condensation and Expansion

A serious question is whether from a conceptual point of view we really need such a complex descriptive framework for the analysis of linguistic expressions such as "accepter", how we can justify it and, if so, what the consequences will be.

It is known that, in linguistics, semantic descriptions proceed in general by a kind of feature analysis that usually completes previous morphological and syntactic descriptions.

For instance, "accepter" shares with many other verbal expressions the same syntactic patterns. In order to be able to distinguish the expression

Proposer) asks actor B (the Agreeer) to evaluate them and to decide in favour of them or against them.

Let us exemplify these two "dialogue games" in taking into consideration example (1) and its expanded version (2) :

(1)

Jean accepte que Paul lui donne un livre

(Jean accepts that Paul gives him a book)

(2)

Jean accepte que Paul lui donne un livre à condition qu'il s'agisse d'un cadeau mais pas d'un prêt ni d'une vente

(Jean accepts that Paul gives him a book if his giving the book is a present but not a loan or again a sale).

There are three views or descriptions of situation P :

— first view : situation r is a gift (v_1)

— second view : situation r is a loan (v_2)

— third view : situation r is a sale (v_3).

Following the adhesion game, actor A (= Paul) could assert either the first or the second or the third view, whereas actor B (= Jean) asserts only and exclusively the first view. If actor A (=Paul) asserts the first view, actor B (=Jean) adheres (= accepts) and the result is that both assert jointly a particular view of situation r.

If actor A (= Paul) asserts either the second or the third view, actor B (= Jean) rejects the proposition of actor A to adhere and the result is that there does not exist a common asserted view of situation r.

Following the inquiry game, there are three possible views of situation r which are known or are not known to actor A (= Paul). In any case, actor A asks actor B (= Jean) to assert a view of situation r to which he, actor A, could, afterwards, adhere or could not adhere.

What we see here is that both games are strictly equivalent — the sole exception consists in the fact that in the first version of the game it is actor A who asserts a view of situation r and in the second version it is actor B.

Indeed, with respect to the both previously introduced configurations describing situation n, both games differ substantially only as far as the first sequence is concerned :

Adhesion Game

(I)

(I.1)

Actor A asserts a view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r.

(I.2)

Actor A wants actor B to assert view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r.

(I.3)

Actor A asks actor B to assert view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .*Inquiry Game*

(I)

(I.1)

Actor A leaves undetermined a view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(I.2)

Actor A wants actor B to assert view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

(I.3)

Actor A asks actor B to assert view v_i (a set of views V) of situation r .

Compare again the following three extremely simple dialogues :

(1)

a. Paul : I would like to give you this book

b. Jean : Oh, thank you, I accept.

(1')

a. Paul : I would like to sell you this book.

b. Jean : No, thank you, I am not interested.

(2)

a. Paul : Would you like to have this book ?

b. Jean : Yes, but only if you give it to me.

(2')

a. Paul : Would you like to have this book ?

b. Jean : Yes, if you give it to me, but not if I have to buy it.

(3)

a. Paul : Would you like to have this book ?

b. Jean : Why not. But what do you mean exactly by "to have" ?

c. Paul : I will give it to you.

d. Jean : Thank you — I accept.

The third dialogue corresponds to the first version of the game : it is actor A (=Paul) who asserts a view of situation r and proposes to actor B to adhere to it. It is quite easy to elaborate more complex versions on the basis of these two canonical versions such as the negotiation between both actors in order to select a common view of situation r .

The above quoted *revision* can, for instance, be considered as one slightly more complex version in the sense that the view v_i of A (the Proposer) is rejected by actor B (the Agreeer) who simultaneously asserts view v_j as the appropriate one in order to interpret or to deal with situation r . Naturally, if the "favourite" view v_j of actor B should become a common view of interpreting situation r and dealing with it, it must be asserted again by actor A.

It is, indeed, mainly the procedure of revision that leads to the complexification of the basic negotiation games.

