

## **Holism, Relevance and Thought Content**

### **Introduction**

While straightforwardly ambiguous words like “bank” and obviously indexical words like “I” are unproblematically treated as referring to different things in different contexts, such variations are displayed by terms that seem neither ambiguous nor indexical. This paper will argue that traditional accounts of word meaning (in which a single fixed meaning is attached to each entry in one’s ‘mental lexicon’) have problems accounting for how the referent of a non-ambiguous/non-indexical term can shift from context to context, while a moderate version of semantic holism can do so by understanding the comparative weight of the meaning-constitutive beliefs as itself something which can vary from context to context.

### **The Problem**

There are two traditional ways in which a word’s meaning can be context sensitive. The first is to be ambiguous. “Bank,” for instance, has two entries in one’s mental lexicon: one designating a financial institution, and another designating the edge of a river. The context-sensitivity of “bank” is thus explained in terms of the different lexical entries being accessed in different contexts. The second is for the word’s meaning to incorporate an ‘indexical’ component, allowing the entry for the word in one’s mental lexicon to make reference to various contextual features. The word “here,” for instance, is context-sensitive because the entry for it in one’s lexicon makes reference to its place of utterance.<sup>1</sup> However, there are many cases where words seem to refer to different things in different contexts without being straightforwardly ambiguous or indexical.

For instance, we can see a type of context-sensitivity when various aspects of the ‘prototype’ associated with a word break up. Consider the following two sentences:

- (1) John behaves so badly in school that the principal should call his mother.
- (2) John probably gets his freckles from his mother.

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<sup>1</sup> For the most influential account of prototypical indexicals, see Kaplan 1989. Such ‘indexical’ accounts can be extended quite far. See, for instance, the discussion of “flat” in Lewis 1979.

If John is adopted, then (whether the speaker knows about the adoption or not) the reference of these two instances of “mother” will probably be different. We typically call the woman bringing him up if he is in trouble, but assume that the woman who contributed to his genetic make-up is responsible for his freckles. Somebody uttering the two sentences may thus refer to two different people with the word “mother” even though there may be no difference in his beliefs to account for the change.<sup>2</sup>

Context-sensitivity may also show up in those cases where someone’s idiosyncratic usage of a term can be understood in terms of either an idiosyncratic belief or an idiosyncratic meaning. To use Tyler Burge’s famous example, Bert uses “arthritis” much as the rest of us do but, notoriously, he also applies “arthritis” to the pain in his thigh.<sup>3</sup> There is a notable lack of consensus about what to say about this case, and this may be because what Bert means by “arthritis” is contextually sensitive. When he goes to the doctor and complains “my arthritis has spread to my thigh” he would typically be taken to mean *arthritis* by “arthritis.” On the other hand, when he is sitting around with his brother and complains “my arthritis is too bad for me to mow the lawn today” it may be more natural to treat him as meaning *tharthritis* (a condition which includes both arthritis and rheumatoid ailments of the limbs) by “arthritis.” What Bert means by “arthritis” would then shift from context to context.<sup>4</sup>

The phenomenon can also show up with some proper names, and perhaps the classic illustration of this is Wittgenstein’s discussion of “Moses”:

If one says “Moses did not exist”, this may mean various things. It may mean: the Israelites did not have a single leader when they withdrew from Egypt -- or: their leader was not called Moses -- or: there cannot have been anyone who accomplished all that the Bible relates of Moses --or: etc. etc. (PI §79)

“Moses” seems as if it can be used to mean a number of things, but, as Wittgenstein points out later, the suggestion that the term is ambiguous is not especially plausible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Such cases are discussed extensively in Rosch 1975 and Lakoff 1987.

<sup>3</sup> See Burge 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Burge, of course, gives no sign that he takes “arthritis” to be context-sensitive in this way. Similar points have been argued for our use of “water” where at times it seems to designate H<sub>2</sub>O and at times seems to designate any substance which looks and tastes like H<sub>2</sub>O. Loar (1985) suggests that our terms might be so ambiguous between their ‘wide’ and their ‘narrow’ readings.

<sup>5</sup> While Wittgenstein’s discussion of “Moses” has traditionally been credited for pointing out that a cluster of descriptions, rather than a single one, is associated with most proper names (See, for instance, Searle 1958, Fogelin 1976), the mere fact that the reference of a given name is determined by a cluster of descriptions does not explain how the name’s meaning could be context-sensitive. If “Moses” simply referred to whatever satisfied most of the cluster, its referent would seem to be context-invariant.

## Popular Responses

There are three standard ways to account for such cases within a more traditional semantic theory. The first is to say that (in spite of appearances to the contrary) there really is no variations in what the terms refer to in such cases. The second is try to explain the phenomena in terms of indexicality, while the third is to claim that the words in question are simply ambiguous. While I don't think that any of these responses can ultimately be successful, arguing for this is not my primary concern here. Consequently these views and their *prima facie* problems will only be mentioned briefly before the presentation of an alternative account. The 'hard line' response simply denies that these words mean different things in different contexts. "Mother," for instance, means, say, only the woman who supplies a child's genetic material and the use of "mother" to pick out the child's adopted mother is not, strictly speaking, true. Bert means, say, *arthritis*, by "arthritis", and while we may understand what he is saying to his brother, his complaint is, strictly speaking, false. "Moses" picks out a certain historical figure to whom various miraculous and non-miraculous feats were attributed, but there is no sense in which "Moses did not exist" could be true just because the miracles were not performed, or because no single person led the Israelites out of Egypt.

I do not have the time to discuss the hard-line response in any detail. I will only note here that while it is always possible to select a single semantic value for a term and insists that all aspects of its usage out of line with it are just 'sloppy,' this approach has considerably less appeal when there is a lack of consensus over what the central semantic value should be. Whether a child's 'real mother' is the woman who brings it up, the woman who gave birth to it, or the woman who contributed to its genetic make-up, is by no means obvious. What Bert 'really' means by "arthritis" is a subject of considerable debate, and it is no more plausible to assume that there would be an uncontroversial answer to the semantic values of names like "Moses," or "Agamemnon" seem to be used at times to designate historical figures around whom various (possibly apocryphal) stories have clustered, and at times to designate fictional characters who may have been based upon historical figures. The claim that such cases of context sensitivity can be accounted for by the words in questions containing an 'indexical' component does not seem especially promising either. Unlike standard indexicals, the

context that these terms are sensitive to is *not* the spatio-temporal context in which they are uttered. Neither is it the sort of ‘discursive’ context that anaphors make use of. Consequently, understanding terms like “mother,” “arthritis,” or “Moses” as incorporating an implicit reference to their context of utterance not only seems implausible, but also does not seem to help account for the phenomena. The final way to try to cope with such cases within a traditional semantic theory is to explain them in terms of ambiguity. Just as there are two distinct meanings for “bank,” there would be multiple meanings for “mother,” “arthritis” and “Moses” in our language. However, such ambiguity-based accounts would have to postulate a huge variety of distinct meanings for each word in our ‘mental lexicon’ to account for the pervasiveness of context sensitivity. “Mother” would have to be ambiguous between birth-mother, nurturing-mother, step-mother, egg-mother, genetic mother, etc. “Moses” would have to be ambiguous between “the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness,” “the man who took down the ten commandments,” etc. Worse still, the suggestion that our use of, say, “mother” is ambiguous between this wide variety of distinct meanings fits badly with those cases where, say, the same woman brings John up, gave birth to him, provided his genetic material, and is married to his father. In such cases, there is no pressure to understand an utterance of “This is John’s mother” as at all ambiguous. Different utterances of “Mother” can be used to pick out people who satisfy different aspects of the mother-prototype, but when it is used to pick out someone who corresponds closely to the prototype, there is no reason to think that it must be doing so by focusing on just one of these aspects.

### **Moderate holism**

Once again, the considerations against the views above are not meant to be decisive. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that an account of context-sensitivity preferable to the alternatives of the hard line, ambiguity, and indexicality is available to the semantic holist. Semantic holism is here (very) roughly characterized as the doctrine that the meanings of one’s words is a function of all of one’s beliefs involving those words.<sup>6</sup> What I mean by, say, “pen,” is determined by my beliefs that pens are writing instruments, that they contain ink, that the cylindrical objects on my desk are

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of holism and the motivations for it, see Block 1998.

pens, etc. Such holistic accounts have a ‘fineness of grain’ which, I hope to show, makes them particularly apt to deal with the contextual aspects of word meaning.

Nevertheless, I should first address the common charge that this same fineness of grain leaves holistic accounts of word meaning too unstable. In particular, holistic theories of meaning are often criticized for entailing that *any* difference between beliefs will result in a difference in meaning. For instance, if what I mean by “gold” is a function of my “gold”-beliefs, and one of these beliefs changes, then what I mean by “gold” would seem to change as well. Holistic theories of meaning are thus typically accused of (among other things) entailing that no two people (or no person at two times) ever mean the same thing by any of their words.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, such criticisms are misconceived. Holism only requires that the meaning of a term be a *function* of the beliefs associated with it, and *this* claim need not commit one to the thesis that meaning is unstable. The holist need only claim, plausibly enough, that the function between sets of beliefs and meanings is not one-to-one. After all, consider the claim that one’s final grade is a function of one’s grades on one’s exams and quizzes. The truth of *this* claim certainly doesn’t entail that any change to one’s quiz grades will produce a change in one’s final grade. Each grade makes *some* contribution to one’s final grade, but not every change among the contributors will produce a corresponding change in the ultimate outcome. The function from one’s test and quiz grades to one’s final grade allows a good deal of stability in the output in the face of considerable variation in the input. That is to say, the function involved is many-to-one rather than one-to-one.

In much the same way, a holist about meaning can consistently claim that what one’s words mean is a function of *all* of one’s beliefs without suggesting that *any* change to these beliefs would produce a corresponding change in meaning. The lack of immediate effect on meaning that some belief changes may have no more entails that those changed beliefs didn’t contribute to what was meant than the lack of immediate effect on one’s final grade that some quiz-grade changes may have entails that those quizzes did not contribute to the final grade. If the function from belief to meaning allows some

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<sup>7</sup> For a much more exhaustive list purported problems with holistic theories, see Fodor and LePore 1992.

constancy of output through variations in input (that is, if it is many-to-one), then holism won't entail that meaning is unstable.<sup>8</sup>

We can arrive at such a holistic account of meaning by tying the semantic value of a speaker's terms to whatever object or set of objects maximizes the (weighted) total number of truths the speaker believes.<sup>9</sup> Such an account of reference will undoubtedly be holistic: a term picks out the object it does because of the role that object plays in contributing, either directly or indirectly, to the truth of countless beliefs. Nevertheless, even if countless beliefs played some role in determining the term's reference, there is little reason to think that a change in one (or even a considerable number) of these beliefs will change what is referred to. The truth of two different sets of 'porcupine' beliefs may, in spite of their differences, be maximized by precisely the same set of objects. Such a holist about reference could thus allow there to be changes in belief without changes in meaning.

### **Holistic contextualism**

Such holism may not make meaning too unstable, but how does it account for the context-sensitivity discussed earlier? If, as the holist maintains, what we refer to is determined by what we believe, it might seem that there could be no changes in what our terms refer to without any changes of belief. However, the problem cases mentioned above all seem to involve the possibility of the reference of a speaker's term changing without the speaker forming any new, or giving up any old, beliefs. Nevertheless, the function which maximizes the number of truths believed by the speaker can account for these contextual features by looking to maximize not just the total number of true beliefs, but rather some *weighted* total of them. Some beliefs will be more important to the speaker than others, and preserving the truth of these beliefs will have a higher priority than preserving the truth of the beliefs assigned less weight. With respect to a name like "Aristotle", for instance, a belief like "*The Nichomachean Ethics*, *The Politics*, and *The Poetics* are works of Aristotle's" will typically have

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<sup>8</sup> Such holistic accounts are dealt with in more detail Jackman 1999. It should be noted that some holistic accounts (e.g.: conceptual role semantics) probably do require that meaning be unstable.

<sup>9</sup> The proposal is thus very sympathetic to the so-called "principle of charity." Furthermore, while I have been talking here about "beliefs" a more careful and detailed formulation of this position would have to be in terms of the agents commitments, many of which would not be explicitly formulated by the agent. For a discussion of the importance of such background commitments, see Searle 1983 and my "Internalism, Individualism, and the Background" Mid-South Philosophy Conference 1998).

greater weight than a belief like “*On Sleep, On Divination in Sleep* and *On Dreams* are works of Aristotle’s.” If our use of “Aristotle” could be historically traced back to two Macedonians, one of whom wrote the former set, the other of whom wrote the latter set, then (all else being equal) we would probably say that by “Aristotle” we meant the one who wrote *The Nichomachean Ethics*.

However, it is important to notice that this weighing is contextually sensitive. For instance, if one were writing one’s dissertation on *On Divination in Sleep*, the belief that Aristotle wrote the latter set might be given greater weight.<sup>10</sup> The context which the weighing is sensitive to is thus not our physical context, but rather our interests at the time of utterance. Once such weighted totals are in the picture, holistic accounts can allow for changes of meaning without changes of beliefs. It is not the beliefs themselves, but rather how heavily they are weighed, that can change from context to context.

### **Accounting for the Examples**

If meaning were determined in the holistic manner outlined above, the ‘problem cases’ like “mother” “arthritis” and “Moses” could be explained as follows.

The variance in the meanings for “mother” is produced by our various interests leading different ‘mother-beliefs’ to be more-or-less heavily weighed. When I am talking about John’s disciplinary problems my belief that John is being brought up by his mother will be weighed more heavily than my belief about his mother contributing to his genetic make-up. When I am talking about his freckles, the opposite will usually be the case. Different aspects of our ‘mother-prototype’ are given greater weight in the two contexts. Nevertheless, all aspects of the prototype may be given some weight, and when a single individual fits all aspects of the prototype, we can say that “mother” applies to her unambiguously.

Such an account would also explain why Bert’s term “arthritis” might refer to *arthritis* when he is consulting his doctor and *tharthritis* when he is complaining to his brother. In addition to a large set of beliefs which would be true of both arthritis and tharthritis Bert has one set of beliefs such as “I have arthritis in my thigh” and “My arthritis is keeping me from cleaning out the garage today” which

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<sup>10</sup> Unless, of course, the thesis was of the form “*On Divination in Sleep* must be of some philosophical significance, it was, after all, written by *Aristotle*, and it helps us understand his more important works.”

would be true only of *tharthritis*, and another set of beliefs such as “Doctors have studied how to treat arthritis” and “The man from the insurance company said that people with arthritis should go see a doctor about it” which would be true only of *arthritis*. When he is complaining to his brother, the former set of beliefs will be given greater weight than the latter (and so he will be referring to *tharthritis*), while when he is consulting his doctor, the latter set of beliefs will be given greater weight (and so he will be referring to *arthritis*).

Finally, who, if anyone, we are referring to by “Moses” will also depend upon how heavily our beliefs are weighed. Someone who is interested in the history of the Middle East may weigh heavily the belief that Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, but not put much weight on beliefs relating to the miracles Moses purportedly performed (even if he does believe that they were, in fact, performed). On the other hand, someone who is only interested in the miraculous aspects of the story might weigh the miracles the most heavily, and if there turns out to be no one who took the ten commandments from God and parted the red sea, then his term “Moses” would not refer to anyone. On the other hand, someone may be both of these, interested sometimes in history, and sometimes in miracles, and the reference of the name may shift for him accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

This account of a holistic contextualism is, admittedly, very sketchy. Nevertheless, it suggests how a single item in one’s mental lexicon could pick out different objects, or sets of objects, depending upon one’s context. The proposed holistic account allows word-meaning to be both stable through changes in belief, and flexible through changes of context. It thus explains how the truth conditions of our utterances can be non-indexically context-sensitive without suggesting that our words are ambiguous.



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