The subjectivity of conditionals in a new light

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The elephant is like a pot.

The elephant is like a wicket basket.

The elephant is like a ploughshare.

The elephant is like a plough.

etc.

Insulation via subjective operators:

The elephant is partially like a pillar.

The elephant seems like a pillar (to me).

If what I am touching is representative, the elephant is like a pillar.

Hidden subjective insulation?

Sly Pete and Mr. Stone are playing poker on a Mississippi riverboat. It is now up to Pete to call or fold. My henchman Zack sees Stone's hand, which is quite good, and signals its content to Pete. My henchman Jack sees both hands, and sees that Pete's hand is rather low, so that Stone's is the winning hand. At this point, the room is cleared. A few minutes later, Zack slips me a note which says "If Pete called, he won," and Jack slips me a note which says "If Pete called, he lost".
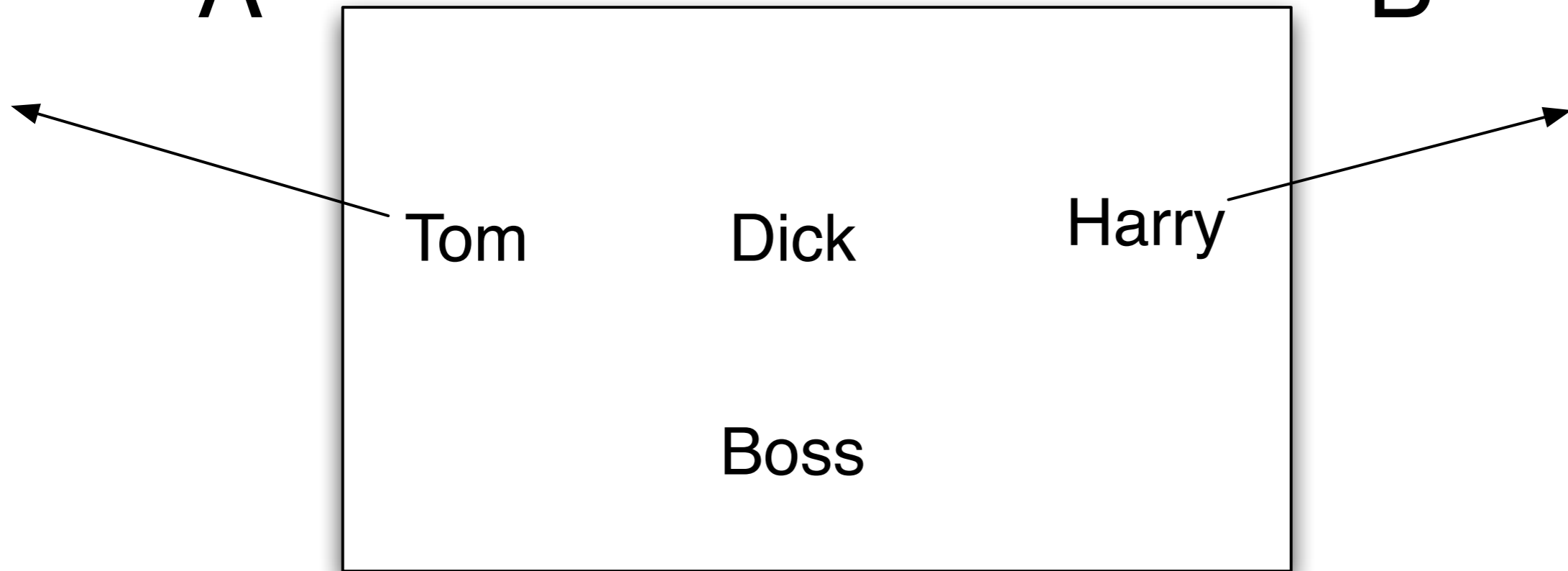
Tom   Dick   Harry

Boss
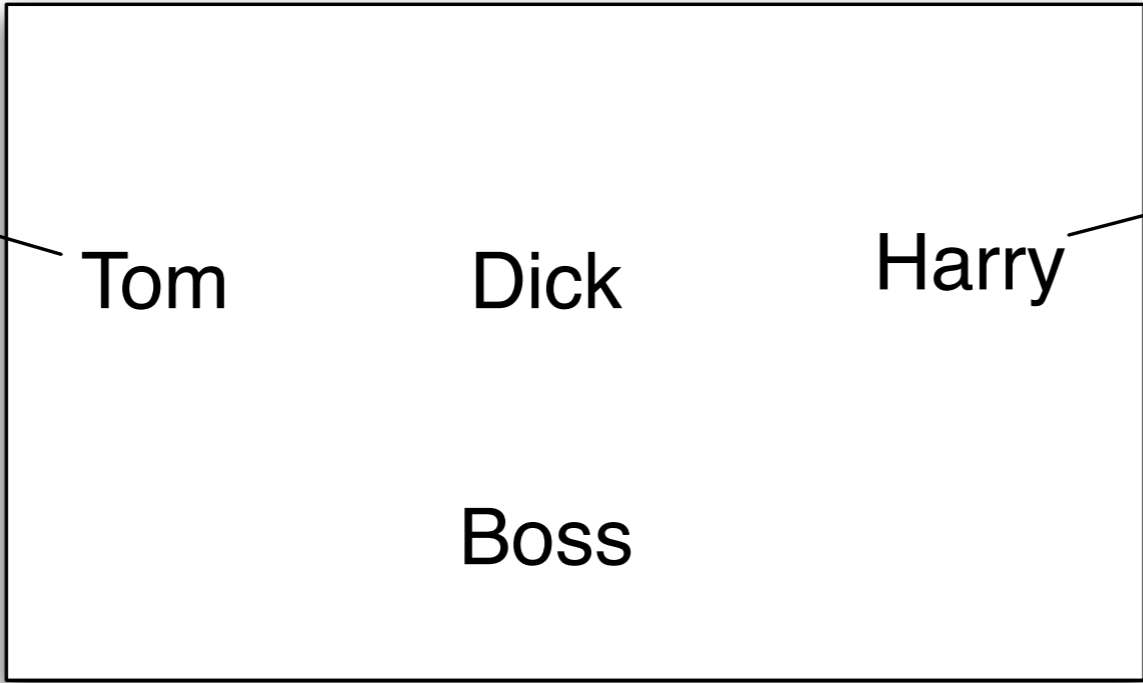
Might

Outline

- The Dilemma

- Despair (nihilism, relativism)

- *Might* Made Right

- Application to conditionals

Subjectivity (Rock)

????

Objectivity (Hard Place)

Faultless Assertion

S can faultlessly assert *might p* and *if p, q* even if p is ruled out by the total evidence/ facts

⇒ suggests that these claims are "insulated"

Justified Disagreement

When S says *might p* or *if p, q*, it is perfectly OK to reply *no* based on different or better evidence.

⇒ not as insulated as we thought

Easy Agreement

S says *might p* or *if p, q*

H says *yes, I agree*

⇒ again, should not be possible if S's claim was subjective and insulated

Are you sure?

"Your assertion of *If A, C* was not a report on your state of mind because neither you nor I treated it in that manner. [. . .] When I asked 'Are you sure?' and you said 'Yes, fairly sure', you were not assuring me that your probability for C given A was high; rather, you were expressing confidence in that high conditional probability."

Bennett 2004

Presumably our indicative conditional has a fixed interpretation, for speakers with different beliefs, and for one speaker before and after a change in his beliefs. Else how are disagreements about a conditional possible, or changes of mind?

Lewis 1976

The problem: once you make the meaning objective enough to have (dis)agreement etc., it becomes hard to understand how the speaker was justified to make their claim.

Two reactions

- nihilism (aka NTV)

- relativism

"[M]any indicative conditionals have a subjective element to them, yet they are not devices whereby the speaker reports some fact about himself. The only other way to accommodate this subjectivity is to suppose that in an indicative conditional the speaker expresses but does not report a fact about his own state of mind. In the absence of anything else he could be reporting, the conclusion is that indicative conditionals are not reports at all; that is, they are not propositions with truth values."

Bennett

Relativism makes these claims "super-subjective".
Not only is the speaker making a claim about her
evidence, the hearer is working with a claim
about *his* evidence.

A: I'm in New York.

B: No, I'm not.

Distinguish

- dependence on utterance context
  (*I*, *here*, *now*, ...)

- dependence on assessment/judge context
  (*might*, *if*, *yummy*, ...)

Basically stipulates that speaker and hearer can count as disagreeing even though all that underwrites their assertions is their own state of evidence.

"I'm in New York." – "I'm not."

not a disagreement b/c different propositions expressed in the two contexts of utterance

"He might be in New York." – "No he can't be."

is a disagreement b/c the same proposition (function from assessment/index pairs to truth-values) is expressed in the two contexts of utterance

at the same time, both are justified in asserting their claims since they constitute different contexts of assessment

Our solution:

von Fintel, Kai & Anthony S. Gillies. 2008. *Might* made right. To appear in a volume on epistemic modality, edited by Andy Egan and Brian Weatherson, Oxford University Press.

http://mit.edu/fintel/fintel-gillies-2008-mmr.pdf.

Replace

one assessment-sensitive proposition

with

a "cloud" of standard context-sensitive propositions

To a first approximation, saying *might p* expresses three propositions simultaneously:

p is compatible with <u>my</u> evidence
p is compatible with <u>your</u> evidence
p is compatible with <u>our</u> evidence

Rule of assertion:

You can assert a cloud of propositions only if you could standardly assert at least one of them.

Rule for the hearer:

Respond to whatever proposition in the cloud you have business responding to.

(plus be relevant and further the common goal)

We can have our subjective cake (assert *might p* because it is true wrt speaker's evidence) and eat it objectively too (reject because fails wrt further evidence).

Types of Context-Dependency:

he

a friend of mine

might

How would this work with conditionals?

if$_X$ p, q

presupposes that *p* is compatible with *X*'s evidence

asserts that all *p*-worlds compatible with *X*'s evidence are *q*-worlds

A speaker who claims *if p, q* is putting into play a cloud of conditional propositions:

$$if_{speaker} \ p, q$$

$$if_{hearer} \ p, q$$

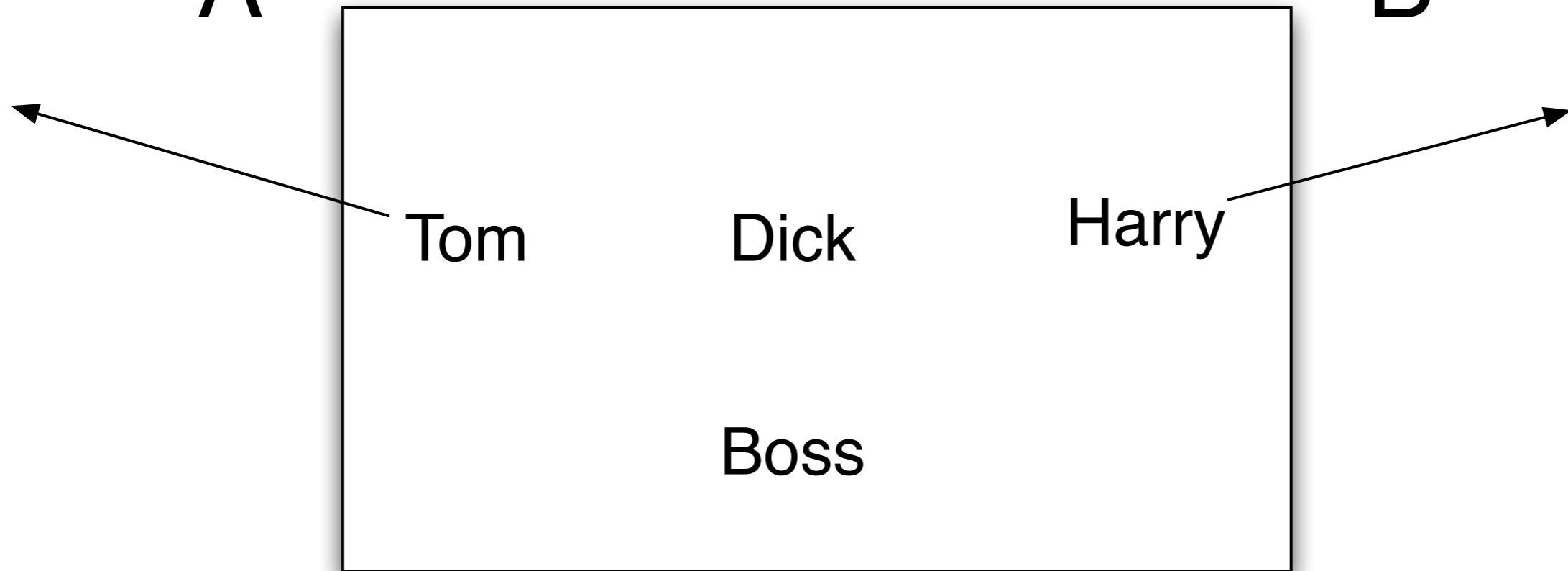$$if_{group} \ p, q$$

felicity of assertion based on speaker reading

acceptance/rejection based on hearer/group reading

A little bit different from *might*:

The hearer has no business with the group proposition, but can only react on the basis of the hearer proposition.

When it becomes clear that *p* is false, the non-subjective reading of *if p, q* suffers presupposition failure.

If he didn't tell Dick, he told Harry.

He told Dick or Harry.

He must have told Dick or Harry.