

Robert C. Stalnaker: *Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014.

The notion of context and its explication is a recurring theme in the philosophical work of Robert Stalnaker. It also plays a major role in contemporary philosophical and linguistic theorizing as is evident from the discussion of e.g. contextualism in epistemology and the ever growing literature on context-sensitivity in linguistics. Stalnaker's most recent work on the topic is based on a series of lectures given in 2010 and 2011 in Paris and Mexico, whereas chapter 5 is a version of already published material (Stalnaker 2011). His motivation is the observation that despite the ubiquity of the notion of context foundational questions regarding what a context is are mainly ignored. Building on and refining his former contributions (Stalnaker 1999, 2002) he vindicates a broadly Gricean account of context. His aim is to separate questions about the structure and functioning of a language itself from the use of language in communication. Stalnaker maintains that if semantic and pragmatic issues are conceptually distinguished, their interaction may be studied in a more fruitful way. Context as a pragmatic notion is not confined to conventional rules of language but to cooperative and rational agency in general. By calling for a clear cut distinction, Stalnaker positions his dynamic pragmatics against many contemporary so-called dynamic semantic theories in linguistics and philosophy of language that loosen a distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

The book consists of an introduction, eight chapters and an appendix. Roughly, the first four chapters are dedicated to a vindication of the notions of context and presupposition as pragmatic notions. Chapter 5 refines the notion of common ground to accommodate centered content. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the role of context in the interpretation of epistemic modals and conditionals, while chapter 8 provides an overview of and a comparison with semantic relativism. In chapter 1, three analyses of the notion of context are advertised. However, what we get are two analyses plus the introduction of a target notion of context. The latter is the intuitive and vague folk understanding of what a context is. It serves to abstract two roles of the notion: (i) context functions as a resource that determines the content of expressions, (ii) context is also the target of actions and is changed by them. This corresponds roughly to two motivations of introducing context into the study of language: (a) language-internal, for providing a compositional semantics for context-dependent expressions; (b) language-external, to model the (intended) impact of utterance actions.

Indexical semantics introduced context as a parameter of semantic interpretation of indexical expressions like "I", "here", "now". To be able to interpret indexicals we need to refer to the context as a resource for determining the meaning of expressions (K-context). Compositional, language-internal reasons drive this notion of context. David Lewis (1980) has argued that with this indexical semantics we should dispense with propositions as contents of sentences and take their meanings to be functions from context-index pairs to truth values, where indices are equivalent to circumstances of evaluations. Stalnaker dismisses this suggestion. Lewis only takes into account language-internal reasons, but forgets about language-external ones. We also need to be able to model the impact of utterance actions. But this is not possible within Lewis's framework. Only with a notion of informational content, as given by the account of propositions as sets of worlds, semantics and pragmatics can be linked. So, what is asked for is a mechanism to recover propositional, i.e. informational, content from the more fine-grained semantic value. This is the moral drawn by Stalnaker from Lewis: compositional processes include features of the context that are not part of the ultimate output of the semantic process, i.e. an informational content. Both things may come apart. E.g. the sentences "I am in New York" and "The author

of this review is in New York” have the same informational content, but exploit the K-context in different ways to arrive at this content compositionally. On the one hand, it becomes clear that we have two notions of context springing from different theoretical roles, language-internal and language-external. On the other hand, we have to connect them and Stalnaker seems to favor Kaplan’s approach of a two step-interpretation.

The external notion is explicated as common ground and is scrutinized in detail in chapter 2. Common ground represents the information which is shared by the participants of a conversation (CG-context). It provides the background for informational exchange on the one hand. Its main point is to represent the open epistemic possibilities the agents want to discriminate among with their (linguistic) actions. The main differences between K-context and CG-context is that the former is not informational, not building on the individual attitudes of agents. A K-context is the objective circumstance of an utterance and therefore factive. Furthermore, it does not have to be accessible for conversationalists. In contrast, CG may be non-factive and by its very nature is accessible. Still, the two notions of context are connected. Stalnaker mentions two possibilities: (i) CG may be seen as part of the K-context. Attitudes of the participants in a concrete situation, i.e. a K-context, can be seen as factual constituents of this situation. Insofar the CG, constituted by the participants attitudes, is a part of the K-context. (ii) CG is structurally similar to K-contexts as a set of centered possible worlds, i.e. possible worlds with designated individual and time as their center. Favoring the latter theoretical possibility, Stalnaker sets out to explicate it in chapter 5.

Chapter 2 explicates the notion of common ground. Common ground (CG) intuitively is the information agents mutually take for granted as the background for their cooperate activity. Pieces of information are propositions represented as sets of possible worlds, where the information holds, e.g. where bananas are yellow. Another proposition might specify worlds where the conversation is going on at a specific time. In all those worlds, the agents are talking to each other. CG then is a set of propositions. Intersecting these propositions, i.e. the sets of worlds, contained within the CG gives the context set. It contains all worlds that are taken to be open possibilities, meaning possible ways the actual world might be. For our examples, these are worlds, where the conversation is going on at a specific time and bananas are yellow. The shared information is a resource conversationalists use to determine which utterance they should make so that the hearer is able to recover the intended speaker meaning. Furthermore, actions and events may change this informational state. But on what these changes are based and hence the precise nature of common ground is a controversial issue.

Again, Stalnaker argues against a suggestion of Lewis. Lewis conceptualizes common ground as a rule-governed conversational score. With Grice, Stalnaker claims that conversation is not governed by conventional rules, but is only intelligible as a rational practice. The rules of language have to be kept separate from the use made of it in communicative action. Correspondingly, CG-context is not rooted in conventional rules, but, very much like speaker meaning in Grice, in the propositional attitudes of agents. The theoretical explanation of the foundation is modeled on the concept of a common attitude, rooted in the individual attitudes of members of a group. The attitude of acceptance is represented via Kripkean models with accessibility relations between worlds. The common attitude then is arrived at by the transitive and Euclidean closure of the individual accessibility relations. What is modeled thereby is the propositional attitude(s) of a group. And it is this attitude, the content of it, that is the target of utterance actions. However, this common attitude is not directly accessible to the members of the group. What they have are beliefs about what is common ground. These beliefs are what Stalnaker renownedly termed

speaker presuppositions. With this concept at hand, he sets out to clarify another debated phenomenon, which is accommodation. Some expressions trigger presuppositions. This means they are only felicitously uttered if something else is being assumed.

Lewis (1979b), amongst others, made the observation that also if the required presupposition is not part of the conversational score at the point of utterance, it automatically becomes part of it with the utterance via a rule of accommodation. Stalnaker aims at a more Gricean explanation deriving accommodation from pressures of cooperativity. Cooperative behavior demands that the presuppositions of the individual agents are the same. Presuppositions change with manifest events. Stalnaker's classical example is the walking in of a goat: Everybody sees the goat and everybody sees that the others see that there is a goat, therefore it becomes a presupposition that there is a goat. Nothing else happens in accommodation. The hearer realizes that the speaker shows that he presupposes something. Now he has three ways of reaction. (i) trust the speaker in his authority on the presupposed matter and also presuppose; (ii) reject the presupposition of the speaker; (iii) go along with the presupposition if they concern non-relevant matters. In so far, there is no need for a rule of accommodation. Whether something gets accommodated depends on the extra-linguistic context and how this influences cooperativity in conversation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the question what presupposition really is and what its role in linguistic explanations is. Stalnaker argues against some contemporary misunderstandings. Certain expressions require certain presuppositions to be in place for the utterance to be felicitous and accordingly understandable. Most uses of "Frank stopped smoking" presuppose that he has smoked in the past. Some theories provide semantic explanations for these cases. But on the pragmatic view, presupposition is neither a semantic phenomenon nor a theoretical notion. First and foremost, it is a descriptive notion describing the fact that certain utterances *in* certain contexts require presuppositions of the speaker to be in place. To explain these facts and to obtain adequate generalizations, different and disparate theoretical tools are required. Sometimes it could be a semantic explanation as in the case of cleft constructions like "It wasn't John who solved the problem" with the presupposition of someone having solved the problem. But the variety of possible explanations is much wider than this. Oftentimes explanations will be derived pragmatically via truth conditional content plus conversational principles. Presupposition is to be understood, or better: described, in terms of a relation between a person and a proposition, i.e. the proposition(s) she presupposes. What is presupposed then is a question about reasonableness at a point of discourse. Therefore the presuppositional relation is not a relation between a sentence and a proposition but between speaker and proposition. On the same level, felicity and appropriateness are not explanatory notions. Concrete linguistic facts can be described with those notions but in the end the explanation why an utterance is e.g. infelicitous in a context has to be given in theoretical terms. Stalnaker's pragmatic framework provides tools for precisely describing presuppositional phenomena and giving an account what presupposition is. Only then is it possible to give theoretical explanations that in the end will not be as unified as the surface phenomenon. Accounts not providing an explication of presupposition, of what it is, quickly run into conceptual confusion.

In chapter 4 Stalnaker expands his critique of research in presupposition to the problem of presupposition projection and points out how the pragmatic account deals with it.

Presupposition projection is the phenomenon that the presuppositions of complex sentences seem to be a systematic combination of the presuppositions of their (sub-)clauses. E.g. one question is, what the presuppositions of a conjunctive sentence *A and B* are and how they relate to the presuppositions of its subclauses. The sentence "Frank is handsome and he knows he is"

has “Frank is handsome” and “Frank knows that he is handsome” as its constituents. “Frank knows that he is handsome” presupposes the first conjunct “Frank is handsome”. But this presupposition is not inherited to the whole conjunction. It is cancelled out via the first conjunct. Rather, the general rule for conjunction seems to be that the whole sentence has the presuppositions of B minus those entailed by A.

It seems then to be a theoretical task to formulate compositional rules for presuppositions. But again, Stalnaker argues that already the formulation of the problem is ill-conceived. What is at stake is the relation between what speakers tend to presuppose in using complex forms and which presuppositions are expected for the simple cases. But such a perspective on presupposition projection is only possible if a further misunderstanding is cleared up. Stalnaker argues against the received view separating semantic from pragmatic processes. Although the aim of the book being separating semantic from pragmatic concepts and explanations, he guards against interpretations that infer a separation of semantic and pragmatic stages of interpretation. Rather, pragmatic reasoning plays a role at all stages, even in the determination of what is said. With this said, the observation is that context, as a pragmatic notion not dependent on conventional rules, changes all the time. This will also be the case within a complex sentence, e.g. the first conjunct of a conjunction is added to the context prior to the second conjunct, which is interpreted with respect to the already changed context. Projection is then a question not about compositional rules, but about how the context changes. From the basic context in interpretation derived contexts are set up. These may be subordinate contexts which are subsets of the basic context or parallel contexts, which are set up by more complicated mechanisms like those of belief revision. Suppositions triggered by the antecedents of conditionals are a prominent example for producing such derived context, but they are not the only ones. Despite the fact that derived contexts are mainly, if not exclusively, introduced by linguistic items, we have to keep in mind that they are derived from and dependent on the basic context which is a purely pragmatic entity. All of their features then are also to be treated as pragmatic notions. This means that in interpretation agents have to manage more than one context and switch between different informational states.

Often the functional role of derived states is grammatical in providing means for interpreting clauses. But still, grammatical or semantical rules may refer to derived contexts, which does not mean that derived contexts are semantic entities. Presupposition projection then is to be explained with respect to changing and derived contexts. As a very rough generalization, former clauses set up the context for the interpretation of latter clauses in complex constructions. But how the explanation is to be given in detail heavily depends on the pragmatic features of the basic context.

Chapter 5 takes up some points of chapter 2 regarding the adoption of a more fine-grained notion of content. Common ground is not only representing factual information, but also information about the discourse itself and about the attitudes and beliefs of the participants of a conversation. What is crucial about the beliefs of agents is that they are not just given as sets of possible worlds. Those plain sets of worlds only represent objective facts without taking account of the first person perspective of the knower or believer. The objective knowledge and the subjective perspective may come apart when a subject cannot properly self-locate in a world. The first person perspective is essentially indexical: from an objective description of the world, you cannot infer where or who you are in this world. To overcome this problem of the simple possible world account of attitude content, David Lewis (1979a) introduced a more fine-grained notion, i.e. sets of centered possible worlds, which, very much like in the case of indexical

semantics, had parameters for a world, an individual and a time. But this comes with a major drawback: Sets of centered possible worlds encode the perspective of a certain subject at a certain time. With this fine-grained content it is no longer clear (i) how a mechanism of belief change is to work when information comes in as a “flat” proposition and (ii) how to communicate the contents of one’s beliefs when they also encode the first person view.

Stalnaker argues that Lewis’ conception misses the essential point of centering, i.e. linking an agent as he objectively – from a third person perspective – is in a world and with certain beliefs to the person he takes himself to be in this world. The basic assumption is that if there are different centers, they correspond to different worlds. The reason for taking on this assumption is, roughly, that if you do not know where you are in a world, you also don’t know in which world you are. The assumption facilitates taking timeless propositions as contents of belief and regard self-location as a feature of the subject’s relation to the content and not part of the content itself. In the end this also opens up a merging of the structure of K-contexts with CG-contexts: the latter is a set of multiply centered worlds encoding the perspective of the conversational group.

Chapter 6 deals with the interpretation of expressions of epistemic modality. Stalnaker takes his main idea from a discussion of deontic modality by David Lewis (1975). The core problem for Lewis’s account of modality is to combine specific force, i.e. imperatival for deontic modality, with truth conditions for those expressions. Stalnaker claims that there is an analogue problem in the case of epistemic modality: E.g. “The keys might be in the car” is not used to make assertions, i.e. to add information that the keys are in the car to the common ground, i.e. eliminate all worlds where the keys are not in the car. Rather the sentence serves to express uncertainty about the embedded proposition “The keys are in the car”, called the prejacent. The truth conditions of the “might”-sentence are that the prejacent is compatible with an informational state, e.g. the common ground. Stalnaker’s line is that the interpretation of expressions of epistemic modality is regulated by the interaction of a special force rule with a truth conditional semantics. The function of the force rule is to open up possibilities in the context, not excluding possibilities like in the case of assertion. The force rule aims at an expansion of the context set to include worlds, where the prejacent is true, i.e. where the keys are in the car. The truth conditions are evaluated with respect to this *prospective* context. For the force rule to make the right adjustments to derive the prospective context, one needs to add a sphere system around the actual context that represents fallback positions and is determined by the epistemic priorities of the agents. The fallback spheres serve to introduce prejacent possibilities. In a way, the truth conditions of epistemically modalized sentences then are trivial, because the force rule already sees to it that they are satisfied, i.e. that there are worlds to quantify over. Insofar Stalnaker labels his approach an expressivist account. Still, it is crucial for him to hold on to truth conditions to be able to explain embeddings in and interactions with other constructions. Epistemic modals on this account have truth conditions *at least* relative to contexts and determine partial propositions, i.e. functions from worlds to truth values not defined for every world in logical space.

Stalnaker claims that the same is true for indicative conditionals. They are interpreted relative to prospective contexts where there are open antecedent possibilities. But their effect on those prospective contexts is, in contrast to the case of epistemic modals, also informational: they have the same effect as the material conditional. Again, holding onto truth conditions provided by the selection-function account helps explaining embeddings, especially those under quantification, which Stalnaker dedicates a subchapter to.

Chapter 7 picks up on questions already shining through in the previous discussion of epistemic modals and conditionals: is there an informational role of epistemic modals and conditionals beyond context management? Are there objective interpretations of those expressions, and what do they say? If there are, then holding on to truth conditions is justified over and above their language-internal role of giving a smooth account of embeddings.

A starting point is to ask how disagreements about epistemic claims are possible and how to model them with the given account. As epistemic claims make suggestions about how the context should be allowed to evolve, participants may disagree with respect to their differing epistemic priorities of how they prefer context to evolve. The problem Stalnaker stresses is that we somehow have to keep track of this disagreement in the actual context. It must reflect what the parties propose that the context set should be like relative to what the actual world is. Stalnaker's favored solution is that the disagreements are projected onto the worlds in the context set, i.e. that the worlds do not only reflect what the facts are, but also what might possibly be true in those worlds. E.g. we have two worlds in the CG where the butler committed the murder, but relative to one, the gardener might have done it, and relative to the other, the gardener might not have done it, when the butler wouldn't have done it. Stalnaker goes on to claim that often this splitting-up of worlds into might-worlds and non-might-worlds is dispensed with when facts get settled. But it is also often the case that epistemic disputes reflect matters of fact when there is some underlying factual question, e.g. about some presently unknown information. Disagreeing presupposes that there is a fact about who is right. But with disagreement about epistemic claims, only at the end of inquiry it is possible to say which of the disputes in question were projected and which were real.

The problem about objectivity arises in a different flavor also for conditionals. Often, the difference between indicative and subjunctive conditionals is characterized as the difference between epistemic and objective interpretation. Stalnaker argues for a unified semantics for both kinds of conditional constructions. The difference is in the pragmatic constraints on the selection function selecting antecedent worlds relative to which the consequent is evaluated. For subjunctives the selection function is allowed to pick worlds outside the context set, whereas for indicatives it is restricted to (prospective) context worlds. This means that for indicatives all presuppositions are retained in the derived context. Not so for subjunctives: they signal that certain presuppositions are suspended. In their interpretation it is not the basic context that is changed but it involves a shift to a parallel context, suspending e.g. with the condition that the conversation takes place in those worlds. Parallel contexts are not information states including the subjects whose knowledge they represent, but much more abstract.

Indicative conditionals serve the function of making a point of epistemic relevance, of giving reasons for the consequent. Epistemic modals serve to negotiate how the basic context should evolve. Both outcomes of those functions are epistemic and unstable. This means that they vary with changing information and so are bound to the local epistemic circumstances. In contrast, the role of presupposition suspension in subjunctive conditionals is to identify stable and robust epistemic relations.

Chapter 8 closes the book with a presentation of contemporary semantic relativism. It mainly serves to locate Stalnaker's own approach in a broader philosophical context and does not add constructive aspects. After giving a discussion of the main motivating phenomena for semantic relativism, e.g. predicates of taste, and pointing out the similarities to the topics of chapter 6 and 7, he concludes with a critical comparison. He claims his own account to be more flexible in

allowing a more or less vague boundary between factual and practical disagreements, and also to be able to explain the special role of epistemic and “relative” vocabulary.

Turning to a critical evaluation of the book, I’d like to focus on two points. First, Stalnaker omits a variety of arguments against the centrality of common ground of which I will sketch one. Secondly, I’d like to point out some blank spaces and missing links regarding the introduced notions.

Stalnaker argues for an iterative notion of common ground (chapter 2). This means that a proposition p is common ground if and only if there is an infinite hierarchy of attitudes to p for every participant of the conversation. This in turn means that all accept that p , all believe/accept that all accept that p , all believe/accept that all believe/accept that all accept that p , etc. ad infinitum.

As a side issue, the need for a clarification of the attitude of acceptance gets manifest here. The discussion about the structure of common ground is carried out in terms of common knowledge and belief. Stalnaker postulates that these notions are sufficiently similar to the attitude of acceptance for the purpose of conversation. But still he owes us an answer to how acceptance and belief interact in general and especially in the iteration needed for common ground. As long as this is not clear, there is ambiguity in the notion of acceptance.

Furthermore, coming back to the main point, it is debatable whether such a strong notion of common ground is needed for communication. I will sketch an argument involving accommodation against the centrality of common ground given by Mandy Simons (2003, 261f.). Take a presupposing utterance of a speaker S : “I have to pick up my sister at the airport” with the presupposition of S having a sister (p). Following Stalnaker’s account, the utterance reveals that S believes p to be common ground. The hearer H infers from her utterance, that S believes p to be common ground and thereby infers that S believes p , because this is a precondition for common ground status. On the assumption of authority on the matter, H will also come to believe p , which then is “really” common ground. The crucial step is that H comes to believe p via the recognition of S believing p . But so, the detour via common ground seems redundant. We can reconstruct the reasoning without it. This time we take the utterance of S to indicate that she plainly believes p . H , by recognizing the utterance, believes that S believes p and via the authority regarding the subject comes to believe p himself. No more is needed here. We have a very weak iteration in H believing that S believes p . It seems that no infinite hierarchy of attitudes is needed to make the right predictions in this case.

Open issues and a need for clarification are raised by Stalnaker’s notions of basic context, derived context, parallel context, prospective context and projection. For one thing, it seems like for an ongoing conversation we have a whole set of contexts at play. The conjecture that these contexts are somehow hierarchically structured and stand in certain relations to one another immediately suggests itself. Alas, the book leaves out an explicit account of how different types of contexts are related to one another. Clearly, Stalnaker gives a distinctive role to the basic context.

Nevertheless, it is not discussed how information gained in subordinated contexts and about those contexts perlocates to the basic context. Furthermore, the status of prospective contexts is left vague. Are they similar to subordinated contexts? And what is their role in issues about projection discussed in chapter 7? Especially, there seems to be a more or less tacit shift in concepts in chapter 6 to chapter 7. Whereas epistemic modality in chapter 6 was discussed via prospective contexts, these get projected onto the worlds in the basic context in chapter 7. But this transition lacks explicit justification. The phenomena of disagreement in chapter 7 could also be scrutinized in terms of prospective contexts. Regarding those questions and to facilitate better

understanding on many points, the introduction of a formal apparatus would have been advantageous.

Despite those shortcomings, the book is very rich in ideas that wait to be scrutinized further in the philosophical and linguistic research communities. The arguments for a clear separation of semantic and pragmatic issues are to the point and facilitate a constructive analysis of major semantic frameworks such as dynamic and inquisitive semantics that semanticize many pragmatic aspects.

The reading is not entirely easy and presupposes some level of acquaintance with the relevant debates in linguistics and philosophy of language. Despite this, everyone working through the book will take away important and thought provoking insights about the question how to theorize about language and communication.

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