

Understanding wh-interrogatives in terms of inferential roles: A view from the philosophy of language

Charles Stewart
Dept. of Computer Science Boston University
cas@cs.brandeis.edu

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I present an approach to pronouns such as ‘what’ or ‘who’ that draws upon inferential role semantics, an influential theory of meaning in the philosophy of language. This theory originates out of two threads of work, firstly the rule theory of concepts due to Wittgenstein in the ‘Philosophical Investigations’, and secondly the proof theoretic semantics of formal languages developed by Gerhard Gentzen in the 1930s. The connection between the two approaches was noted by Nuel Belnap in the 1960s and was elaborated by Michael Dummett, Dag Prawitz and Per Martin-Loef. The theory is attractive because it is conducive to a formal treatment which is compositional and computationally tractable, yet does not relegate issues of pragmatics to the sidelines.

The key to the theory is to say that the meaning of a sentence is normally given by its assertion condition, ie. the grounds that warrant asserting that sentence. So we may interpret a sentence containing a logical operator such as ‘A and B’ by observing that we are entitled to assert ‘A and B’ precisely when we are entitled to assert ‘A’ and we are entitled to assert ‘B’. Expressions for individual terms are understood in terms of our pragmatic ability to recognise and distinguish their referent: so for example we are entitled to assert ‘Paul is dancing’ if we recognise Paul and see that he is dancing.

A feature of Dummett’s account is that it is possible to explain the meanings of speech acts other than assertions in terms of the key concept of assertion conditions. Thus, for example, it is possible to explain a command such as ‘Lisa, shut the door!’ in terms of my wish for Lisa to make the assertion become true, or by paraphrase, ‘I order Lisa to shut the door.’. Similarly a yes/no question such as ‘Is Paul dancing?’ may be seen asking whether or not the listener judges the assertion condition for ‘Paul is dancing’ to hold. This way, the meaning of commands and yes/no questions is determined by the inferential role of assertions.

In my talk I show how this approach can contribute to our understanding of constituent questions. A generalised account of inferential roles enables us to

give the meaning of a (non-subordinate) wh-question such as ‘Who is dancing?’ in terms of its informative answers. These answers take the form of assertions, whose contribution to the meaning of the question are their inferential roles. For example ‘Paul’ might be an acceptable answer to ‘Who is dancing’ (because ‘Paul is dancing’ has an informative assertion condition) or ‘No-one is dancing’ (informing the questioner of a false presupposition), but not by ‘Lisa’ if Lisa is seated, or the uninformative ‘Whoever is dancing’. This provides us with a derived account of the meaning of questions in terms of our account of assertions and a pragmatic theory of informativeness.

Thus, in this approach to the meaning of constituent questions we relate the interpretation of wh-pronouns in interrogatives to the inferential roles of a set of assertions. We can apply our theory to provide an analysis of wh-pronouns in relative clauses (such as in ‘The man who is dancing likes dogs’) determined by our interpretation of the answers to, say, the question ‘Which man is dancing?’.