On the Representation of Contexts

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A lot of very sophisticated formal machinery has been developed and deployed in the past fifteen years or so by linguists, logicians and computer scientists for the study of contexts and the discourses that take place in them: situation semantics and discourse representation theory, update or context change semantics, dynamic predicate logic and dynamic Montague grammar, among others. The emphasis in all of these theories is on the dynamics of discourse - the way in which contexts change in the course of a linguistic exchange, and the way that those changes affect the process of interpretation of the subsequent discourse. Although the theories that have been developed are diverse and quite complex, there are some simple ideas underlying and motivating them, and I think it will help to put the theories and the phenomena in perspective to return to, and to look more closely at, some of the simple ideas. My perhaps optimistic hypothesis is that if we get the foundations right, and separate out some of the basic elements of the structures involved in discourse, we can show how the complexity in the phenomena arise from the interaction of a number of elements that are each in themselves relatively simple.

I will begin with a methodological point: I think it is important to separate the representation of the tasks that are intended to be accomplished in discourse from the representation of the devices that are used by a particular language, and more generally by a particular speech community, to accomplish them those tasks. We need to spend some time getting clear about what language is supposed to do before explaining how it does it. I will try to clarify this distinction, and then to focus my attention on the first kind of representation.

After very briefly reviewing a bit of history, starting with the early study of speech acts, I will sketch a familiar abstract conception of a context: context as the information that is shared, or presumed to be shared, by the participants in the discourse. A context, understood in this way, provides first, the information required for the interpretation of speech acts, second, the materials out of which the contents of speech acts are constructed (a representation of the subject matter of the discourse), and third the materials to explain the force of a speech act - the way it changes the context. Many of the complexities in the phenomena of speech arise from the relations between different contexts: both the updated, corrected and modified basic contexts that result from the events of the discourse, and also the temporary and derived contexts that result from conditional suppositions and attributions of speech acts and propositional attitudes. I will try to show how some
relatively natural assumptions about the relations between different contexts can help to resolve some of the puzzles concerning quantifiers, anaphora, conditionals, and intentional identity that have preoccupied theorists in this area.