

Victor Carranza <rcarranza@pucp.pe>

Fiction and Force-cancellation

Why utterances are neutral (i.e. devoid of their illocutionary force) when they occur within a fictional setting? In the last decades, attention has been paid to fictional utterances that contain empty names or concept words, such as ‘Sherlock Holmes’ or ‘unicorn’ (see Evans 1982, McDowell 1977), but not to fictional statements that doesn’t contain empty names or concept words, such as the sentence ‘Lima is the capital of Peru’ uttered by an actor during a play. Peter Hanks (2015, 2016) has proposed to understand such forceless occurrences of utterances through the notion of ‘force-cancellation’. According to him, utterances loses their illocutionary force when performed within particular contexts in virtue of the conventions that govern such contexts. In effect, a proposition P uttered within such contexts do not commit the speaker to the truth of the content expressed by the utterance: e.g. when uttered by an actor onstage, but also when uttered embedded within the conditional sentence ‘if P then Q’. However, Recanati (2017) has recently objected to Hanks that force-cancellation can occur independently of whether specific conventions govern a context or not: the mechanisms that underlie force-cancellation are related to specific forms of simulation and pretense rather than conventions established for particular contexts. For Recanati, force-cancellation occurs when the person who utters the sentence (e.g. the actor) and the person that is responsible for the content of the utterance (e.g. the fictitious character the actor is simulating to be) are different. Nonetheless, it is important to notice that the theories proposed so far involve both forceless freestanding utterances (in fiction, theatre, etc.) and utterances that become forceless when embedded under the scope of disjunctions, negations, if-clauses, etc., assuming that both type of cases depend upon the same form of force-cancellation mechanism. In this presentation, I make an objection against the intuition, shared by both Hanks and Recanati, that we can build a single theory of force-cancellation in order to account for both embedded and non-embedded cases. I basically show that force-cancellation in non-embedded cases obliterates not only what the speaker has literally said, but also the presuppositions and conventional implicatures that can be obtained by her utterances. If an actor onstage utters ‘Andy stopped smoking’ he will not be considered responsible for its utterance nor for the presupposition that Andy

used to smoke. (*the actor maybe,, but the utterance has such presupposition and the character of the play has it too*) In contrast, presuppositions and conventional implicatures survive to the cancellation produced by linguistic embeddings, showing that ‘secondary assertions’ are not cancelled in these cases: if someone says ‘If Andy stops smoking, he will save some money’, the proposition that ‘John used to smoke’, expressed by the antecedent of the conditional, survives to force-cancellation. After the discussion of my critique, I consider the relation between force-cancellation, asserted content and inferred contents. At the end of the presentation, I suggest studying the difference between non-fictional and fictional utterances from an audience-centered and not a context-centered or intention-centered perspective. There, I consider that non-fictional utterances are those considered as expressing information about how the world is, whereas fictional utterances are interpreted as inviting the audience to imagine a certain state of affairs, independently of the presence of conventions governing the context of utterance and forms of simulation and pretense.

Bibliography

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