

The semantic role of perspective in declarative sentences

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Tämä artikkeli tekee selkoa siitä, miten väitteen esittämisen näkökulma vaikuttaa väitteen sisältöön. Kysymystä käsitellään François Recanatin käyttämän ”Holmes ja Watson” -esimerkin avulla sekä artikkelin tekijän kehittämän näkökulman käsitteen rakenneanalyysin avulla. Näkökulmien semanttinen rooli väitelauseissa voidaan ymmärtää seuraavilla vaihtoehtoisilla tavoilla. ”Intensionaalisen” tulkinnan mukaan näkökulma on väitteiden sisältöön kuuluva, mutta usein lausumatta jäävä osatekijä. ”Ekstensionaalisen” tulkinnan mukaan näkökulma on rakenteensa tilanteissa tai tapahtumissa, joita väitteet koskevat. Artikkelin tulokset saadaan, että näkökulmaa on perusteltua pitää ”intensionaalisena”, siis väitteiden sisältöön kuuluvana. Tämä on filosofisesti tärkeä tulos, koska se tukee metafysisistä realismia eli käsitystä, että todellisuus on sitä koskevista esitys- ja tarkastelutavoista riippumaton.

Keywords: point of view, perspective, indexical expression, propositional content

1 Introduction

It is true of everyday life as well as of scientific investigation that the totality of reality can never be addressed, and certain aspects of reality that can be observed and that are considered particularly relevant are “selected” while others are ignored. Therefore when we consider something from a point of view (which is arguably something we must do if we are to consider anything at all), we supposedly only perceive part, or some, of the aspects or properties of that thing. Alasdair MacIntyre (2003: 367) goes as far as to say that a neutral (i.e., disinterested, inclusive, unrestricted) perspective is a conceptual impossibility, and that the notion of understanding presupposes understanding from a certain point of view. There is no view from nowhere, as Thomas Nagel (1986: 7, 25–26) aptly puts it. Therefore, a point of view represents the capacity to observe and understand reality, and simultaneously a certain kind of limited or partial perspective.

Although the expression *point of view* is used both in everyday language and in science, its meaning is vague and unspecific. In its concrete sense, the term *point of view* refers to the physical, spatial and temporal position from which something is seen or viewed

(Currie 2012: 88). Figuratively, it refers to the perspective from which a subject or event is perceived or a story narrated. This meaning is closely related to another meaning, for the term *point of view* can also refer to a person's state of mind or opinion (Lehtonen 2011: 244).

This paper explains *how the point of view from which a statement is presented influences the content of that statement*. The question is addressed by means of the Holmes and Watson example, used by François Recanati, and by means of the component analysis of the concept of a point of view, developed by the author of the article. Thus, the method of this study consists of philosophical conceptual analysis and an analysis of a thought experiment. Both are common methods of philosophy. The question above is philosophically important because the answer provides a basis for deciding between two fundamental metaphysical views, realism and social constructivism.

2 Perspectival factors in a disagreement

François Recanati uses the Holmes and Watson example, introduced by Jon Barwise (1989: 240), to illustrate the perspectival nature of thought and the related use of indexical expressions. Such expressions are items whose contribution to propositional content depends on the context (Recanati 2007: 3–4, 97). “I am a detective” is an example of an indexical sentence, because it is true with respect to certain contexts, especially when it is uttered by a detective, and false with respect to other contexts.

Recanati's example goes as follows. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson sit at the dining table facing each other, with the salt and pepper shakers standing between them. Holmes says, “The salt is left of the pepper”, because the salt is on the left from his perspective. From Watson's perspective, the salt is to the right of the pepper, but he is mistaken as to which shaker is which. Therefore, he wrongly says, “The salt is left of the pepper”.

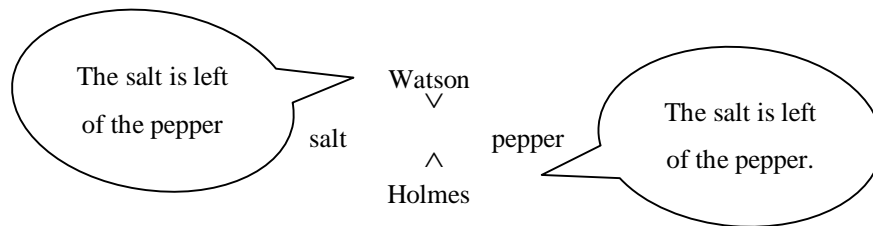


Figure 1. Holmes and Watson facing each other, with the salt and pepper shakers between them

Holmes and Watson say the same thing, but only Holmes is right.

According to Recanati (2007: 84, 116–118, 218–219), the story involves an unarticulated constituent that accounts for the difference in the truth-value of Holmes’s and Watson’s utterances. Apparently, the unarticulated constituent in question is the perspective, because the salt is on the left from Holmes’s perspective, but it is not on the left from Watson’s. That is why Holmes is right and Watson wrong. Their epistemic status would remain the same even if they changed their seats. After such a change they could both say, “The salt is right of the pepper”.

In this story Holmes and Watson both say the same sentence and in so doing express the same perspective-relative proposition that the salt is to the left of the pepper. However, they believe different perspective-specific (or complete) propositions because they each relativize the content of the uttered sentence to their own perspective. Holmes believes that the salt is to the left of the pepper from his perspective, while Watson believes the same from his (Recanati 2007: 116–117).

3 What are Holmes and Watson actually talking about?

The question arises as to whether Holmes and Watson are talking about the same situation. If the answer is yes, it means that they are talking about the objective situation they share, which is basically independent of their existence, presence, and mutual positions around the dining table where the salt and the pepper are. If the answer is no, it means that they are talking about different situations that are individuated in terms of

their subjective perspectives, including their positions around the table and their background beliefs concerning the issue of which shaker contains salt and which contains pepper.

To answer the question above, a preliminary issue needs to be addressed and clarified. Holmes and Watson believe the same thing, in a sense, but in another sense they believe different things about the situation under consideration (Recanati 2007: 84). If we do not pay attention to the fact that their points of view differ from each other, Holmes and Watson can be said to believe the same thing, while Watson is wrong. However, if the perspectival differences are adequately examined, it becomes obvious that they believe different things, because the propositions they believe are qualified in different ways as regards perspective.

In the Holmes and Watson story we can see that the unarticulated distinctive constituent related to the proposition they both accept is the point of view. Generally, there are two alternative views on the placement of unarticulated constituents in propositions: an unarticulated constituent may be fed into *the content to be evaluated* (i.e., into the incomplete, perspective-relative proposition), or into *the situation that the content concerns* (Recanati 2007: 219). The first option represents an “intensional” interpretation, whereas the latter represents an “extensional” one. According to an “intensional” interpretation, a point of view is a constituent belonging to the content of a statement. According to an “extensional” interpretation, a point of view appears as a constituent of the situations and events to which statements are related.

In the first option, both Watson and Holmes are talking about the same objective situation, but they state different facts about it. The facts they state are, respectively:

Holmes:

The salt is left of the pepper from my, Holmes’s, perspective.

Watson:

The salt is left of the pepper from my, Watson’s, perspective.

In this case Watson's and Holmes's perspectives turn out to be (unarticulated) constituents of the facts they state.

In the second option, Holmes and Watson assert the same (relativized) fact:

The salt is left of the pepper.

In this assertion, they talk about different situations:

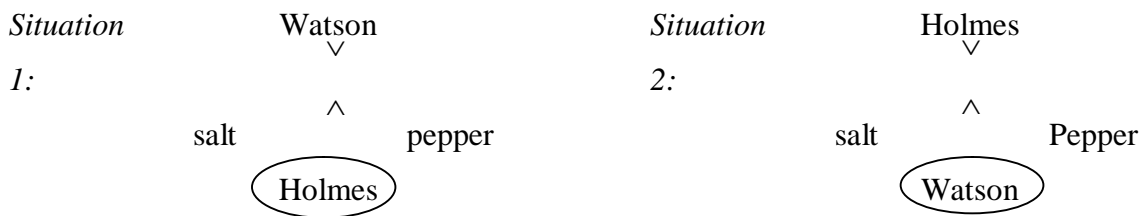


Figure 2. Two different situations in terms of Holmes's and Watson's subjective perspectives

These situations are individuated in terms of Holmes's and Watson's subjective perspectives.

Although we always perceive reality from a particular point of view, it can be claimed, particularly in the case of statements in logic and mathematics, that it is only the articulated content (i.e., what we utter) on which we agree or disagree with other people. In that case, the situation of evaluation (including our spatial position and background knowledge) is not an aspect of the content over which we agree or disagree, but something external (Recanati 2004: 128; 2007: 89). It is worth noting, however, that relevant background knowledge includes the means (or apparatus) of presentation (e.g., a natural language, formal language of logic, Arabic numerals). If we have a wide concept of a situation of evaluation which includes the means of presentation (i.e., the language used), we can say that the situation of evaluation is always an aspect of the content. At any rate, the Holmes and Watson case presented here is an example of a situation in which the different perspectives of the two interlocutors should be considered when judging the reasons and justification for their agreement or disagreement. Obviously,

many real-life situations are similar in this respect. For example, depending on their vantage points, eyewitnesses may give conflicting accounts of an accident. Similarly, depending on their political interests and standpoints, different interlocutors may disagree in principle on any social issue.

According to Recanati, the question of whether Holmes and Watson are talking about the same situation is basically about the nature of the unarticulated constituents involved, which accounts for the difference in the truth-value of their utterances. Are those “unarticulated constituents” parts of the content to be evaluated or aspects of the situation with respect to which the content is evaluated? This question is philosophically important because whatever answer is given may help decide between metaphysical realism and social constructivism. The answer may also shed light on the constituent elements of the concept of a point of view. Basically, metaphysical realists opt for the view that the “unarticulated constituents” are parts of the content to be evaluated, while social constructivists consider the constituents to be aspects of the socially constructed situation through which the content is evaluated.

In order to answer the question about the status of unarticulated constituents, it is important to distinguish between the content of a statement and the circumstance under which it is evaluated. Propositions are relative to these two constituents. Accordingly, the determination of the truth-value of a sentence depends either on the content or the circumstance of evaluation (Recanati 2007: 33–35). If the truth-value depends on the content, which is the case in complete propositions such as “It is raining here”, it does not depend on the circumstance of evaluation. On the other hand, if the truth-value depends on the circumstance of evaluation, it does not depend only on the content. The cases where the truth-value depends on the circumstance of evaluation are called incomplete propositions or propositional functions, an example of which is the statement “It is raining (somewhere or other)”. Thus, the determinant of truth-value is either given as an ingredient of the content or as an aspect of the circumstance of evaluation. In making these distinctions Recanati follows John Perry (1986) and David Kaplan (1989).

For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the sentence “It is raining” expresses a place-relative propositional function, while the sentence “It is raining here” articulates the place, which goes into the evaluated content instead of being simply part of the circumstance of evaluation (Recanati 2007: 223–224). Thus, complete propositions can be characterized as assertions that convey or include a reference to their context or interpretive circumstance.

According to Recanati (2007: 83, fn. 28), two people with two different perspectives on the same fact may agree or disagree because the complete content of their beliefs are distinct propositions, but what they (dis)agree on is more abstract and corresponds to an equivalence class of propositions. The expression “an equivalence class of propositions” should be understood to refer here to incomplete propositions such as “It is raining”. One may ask whether or not Recanati’s view somehow relativizes agreements and disagreements. The obvious answer is yes, and the factors through which the relativization takes place are constituents of points of view. Therefore, it is necessary to shed light on factors that are central to the concept of a point of view.

4 The concept of a point of view

We have already seen that a point of view is a complex epistemological concept in which different, variable factors can be distinguished. These variables include the observer; his/her spatial and temporal position, interests and concerns; the social, cultural and historical contexts; the method of or approach to observation; and the focus of observation. As stated above, the term *point of view*, in a figurative sense, refers to perception and linguistic thinking (e.g., epistemic and ethical consideration), which consists of many factors, some of which relate to the observing subject, some to the tools of observation, and some to the object of observation. Note that in order to have a full account of a point of view, we must also know the focus of that point of view. Therefore object-related factors are included in the list below. The constituent elements of a point of view can be presented as follows (cf. Lehtonen 2011: 250–251):

Observer-related factors

- The subject (observer, viewer, possessor) or the type of subject
- The interests, aims, and values of the subject
- The mental attitude or state of mind of the subject (the “colour” of viewing)
- The relevant background knowledge and expectations of the subject, including the metaphysical commitments and ontological premises that direct the subject’s modes of thinking and understanding
- The spatial and temporal location (i.e., the vantage point) of the subject
- The subject’s cultural and historical context, including the culturally determined standards of truth, rationality and consistency

Tools-related factors

- Observational instruments (e.g., binoculars, telescope, microscope), the tools of the trade
- The conceptual apparatus (concepts, metaphors, models, theories, frameworks, etc.) used by the subject
- The method of or approach to viewing
- The basis of viewing, the data (i.e., the source material)

Object-related factors

- The object, subject matter or focus of a point of view
- The features or properties of the object
- The environment or the thematic context in which the object appears; the domain of discourse

According to Adrian Moore, it is tempting to think that there are perspectival facts, facts whose obtaining is relative to a point of view. However, Moore (1997: 45; see also 41–42, 48, 50) strongly rejects this notion because “‘absolute’ and ‘perspectival’ simply do not apply to facts. They apply at the level of what represents, not at the level of what is represented.” I agree with this because the acceptance of perspectival facts would threaten to lead to a problematic position: it would be unclear whether or not facts could be distinguished from mere opinions and misinformation. Thus, both metaphysical

relativism (i.e., the view that objects, and reality in general, only exist relative to other objects) and epistemological relativism (i.e., the view that there are no universal criteria of knowledge or truth) would follow from perspectival facts. This makes the idea of perspectival fact self-refuting, if not downright self-contradictory. One might say that perspectivism (i.e., the view that facts depend on the perspective) dissolves facts into person- and context-dependent opinions.

It follows from Moore's view that the question of whether Holmes and Watson are talking about the same situation should be answered yes. They are speaking about the same situation, but state different facts about it (properly speaking, only one of them states a fact). Thus, there is reason to consider a point of view to be "intensional", i.e., a constituent that is included in the content of statements. This result is philosophically important because it supports metaphysical realism, i.e., the view that reality is independent of the ways of representing and examining it.

5 Conclusion

So, what is the ultimate difference between using the same sentence *to talk about different situations* or *to state different facts about the same situation*? As for the Holmes and Watson case, the main difference between these alternatives is as follows. In the first ("different situations") case, the difference between Holmes and Watson is that the object-related ("external") factors in their points of view differentiate the propositions they believe. Thus in this first interpretation we have, in a sense, an object- or focus-oriented concept of a point of view. In the second ("the same situation") case, the difference between Holmes and Watson is that the observer-related factors in their points of view – in this case their spatial position and background beliefs concerning the contents of the shakers – differentiate the propositions they believe. Therefore in the latter option we have an observer-oriented concept of a point of view (Lehtonen 2011: 244).

From a semantic point of view, an observer-oriented concept of a point of view is the logically prior concept of a point of view. The reason is that there is no view without

a viewer, a real or imaginary one. Therefore, when we use the term *point of view*, it often includes an explicit reference to a person or group of persons who consider reality from a certain perspective. Examples are a female point of view, a male point of view, a child's point of view, a citizen's point of view, a Western point of view, a non-Western point of view, a narrator's point of view and a character's point of view, to name but a few.

In sum, the perspective as the implicit, unarticulated component related to a proposition is a constituent of the propositional (representational) content to be evaluated, not an aspect of the situation through which the content is evaluated.

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