Strawson on Intended Meaning and Context

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Abstract. Strawson proposed in the early seventies an attractive three-fold distinction regarding how context bears on the meaning of 'what is said' when a sentence is uttered. The proposed scheme is somewhat crude and, being aware of this aspect, Strawson himself raised various points to make it more adequate. In this paper, we review the scheme of Strawson, note his concerns, and add some of our own. However, our main point is to defend the essence of Strawson's approach and to recommend it as a starting point for research into intended meaning and context.

'That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.'
T. S. Eliot, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917)

1 Introduction

The following anecdote comes from the first author [3]:

> Not long ago, I was visiting Boston for a small workshop on context. After a demanding morning session I got into the MIT Bookstore for a bit of shopping. Walking along the isles I noticed on a crowded shelf a sign which read:
>
> $\boxed{\leftarrow \text{NOAM CHOMSKY'S SECTION IS A LITTLE TO THE LEFT}}$
>
> I found this fairly clever! In fact, my expectation that the workshop audience might also like the tongue-in-cheek message of it was fulfilled. When I showed a copy of the sign at some point during my talk I got quite a few chuckles.

Leaving aside whatever that left arrow contributes to the meaning of the sign—for it indeed seems to add something, doesn't it?—what kind of understanding did the author of the sign expect the reader to have as a result of his[1]

[1] In this paper "he" is used as a shorthand for "he/she."

seeing it? In treating this question in any detail, it is unavoidable, we think, to notice the interaction of authorial intentions and context. And it turns out that in his most recent volume of essays, Strawson had considerable things to say on this very question, or more generally, the issue of intended meaning.

Strawson's book is entitled *Entity and Identity*, and the essays which treat the afore-mentioned question at some length appear as Chapters 11 [26] and 12 [27]. It must be observed that the original versions of the essays were published considerably earlier. Thus, Chapter 11, "Austin and 'locutionary meaning'," first appeared in I. Berlin et al., eds., *Essays on J. L. Austin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1973). A partial translation of Chapter 12, "Meaning and context," appeared in *Langages* 17 (March 1970), with the title "Phrase et acte de parole."

In these essays Strawson advances a particularly attractive threefold distinction regarding how context bears on the meaning of 'what is said' when a sentence is uttered [28]. But he also remarks that the proposed scheme "may be held to be too simple, since the situation is, or may be, more complex than the scheme suggests" [27, p. 216], and raises various points to make it more adequate. Here, we will (i) review the scheme of Strawson, (ii) summarize his ameliorations, and (iii) add some of our own. (These three activities will not always be separated by careful boundaries.) However, our main purpose will be to defend the versatility of his approach. As a result, the reader will hopefully appreciate why a Strawsonian look at context may be useful for forming realistic models of how intended meaning is achieved.

An explanation regarding the motivations of the two essays is in order. As is well known, Austin [4] distinguished between the *meaning* and *force* of an utterance. He associated the former with the 'locutionary' act performed in making the utterance, and the latter with the 'illocutionary' act. In his chapter on Austin, Strawson *uses* the threefold distinction to examine Austin's work; his standpoint is that what Austin means by locutionary meaning is not very clear. On the other hand, in "Meaning and context" the threefold distinction *itself* is examined in detail. In the light of this fact, our remarks will generally bear on the contents of that essay (Chapter 12).

2 The Problem and Strawson's Scheme

"A friend of mine [...] once told me [...] that the way to write a paper in philosophy was to begin by asking a question that anybody could understand or by posing a problem in such a way that anyone would see that it was a problem." In the spirit of these words of Davidson [17], Strawson tackles the riddle of how context influences intended meaning by first proposing a simple question and an economic answer, and then attending to the complications which seem not to be easily resolvable by the latter.

Assume that a certain sentence S of a language L (e.g. English) was seriously uttered on some occasion. (N.B. The adverb "seriously" plays a crucial role, as we'll see in the sequel.) Assume further that X, the hearer, possesses only that much information, i.e. X knows that S was uttered but knows nothing about the identity of Y, the speaker, or the nature or date of the occasion. (In various places in the sequel, this restriction will be relaxed.) Let us grant X full mastery of the syntax and semantics of L; thus, X is assumed to have ideally complete knowledge of L (lexicon plus grammar). The question is as follows [26, p. 192]:

> [I]s there any sense in which X can be said to know *the meaning of precisely what was said on the occasion in question*?[2]

Strawson's proposed scheme to investigate this problem is a fine example of the principle of 'separation of concerns'. It consists of erecting three progressively richer senses of meaning which he dubs sense-A-meaning, sense-B-meaning, and sense-C-meaning. We now explain these.

According to Strawson, sense-A-meaning is *linguistic* meaning. Suppose S is free of ambiguity, or more realistically, X is informed which of the alternative readings of S is the right one, i.e. the one meant by Y. (It is beside the point, for the time being, *how* X could be told which of the possible lexical items or syntactic constructions Y actually had in mind in uttering S.) We then say that X knows the *sense-A-meaning* of what is said. An important characteristic of such meaning is that if he has access to it, then X can give a correct translation of S into another language L' (e.g. French), which X, once again, is assumed to know perfectly well. In other words, when sense-A-meaning is under consideration, X basically knows neither more nor less than he needs to know in order to translate S into a sentence S' of L'. Consider the following example (due to Strawson) as S: "The collapse of the bank took everyone by surprise." The designation of the word "bank" varies with different uses. But once the intended designation is clarified, then the translation of S from L to L' proceeds smoothly. Also witness Perry's similar remarks [21]: "An ambiguous expression like 'bank' may designate one kind of thing when you say 'Where's a good bank?' while worried about finances, another when [you] use it, thinking about fishing. [...] Is the speaker holding a wad of money or a fishing pole?"

To summarize the preceding paragraph, we can write

$$\text{sense-A-meaning} = \text{S} + \text{A-knowledge} + \text{disambiguating knowledge},$$

where *A-knowledge* is the ideally complete knowledge of the lexicon and grammar of L. In this mock equation, the interpretations of "=" and "+" are somewhat

[2] Modern literary theory famously distinguishes between an author's intended meaning and whatever *significances* a reader finds in the text. Obviously, not all patterns and relationships found by the reader in a text can be attributed to authorial intention [2]. The meaning/significance contrast, first formulated by E. D. Hirsch, is accepted by Eco. The producer of a text, Eco claims [8, p. 7], "has to foresee a model of the possible reader [...] supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them." This possible reader Eco calls the *model reader*. Eco's proposal is that to make his text communicative, the author has to make sure that the totality of 'codes' upon which his work is built is the same as that shared by the model reader.

procedural; that is, the equation states that sense-A-meaning is obtained by just understanding S in the light of A-knowledge and disambiguating knowledge (and with a propensity toward accurate translation of S into any other, equally rich language).

Strawson's sense-B-meaning is *linguistic-cum-referential* meaning. X will learn the *sense-B-meaning* of S if he has access to the references of proper names or indexicals which may be contained in S.[3] An example might illustrate the difference between sense-A- and sense-B-meanings. If S is the sentence "He stood on his head since then," and if X is further told that this potentially ambiguous sentence has its natural reading where "his" is coindexed with "he," then X can easily translate S to say, French. When X does that accurately, it would show that X understood the sense-A-meaning of S. Now suppose X has no idea who "he" stands for and which time point "then" denotes. This would certainly not pose a problem for the translation. But if X additionally learns the reference of "he" (say, J. L. Austin) and "then" (say, New Year's Day, 1955) then X would know a richer meaning, the sense-B-meaning of S.[4]

In a style suggested by the earlier equation, we can write

$$\text{sense-B-meaning} = \text{sense-A-meaning} + \text{B-knowledge},$$

where *B-knowledge* includes—in addition to A-knowledge—the knowledge of the reference of proper names and indexical expressions that might be occurring in S. Again, this mock equation can be interpreted as follows: sense-B-meaning is obtained by scrutinizing sense-A-meaning in the light of B-knowledge.

Finally, Strawson offers sense-C-meaning as *complete* meaning of a message. *Sense-C-meaning* is obtained by adding to sense-B-meaning the illocutionary force (à la Austin) of what was said, together with a complete grasp of how what was said is intended (by Y) to be understood (by X). Thus,

$$\text{sense-C-meaning} = \text{sense-B-meaning} + \text{C-knowledge},$$

where *C-knowledge* consists of—in addition to B-knowledge—the illocutionary force of S plus the true intent of Y. For instance, if S is the sentence "Don't sign that contract yet," then X needs to know whether this was issued as a request, a command, a piece of advice, or what have you. This is the dimension of meaning Austin captured with the phrase 'illocutionary force'.[5] There is a related but distinct notion: it may be that Y intends to be taken to be implying

[3] The reader is referred to [20] for a recent account of problems raised by names and indexicals.

[4] One may object to the preceding analysis by noting that there are naturally occurring contexts in which the particular S of this example might have metaphorical meaning. Or at least, this is exactly what happens when one replaces S with a similar sentence "He stood on his own feet since then," meaning he thought and acted independently since then. We agree and just note that this is precisely the point of what Strawson imposes on S, viz. S is uttered 'seriously'. More on this later.

[5] An anonymous referee rightly pointed out that Strawson understands illocutionary force as having to do simply with what the speaker means. However, illocutionary

by S something which does not ensue from S's sense-B-meaning alone. Assume that both X and Y know (and know each other to know) that their mutual friend Z declined an honor conferred upon him by a church. When Y says "It is the sign of a feeble mind to turn down a gift from God," the meaning of what he said would not be fully understood by X if X fails to recognize that Z is being labeled as the decrepit one by Y. Grice [9] was in some sense the first to produce an elucidation of how a speaker can communicate more than what his words explicitly say [5]. Since Strawson does cite Grice, it is safe to predict that he has in mind the same kind of systematic Gricean principles underlying pragmatic 'implication'.

With the preceding three equations at hand, we can write the mock inequality

$$\text{sense-A-meaning} < \text{sense-B-meaning} < \text{sense-C-meaning},$$

where progressively 'richer' senses of meaning are obtained by moving from left to right in the inequality. Since X employs (in proceeding from S to sense-A, sense-A to sense-B, and sense-B to sense-C) A-knowledge, B-knowledge, and C-knowledge, respectively, the progression in meaning will in general be *additive*. However, sometimes the move from one sense to another is really no move at all. A fitting example comes from mathematics: let S be a sentence expressing a proposition of arithmetic, e.g. "There is always a prime number greater than a given natural number." In this case, the move from sense-A to sense-B is no move at all because the sentence is completely general and explicit. (Clearly, the tense of "be" lacks any temporal significance.)

How about C-knowledge? Can its additional contribution also be null sometimes?[6] The answer is not obviously in the affirmative, despite what Strawson thinks. Take an explicitly performative statement such as "I order you to drop that gun." Together with Strawson, we may, at first, be inclined to accept that knowledge of the force of this S can be taken to belong to the sense-A-meaning. However[7], this is not really to follow Austin [4]. To give an example, if a mutinous private in the British army purported to order his sergeant to drop his gun and the cowardly sergeant did so, then a court martial would definitely rule that there was no order (or nothing with the force of an order), because a private cannot give an order to a sergeant. In other words, it is one thing for a type to be meant to be tokened in an act with a certain force and another thing for the token *actually* to realize an act with that force.

force has to do with what is conventionally constituted by the locutionary act being performed in context. Witness the following caveat of Austin [4, pp. 116–117]: "I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense. [. . .] So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of *uptake*." In a nutshell, then, one decides on what interpretation to accept by examining uptake—the (conversational) process through which lines of reasoning are developed/modified [12].

[6] In which case the move from B to C might still be regarded as an addition, even if it is the minimal addition that *there is nothing to be added* to the B-meaning.

[7] We owe the rest of this paragraph to an anonymous referee.

3 A Striking Similarity

We believe that Strawson's distinction is a natural one. To support this premise, another threefold distinction due to Leech is worth indicating at this point. Leech states that specification of context has the effect of narrowing down the communicative possibilities of a message. He says that in particularizing meaning, context helps in the following ways [18, p. 67]:

- (A) Context eliminates certain ambiguities or multiple meanings in the message (e.g. lets us know that *page* in a given instance means a boy attendant rather than a piece of paper).
- (B) Context indicates the referents of certain types of word we call DEICTIC (*this, that, here, there, now, then*, etc.), and of other expressions of definite meaning such as *John, I, you, he, it, the man*.
- (C) Context supplies information which the speaker/writer has omitted through ellipsis (e.g. we are able to appreciate that *Janet! Donkeys!* means something like 'Janet! Drive those donkeys away!' rather than 'Janet! Bring those donkeys here!', or any other of the indefinitely many theoretical possibilities).

Clearly, (A) states the so-called *disambiguating role* of context and immediately brings to mind Strawson's sense-A-meaning. Likewise, (B) is along the lines of Strawson's sense-B-meaning. Finally, although the singling out of ellipsis might at first sight seem way too specific, it is clear that Leech is talking in (C) about a particular way of how speaker's intention is to be inferred. His example has the same import as Strawson's sense-C-meaning, viz. the requirement that the reader must be aware of all that was intended by the speaker.[8]

4 A-, B-, C-Meanings and Their Dependence on Context

Having defined the three senses of meaning, A-, B-, and C-, Strawson turns to the following question: what specific differences are there in the ways in which the meaning of 'what is said' depends on context in the three cases? In particular, in which cases and to what degree can this dependence be itself represented as governed by *linguistic rule* or *convention*?

Obviously, context bears on determination of sense-A-meaning in just those situations where S suffers from syntactic and/or lexical ambiguity. However, disambiguation of S by context at this level is not in general a matter of linguistic rule or convention. Rather, it is a matter of general relevance, cf. the earlier example of Perry regarding which meaning of "bank" might be more plausible. In the same vein, Leech [18, p. 69] states that it is relevant to the interpretation of "Shall I put the sweater on?" to know whether sweaters heated by

[8] "Janet! Donkeys!" is recurrently used by aunt Betsey Trotwood in *David Copperfield*; it is an order to her maid to carry out the routine task of driving donkeys off the grass.

electric power are on the market. This shows, in a rather strong sense, that the study of meaning- or interpretation-in-context is closely tied to the *encyclopedic knowledge* about the world.

Context bears on the determination of sense-B-meaning in all cases except those where B-knowledge adds nothing to A-knowledge. And surely there are some semantic rules of natural language moderating such contextual dependence. Here's what Perry [19] says about indexicals:

> There is an intimate connection between the meanings of "I" and "the person who utters this token," even if it falls short of synonymy. The second phrase does not have the meaning of "I," but it gives part of the meaning of "I." It supplies the condition of designation that English associates with "I." [...] Here are the conditions of designation for some familiar indexicals [...]:
> - I: u [an utterance of "I"] designates x iff x is the speaker of u
> - you: u [an utterance of "you"] designates y iff $\exists x$(x is the speaker of u & x addresses y with u)
> - now: u [an utterance of "now"] designates t iff $\exists x$(x is the speaker of u & x directs u at t during part of t)
> - that Φ: u [an utterance of "that Φ"] designates y iff $\exists x$(x is the speaker of u & x directs u towards y)

It is noted, however, that B-knowledge is not wholly under the governance of language rules (cf. Perry's caveat above: "... part of the meaning..."). For instance, with the demonstrative "here" there arises the question of how large a region to consider: "It is always very hot here at this time of the day" ("here" = in this room/in this town?). Similarly, an utterance of "We must sell those HAL stocks now" would signify different time points when it is made by a portfolio manager sitting at his on-line terminal ("now" = in a couple of seconds) and by an executive during a luncheon with his assistants ("now" = in a couple of days).

5 Amendments to the Above Scheme

Strawson enumerated several points at which his threefold distinction is too crude to provide for all the complexities of language use. As a matter of fact, and despite what the title of this section says, he did not always suggest these as amendments to his scheme; sometimes he was content with just jotting them down.

5.1 Semantic Creativity

This refers to the following problem. According to the inequality given earlier, some sense-A-meaning is always included in the complete meaning of what is said. This is due to the nature of construction of sense-C-meaning. However, isn't it unrealistic to suppose that all meanings of a particular word are listed priorly in X's ideal lexicon? Consider the interpretation of a morphologically complex word w. Word formation rules might constrain but do not fully determine the interpretation of w. To put it mildly, the linguistically specified meaning of w may and frequently does go beyond what is available from its compositional subparts [6, pp. 366–370].

On a related note, Aitchison [1, pp. 16–17] remarks that newspapers can popularize new words such as *yomp* and *wimp*. For instance, yomp (to march with heavy equipment over difficult terrain) was a military term used frequently during the Falklands War. Wimp (a feeble or ineffectual person) originated in the U.S.—remember those White House correspondents reporting "President Bush has finally shaken off his wimp image," etc.—and also became popular in the U.K.

Récanati uses the term *contextual sense construction* to refer to the general problem. He notes that sometimes the conventional sense of the subparts of a complex phrase and the way they are syntactically brought together is insufficient to evaluate the semantic value of the complex phrase. His examples are particularly forceful [23, p. 343]:

> Thus 'he finished the book' can mean that he finished reading the book, writing it, binding it, tearing it into pieces, burning it, and so forth [...]; 'finger cup' will mean either 'cup having the shape of a finger' or 'cup containing a finger of whisky' or 'cup which one holds with one finger', or whatever [...]; 'John's book' can mean 'the book that John owns, wrote, gave, received', or whatever [...]. In all such cases there is not a 'selection' from a *limited* range of *preexisting* interpretations for the complex phrase. Rather, an indefinite number of possible interpretations can be constructed in a *creative* manner. [our italics]

Strawson finds his scheme too simple when it comes to such matters of semantic creativity. He first suggests a compromise can be made by allowing that X's ideal dictionary is updated by adding the new (extended) meaning of a new (complex) word. However, he sees this as a sacrifice of his ground rules, viz. when we do this, we make X's dictionary follow his understanding rather than his understanding obey his dictionary.

5.2 Seriousness

Let us return to a crucial proviso in the original formulation of our question, i.e. that a certain sentence S of a language L must be *seriously* uttered. This implies that an *ironical utterance* of S is regarded as non-serious. However, ironical utterances make up quite a large crowd and cannot be so easily dismissed as aberrations.

The essential problem posed by ironical utterances is that a declarative sentence uttered ironically may express an idea that contradicts the idea which it professes to express. Consider saying "Oh, you are always so tidy!" to a janitor and meaning that he has made a mess again. Or consider related variants such as *understatements*, e.g. saying "It was rather concise" and meaning that it (e.g. a televised speech by the president) was extremely terse. As Strawson notes [27, p. 222], in these cases "we cannot say that the C-meaning includes and adds to the B-meaning, but only that the C-meaning *contradicts* the *apparent* B-meaning."

5.3 Reference

Reference has always been a grand issue in studies of contextualism in the philosophy of language [22], and it is only normal that Strawson notes that sometimes a given S admits different interpretations where in one interpretation a certain constituent of S (e.g. a definite description) has a referential use whereas in some other interpretation it doesn't. Take as S the sentence "The next parliamentary elections will resolve the matter." The descriptive phrase may be used to refer to a definite event (say, the elections scheduled to April 23, 2000) or S may be used with the intention of saying "Whensoever the parliamentary elections are carried out, the matter will be resolved."

6 Further Points

The following are not so much weaknesses of Strawson's scheme as possible avenues of research for streamlining it. Due to space limitations they are sketchy and would deserve to be enlarged in a more substantive version of this paper.

6.1 Radical Interpretation

Regarding sense-A-meaning, the following singularity (overlooked by Strawson) needs to be noticed: if his A-knowledge is null then X cannot even set himself to the study the question properly. Obviously, this remark should not be taken as an avowal of the impossibility of radical interpretation. When X is a *radical interpreter* who must interpret L from scratch, he must do so in the absence of any antecedent understanding of L, and only using evidence which is plausibly available to him, cf. Davidson [7]. That this is difficult, on the other hand, is something even Davidson himself accepts to a large extent [17]: "It would beg the question, in trying to study the nature of interpretation, to assume that you know in advance what a person's intentions, beliefs, and desires are. [...] There is no master key or framework theory that you can have prior to a communicative interaction or situation."

6.2 Presemantic Uses

Sometimes context is used to figure out which language is being spoken. Consider the following example due to Perry [21]:

> Ich! (said by several teenagers at camp in response to the question, "Who would like some sauerkraut?")

Perry notes that knowing that this took place in a German rather than an American camp might help one to see that it was made by eager German teenagers rather than American teenagers repelled by the very idea. In this case, context (or rather its *presemantic* use) is pertinent to figuring out which language is being used.

6.3 Contextual Domains

This problem has been discussed most recently in [24]. In a nutshell, it refers to the fact that natural language quantifiers often seem implicitly restricted. When S is the sentence "The president shook hands with everyone," X is inclined to think that "everyone" must range over the domain of people who attended the press conference or the reception or the fund-raising dinner or whatever—not everyone in the whole world. Along similar lines, when Y utters "Most beggars attended the bash" he is likely to allude to a particular group of beggars (say, those in his neighborhood); it is from this group that many joined the festivities.

6.4 Subjective Adjectives

In dealing with *subjective* (a.k.a. *relative* in linguistics literature) adjectives such as "large," the context contributes to meaning in a decisive way. Consider an example attributed to Hans Kamp and Barbara Partee [6, p. 374]: "Lee built a large snowman." If Lee is a toddler playing in the backyard of his house, the snowman is probably at most as big as Lee himself. On the other hand, if Lee is a teenager competing in a snow carnival, the snowman is probably much bigger than Lee. One way of dealing with the context-dependent nature of relative adjectives is to assume that the context provides us with a set of comparison classes. Still, with sentences like "A large tadpole is not a large animal" the situation is tricky; in the *same* context different comparison classes are needed for the first and second occurrences of the adjective.

Perry [19] gives "It is yea big" as another example. Here, the object of conversation is as big as the space between the outstretched hands of the speaker. But then this space is a contextual factor on which the indexical "yea" crucially depends.

6.5 Context-Renewal

Consider an on-going conversation between X and Y. Y utters S, X in return utters S', Y in return utters S", and so on and so forth. In order to understand say, S", X would need to use the previous discourse, or the meaning of 'what was said earlier'.

That an interactional context is continually being developed with each successive utterance is an observation Heritage [15] has made in his work on ethnomethodology. According to him, utterances and the social actions they embody are treated as doubly contextual. First, utterances and actions are *context-shaped*. This means that their contributions cannot be adequately appreciated unless the context in which they operate is taken into account. Second, utterances and actions are *context-renewing*. Every utterance will form the subsequent context for some following action in a sequence; it will thus contribute to the contextual framework which lets one understand the next action. Additionally, each action will function to renew context, where 'renewal' is understood as one or more of the processes of maintaining, adjusting, altering, and so on.

In the remainder of this section we look at contributions similar in nature to Heritage's. Our general point is that at the level of sense-C-meaning Strawson's scheme would benefit from enhancements of sociocultural nature.

6.6 Context of Situation

J. R. Firth introduced the term *sociological linguistics* in 1935. His goal was to discuss the study of language in a social perspective; he derived two important notions, context of culture and context of situation, from B. Malinowski. Firth's key observation is that language is a range of possibilities (options) in behavior that are available to an individual in a social setting. The *context of culture* refers to the environment for the entire collection of these options. The *context of situation* refers to the environment of a particular member that is drawn from the context of culture [13]. To make a rough analogy, the context of culture resembles the possible worlds; it defines the potential—the totality of options that are available. A given context of situation is simply the actual choice among these options. Firth's research program aspired to describing and classifying typical contexts of situation within the context of culture, and clarifying the types of linguistic function in such contexts of situation [18, p. 61].

6.7 SPEAKING

Hymes developed his celebrated *SPEAKING* model [16] to encourage a cultural approach to the analysis of discourse. His model is not an explanatory theory; rather, it is a descriptive attempt aimed at producing a taxonomy of languages. Viewed as a linguistic checklist, it advocates that the ethnographer should basically record eight elements which are briefly explained in what follows.

[S]etting and scene refer to the time and place of a speech act, and the psychological setting or 'cultural definition' of a scene, respectively. *[P]articipants* include the speaker and audience (addressees plus other hearers). *[E]nds* concern the purposes of the discourse. *[A]ct sequence* is the format and order of the series of speech events which make up the speech act. *[K]ey* denotes the cues that establish the tone (manner, spirit) of the speech act. *[I]nstrumentalities* are the forms and styles of speech, including channels (oral, written, etc.) and forms of speech (language, dialect, code, variety, register[9]). *[N]orms* refer to the

[9] Halliday [14, p. 142] defines *register* as "the theoretical construction that relates the situation simultaneously to the text, to the linguistic system, and to the social system," and asserts that language is the ability to 'mean' in the social contexts generated by the culture.

social rules governing the event and the participants' actions. *[G]enre* includes assorted categories such as poem, myth, tale, proverb, riddle, prayer, oration, lecture, etc.

6.8 Communicative Competence

As is well-known, N. Chomsky's notion of *linguistic competence* consists of the knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language by an idealized speaker (hearer). Hymes coined the more general notion of *communicative competence* to go beyond mere description of language usage patterns and to focus on varieties of shared knowledge and cognitive abilities.

Citing J. Habermas's thoughts on 'trouble-free communication' and 'the universal conditions of possible understandings', Gumperz [12, pp. 40–41] regards communicative competence as "the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to initiate and sustain conversational involvement." This requires a knowledge of social and cultural rules of a language (in addition to a knowledge of grammatical) and preferably addresses the competences of actual speakers, not an idealized standard.

Another contribution of Gumperz is a *contextualization cue* [10]. He confirmed that a given aspect of linguistic behavior (e.g. lexical, prosodic, phonological, etc.) can function as a cue, indicating those aspects of context which are to be taken into account to interpret what is said by a speaker. Contextualization cues hint at relevant aspects of the social context (via particular codes, styles, and dialects), thus enabling participants in a discourse to reason about their respective communicative intentions and purposes.

Gumperz notes that because of its cultural base, the meaning of a conversation is frequently different for different participants if they are not members of the same speech community. He [11] offers a case study of how differences in the use of contextualization cues between a native speaker of English and a non-native yet fluent speaker of English cause a serious breakdown in communication. As another example of a cross-cultural (mis)communicative event, Saville-Troike [25, pp. 131-132] observed the following exchange in a kindergarten on a reservation:

> A Navajo man opened the door to the classroom and stood silently, looking at the floor. The Anglo-American teacher said 'Good morning' and waited expectantly but the man did not respond. The teacher then said 'My name is Mrs. Jones,' and again waited for a response. There was none. [...]

The whole exchange is even more interesting and enlightening but this brief excerpt will serve to illustrate our point. The man's silence is appropriate from a Navajo perspective; it shows respect. (What is more, a religious Navajo taboo prohibits individuals from saying their own name!) Mrs. Jones's expectation is also reasonable from an Anglo-American perspective; the man must have returned her greeting, identified himself, and stated his reason for being there. (It turns out that he was there to take his son.)

7 Conclusion

The originator of a message (S) usually assumes quite a bit of background knowledge on the part of an addressee [18]. The task of the addressee is to narrow down the list of meanings available to him and attain the intended meaning of S. Originally, S may be replete with several potential meanings. By 'enveloping' it in increasingly narrower contexts, the number of meanings is reduced. Eventually, it is hoped that just one meaning is isolated as *the* meaning of S. This paper argued that there is a certain persuasive approach to studying the feasibility of this problem, first spelled out in "Austin and 'locutionary meaning' " and later taken up in detail in "Meaning and context," two early papers by Strawson. The approach is both simple and elegant, and we believe that future studies of context might profit from it. Interestingly, we have not come across any mention of it in the recent literature on contextual reasoning in artificial intelligence, and while we, along with Strawson, have proposed certain enrichments, our central goal has been to advocate its general legitimacy and efficacy.

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