

Strawson on Intended Meaning and Context

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Abstract. Strawson proposed in the early seventies an attractive threefold 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:

← 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 his¹

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