An inquisitive approach to occasion-sensitivity

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The following paper presents a uniform account of occasion-sensitivity for a range of declarative and interrogative sentences using inquisitive semantics as the main semantic framework. I propose an extension to the basic inquisitive framework that takes into account the goal-sensitivity of interpretation. The main idea is that among the possible interpretations that a sentence may have, only those that are more conducive to the contextually salient goal than others are expected and ‘visible’ to speakers in a given discourse context. I use inquisitive meanings (i.e. downward closed sets of propositions) to model a range of possible interpretations that a sentence may have (the underspecificity of literal meaning) and define a pragmatic mechanism for determining which interpretation is appropriate in a given context. In addition, an inquisitive approach to occasion-sensitivity allows for a uniform treatment of declarative and interrogative forms.

Occasion-sensitivity

When someone says that the leaves are green what they say is often sensitive to certain features of the occasion on which a sentence is uttered. For instance, they may be saying something that is compatible with the leaves being painted green, or with them being only natural green. To illustrate, consider the following example:

**The leaf is green**
Pia’s Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Pia paints them green.

(1) Zoe needs a green leaf for her artwork
   (a) Zoe: Is that leaf green?
   (b) Pia: Yes, this leaf is green.

(2) Zoe is a botanist seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry
   (a) Zoe: Is that leaf green?

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(b) Pia: # Yes, the leaf is green
(c) Zoe: No, the leaf is not green.

I propose to account for the intuition that the acceptance of information as true, or of an issue as truthfully resolved, is sensitive to goals.

**Goals and goal-conduciveness**

Each goal can be seen as a valuation function that maps classical propositions to goal-conduciveness values (c-values) in accordance with the capacity of that particular property of a world (e.g. the leaf being only painted green) to support a successful achievement of a given goal (e.g. a botanical experiment).

**The extended InqC system**

I define goal-sensitive inquisitive semantics InqC for a simple propositional language $L$, which represents an extension of the basic inquisitive framework InqB. The important clause is the definition of acceptance-conditions for an atomic formula:

$$[[p]]_\gamma = \{ \alpha \in \wp(\{ w : w(p) = 1 \}) \text{ such that there is no } \beta \in \wp(\{ w : w(p) = 1 \}) \text{ such that } \gamma(\beta) > \gamma(\alpha) \}$$

where $\alpha \in \Pi_C$, a non-empty set of classical propositions, $\gamma \in \Gamma$, a non-empty set of goals, worlds map sentences to truth-values, goals map classical propositions to c-values. The proposition expressed by an atomic sentence $p$ on an occasion where the goal $\gamma$ is operative is a downward closed set of classical propositions $\alpha \in \wp([p])$ which have greater c-values than others (i.e. any classical proposition with the c-value that is lesser than the c-value of others in this set is excluded). InqC is essentially conservative with respect to truth- and resolution-conditions; what InqC describes is which section of the InqB proposition is dominant when a certain contextual goal is present, thus determining which subsets of $[[\varphi]]$ are acceptable and which not.

**Linguistic relevance**

I apply the system to a range of declarative and interrogative sentences, showing, for instance, that the contextual meaning of a positive declarative is more specific than its literal meaning just in case the literal meaning of its negation is more specific than its contextual negation.

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1 I use the sign # to indicate that the response is in some sense inadequate or infelicitous, and that an utterance is intuitively ‘false’ and it doesn’t adequately resolve the salient issue