Lewis on Scorekeeping

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Phil Language

1. Baseball and conversations

Baseball score: a specification of the state of the game at some time (not just the runs)

Conversational score: specification of the state of the conversation at some time (for example which propositions are presupposed)

> With any stage in a well-run conversation, or other process of linguistic interaction, there are associated many things analogous to the components of a baseball score. I shall therefore speak of them collectively as the score of that conversation at that stage… What play is correct depends on the score. Sentences depend for their truth value, or for their acceptability in other respects, on the components of conversational score at the stage of conversation when they are uttered… Score evolves in a more-or-less rule-governed way. There are rules that specify the kinematics of score…(pp. 344–45)

2. Accommodation

> There is one big difference between baseball score and conversational score. Suppose the batter walks to first base after only three balls. His behavior would be correct play if there were four balls rather than three. That's just too bad—his behavior does not at all make it the case that there *are* four balls and his behavior is correct. Baseball has no rule of accommodation to the effect that if a fourth ball is required to make correct the play that occurs, then that very fact suffices to change the score so that straightway there are four balls.

> Language games are different. As I hope my examples will show, conversational score does tend to evolve in such a way as is required in order to make whatever occurs count as correct play… I suggest that many components of conversational score obey rules of accommodation, and that these rules figure prominently among the rules governing the kinematics of conversational score. (pp. 346–47)

Accommodation If something is said that would be false or otherwise unacceptable if the conversational score didn't have a certain value, then the score changes to have that value (if it didn't have it already)

> Some things that might be said require suitable presuppositions. They are acceptable if the required presuppositions are present; not otherwise. "The king of France is bald" requires the presupposition that France has one king, and one only; "Even George Lakoff could win" requires the presupposition that George is not a leading candidate; and so on. (p. 339)

Illustration of accommodation:

- All Fred's children are asleep, and Fred has children

- Fred has children, and all Fred's children are asleep

(Accommodation isn't absolute; score-changing can be challenged: "What do you mean, *even* Lakoff could win—the latest polls show that he's the front-runner!")

3. Definite descriptions and salience

"The dog got into a fight with another dog"—Russell's theory has trouble accounting for this. Lewis's idea:

> "the *F*" denotes *x* if and only if *x* is the most salient *F* in the domain of discourse, according to some contextually determined salience ranking. (p. 348)

The flow of a conversation can affect salience:

> The cat is in the carton. The cat will never meet our other cat, because our other cat lives in New Zealand. Our New Zealand cat lives with the Cresswells. And there heÕll stay, because Miriam would be sad if the cat went away. (p. 348)

The first 'the cat' has its salient reference determined by the physical presence of a cat; the last by the conversational drift.

One rule, among others, that governs the kinematics of salience is a rule of accommodation. Suppose my monologue has left Albert [the New Zealand cat] more salient than Bruce [the Princeton cat]; but the next thing I say is "The cat is going to pounce on you!" If Albert remains most salient and "the cat" denotes the most salient cat, then what I say is patently false: Albert cannot pounce all the way from New Zealand to Princeton. What I have said requires for its acceptability that "the cat" denote Bruce, and hence that Bruce be once again more salient than Albert. If what I say requires that, then straightway it is so. By saying what I did, I have made Bruce more salient than Albert. If next I say "The cat prefers moist food", that is true if Bruce prefers moist food, even if Albert doesn't.

4. Coming and going

5. Standards of precision

"France is hexagonal"—whether this is ok to say depends on the context—on how high the standards of precision are.

> If you say "Italy is boot-shaped" and get away with it, low standards are required and the standards fall if need be; thereafter "France is hexagonal" is true enough. But if you deny that Italy is boot-shaped, pointing out the differences, what you have said requires high standards under which "France is hexagonal" is far from true enough. (p. 352)

Intriguing observation: it's easier to raise rather than lower the standards.

> Peter Unger has argued that hardly anything is flat. Take something you claim is flat; he will find something else and get you to agree that it is even flatter. You think the pavement is flat—but how can you deny that your desk is flatter? But "flat" is an absolute term: it is inconsistent to say that something is flatter than something that is flat. Having agreed that your desk is flatter than the pavement, you must concede that the pavement is not flat after all. Perhaps you now claim that your desk is flat; but doubtless Unger can think of something that you will agree is even flatter than your desk. And so it goes…
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> The right response to Unger, I suggest, is that he is changing the score on you. When he says that the desk is flatter than the pavement, what he says is acceptable only under raised standards of precision. Under the original

standards the bumps on the pavement were too small to be relevant either to the question whether the pavement is flat or to the question whether the pavement is flatter than the desk. Since what he says requires raised standards, the standards accommodatingly rise. Then it is no longer true enough that the pavement is flat. That does not alter the fact that it *was* true enough *in its original context*. (p. 353)

(He similarly rebuts Unger's argument for "No one is certain about anything".)

6. Relative modality

"Can *P*" is true if and only if *P* is true in some relevant possible world

"Must *P*" is true if and only if *P* is true in all relevant possible worlds

> Suppose I am talking with some elected official about the ways he might deal with an embarrassment. So far, we have been ignoring those possibilities that would be political suicide for him. He says: "You see, I must either destroy the evidence or else claim that I did it to stop Communism. What else can I do?" I rudely reply: "There is one other possibility—you can put the public interest first for once!" That would be false if the boundary between relevant and ignored possibilities remained stationary. But it is not false in its context, for hitherto ignored possibilities come into consideration and make it true. And the boundary, once shifted outward, stays shifted. If he protests "I can't do that", he is mistaken. (pp. 354–55)

Descartes was really worried that we don't know anything—after all, our ordinary experiences of the world might be a dream, or caused by a deceiving demon. He worked hard to justify ordinary knowledge. But Lewis solves the problem with pragmatics!:

> Take another example. The commonsensical epistemologist says: "I know the cat is in the carton—there he is before my eyes—I just can't be wrong about that!" The sceptic replies: "You might be the victim of a deceiving demon". Thereby he brings into consideration possibilities hitherto ignored, else what he says would be false. The boundary shifts outward so that what he says is true. Once the boundary is shifted, the commonsensical epistemologist must concede defeat. And yet he was not in any way wrong when he laid claim to infallible knowledge. What he said was true with respect to the score as it then was.

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We get the impression that the sceptic, or the rude critic of the elected official, has the last word. Again this is because the rule of accommodation is not fully reversible. For some reason, I know not what, the boundary readily shifts outward if what is said requires it, but does not so readily shift inward if what is said requires that. Because of this asymmetry, we may think that what is true with respect to the outward-shifted boundary must be somehow more true than what is true with respect to the original boundary. I see no reason to respect this impression. (p. 355)

7. Performatives

Sentences like "With this ring I thee wed" and "I hereby name this ship the Generalissimo Stalin" *do* have truth values; but they have their performative effects by score-changing via accommodation. The conversational score includes information about who is married to whom, and about what is named what.