

Satisfaction Conditions for Requests

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Suppose that Jane says,

1. I cut the grass,

In so saying, she has stated that she has cut the grass and her statement is satisfied just in case it is true. Suppose that I say to Jane,

2. Please, cut the grass.

In so saying, I have requested that she cut the grass. Requests also have satisfaction conditions, conditions under which they are fulfilled. My request that Jane cut the grass is satisfied just in case she cuts the grass. If we temporally order my request before Jane's statement, the satisfaction condition for my request and her statement appear to be the same. I make my request to Jane in using a token of 2 and she reports to me what she has done in using a token of 1. If what she says is true, then it would seem that my request has been fulfilled.¹

¹ A necessary condition of my requesting Jane to cut the grass is that there is uptake on her part. That is, she understands that I have made the request. But it is not a necessary condition for my request being fulfilled that Jane cuts that grass as a result of my request. She might well have cut the grass because she wanted to cut it independently of my request and would have cut it even though I had not asked her to cut the grass.

Searle has famously argued that cutting grass is much more complicated than my little story. Imagine the story as above with the following emendation. Jane has cut the grass, not horizontally with a lawn mower, but vertically with nail scissors. We might say that Jane's statement is true; she has cut the grass, albeit, not in the way that I expected. My request, however, has not apparently been satisfied, argues Searle. I wanted her to cut the grass in the normal way, not with nail scissors. Therefore, despite the neat connection that my first description of the scenario gives between the satisfaction conditions of my request and Jane's statement, the two can come apart.

Searle's reason for the divergence in the satisfaction conditions is that our understanding of speech acts, including my request to Jane, requires Background presuppositions and a Network of beliefs and desires.² Searle claims the Background and the Network cannot be part of the literal meaning of sentence 2 that I use in making my request. He argues that the same sentence with the same literal meaning could be used to make different requests against different Background assumptions and Networks. In the example above, according to Searle, what is presupposed is a "...Background of human capacities (abilities to engage in certain practices, know-how, ways of doing things, etc.) [which] ...fix different interpretations, even though the literal meaning of the expression remains constant" (Searle, 1992, 179). Another presupposition of my request is the Network that consists of an interlocking web of beliefs and desires that I must have for me to have the desire that the grass be cut. For example, I must have the beliefs that it is possible to cut the grass on my lawn with a lawn mower, that it can be done in a reasonable amount of

² Searle capitalizes 'Background' and 'Network' to indicate that they are technical terms.

time, that the grass won't grow back immediately to the size it had before it was cut, "...and so—more or less indefinitely—on" (Searle, 1992, 176). Moreover, Searle holds that the Background is non-representational; it does not itself consist of intentional states, but rather it is constituted by various non-representational capacities to do certain things. In addition, the beliefs in the Network are beliefs not about the meaning of lexical items, but non-semantic facts about the world. It is then the Background, the Network, and the literal meaning of 2 in the context in which I make my request to Jane that determines the set of fulfillment conditions of satisfaction for my request. That is, the content of my request is a function of the literal meaning of 2 and the Background and the Network, which obtain in the context in which I use the sentence.

We can imagine another context that would yield a different content. Suppose that Jane and I are performance artists and we are video taping our exchange. I utter 2 and hand her nail scissors that she uses to cut the grass vertically after which she says 1. In this context, with Background presuppositions and a Network of beliefs and desires connected to performance art, Jane has fulfilled my request and what she says is true. In this case, the satisfaction conditions for what she says in using 1 are the same as the fulfillment conditions in my using 2. We see then that tokens of the same sentences, 1 and 2, with the same literal meaning can yield different contents with respect to different Background presuppositions and Networks, so Searle argues.

Since the Background is not representational, it is not something that can be part of the linguistic semantics of a language, that is, a constituent of the semantic information

connected to lexical items.³ Moreover, if the Network consists of an indefinite number of non-semantic facts about the world, it is impossible that these facts could be represented in a finite semantics of a language. It follows that if Searle is correct, and the phenomena to which he appeals to support his argument are as wide spread, as he claims, it is impossible for the grammar of a language to determine the satisfaction conditions of most sentences of a natural language. This would be the case, even if the semantic properties that are widely accepted as being contextually determined, such as the semantic values of indexicals, and similar expressions were added to the input of the Searlean function that yields content. The consequence of Searle's argument is radical contextualism, the view that what determines content, that is, satisfaction conditions, including truth conditions for the use of declaratives, cannot be given by a semantic theory, even one extended to include the indexicals and similar expressions.

Searle does not confine his argument to the cutting grass example, but uses a range of other examples to support his radical contextualism. I shall argue that when these examples are examined in more detail, they do not support Searle's radical conclusion. I shall further show that an account of Searle's examples can be given by appealing to a distinction between semantic and speaker meaning. In the cutting grass example, I have requested that Jane cut the grass without specifying how I want it cut. That I have made the request is determined by the literal meaning of what I say and the contextual conditions that must be met for requests to be made. These contextual conditions are not part of the semantic content of what I request, but are the conditions that have to be met

³ I assume that the semantic information encoded in lexical entries is represented in the entry and is thus, intentional.

for me to make a request, that is, to express the semantic content in question. For me to make a request, what Searle calls the Background and Network might well be required, but these do not enter into the satisfaction conditions of my request. My request is satisfied just in case Jane cuts the grass, even if she cuts it with nail scissors. That is, the content of my request is not determined by Searle's Background and Network.

In making my request that Jane cut the grass, I could have the desire that she cut it in the standard way with a lawn mower, a desire that is not fulfilled if she cuts it with nail scissors. What then about this desire, a desire the fulfillment of which is not necessary for my request to be met? It is what we might call the speaker desire, a desire that is not given by the semantic content of what I request. Although this desire does not play a role in the satisfaction conditions of my request, it is the desire that I wish to have fulfilled. When it is not, something has gone wrong, but what has gone wrong is not connected to the fulfillment conditions of the request I made. Jane did what I asked of her, but not in the way that I desired. Rather, the desire that I have that Jane cut the grass with a lawn mower is commonly connected with requests to cut grass, since grass these days is usually cut with a lawn mower. The final point of my paper is to sketch in what way that common knowledge plays a role in speaker meaning where this can differ from semantic meaning.