

Stress and Truth-conditional Semantics

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In our paper, some aspects of stress are examined; the two leading questions are

- (i) whether certain occurrences of stress affect the meaning of the uttered sentences, and
- (ii) whether and how certain occurrences of stress could be accounted for within the frame of a truth-conditional semantics.

The questions will be addressed in the two main parts of the paper.

(i) Stress and Meaning

In the first part of our paper, some varieties of stress are distinguished and it is discussed whether and how they contribute to the meaning of the sentences in which they occur.

a. Simple Stress and Argument Stress

For a start, two different kinds of occurrences of stress will be distinguished. The basic distinction is that between (i) stress as occurring within the scope of some linguistic element that seems somehow sensitive to its occurrence and (ii) stress as occurring unaccompanied by phrases that seem particularly affected by it. For illustration, consider the following examples:

- (1) You're wearing an earring in your *left* ear.
- (1*) You're wearing an *earring* in your left ear.
- (2) The reason for his illness is that he ate *spoiled* meat.
- (2*) The reason for his illness is that he ate spoiled *meat*.

It is a very common thesis in the literature on explanation that explanatory phrases, such as 'because' or 'the reason for x is that p ', are sensitive to stress in a way affecting the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they occur. Thus, in a given context c a speaker

may make a true statement by uttering (2), while making a false statement by uttering (2*).^1

In the first two examples, on the other hand, no linguistic element is sensitive to the stress. Moreover, the stress does not seem to affect the truth-conditions of utterances of the sentences: in any context in which (1) can be used to make a true statement, (1*) can be so used too (and vice versa); let us call this the *truth-conditional irrelevance* of simple stress.

To distinguish between the two described kinds of stress, we will talk of *simple stress* and *argument stress* (where stress functions as an argument for stress-sensitive expressions). In what follows, some possible views on the role of simple and argument stress are distinguished and compared.

b. Simple Stress Discussed

Concerning the role of stress in (1) and (1*), it is usually regarded as not contributing to the *meaning* of the sentences, where the *meaning-irrelevance* of simple stress is treated as a direct consequence of its *truth-conditional irrelevance*.

But the alleged entailment is problematic. To evaluate it, some basic distinctions between different notions of meaning should be recalled: consider the utterance of a sentence *S*, of which an expression *e* is as a part. Following Grice,² we take it that an aspect of the linguistic meaning of *e* may but need not make a contribution to the proposition expressed by the utterance of *S*. It may also contribute to the conventional implicatures carried by the utterance.

But then, the truth-conditional irrelevance of simple stress only excludes that stress contributes to that part of the meaning which is relevant to the proposition expressed. It may still be meaningful and generate some conventional implicatures. What is relevant to decide this question is to what degree simple stress seems to be entrenched in the linguistic *conventions* of the language; we will present some relevant data and considerations for this question, building on Grice's own short discussion of the issue.³

¹ See for instance Dretske (1972), van Fraassen (1980: ch. 5), Achinstein (1983: ch. 3), Hitchcock (1996).

² Cp. Grice (1989: 25f. *et passim*).

³ Grice (1989: 50ff.).

c. *Argument Stress Discussed*

Whether or not simple stress contributes anything to the linguistic meaning of an expression, it may contribute to the meaning of certain complex phrases that (always or sometimes) semantically operate on the presence of stress. Prominent examples to be found in the literature are (i) the already mentioned explanatory contexts, but also

- (ii) certain intentional contexts ('she inadvertently beat him *to tears*' versus 'she inadvertently beat *him* to tears'),
- (iii) counterfactuals ('had he not *married* her, he would have lost his inheritance' versus 'had he not married *her*, he would have lost his inheritance'), and
- (iv) causal contexts ('his stealing the *bicycle* caused her to be arrested' versus 'his *stealing* the bicycle caused her to be arrested').⁴

Though we are sceptical about whether *any* of these contexts is an uncontroversial case of embedded stress affecting the truth-value of a statement, we do think there are clearer cases. Take the following example:

- (3) He replied, with the same emphasis as follows, that *Julia* hit the child.
- (3*) He replied, with the same emphasis as follows, that Julia hit the *child*.

Uttered in the same context, these reports may receive a different truth-value. The reason is that the phrase 'with the same emphasis' generates a quasi-quotational context which takes stressed expressions as argument (notice that it is not a *purely* quotational context; (3) may be true as a report of a German having uttered '*Julia* hat das Kind geschlagen').

So, we have seen how stress may affect the semantic value of a complex expression: an expression which accepts meta-linguistic arguments may be sensitive to expressions individuated in a number of ways, one of which takes stress into account for the identity of an expression. We will briefly discuss whether some of the above mentioned phenomena (i) to (iv) could be due to some hidden quasi-quotational contexts. Then we distinguish two further ways in which argument stress might be relevant to meaning: *Firstly*, stress may be a way a disambiguating a syntactically ambiguous expression (this seems to apply to at least some cases of phenomenon (ii)).⁵ *Secondly*, the semantics of an expression may have to be construed as operating on implicatures generated by stress.

⁴ For all of the examples see Dretske (1972); for (iv) see moreover Hitchcock (1996).

⁵ Cp. Boër (1978).

Having seen three ways how stress could be relevant to the meaning of a complex expression, we will argue that nevertheless none of these cases provides a good reason to attribute some kind of meaning *to the stress* involved.

To illustrate this claim, let us return to the first case, in which stress provides an argument for a quotational context. Although in such cases stress can affect the truth-value of a statement, it does not follow that in these cases stress should be attributed some kind of *meaning*. To the contrary: if simple stress does not already have a meaning, then presumably the linguistic meanings (the characters in Kaplan's sense) of (3) and (3*) do not differ. Rather, the truth-values differ because of a change in metalinguistic *reference*. That the stress is the argument of the referential element, does not require the stress to have any meaning (that two utterances of 'he did it', in which 'he' refers to different people, differ in truth-value, does not imply that a person can have any kind of meaning).

We argue that the attribution of meaning to stress can be similarly resisted in the other cases distinguished. So we hold that (i) argument stress can affect the truth-value of an utterance, but (ii) argument stress does not give any independent reason to attributing linguistic meaning to stress; whether stress is meaningful or not rather hinges on whether simple stress has a meaning.

(ii) Stress and Truth-Conditional Semantics

In the second, shorter section of our paper, we discuss whether and how stress, in so far as it is relevant to the meaning, can be treated in the framework of truth-conditional semantics. For this purpose, we have to briefly distinguish between different forms and goals of truth-conditional semantics: although some proponents of such semantics claim to show how meaning is somehow posterior to truth, the framework may be used independently of this question; we will follow this latter option.

Now, non-extensional expressions are generally thought of providing major problems for this framework. Developing an idea proposed by Williamson (1984: 253ff.), we will argue, however, that there is a very general way of meeting such problems, if we treat such expression not by semantic axioms, but rather by some kind of metalinguistic inference rules that are added to the theory. With this device, one can treat stress in the truth-conditional framework if (i) the meta-language contains the same resources of stress, and (ii) one adds the according rules to the theory. (Since this part of the paper is work in progress, its abstract had to be more sketchy than the abstract of the first part.)

(iii) References

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