

## On an alleged problem with Stalnaker's representation of context

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Stalnaker proposes to represent context by the set of possible situations (possible worlds) that are compatible with the information. This set (context set) will include all the situations among which the speakers want to discriminate with their contributions to the discourse.

An objection of Kamp (based on an example by Partee) is based on the following two segments of discourse:

(1a) Exactly one of the ten balls is not in the bag.  
(1b) It is under the sofa.

(2a) Exactly nine of the ten balls are in the bag.  
(2b) It is under the sofa.

Kamp assumes that each discourse takes place in the same initial context. In both cases, the first sentence ((1a), resp. (2a)) changes the context, and the second sentence ((1b), resp. (2b)) is made in the modified context. But, (1a) and (2a) are truth-conditionally equivalent, viz. true in precisely the same possible worlds. If Stalnaker is right in simply identifying contexts with sets of possible worlds, Kamp reasons, then the posterior contexts that result from (1a) and (2a) will be identical. But this is not possible, for in this case no difference can be predicted regarding the reference of "it." But "it" in (1b) surely refers to the ball that is not in the bag, whereas "it" in (2b) cannot refer to that ball.

Stalnaker counters this claim of Kamp by accepting that the abstract framework does not foretell this difference simply because it is not a theory of how pronouns work. He then goes on to argue that (1a) and (2a) contribute to context different stuff because although they are truth-conditionally equivalent they are different when it comes to their respective contributions as speech acts. Then he says (Stalnaker 1998: 106):

I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting that Partee's example does not pose a real problem: the problem of explaining just what the relevant difference is between (1a) and (2a), the difference that is responsible for the fact that (1a) makes a certain individual available for pronominal reference, while the truth-conditionally equivalent (2a) does not.

We join this discussion by just raising an important question which is not clear (at least) in Stalnaker's rendering of Kamp's objection. Are the sentence pairs uttered by the same person or different persons? Assume, for the sake of the argument, that (1a) (resp. (2a)) is uttered by myself and (1b) (resp. (2b)) is uttered by my daughter. The initial context we find ourselves in is one in which we are jointly trying to arrange her toys. So, when I utter (1a), my daughter would rightly reply with (1b), having just spotted the missing ball. How about (2a) and (2b)? There is reasonable ground to state that they also make up a meaningful discourse in light of the presently suggested scenario. Briefly, by uttering (2a) I'm as a matter of fact stating that one of the balls is missing. (Remember our joint intention, available from the initial action context in which we

found ourselves embedded.) My daughter recognizes this intention. Now she can rightfully utter (2b), because the missing ball has now been made salient.

The lesson is clear: it is crucial to be able to represent the context in which one finds himself embedded. It is not straightforward how this can be achieved in Stalnaker's theory. After all, contexts get defined and get affected as a result of utterances only. On the other hand, common sense dictates that my daughter would recognize (by just looking) that I am searching the misplaced balls. This might occur in countless ways. In one scenario, she sees me looking inside the wardrobe, behind her bookshelves, inside her storage box for toys, etc. with a bag in my hand, almost filled with balls. In another scenario, we had visiting kids who played with the balls and made a mess, and we are now in the process of restoring order.

### *References*

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