

## **Defeasibility as a source of semantic context-dependence**

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In this paper I argue that a context-sensitive dimension is introduced in inferentialist semantic theories that make use of defeasible (nonmonotonic) inferences. According to inferentialism, the content of a claim is (at least partly) determined by its inferential connections with other claims. Among these content-determining relations, many inferentialist theories (e.g. Brandom, 1994) include nonmonotonic inferential connections – that is, inferences that can be defeated by the introduction of additional premises. I will argue that, as a consequence of nonmonotonicity, the inferential role of a claim (what follows from it, when joined by suitable collateral premises) becomes a context-sensitive matter. The inferential entailments of a given claim (plus collateral premises) will depend on underlying background circumstances – including typical environmental conditions, and probably other pragmatic factors, such as the interests and purposes of the relevant agents.

First, I explain that the inferential significance of some claim depends on the collateral premises available. However, this does not mean, necessarily, that the content of a claim changes with the addition of new collateral premises. This consequence may be avoided by defining the content of a claim as a function from collateral premises available (inferential setting) to inferential significance.

In the rest of the paper, I discuss some interesting features of nonmonotonic inferences. A good nonmonotonic inference can be defeated by the introduction of some additional premise (i.e., defeter). I have assumed that, in many cases, there is an indefinitely large number of possible defeaters. Therefore, it is not possible to add a complete list of anti-defeater premises, so as to make the inference monotonic. Some anti-defeater considerations will, in general, have to remain unstated in the background – although this should not make us see the inference as an enthymeme. This background of unstated conditions underlies the goodness of the corresponding nonmonotonic inference.

Furthermore, I argue that contextual factors are crucial in determining which considerations may remain in this background, without making the inference enthymematic. In relation to some given inference, the same consideration that in some context could be relegated to this background of unstated conditions – as something considered expectable –, in a different context may need to be included as a premise of the inference, on pains of making it enthymematic. For instance, the inference from “The water is boiling” to “The water is very hot” is generally taken as good in a standard Earth context, without needing to add the additional premise “The pressure is around 1 atm.” – this condition may remain in the unstated background. However, in an environment where pressures are *typically* low, such a claim has to be added as a collateral premise so as not to make the inference enthymematic. In a similar way, what premises count as providing enough evidence for accepting some claim depends on contextual features – for instance, on what is at stake in the conversation or on the salient possible defeaters (MacFarlane, 2005).

If this discussion is on the right track, one would find that contextual factors – such as typical environmental conditions, or the interests of the relevant agents –determine whether some conclusions follows (in a non-enthymematic way) from some given premises. The inferential significance of a claim, therefore, would depend on such contextual factors. Again, I try to preserve a notion of content invariant across contexts by characterizing the content of a claim as a function from collateral premises (inferential setting) and background of anti-defeater conditions (inferential background) to inferential significance. I relate this characterization of content to MacFarlane's non-indexical contextualism (McFarlane, 2009).

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