snippets

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A note on Schlenker's Translucency

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Schlenker (2010, 2013, 2020) argues that the content of Appositive Relative Clauses (ARCs) should be *translucent* in the sense that they should make a weak semantic contribution relative to the global utterance context (1).

(1) **Translucency** (adapted from Schlenker 2013, (24))
     If an ARC is uttered in a global context set C,
     a. its content should not be locally trivial, but
     b. it should be possible to add to C unsurprising assumptions to obtain a context C^+ in which its content is locally trivial.

Condition (1a) captures Potts's (2005) observation that the content of an ARC should be informative. Condition (1b) is motivated by Schlenker's novel observation that not any information can appear in an ARC, as exemplified by the contrast in (2), modelled after Schlenker's examples.

(2) *Context: Smith has worked for the NYPD for 20 years.*
     a. Smith, who is a reputed officer, has murdered two people today.
     b. #Smith, who has murdered two people today, is a reputed officer.

Following Schlenker, the contrast above arises because the ARC in (2b), unlike the one in (2a), violates (1b). In a nutshell, the content of the ARC in (2a) can be made locally trivial if speakers enrich the global context by assuming that, over his 20 years of service, Smith has gained in reputation; by contrast, the content of the ARC in (2b) is quite disconcerting and, arguably, speakers fail here to find such a smooth enrichment of the global context to make it locally trivial.

In this note, we add to (2) the novel contrasts in (3)-(5): in each pair, the (a) and (b) sentences are uttered in the same global context set and involve the same ARC, the content of which should be quite surprising given common knowledge. Thus, following Translucency, the ARCs in those pairs should be both unnatural. This prediction is however incorrect: while the (a)-sentences are indeed unnatural in most contexts, the (b)-sentences sound perfectly natural.

(3) a. #Bill, who has thirteen fingers, speaks faster than anybody else.
     b. Bill, who has thirteen fingers, plays arpeggios faster than anybody else.

(4) a. #Sue, who has just won a huge lottery jackpot, was born in 1985.
     b. Sue, who has just won a huge lottery jackpot, bought a $10 million yacht.

(5) a. #John's father, who is dying of an autoimmune disease, voted from Trump.
     b. John's father, who is dying of an autoimmune disease, is in palliative care.

Intuitively, the (b)-examples sound natural because the ARCs in them contribute to explain some of the implications of the main clauses in which they appear (e.g., Bill plays arpeggios faster than anybody else *because he has thirteen fingers*). By contrast, in the (a)-sentences, these same ARCs cannot fulfil such purposes (e.g., Bill speaks faster than anybody else *#because he has thirteen fingers*), and their informative content is perceived there as superfluous. These contrasts are thus problematic for the current formulation of Translucency and, specifically, for the idea that the contribution of an ARC is to be evaluated relative to the original context together with the linguistic material that precedes it. They suggest instead that the contribution of an ARC can be evaluated by considering all (preceding and following) material in the sentence.

Two analytical options could be explored to account for these contrasts:

- The condition (1b) of Translucency could be amended so that ARCs should make a weak contribution relative to the main clause in which they appear. This same result could also be achieved by assuming instead that speakers rely on a symmetric (rather than incremental) algorithm for calculating the local context of ARCs (P. Schlenker, p.c.). We note, however, that these refinements would not immediately account for the contrasts above. In particular, one would still have to explain why, for instance, the information of *Bill has thirteen fingers* is easier to trivialize upon considering *Bill plays arpeggios faster than anybody else* rather than *Bill speaks faster than anybody else*.

- Alternatively, the logic behind Translucency could be recast in terms of relevance so that the contribution of an ARC should be relevant yet less critical to the conversation than that of the main clause in which it appears. In other words, the contribution of an ARC should be that of a *relevant side comment* (e.g. Loock 2007; Leffel 2014; Marty 2017). As far as we can see, this alternative view would also capture the novel contrasts discussed in this note by distinguishing the ARCs whose content can easily be construed as following up on that of their main clause from those whose content appears to be orthogonal to that of their main clause, and which are thus perceived as odd contributions.

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