

Contextualism as representationalism?

Contextualismo como representacionismo?

Eduardo Caliendo Marchesan

Universidade de São Paulo – USP – Brasil

Bolsista FAPESP

ecmarchesan@hotmail.com

Abstract: This paper addresses a critique made a few years ago by Avner Baz of the work of current contextualists in the philosophy of language. Baz's critique focuses on the idea that contextualists (especially Charles Travis) have misread the attack made by J. L. Austin and Wittgenstein on the so-called "prevailing conception of meaning". Despite their insistence on the contextual factors determining the content of a statement, Baz contends that the contextualists still explain our utterances in terms of the truth-conditions of the sentences they express and, by emphasizing the referential dimension of words, they end up advocating a conception of meaning as a theoretical entity responsible for pointing out the objects of our discourse. Therefore, to Baz, they hold a representationalist view still closely connected to the traditional conception of meaning. Describing the foundation of Baz's view, I argue in this paper that the connection he advocates between reference and a theory of meaning as representation is precisely the target of contextualists like Charles Travis. Their work is presented here as an attempt to explain the reference of words and the truth-conditions of a sentence after a radical negation of the notion of meaning as representation has been made. In that sense, contrary to what Baz affirms, they are closely connected to the spirit of the pioneers of Ordinary Language Philosophy.

Keywords: Contextualism. Truth-conditions. Meaning. Representation. Ordinary language philosophy.

Resumo: *Este artigo aborda uma crítica feita alguns anos atrás por Avner Baz sobre o trabalho de contextualistas radicais em filosofia da linguagem. A crítica de Baz enfoca a ideia de que os contextualistas (especialmente Charles Travis) interpretaram mal o ataque feito por J. L. Austin e Wittgenstein à chamada "concepção vigente de significado". Apesar da insistência deles sobre os fatores contextuais que determinam o contexto de uma afirmação, Baz argumenta que os contextualistas ainda explicam nossos enunciados em termos das condições de verdade das proposições que expressam e, ao enfatizarem a dimensão referencial das palavras, acabam por defender uma concepção de significado como uma entidade teórica, responsável por assinalar os objetos do nosso discurso. Portanto, para Baz, eles mantêm uma visão representacionista ainda intimamente ligada à concepção tradicional de significado. Descrevendo as bases da leitura de Baz, sustento neste artigo que a ligação que ele assevera entre referência*

e uma teoria de significado como representação é precisamente o alvo de contextualistas como Charles Travis. O trabalho deles é apresentado aqui como uma tentativa de explicar a referência de palavras e as condições de verdade de uma sentença a partir de uma negação radical da noção de significado como representação. Nesse sentido, contrariamente ao que Baz afirma, o contextualismo radical está intimamente ligado ao espírito dos pioneiros da filosofia da linguagem comum.

Palavras-chave: Contextualismo. Condições de verdade. Significado. Representação. Filosofia da linguagem comum.

Introduction

In this paper, I am going to take a close look at a recent critique made by Avner Baz of the work of contemporary contextualists in the philosophy of language, especially the work of Charles Travis, and also at the way in which Travis's work relates both to J. L. Austin and to Wittgenstein.¹ Baz's critique centers on Travis' take on an utterance of the form "N knows that such and such", understood in the sense that someone (I, you, she, Charles, Avner, etc.) is considered to know something (a given fact). It is a critique that focuses on the way Travis describes a situation in which *knowledge* is ascribed to someone or, in other words, a critique of the way he looks at "[...] *how—and when—we actually do speak of knowledge*" (TRAVIS, 1989, p. 156). But if this is an epistemological quarrel, it interests me in a precise way, that is, in the way it sheds light on another remark made by Travis in which he affirms that "*Austin's view of meaning is integral to his view of Knowledge*" (TRAVIS, 2000, p. 545).

In order to do address this point, I must first reconstruct the context in which Baz's critique is placed, which means making a brief summary of the goals he sets for himself in his book *When words are called for*. This summary intends to show how Baz's critique is founded on the idea that contextualists in general, and Travis in particular, are committed to a traditional view of language as representation. Besides presenting this account of what contextualism is, my objective in the first section of this paper includes making a short description of the way in which Baz characterizes the representationalist view. After that, I will be prepared to assess his critique.

Part 1 – Three features of the traditional idea of meaning attacked by Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP)

Baz's account of what Travis is proposing (which I will describe in a few moments), emerges within a book Baz wrote, if not to vindicate OLP in its classical form, at least to expose the mistakes its detractors had perpetrated in attacking its foundations and declaring its failure (and subsequent extinction). Fundamentally, his book is a work to set the record straight. That is to say, a work whose purpose is to present OLP's

1 Part of what I'll say here is indebted to an early version of an article by David Zaperó entitled "*Connaissance, engagement, contexte*".

project in its true form by showing how its critics missed something important it was trying to say: precisely OLP's critique of what Baz calls the prevailing conception of meaning.

According to Baz, the most common accusation against OLP, regarding its stance on the meaning of a word (or of a collection of words), is the way it allegedly conflates meaning and use. Critics like Searle (1969)² for instance have pointed out that what a word means, i.e. the way in which it contributes to determine the truth-conditions of a sentence, has been mixed by OLP with the purposes of uttering a sentence in a given moment or situation. In other words, a sentence's capacity to determine the elements in the world about which we are talking—its “aboutness”—gets confused with the acts we perform in pronouncing it. As a result, according to that view, OLP loses sight precisely of this aboutness attained through the work done by what Frege (1962) called the “Sinn” of a word (or of a thought in the case of a sentence).

The point Baz rightfully wants to make is that the notion of meaning OLP's critics see as being in peril is precisely one of OLP's main targets. Albeit, its chief goal is the dissolution of philosophical problems, OLP's means to attain that objective is to attack a prevalent conception of meaning built on three related features. The first feature corresponds to what is commonly called the platonic view. For every word, there is something referred to as its meaning, which is “[...] *theoretically separable from, and makes the word fit for, its ordinary and normal uses* [...]” (BAZ, 2012, p. 13). The second feature expands the idea of a theoretically independent entity from being something referred to by words into something related to full sentences. In other words, just as there are meanings behind independent words, there would be propositions behind sentences. What comes up with this second feature is the problem of compositionality. I will not address this problem here since what will be relevant in Baz's reading of Travis is the connection between a platonic view of meaning and its power to refer to the world, which is precisely the third and final feature of the traditional view attacked by OLP. This final feature is presented by Baz as taking

[...] the meaning of a word [...] to be a matter of what it refers to [...]. And [taking] the meaning of a sentence to be, or to determine, what the sentence 'says' or expresses, where that has often been called 'proposition' or 'thought' and taken to be cashable in terms of the conditions under which the sentence [...] would be true. (BAZ, 2012, p. 15).

The point Baz wants to stress is central to his reading of Travis, which we will consider in a few moments. It is that although they are two different features of the prevailing conception, nevertheless, platonic meaning and “the power to refer to something” go hand in hand. That is to say, the notion of a capacity to “pick out” or to name something in the world entails, if not *necessarily* at least *often*, the idea

2 Although Searle is in many ways OLP's main heir, the conflation of use and meaning is part of his objections to this philosophy. For a similar (and classic) form of this objection, see Grice (1989).

of meaning as a particular entity attached to words regardless of what we do with them when we speak.

That pair of features is the foundation of what Baz sees as the representational core of the prevailing conception attacked by OLP and the representational core is described as “[...] the idea that language is first and foremost an instrument for the formation of representations or for the expression of truth-evaluable thoughts or propositions” (BAZ, 2012, p. 18). Language is primarily a tool to determine what a sentence proposes about the world—that which the world itself will establish as true or false—and the uses that can be made of a sentence are only a feature added after the referring process is done.

Due to the fact that considering words in isolation has led to unsolved puzzles and deep confusion, especially in the case of troublesome philosophical words, OLP appeals to the ordinary use of words as a way of getting rid of such problems. Meaning as representation is therefore OLP’s target *en route* to dissolving philosophical problems.

However, in presenting OLP’s reaction to this idea of representation, Baz regards the work of its so-called continuators, the contemporary contextualists, as departing from OLP’s original intentions. He argues that they do so precisely because they preserve the representationalist view. By showing contextualism’s representationalist foundations, Baz wishes to dispel “[...] the rumor that the position known in contemporary analytic philosophy as ‘contextualism’ constitutes some sort of clear and straightforward continuation of the work of either Austin or Wittgenstein or both” (BAZ, 2012, p. 135). In what way, however, does the contextualist preserve the representationalist view?

In reaction to the prevailing conception of meaning, OLP, according to Baz, “[...] considers things in the reverse order: that is, [it takes] the ordinary and normal use(s) of philosophically troublesome words as primary, and as the best guide to what, if anything, it refers to, or picks out—in general, or on a particular occasion” (BAZ, 2012, p. 20). Contemporary contextualists, however, would conserve the idea of reference as primary. Even if that which a sentence proposes depends, in the contextualist perspective, on the occasion of its utterance, that proposition would, in the end, still be cashable in terms of the conditions under which the sentence would be true. In the end, the outcome of this perspective would be the conservation of semantic categories detached from the sentence’s pragmatic application (I will come back to that).

Let us consider the case Baz uses to make his point: a case of “ascriptions of knowledge” exemplified by the sentence “N knows that such and such”. For Baz, “[...] Contextualist, with respect to ‘know that’ and its cognates, maintain that the truth-conditions of ‘knowledge ascriptions’ depend not only on the meaning of ‘know’ (and the other words that make them up) but also on the context in which they are made [...]” (BAZ, 2012, p. 136). In this quote, our attention needs to be placed on the correlative conjunction “not only, but also”. What it brings about is the idea that two elements are placed together to determine the truth-conditions of a sentence, the first one being the meaning of “know” and the second the context in which the sentence may appear. Therefore, the context in which “N knows that such and such” is uttered would determine only what “such and such” means in that particular situation, but not the meaning of “know”.

In other words, the problem, phrased in that way, states that to understand a sentence in context already presupposes a given idea of what “to know something” means. It presupposes a meaning that makes an independent contribution to the truth-condition of the sentence. A sentence like “N knows that such and such” may be true in one context and false in another, depending on who is stating the sentence and the occasion for him or her to do so, but a given idea of knowledge is already in place regardless of what a given person is doing with the sentence. For Baz, the whole problem revolves around the fact that contextualists are “[...] already committed [...] to the idea that understanding an utterance or ‘a sentence in context’ is essentially a matter of knowing its ‘truth-conditions’” (BAZ, 2012, p. 137).

If we look closely at the problem he is stating, we see that its foundations are constructed around the link between “platonic meaning” and “the power to refer” that Baz established early on as the basis of the representationalist view. Thus, if the reference of a word and a proposition’s truth-conditions come first in the way we approach language, they will most certainly carry with them an idea of meaning as being independent from the use we make of our words. That foundational link reappears when Baz presents contextualism as responsible for maintaining a distinction between semantics and pragmatics in spite of its avowed intentions: “In challenging as he does the traditional separation of semantics from pragmatics, the contextualist is still committed to the traditional categories of ‘semantics’ and ‘pragmatics’ themselves” (BAZ, 2012, p. 138).

In the end, what a sentence states about the world is independent of the use we make of it; it is independent of the work the words are fit to do, the specific point of their application. The commitment to those categories are, as I have mentioned, read as being related to the unavoidable representationalist link between platonic meaning and reference. Consider Baz’s words coming right after his mentioning of semantic and pragmatic categories:

A major source of philosophical difficulty is the idea that it ought to be possible for us to get at and grasp the meanings of our words, or the concept they express, apart from a consideration of the work they are fitted to do and of the conditions under which they can do it. A related source of difficulty is the idea that it ought to be possible for us just to ‘apply’ any of our ‘referring’ words to cases, even apart from doing any specific work with it, and that the application would then always be felicitously assessable in terms of truth and falsity, irrespective of what specific point, if any, they had. (BAZ, 2012, p. 139).

To summarize this first part: Platonism and referential application of words go hand in hand, but while the OLP’s fight against both items of this pair is carried on through its attack on the prevailing conception of meaning “[...] contemporary contextualism still operates within the bounds of the tradition’s way of thinking” (BAZ, 2012, p. 139). So, when the contextualist is worried about the truth or falsity of a sentence like “N knows that such and such”, he doesn’t care why the sentence is being used—or ultimately what “to know that such and such” might mean—he simply wants to identify whether, given the situation in which the sentence has been stated, N knows or does not know what someone said that N knows.

To put it bluntly, I believe there is a significant misconception in Baz's characterization of the contextualist's position—or at least of Travis' position—as representationalist in the sense presented above. To try to make this clear, in the second part of this paper I will consider Travis' example of “[...] knowing that the milk is in the refrigerator” (TRAVIS, 1989, p. 156).

Part 2 – Knowing that the Milk is in the refrigerator

Travis proposes the following situation:

Hugo, engrossed in the paper, says ‘I need some milk for my coffee’. Odile replies, ‘You know where the milk is’. Suddenly defensive, Hugo replies: ‘Well, I don't really *know* that, do I? Perhaps the cat broke into the refrigerator, or there was, just now, a very stealthy milk thief, or it evaporated or suddenly congealed’ (TRAVIS, 1989, p. 156).

I want to ask what the point of Travis' example is. Does he simply want to know if we can or cannot ascribe a given knowledge to Hugo in that particular situation? Or does he want to show that what Hugo knows or does not know, i.e. what the phrase “Where the milk is” means, depends on the situation of its utterance?

Before answering those questions, let me first consider the way in which Baz reads this example; it will help to illustrate what has been presented in the previous section. After listening to Hugo's words, Odile makes an ascription of knowledge to him. She claims that he knows where the milk is. Hugo then raises some doubts, chosen among many conceivable others, that question his possession of the referred knowledge. Sharing a representationalist view with the traditional philosopher (also known as anti-contextualist), the contextualist would only be interested in answering the following question: does Hugo as he stands know where the milk is? His concern, shared with the tradition, could be reduced to what follows: take any pair constituted by a person N and a given fact (or proposition) and one may simply ask whether “N knows that such and such”. This fundamental worry shared with the tradition shows that the contextualist “has no real use for the particular way in which Odile meant her words” (BAZ, 2012, p. 148).

In Baz's view, Travis' description of his example is insufficient. Odile is clearly reacting to Hugo's chauvinist posture and accordingly says that “he knows where the milk is” as a way of telling him to get his own milk or something similar. This is her way of using these words in this situation. That is what she is doing with them. No question of knowledge is involved since Odile is not truly ascribing any knowledge to Hugo. Being “[...] essentially a theory about the truth-conditions of utterances of declarative [...] sentences” (BAZ, 2012, p. 143), contemporary contextualism is blind to this illocutionary dimension of Odile's words and is interested only in the truth-conditions of what is being said. Contextualists have not been faithful to OLP, since they have not made their primary concern the purpose of Odile's words, i.e. her attack on Hugo. Instead, it remains attached to the traditionalist question: does Hugo know where the milk is?

The only nuance introduced by the contextualist to the traditional question of knowledge is, in Baz's view, an inquiry concerning a) the person (the speaker)

who says that “N knows that such and such” and b) under what conditions he says it. However, no matter who ascribes the knowledge to Hugo—or whether she does so in her kitchen and not at the supermarket—the fundamental question remains the same: does Hugo know what a given person says he knows? In other words, despite the nuances introduced by the contextualist, the propositional content of Odile’s sentence is still a representation of the world that has to be evaluated as true or false. Hugo either knows that such and such or he does not.

Therefore the problem can be summarized in this way “Given that the doubts [Hugo] raises [...] are ones that he has not ruled out and that he is not in a position to rule out, does he or does he not know what Odile says he knows?” (BAZ, 2012, p. 149). And the correct answer to this question for the contextualist would be “sometimes ‘yes’, sometimes ‘no’, and sometimes ‘the question is not determined enough to be answered either correctly or incorrectly’, depending on the circumstances under which the question was raised and answered.” (BAZ, 2012, p. 150).

So, the point here would be to show that if Hugo knows something, *what* he knows depends on the occasion, while knowledge is a pre-determined condition that might or might not correspond to Hugo’s present situation.

However, I want to argue that Travis’ example is formulated not to ask whether an occasional determined ascription of knowledge is true or false, but to ask, as he puts it, “[...] how—and when—we actually do speak of knowledge” (TRAVIS, 1989, p. 159). Travis’ example follows directly from a section of his book in which he had made an explicit reference to the opening remarks of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, where the Austrian philosopher is questioning G. E. Moore’s right to pursue inquiries about knowledge by abstractly enumerating what he knows while seated in his room. Moore’s description of his method is well known:

I am going to begin by enunciating, under the heading (I), a whole long list of propositions, which may seem at first sight, such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating: they are, in fact, a set of propositions, every one of which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true. I shall, next, under the heading (2) state a single proposition which makes an assertion about a whole set of classes of propositions—each class being defined, as the class consisting of all propositions which resemble one of the propositions in (I) in a certain respect. (2), therefore, is a proposition which could not be stated, until the list of propositions in (I), or some similar list, had already been given. (2) is itself a proposition which may seem such an obvious truism as not to be worth stating; and it is also a proposition which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true. (MOORE, 2015, p. 13).

To question Moore’s right means, in Wittgenstein’s terms, no more than asking if the situation in which Moore has started to enumerate what he knows is a situation allowing for the use of an expression like “I know”. Wittgenstein’s answer is “no”. He says, “Now, can one enumerate what one knows (like Moore)? Straight off like that, I believe not—for otherwise the expression ‘I know’ gets misused” (1972,

p. 140). But what is Wittgenstein proposing when he says that an expression has been misused?

The answer comes right away in paragraph 11: “We just do not see how very specialized the use of ‘I know is’” (1972, p. 140). Here, Wittgenstein is suggesting that Moore’s misuse of this word is due to the fact that, as Travis puts it, “he ignores the fact that ‘know’ is a special word, requiring special circumstances for its proper use” (1989, p.151). The problem with Moore’s use (or misuse) is the fact that, pronounced outside a precise circumstance, words of the form ‘A knows that F’ cannot determine a definite thought: why is A’s knowledge about F being stated? Is there any doubt about that knowledge? If so, is it not the point of the statement of knowledge precisely to answer that doubt?

‘I know that I am a human being’. In order to see how unclear the sense of this proposition is, consider its negation. At most it might be taken to mean ‘I know I have the organs of a human’ (e.g. a brain which, after all, no one has ever yet seen),but what about such a proposition as ‘I know I have a brain?’ Can I doubt it? Grounds for doubt are lacking! (WITTGENSTEIN, 1972, p. 140).

What would the doubt about having a brain mean (if anything)? Travis presents the example of the milk in the refrigerator as a way of illustrating Wittgenstein’s point regarding that problem. When facing Odile’s ascription of knowledge to him, ‘you know where the milk is’, Hugo enumerates doubts that supposedly question such an ascription. He mentions a variety of possibilities: a cat breaking into the refrigerator, the mysterious evaporation of the milk or the existence of a very stealthy milk thief. Facing Odile’s remark in such a way, Hugo resembles Moore in his activity of listing what he knows. In both cases, the list might continue indefinitely. Hugo could go on and suppose that Odile might have drunk the milk while sleepwalking, that they never bought the milk in the first place, etc., just as Moore could have spent a very long time producing an interminable inventory of what he knew while seated in his room.

Such an indefinable number of possibilities has the effect of producing a sentence to which no truth-value can be assigned. That is, it is not possible to determine what would count as Hugo’s knowing where the milk is because his answer to Odile does not restrict the possibilities of what counts as knowing and not knowing where the milk is. Hugo’s statements simply do not correspond to an example of “speaking about knowledge.” It is only when pronounced on a given occasion (a proper occasion) that a sentence of the form “N knows that such and such” can be subjected to the kind of restriction required to determine what counts as knowing that such and such. On such an occasion, we will be able to both provide a paraphrase for “Knowing that such and such” and state what would be a case of not knowing that. The paraphrase and the counter example show, as Travis says:

[...] an important part of Wittgenstein’s point on Knowledge, and on Moore. Moore disagreed with the sceptic on what knowledge consisted in. But he shared with the sceptic the more crucial assumption that there was just one thing it consisted in

[...] whereas Wittgenstein's point, put non-linguistically, is that different things would count as knowing that F on different occasions for judging whether A, in a given condition, counts as knowing this. (TRAVIS, 1989, p. 155).

A similar point is made by Austin in his seminal article "Other minds", when he discusses metaphysical doubts regarding the knowledge of certain objects. "How do you know this table is a real table?" is one of the examples. His comments on the word "real" illustrate just what Travis is emphasizing. He says:

The wile of the metaphysician consists in asking 'Is it a real table?' (a kind of object which has no obvious way of being phony) and not specifying or limiting what may be wrong with it, so that I feel at loss 'How to prove' it is a real one. It is the use of the word 'real' in this manner that leads us on to the supposition that 'real' has a single meaning [...] a highly profound and puzzling one. Instead, we should insist always on specifying with what 'real' is being contrasted [...] (1961, p. 87).

If we now come back to Baz's account of current contextualism as a representationalist perspective, we recognize it as a clear departure from the way Travis actually reads Wittgenstein (and Austin). The point Travis is advancing regards precisely how the concept of knowledge must be envisioned in the specialized way mentioned by Wittgenstein and therefore cannot be taken as one pre-determined concept. Thus, what counts as "knowing that such and such" is precisely what is dependable in the circumstances. That is how the epistemological conception being advanced in his works—echoing Austin and Wittgenstein—is profoundly intertwined with a fundamentally non-platonic view of meaning. At the same time, Travis and the contextualism he represents are deeply concerned with the occasions in which we use words to refer to objects in the world or to pronounce sentences trying to state something that is true or false.

Therefore, Travis' work is not based on a representationalist idea, at least not one presupposing a link between platonic meaning and the referential capacity of words. In fact, the problem regarding the delimitation of the truth-conditions of a sentence without the appeal to a platonic notion of meaning informs not only his work, but Austin's and Wittgenstein's too. It is precisely the link between contemporary contextualism and OLP in its classical form.

References

AUSTIN, J. L. Other minds. In: AUSTIN, J. L. *Philosophical papers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961. p. 76-116.

BAZ, A. *When words are called for*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

FREGE, J. G. *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962.

GRICE, H. P. *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

MOORE, G. E. A defense of common sense. In: MUIRHEAD, J. H. (ed.). *Contemporary British philosophy: personal statements second series*. New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 106-133.

SEARLE, J. *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

TRAVIS, C. *The uses of senses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

_____. Taking Thought. In: *Mind*, v. 109, n. 435, p. 533-558, 2000.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. *On certainty*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1972.

ZAPERO, D. Connaissance, engagement, contexte. In: *Raison Publique*, Rennes, n. 21, s/p, septembre 2016.

Endereço/ Address

Eduardo Caliendo Marchesan
Rua Harmonia 937, apto. 101
CEP: 05435 – 001 – Sumarezinho
São Paulo – SP – Brasil

Data de envio: 28-03-17

Data de aprovação: 24-04-17