

Situatedness and intentionality: a salience-based approach to non-representational cognition

Abstract:

It's 6am when the sound of rain hitting the window of your room wakes you up. The first thought that comes to you is: *it's raining again*. Though you are in London, you don't think that *it's raining in London again*. Somehow, the mere fact of your presence in London suffices to make the truth of your thought, its content, rest on the location, without it being represented.

This is the starting point of Perry's (1986) famous analysis of unarticulated constituents: features of the truth-conditional content that are not mentally represented. What is more directly interesting for philosophy of mind is the distinction that Perry makes between two forms of intentionality: 'aboutness', which involves representation, and 'concerning', which consists in the sheer act of making the truth of the thought turn on a certain unrepresented, possibly unconceptualized, aspect of the environment.

The question then arises: what must the environment be like for it to be possible for the thinker to make the truth of her thought turn on some of its features in such a way?

I would like to suggest that what makes it possible for you to hinge the truth of your thought on features of the environment that you do not represent, is determined by situation-specific *salience* lists. Indeed, I follow Barwise & Perry (1983) and Barwise (1989) in thinking that the thinker is never related to the environment itself, but to a part of that environment, which is determined by what her attention is restricted to (what Barwise calls 'focus situations'). To be in a situation, then, is to activate certain 'mental constraints' (Breheny 2002) that make only certain thoughts and representations available. I propose to say that the situation sets *appropriateness conditions* for *thoughts*, which can then be assessed for *truth or falsity*. This means that appropriateness conditions act as the necessary frame for semantic evaluation.

I would also like to propose some clarifications on the notion of salience. I will distinguish between two varieties: cognitive salience and ontological salience (cf. Schmid 2007). Cognitive salience is relative to what has been actively raised to salience (what you endogenously focus your attention on), whereas ontological salience refers to what is salient for an organism by default (or what your attention is exogenously drawn to). For instance, it would appear that changes in animals are easier to detect than changes in inanimate objects in otherwise identical pictures of natural scenes (New, Cosmides & Tooby 2007). The proposal is that precisely *how* salient the feature of the environment is, determines the extent to which it is possible to hinge the truth of thoughts and, perhaps, the success of actions, on it, without representing it. I will discuss some objections to this view and some applications as well.

References:

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