

Might Made Right

1 Overview

In recent work, MacFarlane [5] and Egan et al. [2] have used new observations about epistemic modals to motivate radical new semantic analyses. MacFarlane introduces a triple-indexed semantics which makes sentences with epistemic modals not just sensitive to the index of evaluation and the context of utterance but also to a *context of assessment*. Egan et al. propose that epistemically modalized sentences do not express standard propositions but functions from individuals to propositions, something like “centered propositions”.

We will argue that these moves are not only problematic but also unnecessary. Instead, what needs to be recognized is that contextually underspecified sentences are subject to a “cloud of possible resolutions” and that this fact plays a role in the assessment of the success of an utterance in extended dialogues.

2 The Standard Analysis

Following Kratzer [4], we assume that epistemic uses of *might* are interpreted relative to a conversational background f , which assigns to any world of evaluation w a set of propositions $f(w)$, representing “what is known in w ”. A *might* ϕ statement asserts that there is a ϕ world within the set of worlds compatible with $f(w)$, i.e. with what is known in w .

There are two kinds of *might* statements: specified ones (where something like an *in view of* phrase indicates the particular conversational background intended by the speaker) and unspecified ones:

- (1) In view of what I know right now, the key might be under the carseat.
- (2) The key might be under the carseat.

In work by Hacking [3], Teller [6], and DeRose [1], it has been established that in the case of unspecified *might* statements, context determines a relevant group whose knowledge the statement is sensitive to. Possible resolutions range from solipsistic cases where only the speaker’s knowledge is relevant to cases where the knowledge of a larger community is relevant. [We have some additional contributions to this work, in particular (i) we propose some modifications to how these authors deal with cases of available evidence “unprocessed” by any of the members of the relevant community, (ii) we argue that the relevant knowledge can be *distributed* within the relevant community.]

3 The New Data

Consider this dialogue presented by MacFarlane:

- (3) Sally: Joe might be in Boston.
George: He can't be in Boston. I saw him in the hall five minutes ago.
Sally: Oh, then I guess I was wrong.

Sally's response, which arguably assesses her initial *might* statement as false, might just be taken to support the standard analysis: Sally's statement is not solipsistic but sensitive to what George knows. MacFarlane, however, adds another scenario:

- (4) *Jane, a stranger, is hiding in the bushes . . .*
Sally: Joe might be in Boston.
George: Oh, really? I didn't know that.
Jane (sotto voce): Sally is wrong. I saw Joe just a few minutes ago.

MacFarlane argues that a stranger in the bushes should not be considered part of the relevant community and thus should not be allowed to influence the truth of Sally's *might* statement. As we mentioned in the Overview, MacFarlane argues from such data that the truth of epistemic modal statement is sensitive to who assesses them, and not just (or not at all) to who utters them.

We will argue in response that the radical moves proposed by MacFarlane and also Egan et al. are problematic and unnecessary. In this abstract, we concentrate on sketching our alternative analysis.

4 Our Analysis

When the interpretation of a sentence is sensitive to how the context resolves an indeterminacy in its logical form – and if the speaker chooses not to reduce the indeterminacy –, the speaker exposes themselves to challenges. Assume that when there is indeterminacy, we model this by saying that there is a set C of admissible contexts. Roughly speaking, C contains those contexts which the speaker should reasonably expect to be possible contexts within which the utterance is evaluated. Epistemic *might* statements are sensitive to what conversational background the context supplies but unless there is a very specific *in view of* phrase or very strong contextual clues, there will be indeterminacy, that is there will be a non-trivial set of admissible contexts. In such a case, the speaker is responsible for the fact that their statement could be interpreted with respect to a conversational background that makes the statement much stronger than it would be under a solipsistic interpretation.

What distinguishes items like epistemic modals from items like the indexical I is that all of the admissible contexts will have the speaker be the referent of I , while admissible contexts may vary as to the value of the epistemic conversational background.

The behavior of epistemic modals is found with other “contextually restricted” quantificational expressions as well, but with illuminating differences:

- (5) Sally: Every student was at the meeting.
George: What, even those that are on leave in Nicaragua?
Sally: No, what I meant was every student in residence.

In (5), Sally retreats to a more specific resolution of her initial statement. This kind of retreat seems unnatural with *might*:

- (6) (continuing the dialogue in (3)):
Sally: Well, what I meant was that given what I knew then, Joe might be in Boston.

The explanation is straightforward: Sally’s prior epistemic state is of little interest once George’s information is revealed.

The speaker’s responsibility should not reach beyond a reasonable cloud of contexts:

- (7) *Detective Parker is reading court transcripts from the 1920s where Capone is on the stand being asked about where some money is in relation to a particular safe . . .*
Capone: The money might be in the safe.
Parker: ??Al was wrong/That’s false. The safe was opened in 1956 and found to be empty.

It is hard to imagine a sense in which Capone and Parker form a relevant community whose knowledge Capone’s statement could be sensitive to. In contrast, we argue that the “stranger in the bushes” scenario is one where Sally’s utterance is transported into a context that she may well not have anticipated, but where it could still be felt that Jane-in-the-bushes and Sally are engaged in the same “investigation” and that therefore there is an admissible context assigning to the modal the evidence shared between Sally and Jane.

5 Outlook

The crucial point of our analysis is that when faced with indeterminacy it is a mistake to assume that “the context” will resolve the indeterminacy. Instead, participants in a conversation need to take into account a cloud of admissible contexts within which their conversation is situated. We anticipate that our analysis may also serve as an alternative to other proposed applications of MacFarlane’s notion of assessment relativity, for example the contextual relativity of knowledge attributions.

There are also obvious connections from our analysis to the supervaluation treatment of vagueness, to recent optimality-theoretic analyses involving principles of maximizing strength of interpretation, and to Beaver’s picture of accommodation as context selection.

Bibliography

- [1] DEROSE, Keith: 1991. “Epistemic Possibilities.” *The Philosophical Review*, 100(4): 581–605.
- [2] EGAN, Andy, HAWTHORNE, John, & WEATHERSON, Brian: 2003. “Epistemic Modals in Context.” URL <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/homepages/weatherson/em.pdf>.
- [3] HACKING, Ian: 1967. “Possibility.” *The Philosophical Review*, 76(2): 143–168.
- [4] KRATZER, Angelika: 1977. “What *Must* and *Can* Must and Can Mean.” *Linguistics & Philosophy*, 1: 337–355.
- [5] MACFARLANE, John: 2003. “Epistemic Modalities and Relative Truth.” URL <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~jmacf/epistmod.pdf>.
- [6] TELLER, Paul: 1972. “Epistemic Possibility.” *Philosophia*, 2: 302–320.