

NEW TRENDS IN FORMAL SEMANTICS

15TH MARCH 2021

Free choice is a form of dependence – Magdalena Kaufmann (2016)

Kaufmann's paper builds on her previous work on imperatives and modals and considers the case of free choice effects in disjunctions. Disjunctions introduce propositional alternatives and the one which is true is related or *depends* on the *choice* of the addressee.

- The session started with an overview of the paper by **Terence**, whose master thesis project is related to Kaufmann's work. A first observation concerned the unavailability of (2)
 - (1) You can take the bus or the boat; it depends / depending on the weather.
 - (2) #You can take the bus or the boat, but I don't know which. It depends on the weather.
- According to Kaufmann, **(2) is odd** because the ignorance reading induced by 'You can take the bus or the boat, but I don't know which.' is different from the free choice (or what she calls fact-dependent reading) in (1). Terence, however, observes that (2) is not odd according to his intuitions and other English speakers he consulted. Similarly, Floris observes that (2) is fine if it indicates epistemic uncertainty over future events. Similar observations about the availability of (2) are also expressed in fn. 27 of Kaufmann's paper. Additionally (2) is fine when the ignorance is due to the lack of knowledge of the weather (I don't know which one, because it depends on the weather). It seems however that Kaufmann is precisely trying to disentangle these two aspects.
- **Floris** also observed that for (1), the continuation with '**depending**' seems more natural and in a way different than '**it depends on**'. However, Kaufmann does not make any clear distinction between the two in her formalization.
- Another issue concerning (1) is the way in which *depending on* operates on the alternatives. According to Kaufmann, *depending on* partitions the alternative in an **exhaustive** way (if the weather is fine, you can take the boat, if the weather is not fine, you can take the bus). However, a

sentence like (3) is fine if bus A is not available in the weekend, but both A and B are available the other days.

(3) 'You can take bus A or bus B, depending on the day of the week.'

- There was also a discussion concerning a context for (1) in which the weather is so bad that both the bus and the boat are not possible. In such context, however, a sentence like (1) is simply false.
- Another remark that was made concerned the **triviality** of the disjunction before the *depending on* clause:

(4) You can take the soup or the broccoli, depending on the menu of the day.

(4) is intuitively odd if the soup or the broccoli are on the menu every day. Kaufmann talks about a variability requirement, but it does not seem to be adequately spelled out.

- Some relevant work concerning 'depending clauses' was mentioned (Ciardelli 2016 thesis, e.g. p. 243) and Theiler et al (2018, sec. 4.2) [Picky predicates ...].
- While Kaufmann wants to avoid structural considerations about **wide vs narrow scope** of free choice, her analysis couched in Hamblin semantics relies on a wide scope configuration of disjunction. This might also indicate that *depending on* is not related to the NS meaning of free choice, but to a WS interpretation.
- In this regard, consider a sentence like (5)

(5) You can take the bus or the boat. It depends on your preferences.

According to Kaufmann, the truth conditions for (5) are

(6) If you have an effective preference for taking an apple, you can take the bus, and if you have an effective preference for taking the boat, you can take the boat.

Robert observed that for him **(5) is even odd**. What does it mean that something that the speaker allowed the addressee to do is dependent on the preferences of the addressee? More strikingly, consider a sentence with a FC indefinite

(7) You can take anything. It depends on your preferences.

There seems to be a tension between what is allowed in a particular situation and what ultimately the addressee does, granted the initial permission.

- **Dean** brilliantly observed that it is possible to substitute *it* to understand to what the pronoun is referring to. Indeed, the *depending* clause seems to be related to the agent's final choice, rather than the permission of taking or not taking something.

(8) You can take the bus or the boat. ?What you are allowed to take depends on your preferences.

(9) You can take the bus or the boat. What you choose to take depends on your preferences.

The latter observation might also explain Floris's different intuitions (see above) with 'depending on' vs 'it depends on'.

- **Robert** wants to defend a **performative analysis** of FC. Kaufmann, instead, thinks that the distinction between 'performative' and 'descriptive' is not sufficiently tenable. Moreover, she observes that in some cases FC can go through even if the modal is descriptive, as in (18a):

- (18) a. I checked the rules for paying your ticket. You can pay online or you can pay at the police station.
 ⇒ You can pay online; you can pay at the police station.
- b. Mr. X might be in Victoria or in Brixton.

On its descriptive reading, the speaker is simply reporting the rules for paying the ticket. There is a sense, however, in which (18a) has a performative reading, where the epistemic authority is not the speaker herself, but the rules for paying the ticket, which give permission to what is allowed to do. Maria observed that, however, the boundary between performative and descriptive is not always clear. Moreover, one might wonder how to deal with FC effects in a past form like 'were allowed to', even though the latter might simply reflect the state of affairs of a certain situation in the past. Maria also observed the difficulties to deal with embedded FC, like in conditionals, and she challenged (not-seriously) Robert to provide a performative account of FC inferences in conditionals.

- The discussion ended with a comparison of Kaufmann's epistemic authority principles with **Maria's indisputability accessibility relation** in her account of FC (BSML).

