



Seminar

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The Impossibility of Radical Interpretation

Tuesday, 14 October, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT ANANDI HATTIANGADI

Anandi Hattiangadi received a BA in Philosophy from York University, Toronto; an MA in Philosophy from the University of Toronto; and a Ph.D. from the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge. In 2000, she took up a Research Fellowship at Trinity College, University of Cambridge, and from 2005 to 2013, she was University Lecturer at the Philosophy Faculty and Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at St Hilda's College, both at the University of Oxford.

Hattiangadi specializes in the philosophy of mind and language, and has research interests in epistemology, metaphysics, meta-ethics and philosophy of science. Her publications include *Oughts and Thoughts: Rule Following and the Normativity of Content* (Oxford University Press, 2007); 'Is Meaning Normative?' in *Mind and Language* (2006); 'Semantic Normativity in Context', in *New Waves in the Philosophy of Language* (ed. Sarah Sawyer, 2009); 'The Love of Truth', in *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* (2010); and 'The Open Future, Bivalence and Assertion', in *Philosophical Studies* (with Corine Besson, 2013).

While at SCAS, Hattiangadi will work on a new monograph provisionally entitled 'The Fundamentality of Intentionality', in which she will defend the radical view that the intentional and semantic properties of mental and linguistic representations – their meaning, content, truth or falsity – cannot be reductively explained in non-semantic terms, and that intentionality must be regarded as fundamental.

ABSTRACT

Karl is a regular guy, going about his life as any of us do, engaging in communication with others in a language he understands and enjoying a rich mental life full of beliefs, desires, intentions, wishes, hopes and fears. Mary is a *radical interpreter* of Karl, an ideally rational being who knows all of the non-semantic facts about Karl, all about his evolutionary history, his lifetime of experiences, his neurophysiology, relations to his natural environment and others, his behavior and dispositions. Mary's task is to deduce the semantic truths about Karl from the non-semantic information; her task is to work out what the sentences and expressions of Karl's language mean, what Karl believes, desires, wonders, intends, hopes and fears. But there are infinitely many logically possible interpretations of Karl. How does Mary select the intended interpretation, which accurately represents the semantic truths, from among all of these? A popular answer is that she can rely on some a priori constraints, such as a principle of charity, compositionality or naturalness, the application of which narrow down the eligible interpretations to one.

Is radical interpretation possible? Is it possible for Mary to deduce the intended interpretation of Karl from her knowledge of the physical information and a priori constraints alone? I will propose a model that will help to address this question. In this model, each constraint determines a weak ordering of all logically possible interpretations. For instance, the principle of charity orders the logically possible interpretations by how charitable they are, and the principle of generativity orders them by how compositional they are. All Mary needs to do is figure out which interpretation is ranked highest, and if all goes well, this will be the intended interpretation.

I will argue that radical interpretation so construed is impossible. The first problem is that each of the constraints so far proposed when applied in isolation deliver the *wrong result*. Since Karl is neither perfectly rational nor omniscient, there is an interpretation of Karl that is strictly more charitable than the intended interpretation. The same goes for all other constraints so far proposed. An application of these constraints, even given full knowledge of all non-semantic information, would lead Mary astray.

In response, it could be argued that a) we have not yet imagined all the constraints and b) Mary needs to aggregate the individual orderings determined by each constraint to ascertain which interpretation is best overall; if all goes well, this will be the intended interpretation. But this move does not help. I argue by appeal to Arrow's theorem that there is no aggregation procedure that can satisfy a small number of apparently plausible constraints. I then consider a number of ways Arrow's result might be avoided, and argue that none of these strategies make sense when applied to radical interpretation. So, radical interpretation is impossible.