

Hermeneutics, Logic and Reconstruction

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Abstract

Using a short excerpt from Anselm's *Responsio* as an example, this paper tries to present logical reconstruction as a special type of exegetical interpretation by paraphrase that is subject to (adapted) hermeneutic maxims and presumption rules that govern exegetical interpretation in general. As such, logical reconstruction will be distinguished from the non-interpretative enterprise of formalization and from the development of theories of logical form, which provide a framework in which formalization and reconstruction take place. Yet, even though logical reconstruction is dependent on methods of formalization, it allows us to use formal methods for the analysis and assessment of natural language texts that are not readily formalizable and is thus an important tool when it comes to applying the concepts and methods of formal logic to such texts.

A basic aim of exegetical interpretation, i. e. interpretation with the aim of understanding a text, is to understand texts uttered by certain authors in certain contexts as results of sequences of speech acts performed by these authors in these contexts. Due to problems of underdetermination, natural language sentences and texts are often in need of interpretation even if we are familiar with their context and know the language the author is speaking. These problems also pose limits on the interpretation of natural language arguments by natural language means. Here logical reconstruction comes to the fore as a special kind of exegetical interpretation that aims at developing explicit and defensible understandings of natural language texts and in particular arguments (1). With regard to the mode of interpretation, reconstruction can be described as a type of interpretation by assignment and ascription (also known as interpretation by paraphrase). However, in contrast to the interpretation of texts by natural language paraphrases, reconstructions are logically explicit formal language texts and can be analyzed using well-defined meta-theoretical concepts that are not directly applicable to natural language texts (2).

Exegetical interpretation should not lead to results that are arbitrary or in the same need of interpretation as the interpreted text itself. On the contrary, the aim is to provide readings that the author in question could be asked to accept to the best of our knowledge and which are less in need of interpretation in the relevant respects. In order to provide appropriate guidance to the interpreter and to allow the systematic evaluation of given interpretations, hermeneutic maxims, such as the maxims of accuracy and charity, have been developed in both the philosophical and the philological-hermeneutical tradition. Suitably adapted and specified, these maxims can also serve to guide and thus facilitate the logical reconstruction of arguments and other texts (3). Maxim-guided interpretation needs some kind of input, which can be provided by the application of presumption rules. Such rules allow one, for example, to presume that authors use languages that are shared or at least sharable by their audience. Some of the presumptions concern the acceptability of the frame of the interpretation and the accuracy of standard interpretations. For reconstructions, the

frame includes some formalism and (among) the standard interpretations are adequate formalizations. Reconstruction is thus dependent on a working method of formalization, which in turn requires a theory of logical form (4). With regard to the evaluation of interpretations, coherence may be regarded as an indication of plausibility, but coherence alone is not enough. What we are after is a state where the fairly well supported statements about the interpreted text, its author and its context remain intact and statements we presume to be fairly well supported are respected – while any revisions are made in the field of statements that enjoy a lesser degree of support (5).

As a hermeneutic method, reconstruction is also a tool for the preparation of natural language texts, especially arguments, for the application of formal methods. As such, reconstruction and formalization are driven by the fact that we do not always have strong, stable and coinciding intuitions concerning the logical properties of natural language expressions and texts. Therefore, total agreement with – possibly non-existent or unclear – intuitions is not a very helpful criterion for either enterprise (6).¹

1. Whys and wherefores

Exegetical interpretation, i. e. interpretation that aims at understanding a text with respect to its utterance by a certain author in a certain context, is part and parcel of our getting along in the world (Rescher 2001, 60–62). Among exegetical interpretations, one may (at least and roughly) distinguish between interpretations that aim at a *true understanding* of a text as uttered by an author, i. e. an understanding that corresponds to a (or even the) meaning this author intended, and interpretations that aim at a *defensible understanding*, i. e. an understanding that can be defended as being fair and plausible to the best of our knowledge.² In the following, ‘interpretation’ is mostly used in the sense of ‘exegetical interpretation’. Furthermore, for the most part, I simply assume that the primary aim of exegetical interpretation is defensible understanding.

As for all objects of understanding, one can distinguish different aims of understanding for the sentences and texts uttered by our fellow human beings (Gatzemeier 1973, 282–285). Even given the aim of defensible understanding, one may single out different (sub-)aims. Among these, one basic objective is to understand utterances of sentences and texts as uttered by a certain author in a certain context as performances of speech acts and sequences of speech acts, respectively. Authors who utter sentences and texts

¹ In the following, I presuppose the use-theoretical conception of languages developed in Hinst 1982; Meggle & Siegart 1996; Siegart 1997 and 2007. According to this approach, a *language* consists of (or, in the case of natural languages, can be described by) a grammar, a set of speech act rules which detail the correct use of the expressions specified by the grammar, and possibly sets of (different kinds of) postulates, e. g. axioms and definitions. A *formal language* as the term is used here is thus more akin to a formal system or a calculus than to a language in the purely syntactical sense. *Sentences* are those expressions that can be used on their own to perform speech acts. *Propositions* are those expressions that can be uttered with a certain force in a speech act (e. g. assumed, adduced as a reason, set as an axiom, inferred). *Pragmatized formal languages* are formal languages that contain *performators*, i. e. atomic illocutionary force indicating expressions. In such a language, a sentence will always consist of a performatore and a proposition, where the latter is just a closed formula.

² The aim of true understanding (with some sharability constraints) is put forward by, for example, Hirsch 1967. Davidson 1986 seems to use ‘understanding’ in the sense of true understanding. Defensible understanding is brought forward as an aim of interpretation by, for example, Rescher 2001, 68–69.