Okay, Whatever

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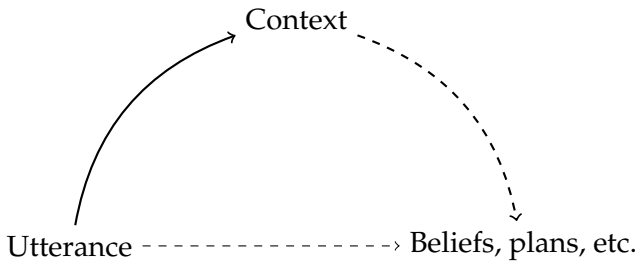
Goal: try to figure out what's going on with a neglected 'discourse move'; the response in (1).

(1)   *A*: My score was exactly double yours!
        B: Whatever.

Main Idea: *whatever* allows a proposal to update the conversational context, but often in a way that suggests that the respondent is not taking that part of the context seriously.

PART I
Background (and Why Care?)

Contexts:

Stalnaker-style Common Ground: set of propositions jointly accepted for the purpose of the conversation.

Farkas and Bruce-style Table: stack T of proposed CG updates.

Portner-style To-Do Lists for imperatives.

Context Updates:

Assert(ϕ) = Replace T with $push(\; [\![\phi]\!], T)$

$[\![okay]\!]$ = Accept = Replace CG with $CG \cup \{top(T)\}$ and replace T with $pop(T)$

Big Theoretical Questions:

- ▶ What are the ways people can update contexts?
- ▶ What means do languages provide for making such updates?
- ▶ How do various facts about the conversational context have effects beyond the context?
- ▶ How should we be modelling all this?

More Applied Issues: Langton, McGowan, Stanley, et al. on ways of updating context are effective for propaganda, manipulation, oppression, etc.

Worry: CG status on its own is very weak—acceptance for the purpose of conversation does not require belief.

So what's the big deal if something pernicious gets into CG?

Mere acceptance normally isn't enough for CG.

Yalcin (2008): "An attitude is the *conversational tone* of a group of interlocutors . . . just in case it is common knowledge in the group that everyone is to strike this attitude towards the propositions which are common ground. . . . When interlocutors coordinate on a conversational tone, they come into agreement about what counts as the correct non-public attitude to take towards what is common ground."

How should we think about conversational tone?
What ways are there for changing it?

One option for a conversation headed in a direction you don't want to go: resist the proposed updates.

Another option: don't resist, but shift the tone.

I think this is something *whatever* can do.

PART II
Some Data and Wrong Theories

(1)   *A*: My score was exactly double yours!
        B: Whatever.

A: adds ⟦*A*'s score was double *B*'s⟧ to the Table.

B: allows ⟦*A*'s score was double *B*'s⟧ into the CG, removing it from the Table, but also expresses indifference about the truth of ⟦*A*'s score was double *B*'s⟧.

Truth-Indifference Theory

Whatever expresses indifference that the proposition on the Table is true.

How to spell this out?

$[\![\textit{whatever}]\!]$ = INDIFF + ACCEPT

Where INDIFF is a not-at-issue update with
$\neg(top(T) >_B \neg top(T) \lor \neg top(T) >_B top(T))$.

Or INDIFF updates Potts (2006)-style expressive indices with
$\langle B\,[0,0]\,top(T)\rangle$.

(2)   *A*: John didn't study at all.
        B: If he wants to fail the class, then whatever.

Truth Indifference seems like it will be able to get this right. Plausible that (2) expresses conditional indifference about the truth of *top*(*T*).

Getting a conditional semantics that does this would be tricky, but this is something we'll need to do anyways.

(3)   *A*: Can I go play outside?
        B: If you've finished you're homework, then okay.

Problem for **Truth Indifference**: *whatever* is compatible with explicit non-acceptance.

(4)   *A*: I got into Harvard!
      B: I don't believe that, but whatever.

Issue Indifference Theory
Whatever expresses indifference about the issue of *whether* the proposition on the Table is true.

(Just drop ACCEPT)

Problem for **Truth Indifference** and **Issue Indifference**:

(5)   *A*: You're an idiot.
        B: Whatever.

B is not indifferent about this issue!

Utterance Indifference Theory
Whatever expresses indifference about the fact that the previous *utterance* was made.

Cool things:

- ▶ When utterance results in a belief update, we can derive content indifference.
- ▶ When respondent cares about issue, we can derive disbelief.
- ▶ Seems plausible given etymology.

Care/Information Closure
If *A* cares about *Q* and *A* takes *R* to be informative about *Q*, then *A* cares about *R*.

Contraposed: If *A* doesn't care about *R*, then either *A* doesn't care about *Q* or doesn't take *R* to be informative about *Q*

If *A* doesn't care about *R* but *A* does take *R* to be informative about *Q*, then *A* doesn't care about *Q*.

(1)   *A*: My score was exactly double yours!
        B: Whatever.

If *A* doesn't care about *R* but does care about *Q*, then *A* doesn't take *R* to be informative about *Q*.

(5)   *A*: You're an idiot.
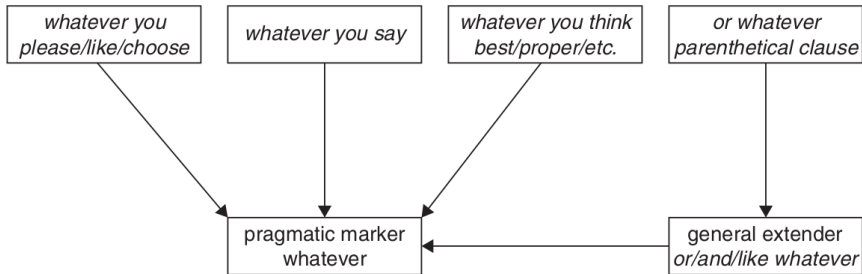   *B*: Whatever.

Etymology, from Brinton (2017):

Figure 9.4 Origin of the pragmatic marker *whatever*

whatever you say: utterance focused

or whatever: indifference-expressing

Big literature on free relative uses of *wh- ever*:

Jacobson (1995), Dayal (1997), von Fintel (2000), Treddinick (2005), Lauer (2009), Heller and Wolter (2011), Condoravdi (2008, 2015), Rawlins (2008, 2013, 2015), Hirsch (2016), Šimík (2018), Abenina-Adar (2019), . . .

Sometimes implies ignorance:

(6)   Whatever Arlo is cooking has a lot of garlic.

But also has an indifference reading:

(7)   a.   I grabbed whatever tool was handy.
        b.   Zack simply voted for whoever was at the top of the
               ballot.

Accounts of free relative *whatever* might help us with filling out some of the **Utterance Indifference** details.

Jacobson et al.: $\llbracket$ *wh- F* $\rrbracket$ = the maximal (contextually relevant) F.

Condorovdi et al.: *-ever* introduces alternatives $Alt(\llbracket$ *wh- F* $\rrbracket)$.

$\llbracket$ *whatever tool was handy* $\rrbracket = \Big\langle$, $\Big\{$, , , … $\Big\}$ $\Big\rangle$

$\llbracket$ *whatever you say* $\rrbracket =$
$\langle$ "You're an idiot!", { "You're a loser!", "You're a piece of shit!", … } $\rangle$

RP *whatever* expresses indifference between what was uttered and any of a bunch of alternatives that could have been uttered.

RP *whatever* = FR *whatever you say*?

Merchant (2004), Holmberg (2015), others: fragment answers and particles like *yes* and *no* are full sentences with a lot of stuff elided.

Problem #1: What's the rest of the elided material?

Problem #2: Why can't we substitute *what* or *the things*?

(8) *A*: My score was exactly double yours!
     B: *What (you say)./*The things ?(you say).

RP *whatever* = Unconditional adjunct *whatever you say*?

(9)   a.   Whatever you say, I'm not paying.
      b.   *What you say, I'm not paying.
      c.   *The things you say, I'm not paying.

Still faces Problem #1: what's the main clause?

Problem #3: Why can't we use other *wh- ever* words as response particles in the same way?

(10) a.   *A*: Sally won the race!
      b.   *B*: Whatever (you say).
      c.   *B*: *Whoever (you say).

So what is RP *whatever*, if not elliptical for a full sentence?

Anaphoric
- to a proposition (Krifka (et al.) on *yes*, *no*, . . .)
- to a **speech act** (Krifka on *right*, *maybe*, *okay*, . . .)

Utterance Indifference: RP *whatever* is a speech act anaphor that expresses (not-at-issuely) that respondent is indifferent between what their interlocutor said and various alternatives to what they said introduced by *-ever* (perhaps with an elided *you say*).

It can derive content indifference and disbelief in the right contexts, seems to fit reasonably well with the etymology and FR *whatever*.

But wrong, sadly.

Problem #1 for **Utterance Indifference**: *whatever* cannot be used to respond to interrogatives.

(11)   *A*: What was Kurosawa's first film?
       B: *Whatever.

(12)   *A*: Is this Kurosawa's first film?
       B: *Whatever.

One can respond to a question by expressing indifference.

(13)   a.   Who cares?
       b.   I don't care about that question.
       c.   I am indifferent between you asking that question
            and asking some other question.
       d.   Blah blah blah, there you go with your pointless
            questions again.

Actually, maybe RP *whatever* can sometimes be used to respond to interrogatives of permission and planning.

(14)   *A*: Can I stay out past midnight?
         B: (Sure,) whatever.

(15)   *A*: What should we have for dinner?
         B: Whatever.

(16)   *A*: Who should we invite to the party?
         B: Whoever.

Not obvious that this is the same *whatever* (esp. in (15)), but would be nice to account for them too, and **Utterance Indifference** doesn't.

Problem #2 for **Utterance Indifference**: imperatives.

(17) A: Give me your wallet!
       B: (Okay,) whatever.

Does not mean: B is indifferent between this and other things A might have said.

Strong preferences:
"Have a nice day" $>_B$ "Give me \$5" $>_B$ "Give me your wallet"
$>_B$ "Give me your wallet and your phone"

Problem #3 for **Utterance Indifference**: imperatives again.

(18)   *A*: Please don't suspend me!
         B: Whatever.

Seems to mean: okay, *B* won't suspend *A*.

Doesn't mean:

(19)   *B*: I do not care what plea you make.

Problem #4 for **Utterance Indifference**: how to account for *whatever*'s pairing with some other response particles but not others?

(20)   a.   *Yes, whatever.
           b.   Yeah, whatever.
           c.   Sure, whatever.
           d.   Okay, whatever.
           e.   *No, whatever.

Finally: **Utterance Indifference** isn't really parallel to free relative *wh- ever* after all.

As von Fintel (2000) notes, it's not exactly indifference that *wh-ever* expresses.

(7-b)   Zack simply voted for whoever was at the top of the ballot.

(21)   I had no time to play around, so I grudgingly used whatever email program was installed on the computer.

Seems to be counterfactual: I would have used any of the email programs in *Alt*(⟦*the email program was installed on the computer*⟧).

So let's look for an alternative to **Utterance Indifference**.

Perhaps: respondent would ϕ any *Alt*($\llbracket$*what you say*$\rrbracket$).

But what is ϕ?

PART III
The Non-Resistance Theory

Non-Resistance Theory (v1)
⟦*Whatever*⟧ = Accept + not-at-issue update that respondent
would have accepted any of *Alt*(*top*(*T*)).

What does ACCEPT do, exactly?

Gunlogson (2008): *oh* vs. *yes*

(22)   *A*: The server's down.
         B: Oh. (I didn't know that.)

(23)   *A*: The server's down.
         B: #Yes, I didn't know that.
         B: Yes, I know.

Krifka (2013): *okay* vs. *right*

Gunlogson: source vs. derivative commitments.
Krifka: duplicating speech act vs. compliance with speech act.

Note *okay* is also more general: can be used to respond to imperatives.

(24)   *A*: Go clean your room.
       B: Okay.

We'll either need to say there are two Tables—one for the CG, one for To-Do Lists—or say that the Table allows for different kinds of proposals.

In any case: ACCEPT allows a proposal on top of a/the Table to go through, resulting in a derivative commitment for respondent.

However, usually not good as a response to questions.

(25)   *A*: Is this Kurosawa's first film?
         B: *Okay.

So I suggest: declaratives and imperatives make proposals to update some part of the context (put a proposed update on the Table), whereas interrogatives do not.

If this is right, **Non-Resistance** avoids Problem #1.

(11)   *A*: What was Kurosawa's first film?
       B: *Whatever.

(12)   *A*: Is this Kurosawa's first film?
       B: *Whatever.

We predict that *whatever* can't be used to respond to most interrogatives, since there's no *top*(*T*) proposal to accept.

What about planning and permission interrogatives?

Some plausibly do introduce proposals to update.

(14)   *A*: Can I stay out past midnight?
         B: (Sure,) whatever.

Less clear what to say about the others.

(15)   *A*: What should we have for dinner?
         B: Whatever.

(16)   *A*: Who should we invite to the party?
         B: Whoever.

Non-Resistance also avoids Problems #2 and #3.

(17)   *A*: Give me your wallet!
       B: (Okay,) whatever.

(26)   *A*: Please don't suspend me!
       B: Whatever.

Roughly: *B* allows *A*'s proposal to update their To-Do List; expresses that they would have allowed any of a range of alternative proposals to update it as well.

Non-Resistance makes some progress on Problem #4.

(20)   a.   *Yes, whatever.
        b.   Yeah, whatever.
        c.   Sure, whatever.
        d.   Okay, whatever.
        e.   *No, whatever.

It makes sense that the self-sourced commitments from *Yes* and *No* can't pair with the derivative commitment from ACCEPT.

Still work to do: why can it pair with *yeah*?
Why isn't it redundant with *sure* and *okay*?

Non-Resistance handles the problems for **Utterance Indifference** pretty well.

But what about *whatever* in response to declaratives?

Why would ACCEPT + would ACCEPT alternatives sometimes convey indifference? And how is it even compatible with disbelief?

(4)   *A*: I got into Harvard!
       B: I don't believe that, but whatever.

Interesting fact about *okay*:

(27)   a.   I'm not sure I believe that, but okay.
       b.   I don't understand what that means, but okay.
       c.   I don't believe that, but okay.
       d.   That's not true, but okay.

Options:

▶ Say ⟦*okay*⟧ ≠ ACCEPT.

▶ Say ACCEPT doesn't require belief (or conveying belief).

I say the latter, which we need to say anyways.

Yalcinian Conversational Tone:

"common knowledge in the group that everyone is to strike this attitude towards the propositions in the common ground"

We'll use a weaker, more localized notion:

► Tone can vary across interlocutors.

► Tone can vary for a single interlocutor across propositions in CG.

► Probably want a publicity condition less demanding than common knowledge.

(27-c)   I don't believe that, but okay.

Registers disbelief in *top*(*T*), but then allows it into CG anyways.

Implication: respondent must take a non-belief entailing tone towards this part of CG (and presumably anything built on it).

This kind of utterance makes a traditional kind of discourse move, but also (locally) shifts the tone.

Puzzle for some other time: why can't self-sourced proposed commitments be explicitly tone-shifted?

(28)   #I don't believe this, but it's raining.

(29)   #I don't believe that, but yes.

(30)   I don't really believe this, but maybe/suppose it's raining.

Declarative proposals can have shifted tone through other means—intonation or obvious sarcasm—but why not in the explicit way acceptance can?

Strategy for getting **Non-Resistance** to work for responses to declaratives: *whatever* allows *top*(*T*) into CG, but also shifts to a non-serious tone.

In some cases, respondent doesn't take this part of the CG seriously because they don't take the source to be reliable.

In others, because they don't care about the topic.

But how exactly does this work?

Can we infer *from* the fact that one accepts *top*(*T*) and would have accepted a bunch of alternatives to it *to* the conclusion that they are not taking this seriously?

I think not.

A and *C* have had a falling out, and now each accuses the other of doing bad things, being manipulative, etc. Due to *C*'s social status, most people have been taking *C*'s side. *A* is trying to explain what's going on to *B*.

(31)   *A*: It's terrible. Nobody believes me, and I know *C* might have got to you already, but here's what really happened. *C* stole my dog.
         B: Okay, I accept that, and would have accepted anything you might have said about this.

No indifference, no disbelief. Very different from:

(32)   *B*: Whatever.

One way to try to rescue **Non-Resistance (v1)** is by replacing *Alt* with *Wacky-Alt*, which always includes some ludicrous alternative.

Wacky-Alt(*top*(*T*)) =
⟨ *C* stole my dog, {*C* hid drugs in my car, C proved that $\pi < 2$, . . . } ⟩

B wouldn't be willing to accept all those alternatives if acceptance meant belief.

Helps with the problem case, but spawns new problems:

- ▶ Seems ad hoc.
- ▶ Not good for imperatives.
- ▶ Saying *whatever* to God.

I think a bigger overhaul to **Non-Resistance** is called for.

General extender *or whatever*:

(33)   I'm here working while you're out playing pinball or whatever!

Corrective use of *wh- ever*.

(34)   *B*: After you meet with John, could you take a look at my slides?
        A: James—I'm meeting with James.
        B: Whoever.

(35)   *B*: I'm here working while you're out playing pinball!
        A: Billiards.
        B: Whatever.

Here *whatever* seems to be lumping alternatives together, indicating that distinctions between them are irrelevant.

Non-Resistance Theory (v2)
⟦*Whatever*⟧ = Accept + not-at-issue update expressing that differences between *top*(*T*) and each of *Alt*(*top*(*T*)) are pragmatically irrelevant.

Natural tool to try: Lasersohn (1999)'s pragmatic halos and slack regulators.

Requires a little modification, but not much.

For Lasersohn, the similarity relation is given by the context, and slack regulators can expand/contract size of halo. But we want the similarity relation to be modifiable.

Needs to apply to discourse updates, not just inhabitants of standard types. (Morzycki (2011) already goes metalinguistic)

Most importantly: what is pragmatic irrelevance?

Irrelevant with respect to what?
(cf. Rawlins (2013) on relational indifference and *wh- ever*)

If we go with respondent's personal goals, we run into old problem with imperatives.

(17)   *A*: Give me your wallet!
        B: (Okay,) whatever.

So I suggest Discourse Goal (cf. Roberts, Grice, others)

But what's a given conversation's Discourse Goal?

Proposal: default Discourse Goal in information-sharing conversations is for interlocutors to establish joint knowledge worth having.

We can use this to derive the indifference and disbelief uses of *whatever* as responses to declaratives.

Suppose that among *Alt*(*top*(*T*)) is an update incompatible with *top*(*T*).

Then it can't be that the *Alt*(*top*(*T*))s are as good at promoting the Discourse Goal as *top*(*T*) is due to their all resulting in joint-knowledge-worth-having.

So it must be that *none* of these updates would result in joint knowledge worth having.

So they would either result in joint knowledge that's *not* worth having, or they would not result in joint knowledge at all.

So given that *B* allows *top*(*T*) into CG, they must not take this part of the CG to amount to joint knowledge worth having.

What about the mugging case?

Why wouldn't there be a relevant difference between *top*(*T*) and any of *Alt*(*top*(*T*))?

Suppose Discourse Goal is something like coordinating actions so that *A* doesn't harm *B*; in other words, in this scenario, for *B* to do what *A* demands.

Then given that *B* would do anything (domain-restricted) that *A* demands, it doesn't make a difference to the promotion of the Discourse Goal whether the update is with *top*(*T*) or something from *Alt*(*top*(*T*)).

So, if we help ourselves to some reasonable-seeming assumptions, **Non-Resistance (v2)** can still get the indifference and disbelief implications of *whatever* in response to declaratives, through acceptance and tone-shifting.

And it does so without overgenerating in the imperative case, as **Utterance Indifference** did.

It also avoids some of **Utterance Indifference**'s other problems.

A lot left to do:

- ▶ More English data?
- ▶ Any interesting cross-linguistic comparisons?
- ▶ Better account of pragmatic irrelevance?
- ▶ Alternative theories?
- ▶ Work out a bunch of modelling details.

Thanks!

Remaining questions, objections, observations, etc.?

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