

Varieties of Minimalist Semantics

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Cappelen and Lepore (C&L) view themselves as embattled defenders of the Free Republic of Semantics from the attacks of its enemies, mostly in the form of pragmatic incursions. They withdraw to a limited territory, and defend it with reason, humor, and other less noble weapons. The enemies are everywhere. This way of posing the debates is often humorous and helps make the book easy to read. It also often leads the authors to caricaturize and to trivialize many of the problems, arguments and positions held by the different parties.

Here is a curious pair of facts. C&L think that the vast majority of philosophers and linguists who have written on the matter are contextualists. François Recanati (2004), an admitted and unapologetic contextualist, thinks that most philosophers and linguists are literalists. One might wonder if the terms of the debate are distorting rather than clarifying things. We not only wonder it, we think it.

TERMINOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

First, there is the “content” of an utterance, more commonly called “the proposition expressed.” The question is, how much pragmatics is involved in determining it. Literalists say none. Contextualists say a lot. Moderates say something in between. But this concept of semantic content is basically a conflation of two quite different concepts. We’ll call these *locutionary content* and *semantic contribution*.

Locutionary content is rooted in such common locutions as “what X said,” and “what X said by uttering (saying, writing, signing) so and so.” They surface in Austin, Grice, and the “new theory of reference.” There the *theoretical* concept of *the proposition expressed* is motivated by intuitions mined with the help of these common-sense concepts. This is most explicit in Kaplan’s *Demonstratives* (1989), in the crucial Peter-Paul argument.

Our working definition of “locutionary content” is the conditions the truth of an utterance of a declarative sentence put on the objects it is about. This is

called “referential content” in (Perry, 2001). The locutionary content, is, we think, *normally* what is said, but not in those cases for which Grice used “make as if to say” instead of “say”. There are also other cases, such as informative identity statements, where we might not identify what is said with the locutionary content (see (Perry, 2001)). We agree with C&L and others that “what is said” is a rather complicated concept. We don’t claim to have a full theory of this concept (yet).

The second root of the concept of content is “semantic contribution.” Meaning is commonly assumed to be a property of simple and complex expressions that derives from conventions that pertain to the meaning of simple expressions, found in a lexicon, and conventions about modes of combination. This is what the semantic component of model-theoretic or other formal analyses of languages assign to expressions. It is also what philosophers and cognitive scientists take to be a central aspect of knowledge of language, of “semantic competence.”

“Content” is a semi-technical expression. The philosophy of language has been heavily influenced by Kaplan’s use, where paradigmatic content primarily is assigned to utterances, or uses of declarative sentences, or, as officially in his formal development, pairs of such sentences and contexts, where contexts are quadruples of agent, location, time and world (Kaplan, 1989). Declarative sentences are the model, and the content is taken to be a proposition that incorporates the truth-conditions of an utterance, use, or sentence in context. We will reserve the use of “content” for utterances, uses, and sentences in context, and “meaning” for types of expressions, following Kaplan, whose approximation to meaning is called “character.” So, in Kaplan’s system, the content of a sentence in context is a function of the character of the sentence and the context. We’ll use the term “semantic contribution” for the property of sentences that C&L seem to be after.

In our terms, C&L maintain that the semantic contribution of a sentence is not as tightly linked to the locutionary content of an utterance of the sentence as might be thought. Locutionary content is a concept that belongs to pragmatics, semantic contribution belongs to semantics. With this we agree. Thus there are two questions instead of one:

How much pragmatics is involved in determining the locutionary content of an utterance?

How much pragmatics is involved in determining the semantic contribution of a sentence used in a standard way in an utterance?

We are contextualists with regard to the first question, and minimalists as regards the second, and so in broad agreement with C&L. We are more moderate than they on the first question, which we don't pursue here. We focus on the second, where our complaint is that C&L are not minimalist enough.

A NOTE ON EPISTEMOLOGY.

The word "pragmatics" brings to mind two sorts of facts that are connected with particular utterances. First are narrow contextual facts: the speaker, audience, time and place of the utterance. Second are matters of the intentions of the speaker. The paradigms of such intentions are the sort that Grice emphasized in his study of implicature: intentions to convey something beyond, or in place of, what is literally said. But in fact the discovery of intentions is involved at every stage of understanding utterances.

Herman says to Ernie, "I am tired." Ernie learns that Herman is tired. Knowledge of different kinds is involved here. First, there is the knowledge Ernie has as a semantically competent user of English. We take this to be the meanings of the words of English and how to interpret the modes of combination one finds in complex English expressions. This, *and this alone*, seems to us to be semantic, at least from a *minimalist* perspective. And this does *not* depend on anything about the utterance; Ernie's knowledge of the semantics of the English sentence "I am tired" was in place before Herman said anything, and the same knowledge would be involved in his understanding of anyone's utterance, or Ernie's own production of such an utterance.

Then there is perception of the public factors involved in Herman's utterance: Ernie hears the words Herman uses, and recognizes them as sounds that could be used as words of English. He also sees that Herman is the speaker.

Then there are Herman's intentions. If, as we assume, Ernie knows no Norwegian, he might briefly entertain the possibility that the sounds he hears are

being used as Norwegian words. But why would Herman say something in Norwegian to Ernie? So he concludes Herman is speaking English, a fact about Herman's intentions in producing the noises he does. Notice that Ernie's knowledge of the semantics of "I am tired" will likely play a role here. If Herman emits some sounds which sound like "Albuquerque is probably pregnant," his knowledge of Herman's likely intentions and the semantics of "Albuquerque is probably pregnant" would instead argue for the utterance not being in English.

Having established that Herman intends to be speaking English, another layer of thinking about intentions comes up with the word "tired." Probably Herman realizes he is not an automobile, and means to use "tired" in the sense in which people who would like to nap are tired. There is the issue of exactly what Herman counts as "tired". Consistent with English he might mean to say that he is tired as opposed to being full of vim and vigor, or that he is dead-tired, barely able to lift a pencil. More intentions. Then, finally, there is the question of what Herman is trying to convey, to implicate, by saying what he does. That he needs a coke? That he needs a nap? That he needs a vacation? That battling with the absurdity of life and language has driven him to a deep and unshakeable ennui? More intentions.

Our point is that the understanding of particular utterances requires a great deal of knowledge in addition to semantic knowledge, properly so called, and knowledge of intentions saturates every aspect of understanding in every transaction. The picture that semantic knowledge, in any reasonable sense, gets us very far by itself is untenable. In particular, the idea that simply by knowing the meanings of English expressions and mode of composition we can get to the locutionary act, and only after that, in figuring out implicatures, to what we need to discover and reason about intentions, is certainly false.

MINIMALISMS

In Kaplan's theory, philosophical arguments about what is said guide the choice for what the content of an utterance is taken to be, suggesting that content is *what is said*, in a fairly robust sense and intuition-rich sense of that phrase, which, in the limited sort of cases Kaplan considers, is or is very close to locutionary content in our sense. Character is semantic contribution. Content is determined

by character and context. This gives us two possible, Kaplan-inspired, minimalisms:

- i) Minimal Semantic contribution should be like Kaplan's *content*: it is determined by character *plus* context (agent, location, time, world)
- ii) Minimal Semantic contribution should be like Kaplan's *character*; it is the same for every utterance of a sentence.

Minimalism i) seems to be a non-starter. In Kaplan's system, *content* is what *varies* from utterance to utterance, even though the semantics ---everything Kaplan's theory tells us about the sentence, everything in the lexicon and the compositional rules--- stays the same. Minimalism ii), on the other hand seems quite promising; it identifies minimal semantics with exactly the sort of facts that semantic theories like Kaplan's provide, and the usual meaning of "semantics," viz. the meaning of expressions as determined by the conventions of the language to which they belong.

C&L explain their basic idea as follows:

The idea motivating Semantic Minimalism is simple and obvious: The semantic content of a sentence S is the content that all utterances of S share. It is the content that all utterances of S express no matter how different their contexts of utterance are. It is also the content that can be grasped and reported by someone who is ignorant about the relevant characteristics of the context in which an utterance of S took place. [p. 143]

C&L emphasize their broad agreement with Kaplan, so this use of "content" is rather odd; for Kaplan the content is what *changes* with context; the character remains the same and is what is grasped by someone ignorant of context. If the *contents* of all utterances of a sentence S were the same, their truth-value would also be the same: a bullet no one wants to bite. At this point one might suppose that minimalism ii) fits everything in the Basic Idea so well that this use of "content" must just come to "contribution". Thus we would have:

There is a *semantic* contribution that all utterances of a sentence S make to contents of the utterances, which is the same for all utterances whatever

the context and is what someone who is ignorant of the relevant characteristics of the context grasps.

However, having given us this basic idea of semantic minimalism, C&L almost immediately replace it with another conception; they call it an “elaboration,” but it is really nothing of the sort. It is a move from something prima-facie coherent like ii) to something prima-facie incoherent like i). They list seven theses of what we shall call C&L Semantic Minimalism. The heart of the matter is their thesis 5, which gives us our next concept of minimalism:

iii) C&L minimalism [pp. 144-145]

In order to fix or determine the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence S, follow steps (a)-(e):

- a) Specify the meaning (or semantic value) of every expression in S (doing so in accordance with your favorite semantic theory...).
- b) Specify all the relevant compositional meanings rules for English (doing so also in accordance with your favorite semantic theory...).
- c) Disambiguate every ambiguous/polysemous expression in S.
- d) Precisify every vague expression in S.
- e) Fix the semantic value of every context sensitive expression in S.

What are clauses c) through e) doing in an exposition of semantic *minimalism*, a description of the “content” that all utterances of a sentence *share*? The clauses c), d) and e) all pertain to factors the *differentiate* the content of English sentences as used by different people at different times, or with different intentions about which meanings of ambiguous expressions they wish to employ, and the standards of precisification for vague expressions. Something has gone awry, and the basic idea of semantic minimalism has slipped away.

K&P MINIMALISM

We will propose two forms of minimalism that are more in accord with C&L’s basic idea ---more pure--- than C&L minimalism. We will call them “Kosher and Pure minimalisms” or “K&P minimalisms” for short.

Both forms of K&P minimalism result from eliminating parts of C&L minimalism. The first form eliminates d) and e); the second form eliminates c) as well.

For this purpose we use the concept Content_M from (Perry, 2001). In general, the content of an utterance is what the world has to be like for the utterance to be true, taking certain things about the utterance as fixed. Let \mathbf{u} be an utterance of "I am tired" in English, the meanings of the words and the mode of composition involved are given, but not the speaker, time, etc. The Content_M of \mathbf{u} is:

(1) *That the speaker of \mathbf{u} is tired at the time of \mathbf{u} .*

(1) is what we call a *reflexive* content of \mathbf{u} , since it puts conditions on \mathbf{u} itself. Content_M gets at the vision behind C&L's basic idea: it is what all utterances of the same sentence have *in common*.

Of course, two utterances, \mathbf{u} and \mathbf{u}' of "I am tired" by different people will not have the same *content*, reflexive or locutionary, and they may differ in *truth-value*. This difference is reflected in the difference between (1) and (2):

(2) *That the speaker of \mathbf{u}' is tired at the time of \mathbf{u}' .*

Suppose you find a note \mathbf{n} that reads "I am tired." You don't know who wrote it, or when, but you assume it is written in English. On the C&L account you *do not* grasp the semantic contribution of the sentence, for you do not have the information necessary, on their theory, to grasp "the proposition semantically expressed". But of course you do, and you can report it:

Note \mathbf{n} is true iff the person who wrote it was tired at the time he wrote it.

Suppose Tom wrote the note at noon Wednesday. If you knew that you could say,

Note \mathbf{n} is true iff Tom was tired Wednesday.

The proposition that Tom was tired Wednesday is what we call the locutionary content of the note, the Content_C or the referential content in (Perry, 2001). It is what is required of the world for the note to be true given *not only* that it was written in English, *but also* that it was written by Tom on Wednesday. With the

sentence “Tom was tired Wednesday” you can actually *express* the proposition Tom expressed with the note. Without that information you cannot *express* that proposition, but you can give an *utterance bound* or *reflexive* characterization of it.

The requirement that to grasp the *semantic* content of an utterance you need to know the contextual facts, so that you can *express* the locutionary content, as opposed to merely providing an utterance bound description of it, is unmotivated by C&L’s basic idea, and by the general truth-conditional and compositional approach to semantics.

If one looks at a formal theory, such as Kaplan’s in “Logic of Demonstratives,” the compositional clauses work at the level of utterance bound meaning; that is, they quantify over contexts, and thus contextual factors. One can grasp the contribution that parts make to wholes, on Kaplan’s account, without having any idea who made the utterance and when (or what the context of a sentence-context pair is).

Consider, for example, a note:

- (3) Because I ran a marathon yesterday, I am too tired to fix the car today, so I’d better wait until tomorrow, so you can’t use it to go to the store until then.

We can grasp the utterance bound truth-conditions of (3) if we grasp the utterance bound truth-conditions of the parts; we don’t need to know who said it, and when, and to whom.

This is not a point that simply pertains to indexicals. Suppose the note is “I’ll fix the car soon.” What does the speaker mean by “soon”? It is a vague expression. C&L would claim that we don’t grasp the semantic “content” unless we can fix what counts as “soon”. But surely we do grasp that utterance bound truth-conditions:

The note is true iff the author of the note fixed the car he is referring to within the length of time that counted as upper bound of what counted as “soon” according to his intentions.

Suppose you get an email from Gretchen that says, “David has made an amazing discovery.” There are a lot of Davids. You don’t know which one

Gretchen is referring to with her use of "David": David Kaplan, David Hills, David Israel? You respond, "David Who?" Your response can be understood precisely because you *do* grasp utterance-bound truth-conditions of the email:

This email is true if the David the author it was referring to with "David" has made a great discovery.

By recognizing the fact that the *common* semantic contribution of sentences of English is at the level of utterance bound truth-conditions, we can provide a conception of semantic contribution and semantic content that is much more in accord with C&L's basic idea:

KP-1

The semantic contribution of an English sentence is determined by the meanings of the expression in the sentence in English and the English rules for modes of combination, plus a disambiguation of any ambiguous expressions. The semantic content of an utterance of the sentence is the reflexive truth-conditions of the utterance, where contextual factors, the reference of nambiguous names, and standards of precisification are not fixed but quantified over.

We also propose a more radical rendering of semantic minimalism, limited to a) and b) on C&L's list.

KP-2

The semantic contribution of an English sentence is determined by the meanings of the expression in the sentence in English and the English rules for modes of combination. The semantic content of an utterance of the sentence is the reflexive truth conditions of the utterance, where contextual factors, the meanings of ambiguous expressions, the reference of nambiguous names, and standards of precisification are not fixed but quantified over.

This is the conception of semantic contribution needed by the working epistemologist of language or cognitive scientist. Consider Grice's example (Grice, 1967) "He was in the grip of a vice." What does someone know, who hears this sentence uttered, and recognizes the expressions, based merely on his

knowledge of the meanings of words and the grammar of English? We suggest, following Grice rather closely, something like this:

This utterance is true iff the speaker is using “in the grip of a vice” to mean “has a particularly bad habit or moral failing,” if the person the speaker uses “he” to refer to has a particularly bad habit or moral failing, or if the speaker is using “in the grip of a vice” to mean “held by a clamping vise” and the person he is referring to is held by a clamping vise.

The material to the right of the “iff” provides us with an utterance bound truth-condition. This is a complicated proposition that is ultimately about the utterance itself. This proposition fits very well with C&L’s basic idea, for it is what a semantically competent speaker of English grasps simply in terms of that semantic competence, with no additional knowledge of the intentions of the speaker beyond that of speaking English.

We believe that once either of these truly minimalist conceptions of semantics is adopted, many of C&L’s arguments against the presence of unarticulated constituents in locutionary content lose whatever force they may have had. But we do not have space to elaborate on this.

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