

Book review

Insensitive Semantics. A Defence of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism

Herman Cappelen, Ernest Lepore, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, XII + 219 pp.

This extremely provocative and most illuminating book is a dissonant voice in the semantics/pragmatics debate by two eminent philosophers of language. The authors are aware of their isolated position. I suppose philosophy is a subject where an argument is sound *not* because of the number of people who adhere to it, but because of its intrinsic merits. In theory and in practice, it should be possible to show that things are one way or the other. So we wonder why the population of philosophers is so neatly divided in connection with the issues dealt with in this review and the majority of them defend one camp, while two or perhaps three strenuously defend the other. It looks as if something very important is going on in philosophy and as if the destiny of philosophy itself is at stake. Could centuries of mistaken philosophy follow as an aftermath of accepting the wrong creed?

I think we should listen very carefully to what Cappelen and Lepore say, as they, after all, embody a very respectable philosophical tradition that descends from the ideas of Donald Davidson.

The preface starts like this:

From the end of the nineteenth century right up until today, Philosophy of Language has been plagued by an extensive and notoriously confusing literature on how to draw the distinction between semantic content and nonsemantic content, or, in a terminology we prefer not to use, on how to draw the distinction between semantic and pragmatic content. This debate, at its deepest level, is about how to accommodate context sensitivity within a theory of human communication (...).

Our ambitious goal in this book is to defend a simple and naïve view about context sensitivity, the kind of view you might come up with after a few moments' reflection. Our view goes something like this: There are just a few easily identifiable context-sensitive expressions in natural language. In English, they are familiar words like 'I', 'you', 'that', 'now', etc. In essence, our view is that there are no deep secrets or hidden surprises behind that 'etc' (...).

The central opponents in this book are philosophers and linguists who inflate the role of context in semantics. We call such philosophers *Contextualists*. The common thread that runs throughout our criticism of contextualism is that it fails to account for how we communicate *across contexts* (pp. ix–x).

I think we should make it clear, from the outset, that the position identified with Contextualism is *not* the idea that a number of linguistic expressions (e.g. 'I', 'you', 'that', 'this', etc.) have their semantic values fixed in a context of use. For Cappelen and Lepore the values furnished by

contexts of utterance for such expressions are somehow incorporated into truth-conditional semantics. For these authors, Contextualism is the proliferation of this idea, the extension of this idea to expressions which do not belong to the Basic Set of context-sensitive expressions.

A preliminary consideration: Why should there be a case for making the Basic Set of context-sensitive expressions very small? What changes if there are ten or, say, twenty context-sensitive expressions? Why should the size of the Basic Set be so important and why should it be kept so low?

If the line of thought is that the Basic Set should be kept very small because context sensitivity is seen as an *imperfection* of natural language, then we are not persuaded by this reasoning. One could, instead, argue that context-sensitivity is a virtue, because it shifts the burden from memory to pragmatics, modulation being an important linguistic resource that serves to extend the meanings of words and sentences (see Recanati, 2004).

I suppose that a more reasonable line of thought is that the Basic Set is small because if you take any further context-sensitive expression not contained in it, it reduces to an expression that is already in it. If this is the reasoning, Cappelen and Lepore may be right in opposing the idea that the Basic Set must be enlarged. Contextualists, in making specific points, after all implicitly make use of the expressions already in the Basic Set—and so, while they may be right about their specific points, they are not right about the idea that the Basic Set is to be enlarged. I suppose that for expressions of this type, a compromise of some kind could be reached between Cappelen and Lepore and the Contextualists; but what about other expressions that cannot be subsumed within expressions belonging to the Basic Set? Well, intuitively here the problem is how to decide that they cannot be subsumed, and secondly, if it is settled that they cannot be subsumed, what kind of relationship should there be with expressions already in the Basic Set? Should we create an enlarged Basic Set? Or should we create a Further Set of context-sensitive expressions (a less basic one)?

If the idea that all context-sensitive expressions reduce to the ones in the Basic Set is rejected, then there can be no compromise between Cappelen and Lepore and the Contextualists. Furthermore, we see no longer why we should accept Cappelen and Lepore's idea that the Basic Set is very small. Is this a capricious idea? Or is this idea dictated by some deep rationale?

One might suggest that in case context-sensitive expressions reduce to those already in the Basic Set, Contextualists should shift their position and go to Cappelen and Lepore's camp. While Cappelen and Lepore extensively argue that Moderate Contextualism slides into Radical Contextualism, from the outset it is clear that there can be no interesting 'Moderate Contextualism' as this will be absorbed by some classical semantic picture. The only interesting position is Radical Contextualism. Of course Moderate Contextualism studies some interesting linguistic phenomena, but it should be relabelled.

I propose to start with some relatively uncontroversial issues. Cappelen and Lepore write (on p. 143):

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 the utterances of *S* express no matter how different their contexts of use 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).

Given what the authors say, it is not impossible to say that various different utterances of (1)

(1) John bought a car.

all express the same content, which is that John bought a vehicle. Well, although 'John bought a vehicle' is, surely, a semantic entailment of (1) (plus pragmatic information fixing the referent of

‘John’) and, thus, is part of the semantic content of (1), it would be useful to distinguish between the *partial* semantic content of (1) and the *exhaustive* semantic content of (1). Now, to say that the exhaustive semantic content of (1) is the content that all utterances share is, in my modest opinion, absurd. All utterances of (1), in fact, share the entailment ‘John bought a vehicle’, but this does not amount to the exhaustive semantic content of (1). Presumably, the semantic content of (1) is the exhaustive set/list of entailments which they share. I think it is important to make this precise, because it helps establish a limit between the speech act content and the minimal proposition (or the semantic content).

The authors go on to write:

The minimal proposition cannot be characterised completely independently of the context of utterance. Semantic Minimalism recognizes a small subset of expressions that interact with contexts of utterances in privileged ways; we call these the *genuinely context sensitive expressions*. When such an expression occurs in a sentence S, all competent speakers know that they need to know something about the context of utterance in order to grasp the proposition semantically expressed by that utterance of S, and to recognize the truth of conditions of its utterance. These context sensitive expressions exhaust the extent of contextual influence on semantic content (p. 143).

The view expressed so far is not very different from Grice’s—with a terminological difference. Cappelen and Lepore specify that it is important not to identify the proposition semantically expressed with what is said (or asserted) (see p. 150).

There are two important points to bear in mind. The proposition semantically expressed by an utterance u of a (declarative) sentence S does not exhaust the speech act content of u. An utterance of a sentence S typically says, asserts, or claims a wide range of propositions in addition to the proposition semantically expressed.

An epistemic consequence of the point above is that intuitions about, and other evidence for, speech act content are not direct evidence for semantic content.

This, in essence, is Semantic Minimalism. A virtue of Semantic Minimalism is that, even though a certain degree of contextual information is required, it is maximally limited to information associated with context-sensitive expressions which are part of the Basic Set. Another virtue is that it makes it possible to express semantic content in a fairly abstract way that is unaffected by shifts in the contexts of utterance.

It should be noted that in the considerations above, the verb ‘say’ has been used meaning ‘assert’. This use is not coherent with other parts of the book, e.g. with the passages about intercontextual disquotational indirect reports tests. Indirect reports where the verb ‘say’ is used are employed to show whether an expression is context-sensitive or not. Context-sensitive expressions block intercontextual disquotational indirect reports; instead, the semantic content is what is reported in intercontextual disquotational indirect reports. The test in question uses the verb ‘say’ not in the sense of asserting (more than the semantic proposition), but in the sense of *just* expressing the semantic proposition. I think this is a serious mistake. It is easy to slide from the use of say₁ to the use of say₂; but at least one could use subscripts to clarify things for the reader. Well, we have done this for the authors. I will return to the tests for semantic content now.

Cappelen and Lepore think that if there is a relatively stable semantic content, this emerges in our practices of reporting direct speech. Suppose Mary says (2)

(2) John went to Harrods

then we can report what Mary said in the following utterance:

(3) Mary said John had gone to Harrods

Even if the contexts in which (3) and (2) are respectively uttered are different, it is possible to go back from (3) to the semantic content of (2). Instead, context-sensitive expressions are blocked in reporting an utterance, given that contextual information changes and, thus, by the use of the same context-sensitive expression one runs the risk of misinforming the hearer.

Now, imagine that the sentence (2) is uttered by Mary in two distinct contexts. Given that there is a relatively stable semantic content associated with (2), one could describe the two events in a **conjunctive** form:

(4) In both C and C1, Mary said that John had gone to Harrods.

The problem is that with a number of expressions, this test does not work well. And it is in these cases that we must say whether the expression is sensitive to context or not. Consider the case of 'ready'. Some say that 'ready' is a context-sensitive expression; some say (e.g. Cappelen and Lepore) that it is not. According to Cappelen and Lepore the test establishes that 'ready' is not a context dependent expression, in fact we can proffer something like (5)

(5) In both C and C1, Mary said that John was ready.

I think that now many doubts arise. As Montminy (2006) says, John was ready to do one thing in C and another thing in C1 (see also Carston, 2007). Is (5) true in this case?

Of course, in a **quotational** interpretation of (5), Cappelen and Lepore are right. One could (perhaps) say things of the sort (although some may question their grammaticality). But this is not the interpretation which is interesting for Cappelen and Lepore, as they discuss Intercontextual Disquotational Indirect Reports as a test.

Now, I am indifferent to the objection expressed by Montminy, mainly because Cappelen and Lepore have accepted that a limited number of context-sensitive expressions enter into semantic content. If they manage to describe the semantic content of (6) in terms of a deictic pronoun (e.g. discourse deictic 'that')

(6) Mary said that John was ready

then they achieve a modest victory. I would say that a natural paraphrase of (6) is (7):

(7) Mary said that John was ready for that.

where 'that' is discourse-deictic. Of course, this analysis requires assuming that there are two types of 'that', one is a demonstrative, the other is discourse-anaphoric, involving at an abstract level a single deictic element.

Now, this is like saying that the kind of semantic intrusion which is pointed out in the semantics/pragmatics debate is reducible to usage of expressions taken from the Basic Set. Well, I do not know whether this is the full story, but it works well with the adjective 'ready'.

Now, the next task would have to be to check the Intercontextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test with reference to other notoriously thorny expressions. It is well-known that

comparative adjectives seem to make reference to classes which are implicit in the discourse. Thus, if I say that John is tall, I may imply that he is tall for a basket player or that he is tall for a policeman. Cappelen and Lepore say that comparative adjectives are shown to have a stable semantic content by the Intercontextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test. One could, in fact say things such as:

(8) They both said that John is tall

on the basis of two distinct utterances of ‘John is tall’. Well, I doubt that (8) is appropriate (and true) in case in an utterance a person meant that John is tall for a basketball player and in the other someone meant that John is tall for the dance group. Of course, in a quotational sense, (8) could be true. But this is not the sense in which Cappelen and Lepore are interested, as they are discussing intercontextual disquotational indirect reports as a test. This seems to show that the expression is context sensitive. But this is not a catastrophe for the authors, since they admit a limited number of context-sensitive expressions. Suppose that in saying (9)

(9) John is tall

one means

(10) John is tall for that.

‘That’ could be used as a demonstrative (the class of people you are actually seeing, e.g. the basketball players) or as a discourse-deictic (an anaphoric element). Assuming that we posit a single element in the Basic Set from which the two are derivable, then we have not enlarged our set of context-sensitive expressions.

We could apply an analogous treatment to

(11) Steel is not strong enough;

(12) You will not die (for that cut).
etc.

It will be fair to say that the book can be rescued from Montminy’s objections thanks to my proposal. But there are other objections which it would be good to answer, to make the general perspective persuasive. Scholars like Recanati (2004), in fact, deny that a verb like ‘open’ has a single semantic core, and to prove that they cite a wealth of examples such as:

(13) I opened the book;

(14) I opened the window;

(15) I opened the wound;

(16) I opened the can;

(17) I opened my shirt.

Recanati (2004) argues in favour of pragmatic modulation—the sense of every new use of ‘open’ is interpreted pragmatically taking into account past uses of the same verb. Well, surely there is much that is of use in Recanati’s proposal, apart from the radical assumption that there is no unitary semantics for ‘open’. A scholar in lexical semantics might want

to propose that the relatively stable meanings of ‘open’ (verb) are those that are involved in the corresponding nouns (an open)—identifying in lexical relationships of the type verb/noun an element helping us to discriminate between central and less central aspects of the meaning of a lexeme. (Thanks to the compilers of the Longman Dictionary, for leading me to this modest insight.)

I would now like to concentrate on another important claim of the book:

If Context Shifting Arguments of the kind described in chapter 2 suffice to show that MC (Moderate Contextualism) is true (i.e. if they suffice to show that there is a context sensitive expression or locution *e* not in the Basic Set of context sensitive expressions), then RC (Radical Contextualism) follows (p. 39).

Cappelen and Lepore go on to say:

With sufficient ingenuity, a CSA can be provided for any sentence whatsoever, and consequently for any expression (p. 40).

The examples used to exemplify the claim are many, but here I will just concentrate on a single example. Needless to say, when we consider an utterance in different contexts, we could always point out that a different usage is involved (but the question is whether it is licit to proceed from the speech act content to the semantic content). In other words, we could contrive contexts such that they considerably affect the meaning of the speech act, thus making it appear that the semantic content is affected thereby. Consider (18)

(18) Justine destroyed those shoes.

In the context of a dinner, Justine makes preparations and sprays yellow paint on her shoes. We could say that in this context (18) is true. However, in a different context (an expedition in the jungle in Kenya) Justine pours oil all over her shoes to protect them. In the latter context, (18) appears to be false.

It is useless (and tedious) to go through all the examples, because the logic of Cappelen and Lepore’s argument has now been established. By changing the context and by a bit of stage-setting, one makes a sentence take on a distinct truth-value. In other words, supposing that there is something called Moderate Contextualism, it degenerates into Radical Contextualism.

There are two kinds of considerations that must be made now. First, I said beforehand that Contextualism will actually disappear (in the perspective of the authors) if the problematic examples are possibly reduced to cases in which elements from the Basic Set are used. This reductive tack would not be unwelcome. Secondly, given that real context shifting arguments are used to prove the context sensitivity of the expressions belonging to the Basic Set, would not one want to say that by the same methodology we could assign distinct truth-values to the same expression type used in different contexts? In other words, I do not see why this strategy does not generalize in the case of the expressions of the Basic Set, while it does in the case of allegedly context-sensitive expressions *not* in the Basic Set. Some further explanation is given, perhaps involving the idea that one should not proceed from speech act content to semantic content—but this would need positing that in the case of uses of context-sensitive expressions it is possible to proceed from the speech act content to the semantic content, filtering those meanings which are not connected with usage of the context-sensitive expression.

With the words of the authors we could say:

We are not claiming there are *no* interesting or informative connections between intuitions about speech act content and semantic content. In fact, in chapter 7 we will present tests for context sensitivity and those tests rely on such intuitions. However, they are *very* fine grained (p. 57).

So far I have done my best to see the positive aspects of the book. There is, however, a chapter which appears to need extensive discussion: that is chapter 6.

It appears that quantified NPs have an implicit domain of quantification, which is to be inferred from contextual information. Thus, for example, (19)

(19) Every bottle contains red wine

means something like ‘Every bottle on the shelves in this room contains red wine’ and not ‘Every bottle in the world contains red wine’ or ‘Every bottle in the universe contains red wine’. This is an idea that can be credited to Stanley and Szabó (2000) and to Stanley and Williamson (1995), who associate each nominal with an indexical, which when unbound behaves like a free variable to which a semantic value must be contextually assigned. This idea is not pernicious, and one tends to agree with Stanley and Szabó’s idea that, without positing a hidden domain variable, sentences such as (19) express no coherent proposition at all. At most, one could disagree whether the indexical element is present at logical form or simply *understood*, being a totally pragmatic increment (an idea which is more consonant with Carston, 2002). Well, before getting to the specific objections by Cappelen and Lepore, I propose to reflect on the alternative picture which the authors would have to adopt in connection with quantified expressions’ domain restriction. Suppose that there is no domain restriction provided by pragmatic intrusion in cases similar to (19). Then a sentence such as (19) would have to be interpreted as ‘Every bottle in the world is empty’, but this interpretation cannot obviously go through, so at the level of speech act content it is adjusted. Thus we have a mismatch between the semantic content and the speech act content. This is a desirable result for Cappelen and Lepore, since, given that a theorist cannot proceed from intuitions about speech act content to intuitions about semantic content, there is no reason why speech act content should match semantic content. I personally find all this hard to swallow and consider it the weakest point of the theory. The theoretical move suggested is that cases of a quantifier’s domain restriction should parallel cases of metaphors, where there is also a mismatch between literal meaning and speech act content. The current literature (e.g. Giora, 2003) suggests that in the cases of metaphors and idioms literal meaning need not be present in the inferential algorithm. This could furnish Cappelen and Lepore with a good argument in case readers (including the present reviewer) notice that in the interpretation of quantified NPs one does not normally proceed from the perception of a patent falsehood to a meaning readjustment. However, such an argument actually helps Cappelen and Lepore’s opponents, because the only way to have such an inferential procedure (which does not recognize an obvious falsehood) is to have a hidden domain variable (whether or not this is present at logical form or just at the level of pragmatic interpretation).

Cappelen and Lepore present some interesting objections to the binding arguments, usually presented as evidence in favour of a variable somewhere in the syntactic structure of quantified noun phrases. On p. 74 the authors argue that if the binding arguments are credible, then one could construct binding arguments for sentences such as (20)

(20) Everywhere I go, $2 + 2 = 4$

which ought to be held equivalent to (21)

(21) For all places x , if Sally goes to x , then $2 + 2 = 4$ at x .

The interpretation in (21) is what the sentence (20) means, however Cappelen and Lepore say that there is obviously no variable ranging over locations in ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ and this is a *reductio* of the binding arguments (personally, I would not be surprised if some philosophers found acceptable the idea that there is a variable ranging over locations in ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’).

Another objection the authors raise to the ‘hidden indexical’ proposal is that indexicals can participate in anaphoric relationships, as in example (22)

(22) That’s a table but it is not a book

While hidden indexicals are not capable of entering into anaphoric relationships, as is shown by (23), (24)

(23) Many students failed, and it is a big domain

(24) Tigers are mammals and it is a big domain

Well, all the authors have shown is that hidden indexicals are different from overt indexicals from a syntactic point of view—and on p. 77 the authors agree that it is not easy to make reference to the covert subject of ‘please’ in ‘John is easy to please’ and that it is impossible to get anaphora on controlled PRO, but seem willing to treat PRO and traces as special cases. At this point, it is clear that the argument is not very compelling, although it may incline us to consider Carston’s free enrichment hypothesis as more palatable.

Of course, there is a move available to Cappelen and Lepore. They oppose a view of the semantics/pragmatics debate that extends indefinitely the class of context-sensitive expressions, but they should welcome a view of quantified expressions’ domain that does not necessarily extend the Basic Set of context-sensitive expressions. Consider again a sentence such as (19) repeated here as (25)

(25) Every bottle contains red wine.

Is it implausible to utter such a sentence pointing (with a finger) to a place in the house (say, a room)? And if this is what has been done, what does the pointing (a demonstrative gesture) mean? Does it mean that the speaker construes the utterance as containing a demonstrative expression? Now, this leads us to think that a plausible meaning of (25) in context is:

(26) Every bottle in this (place) contains red wine.

Pragmatic intrusion in this case is limited to the usage of a demonstrative, which is already part of the Basic Set. Cappelen and Lepore have no problem is saying that, after all, the pragmatic intrusion in question does not require extending the Basic Set, and, thus, the contextual information needed is incorporated into what they call the ‘semantic content’ of (26).

We need to mention that Cappelen and Lepore argue against what most pragmaticists say about pragmatic intrusion by denying that their alleged context-sensitive expressions are really cases of pragmatic intrusion. But then, faced with plausible objections, they have to retreat to a position that semantic minimalism can deal with such objections by reducing all new cases of

pragmatic intrusion to uses (tacit or explicit) of context-sensitive expressions of the Basic Set. Is not this a tacit recognition of the importance of pragmatic intrusion? And does not the expression ‘semantic content’ have a semantic flavour? After all, the authors recognize that even in the case of assigning content to context-sensitive expressions one needs recourse to the speaker’s intentions (“Recanati is probably right: wide context is involved” (p. 148)). On p. 149, in a negative remark, the authors presuppose that semantic content incorporates a reference to the speaker’s intentions. However, I understand that they insist on calling semantic content ‘semantic content’ and *not* ‘pragmatic content’ because contextual information interacts with the meanings of context-sensitive expressions in a way that can be predicted given the semantics of such expressions. In other words, it is the **semantics that controls pragmatics**, and not vice versa.

I have so far suggested that the examples used by pragmaticists to claim that semantics is not autonomous but requires pragmatic intrusion (or whatever it is called) can be disposed of by Cappelen and Lepore in one way or the other, and in particular by retreating to the position that only a limited amount of context-sensitive expressions is allowed. So, is this a final blow for the theories of pragmatic intrusion? Not necessarily. Consider a case from Capone (2006), from which I will now quote:

M.V.M., who lives on the other side of the straits of Messina, in Reggio Calabria, complains about the traffic. The last time she came to Messina (where the conversation occurs), she got stuck in the city traffic in Reggio for three quarters of an hour. She says: “I should have walked to the harbour. The distance between my house and the harbour is only ten minutes’ walk”. I reply: “Then why don’t you walk to the harbour, instead of getting stuck in the traffic?”. She continues: “I have got a sore leg. And then, when I come back, I have got to go up and it takes much longer”. What M.V.M. means, when she says “The distance between my house and the harbour is only ten minutes’ walk” is “It only takes ten minutes to walk from my house to the harbour” and a motivation for attributing that meaning to her is that her house is situated higher than the harbour. She does not mean: “It takes ten minutes to walk from the harbour to my house”. Presumably, she could rely on me, as I know that she lives somewhere up the hill, to understand that her intention is to let me know that the distance between her house and the harbour, when it is measured in terms of time, is equivalent to a ten minutes’ walk starting at her house and ending at the harbour. I understand that she means that it takes her ten minutes to walk from her house to the harbour and not to walk from the harbour to the house because the context of utterance (what she has previously said, as selected by my cognitive ability to make it bear on the utterance interpretation; Sperber and Wilson, 1986) makes it clear enough that this is her **intention**. She has been talking so far of the event of her getting trapped in the traffic while driving from her house to the harbour. Supposing that this topic and her utterance “The distance between my house and the harbour is ten minutes’ walk” are connected, I make the inference that this distance (the length of the event of her going) amounts to the length of the event of her going from her house to the harbour. In the conversation, it is also clear that she is contrasting the event of her getting stuck in the traffic for three quarters of an hour with the possible event of her walking from her house to the harbour. The contrast is more effective if the events contrasted are sufficiently similar, that is if they both describe M.V.M.’s going from her house to the harbour. In context, it is clear that she cannot be contrasting her driving the car from her house to the harbour with her walking from the harbour to her house, as they are not comparable events. Although both events involve covering the same distance, the direction of the walking/going is different (p. 646–647).

Lepore has been aware of such examples, but has not responded in writing. In fact, it is not clear to me how such examples can be disposed of. I admit that, with all my good will, I cannot see a way out for Cappelen and Lepore.

To end this review, I think that this book, which admittedly reflects an isolated position, puts forward a proposal which is both coherent and robust. There are small problems, as Montminy (2006), Carston (2007) and I note in connection with the author's insistence on shared content in the wrong cases (e.g. 'ready'), which, I argue, can be resolved by retreating to a minimal semantics position in which use is made of demonstratives or pronominals. It remains a mystery why authors make such a fuss about making the Basic Set maximally restricted. What substantial difference would there be if the Basic Set contained, say, thirty rather than, say, fifteen elements? Well, I think the solution to the puzzle must lie in the *hope* that all kinds of context sensitivity can be reduced to the elements of the Basic Set. Perhaps the authors can cope, by this reasoning, with the standard objections, but now they should be prepared to cope with the type of examples I discussed in Capone (2006).

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