

WHAT IF SENSITIVE EXPRESSIONS MEET SEMANTIC MINIMALISM?

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If asked whether sentences as ‘John is ready’ or ‘Smith weights 80kg’ is context sensitive or not, various philosophers of language would respond differently. Accepting minimalist’s criterion, neither of them turns out to be context sensitive. According to most moderate contextualists, only the first one is context sensitive. By the standard of radical contextualism, both of them are context sensitive.

It is this discrepancy between the amounts of context sensitivity that forms the subject matter of the fourteen essays collected in this volume. All of the essays are devoted directly to one or more of the claims addressed by Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore’s (hereafter CL) *Insensitive Semantics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2005, hereafter *INS*), in which they allow only a limited set of context sensitive expressions. Meanwhile, on one hand, moderate contextualism is taken to be instable; on the other, radical contextualism’s internal inconsistency, failure in passing context sensitivity tests and deficiency of making communications impossible are spelt out.

Corresponding to these broad arguments, the contributions are grouped into three parts. Papers in the first part take up topics on ‘The Defence of Moderate Contextualism’, including Peter Pagin and Francis Jeffrey Pelletier (co-authors), Kenneth A. Taylor, Kapa Korta and John Perry (co-authors), Ishani Maitra, Sarah-Jane Leslie, Eros Corazza and Jérôme Dokic (co-authors), and Elisabeth Camp. Part II, ‘On Critiques of Semantic Minimalism’ features Jay David Atlas, John MacFarlane, Lenny Clapp, Reinaldo Elugardo, Philip Robbins, and Henry Jackman. Making up the third and final part is Emma Borg’s paper entitled ‘Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics’. The collection is thus warmly recommended to anyone interested in the extensive debate. Limitation of space prevents me from discussing all those essays here, which are of a consistently high quality.

In addition to the main chapters, there is a brief introduction by Herman Cappelen, in which he develops an overview of the current debates on ‘expres-

sion variability’. Three models are discussed, including the semantic model, the pragmatic model and the index model. By pointing out six common challenges pertaining to all these explanatory models; Cappelen defends CL’s view in *INS* in a sense, such as the partially applicability of Disquotational Reports tests, the necessity of drawing a line between semantic content and speech act content, and the feasibility of proposing shared content. However, Cappelen consents that there is still a long way to go for all related theorists. For pluralistic minimalist, he needs to account for how plurality of propositions is generated and how it is related to the semantic contents. For others, they need to offer an explicit explanation of context mechanisms respectively.

Peter Pagin and Francis Jeffrey Pelletier (chap.1) open proceedings with a discussion of compositionality. They neither agree with CL on the ‘no systematic theory of speech act content’ view, nor assent to Recanati on that words have no meaning at all but only ‘semantic potential’ for activating ‘associations’. In addition to extending semantic compositionality to speech act content, Pagin and Pelletier employ a pragmatic modulation E_m , whose function lies in getting propositions of modulated interpretation from propositions of conceptual structure. Relying upon such constructions, they build up a systematic framework. Besides, with the help of Recanati’s ‘modulation’ and Grice maxims for ‘implicature’, they argue to have defused CL’s instability argument. In other ways, it appears that Pagin and Pelletier are able to expand CL’s Basic Set without collapsing into radical contextualism. But if modulations are permitted in every stages of communication as they envisaged, the following GEN* similar to CL’s GEN (See CL, *INS*, 2005, p. 40) would hold accordingly:

(GEN*) With sufficient ingenuity, a modulation can be provided for any sentence whatsoever, and consequently, for any expression.

As a result, despite Pagin and Pelletier’s seeming success in systematicity, they still owe us a story in limiting the functions of modulation to avoid deriving strange interpretations, which they themselves are aware of as well.

Ken Taylor, in ‘A Little Sensitivity Goes a Long Way’ (chap. 2), develops a distinction between context sensitivity and speech-situational sensitivity. The former is conceived of as objective features while the latter is primarily ‘a locus of action’ (p. 69). Grounding on such a division, he argues that quantifier phrase and ‘some limited array of other expressions’ are associated with speech-situational sensitivity—they don’t have a fully determinate significance independently of speech situation. A speaker who uses them should undertake a double burden: a semantic burden to load a value to the suppressed parameter

and a pragmatic burden to make it clear to her hearer what she intends to load (p. 74). In CL's reply to Taylor, they ask what would happen if 'the alleged parameter is not and cannot be loaded, but where the indirect reports are true' (See CL, 'Reply to Taylor', 2005, p. 4), which deserves Taylor's further consideration. Moreover, I don't really see the necessity of positing 'speech-situational sensitivity' here. Taylor takes Kaplanian 'context' to contain objective features exclusively. In fact, Kaplan thinks of context as a region of world containing a speaker at a time in a place (See Kaplan, 'Afterthoughts', *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford, 1989, p.591).

Another topic in Taylor's essay is CL's Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect reports (ICDI). He doesn't regard it as a reliable test, since expressions such as 'we' and 'that' in the basic set sometimes block and sometimes don't block ICDI. So some restrictions on the 'relevantly different context C' should be made to guarantee the claimed result. For 'we' to block ICDI, C' must involve a speaker not included in the reference set of 'we' (p. 80); for 'that' to block ICDI, C' must involve a shift in reference (p. 81). But Taylor argues that if we apply similar restrictions to expressions outside the basic set, say 'ready', by stipulating that the relevantly different context C' must 'involve a shift in the intended respect of readiness' (p. 89), it will also pass ICDI and thereby being proved to be sensitive.

Sarah-Jane Leslie (chap. 5) continues Taylor's topic and provides a nicely-organized discussion of CL's well-known tests. Among the three, she trusts Inter-Contextual Disquotation/Real Context Shifting Argument test (ICD/RCSA) and thus attributes a fresh function to it. An expression is considered to be context sensitive by CL only if there is a true utterance of (ICD) (See CL, *INS*, 2005, p. 105), or in other words, only if we can construct a Real Context Shifting Argument (RCSA) for the expression (See CL, *INS*, 2005, p. 107). Adhering to a similar strategy, Leslie runs a series of informal polls to test intuitions on certain words and expressions. As her results show, all or at least most people agree the following ICDs to be true:

Ready There are false utterances of "SJ is ready" even though SJ is ready.
Tall There are false utterances of "Tom is tall" even though Tom is tall.
 (pp. 141–2)

But people could not take the following ones to be true:

Red There are false utterances of "Clifford is red" even though Clifford is red.

Weights 80kg There are false utterances of “Smith weights 80kg” even though Smith weights 80kg. (p. 142)

With regard to RCSA, she makes constructions on *Tall* (p. 138) and *Tall for a pregnant giraffe that is standing up straight* (p.141) respectively and finds the scenario for *Tall* is natural while the one for *Tall for a pregnant giraffe that is standing up straight* is less plausible. In a word, Leslie’s polls reflect that intermediate items such as ‘enough’, ‘ready’, ‘tall’, ‘every’ do pass ICD/RCSA test, but expressions belonging to Radical Contextualist’s broad set, to name a few, ‘knows’, ‘is red’, ‘weight 80kg’, ‘is tall for a pregnant giraffe that is standing up straight’ don’t. She concludes ICD/RCSA serves to differentiate between context sensitivity and context insensitivity and thereby moderate contextualists have struggled a principle way to block CLs slippery argument. But to defend this claim Leslie has to offer a good reason for why her intermediate items don’t pass CLs other two tests. To reconcile the tension, Leslie calls for ‘a better understanding of the nature and behaviour of context-sensitive items other than the pure indexicals’, for sensitive item ‘nearby’ seems to fail the Report test except ‘in contexts of ignorance and indifference’ or where ‘a preamble is permitted’ (p. 149); it also fails the Collection test except where ‘a subject-based interpretation is available’ (p. 155). She suggests her intermediate items be understood in a similar way. Anyway, appealing to ICD/RCSA to predict the sensitivity of an item may worth a try, provided further standard on the naturalness of ICD/RCSA is presented, without which, it is not easy to determine which construction is more natural than the other. As it appears to me that Hawthorne’s story on ‘red’ (See Hawthorne, ‘Testing for Context Dependence’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2006, p. 448) is exactly as natural as Leslie’s case on ‘enough’ (p. 137).

The second parts of the volume are essays focusing on critiques of semantic minimalism. In ‘Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism’ (chap. 9), John MacFarlane raises the ‘intension problem’ for semantic minimalism, namely, at which circumstances of evaluation is the minimal proposition ‘Chiara is tall’ true. According to him, ‘Chiara is tall’ expresses the same proposition at every context of use but diverges in truth values in different circumstances of evaluation. Consequently, MacFarlane recommends CL to resort to a count-as parameter, which determines the truth value of the minimal proposition. If CL follow his suggestion, speech act pluralism is unnecessary. Accordingly, we witness a happy marriage of semantic minimalism and non-indexical contextualism. CL later respond that they don’t take the intension problem to be a problem at all and hence semantic minimalism plus speech

act pluralism are totally enough, because ‘whatever work is done by the extra parameter added to the circumstance of evaluation can just as well be done by adding a proposition to the totality of expressed speech act content’ (See CL, ‘Reply to MacFarlane’, 2005, p. 11).

Reinaldo Elugardo, in ‘Minimal propositions, Cognitive Safety Mechanisms, and Psychological Reality’ (chap. 11), argues against CL’s Psychological Reality Thesis. Instead of running the processing objection by denying minimal semantic contents are intuitively accessible to the addressee or charging minimal semantic content of cognitively redundant, Elugardo challenges four cognitive roles of minimal semantic content addressed by CL. He imagines a situation where Yeats’ poem is read aloud by Maude; he then considers the following sentence (take *him* to be interpreted as an anaphoric occurrence):

[1] Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read him aloud. (p. 289)

The minimal proposition expressed is thus:

[2] William Butler Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read William Butler Yeats aloud.

But the speaker doesn’t mean to assert the strange minimal proposition, what he asserts should be the speech act content in [3], and it is therefore speech act contents that play the cognitive role:

[3] William Butler Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read William Butler Yeats’ writings aloud.

To investigate into Elugardo’s objection, let’s recall CL’s F₁ and F₂:

(F₁) Speakers know that their audience can be (and often are) mistaken (or have incomplete information) about the communication-relevant facts about the context of utterance (i.e., the facts listed in Bezuidenhout’s (i)–(vi) discussed in Chapter 8). The proposition semantically expressed is that content the speaker can expect the audience to grasp (and expect the audience to expect the speaker to expect them to grasp) even if they have mistaken or incomplete communication-relevant information.

(F₂) Audiences know that the speaker can be (and often is) mistaken (or has incomplete information) about the communication-relevant facts

about the context of utterance (i.e., the facts listed in Bezuidenhout's (i)–(vi)). The proposition semantically expressed is that content the audience can expect the speaker to grasp (and expect the speaker to expect the audience to grasp, etc.) even if she has such mistaken or incomplete information. (CL 2005, pp.184–5)

Elugardo argues that a competent speaker couldn't expect her addressee to interpret her utterance as the minimal proposition [2] but the speech act content [3] instead, hence CL's (F1) fails. Nor could the intelligent addressee expect the speaker to grasp [2], (F2) is thus taken to be suspect. He predicts CL might reply to this challenge by taking sentence [1] to be ambiguous, but he doesn't think semantic ambiguity would help block his conclusion. As far as I am concerned, Elugardo does get on with the conclusions of (F1) and (F2) without considering their premises, namely, the example should be constructed in case of a mistaken or ignorant context, where minimal propositions would play a unique role.

The volume closes with Emma Borg's essay (chap. 14), who attempts a slightly different take on semantic minimalism. Borg doesn't agree with CL on holding minimal propositions are required because they play an important role in communication. Citing evidence from experimental psychology, she shows a result to the contrary and tries to seek the motivation of propositionalism in terms of 'validity of arguments'. But I don't think she has explained her point in a very precise way. She also criticizes CL's minimalism to be not minimal enough in allowing speaker intentions to play a role at semantic level, by contrast, she adopts every feature contributed to the context should be formally tractable. More importantly, Borg thought CL's way of framing the debate to be problematic. She holds that the key point is rather framing the mechanism of context sensitivity than adding how many words to the basic set (p. 346). Under her demarcation, moderate contextualists are those 'who think all context sensitivity mirrors that to be found amongst members of the Basic Set', while for radical contextualists 'there can be free pragmatic enrichment, not all context effects are triggered by elements in the syntax of a sentence' (p. 346).

Many authors, as already pointed out, make significant points about how to be moderate or why not to become a minimalist. The discussions in this volume, nevertheless, help shed light on the debate taking place among contemporary philosophers of language. But if Borg's analysis is correct, then the shape of the current debate would really be changed, moving on to the mechanism of context sensitivity precisely. What are the factors contributing to generating speech act contents? What is the mechanism behind primary and secondary

pragmatic processes (to borrow Recanati’s terminology)? Is it just a result of linguistic competence, which picks out what is meant through a Fodor–style module; or does it rely on a global cognitive process? This collection overall contains significant steps forward in our understanding of these complex questions, the difficulty of which deserves a continuing study.

References

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