

CONTEXTUALISM

Claudia Bianchi
University of Milan

1. Two perspectives
 2. Semantic minimalism
 3. Indexicalism
 4. Radical contextualism
 - 4.1 Overview
 - 4.2 Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, and Travis
 - 4.3 Motivations for radical contextualism
 - 4.4 Objections to radical contextualism
 5. Nonindexical contextualism
 6. Conclusion
- References

1. Two perspectives

Contextualism is a view about meaning, semantic content and truth-conditions, bearing significant consequences for the characterisation of explicit and implicit content, the decoding/infering distinction and the semantics/pragmatics interface. According to the traditional perspective in semantics (called “literalism” or “semantic minimalism”), it is possible to attribute truth-conditions to a sentence independently of any context of utterance, i.e. in virtue of its meaning alone.¹ We must then distinguish between the proposition literally expressed by a sentence (“what is said” by the sentence, its literal truth-conditions) and the implicit meaning of the sentence (“what is implicated” by a speaker uttering the sentence). Over the past

forty years, however, an increasing number of linguists and philosophers have begun to underline the phenomenon of *semantic underdetermination*: the encoded meaning of the sentence employed by a speaker underdetermines the proposition explicitly expressed by an utterance of that sentence. According to the extreme version of this perspective – labelled “radical contextualism”² – no sentence of a natural language expresses a complete proposition, or has fixed truth-conditions, even when unambiguous and devoid of indexicals. A sentence expresses a proposition only when completed and enriched with pragmatic constituents that do not correspond to any syntactic element of the sentence and yet are part of its semantic interpretation.

The opposition between minimalism and contextualism can be traced back to a disagreement – at the very beginning of the contemporary philosophy of language – between philosophers interested mainly in formal languages on the one hand, and those interested mainly in natural languages on the other. Philosophers and logicians like Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, the early Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alfred Tarski, and Rudolf Carnap aim to create perfect languages for philosophical and scientific communication, artificial languages devoid of all the ambiguities and imperfections that characterise natural languages; ordinary language philosophers (the later Wittgenstein, Friedrich Waismann, John Austin, Paul Grice, Peter Strawson) view natural languages as autonomous objects of analysis – and their imperfections as signs of richness and expressive power. Frege and Russell inspire the minimalist perspective in its thinking that truth-conditions may be ascribed to a sentence independently of any contextual considerations; the ordinary language philosophers inspire the contextualist perspective that it is only in context that sentences have complete truth-conditions.

More broadly, “contextualism” may be used to refer to a family of views which includes moderate contextualism (also called “indexicalism”), radical contextualism and non-indexical contextualism – and which contrasts with semantic minimalism.

2. Semantic minimalism

Semantic minimalists hold that “what is said” by a sentence (its truth-conditional content) is closely related to the conventional meaning of the linguistic expressions employed in it and departs from that meaning only in cases of ellipsis,

ambiguity and indexicality strictly understood (i.e. concerning only a small number of expressions such as true indexicals and demonstratives) – namely only when the conventional meaning of an expression makes a mandatory appeal to context (Borg 2004; Cappelen & Lepore 2005). The semantic content of a (unambiguous, non indexical) sentence is the proposition expressed by *every* utterance of that sentence.

According to minimalism, all context sensitivity can be traced to syntactical elements of the sentence – the expressions belonging to Cappelen and Lepore’s *Basic Set*: true indexicals (like “I”, “here”, “now”) demonstratives (like “this” or “that”), personal pronouns (“he”, “she”), and expressions like “local” or “enemy” (Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 2). These expressions have a reference only given a context of utterance: different occurrences of the same expression-type can have different referents. The conventional meaning of a sentence like

(1) I am Italian

independently of any context whatsoever, cannot determine the truth-conditions of the sentence: the referent of “I” must be identified. The truth-conditions of an indexical sentence are thus determined as a function of the context of utterance of the sentence. According to Kaplan, a function – the *character* – is assigned to each indexical expression as a type: given a context, the character determines the *content* (the intension) of the occurrence – which is a function from circumstances of evaluation to truth-values. The character of an indexical, then, encodes the specific contextual co-ordinate that is relevant for the determination of its semantic value: for “I” the relevant parameter is the speaker of the utterance, for “here” the place of the utterance, for “now”, the time of the utterance, and so on: the designation is then automatic, “given meaning and public contextual facts” (Kaplan 1989: 595). Hence, minimalists distinguish between a mandatory semantic process (*saturation* of the expressions belonging to the Basic Set) – determining the proposition literally expressed – and optional pragmatic processes (*enrichment, transfer, implicatures*) – determining the proposition implicated by the speaker.

Let’s examine a more controversial example, the sentence

(2) It rains.

According to minimalists, (2) expresses a complete proposition (if we put time aside): its semantic content is *IT RAINS*.³ (2) is true iff it rains, i.e. if there is an occurrence of rain at some place or other in the universe. When (2) is uttered in context, the addressee may derive the conversational implicature *IT RAINS IN THE PLACE RELEVANT FOR SPEAKER AND ADDRESSEE*.⁴ In a similar vein, the sentence

(3) All the bottles are empty

expresses the minimal proposition *ALL THE BOTTLES ARE EMPTY*: (3) is true iff all the bottle are empty, i.e. if all the bottles in the universe are devoid of any content; in context *C* the addressee may derive the implicature *ALL THE BOTTLES PETER JUST BOUGHT ARE EMPTY*. And

(4) Tom is tall

expresses the minimal proposition *TOM IS TALL*: (4) is true iff Tom is tall, i.e. if Tom has a degree of height above the norm.⁵ The semantic content of (4) is the proposition expressed by every utterance of (4): in different contexts the addressee may derive different implicatures – in context *C*, for example, the implicature *TOM IS TALL FOR A JOCKEY*, and, in context *C'*, the implicature *TOM IS TALL FOR A BASKETBALL PLAYER*.

3. Indexicalism

Indexicalism is an intermediate position between minimalism and contextualism. Indexicalists such as Jason Stanley and Zoltan Szabò do not postulate an alleged pragmatic contribution to the semantic interpretation of (2)–(4), but posit hidden indexical elements in the logical form of the sentences. The only process affecting the truth-conditions of a sentence is the mandatory semantic process of saturation, triggered by the presence of a syntactic element (explicit or hidden) occurring in the syntactic structure of the sentence. As in minimalism, all context sensitivity can be traced to syntactical elements of the sentence – but those elements may be covert or hidden indexicals at logical form: “all truth-conditional

effects of extra-linguistic context can be traced to logical form” (Stanley 2000: 391). Indexicalists, for example, posit in the logical form of (2) a covert indexical element for the relevant place: (2) is true iff it rains in the place the speaker refers to. Similarly, the quantificational domain of “all the bottles” isn’t present in the surface structure of (3): it is a hidden variable in the logical form of (3). In a given context, (3) *expresses* (and not merely *conveys*) the proposition ALL THE BOTTLES PETER JUST BOUGHT ARE EMPTY:

there are covert semantic values which play their role in determining the proposition expressed. The semantic value of the sentence is a proposition that quantifies over the relevant [bottles]... the value of a contextual parameter somehow contributes to the semantic value of the whole sentence (Stanley & Szabò 2000: 234).⁶

As far as adjectives like “tall” are concerned, indexicalists claim that the comparative class (tall relative to which set of individuals?) isn’t present in the surface structure of (4): it is a hidden variable in the logical form of (4). In context C, (4) *expresses* the proposition TOM IS TALL FOR A JOCKEY, and in context C’ the proposition TOM IS TALL FOR A BASKETBALL PLAYER.

Indexicalism may be seen as a more liberal version of minimalism: it retains the central minimalist tenet, namely that the only semantic process is the saturation of the indexical expressions (even if some of them are “hidden” in the logical form of the sentence). Stanley himself maintains that his position is “very conservative”:

My own view of the truth-conditional role of context is very conservative. First there are expressions which are obviously indexicals in the narrow sense of the term, words such as ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘you’, ‘now’ and their brethren. Secondly, there are expressions which are obviously demonstratives, such as ‘this’ and ‘that’. Third, there are expressions that are obviously pronouns, such as ‘he’ and ‘she’. Overt expressions that are in none of these classes are not context-dependent. If the truth-conditions of constructions containing them are affected by extra-linguistic context, this context dependence must be traced to the presence of an obvious indexical, demonstrative, or pronominal expression at logical form, or to a structural position in logical form that is occupied by a covert variable (Stanley 2000: 400).

For Cappelen and Lepore, in contrast, indexicalism is a form of moderate contextualism – an attempt to extend the *Basic Set* to expressions which are not “obviously” indexical – namely predicates like “know”, quantified phrases, adjectives like “tall” or “green”; moreover, moderate contextualism is doomed to collapse into radical contextualism. This last claim may be criticised by pointing out that the difference between moderate and radical contextualism can be framed not in terms of the range of context-sensitive expressions each perspective allows, but in terms of the kind of mechanisms they posit. According to both minimalists *and* indexicalists, we must provide a value for a context-sensitive expression only when the conventional meaning of that expression makes a mandatory appeal to context; this is not the opinion of radical contextualists, who allow context to make a free pragmatic contribution to the semantic interpretation of a sentence (Bianchi 2003; Borg 2007; Recanati 2004a).

4. Radical contextualism

4.1 Overview

According to the radical contextualist perspective, no sentence of a natural language expresses a complete proposition, or has fixed truth-conditions, even when unambiguous and devoid of indexicals. A sentence expresses a proposition only in the context of a speech act, when completed and enriched with pragmatic constituents that do not correspond to any syntactic element of the sentence (neither an explicit constituent, as in cases of syntactic ellipsis, nor a hidden indexical present at logical form) and yet are part of its semantic interpretation.

The identification of a single contextualist paradigm is far from obvious; it is nonetheless possible to identify a general research program, common to various scholars: John Searle and Charles Travis, François Recanati, the Relevance theorists Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson and Robyn Carston. The cases motivating the contextualist view are well known – although not everyone agrees on all the examples listed below:

- (5) Nobody [famous] goes there any more because it's too crowded;
- (6) I have nothing [appropriate to the occasion] to wear tonight;
- (7) Some [not all] children got stomach 'flu;

-
- (8) Jill got married and [then] became pregnant;
 - (9) Bob has [exactly] three cars;
 - (10) Jack and Jill are engaged [to each other];
 - (11) Tom hasn't had breakfast [today];
 - (12) You're not going to die [from this cut];
 - (13) The conference starts at five [or some minutes later];
 - (14) France is hexagonal [roughly speaking];
 - (15) I need a Kleenex [or any paper handkerchief].

According to contextualism, these examples show that there is a significant distance between the level of the conventional meaning of a sentence and the proposition expressed by uttering that sentence – a distance not imputable only to ambiguity or indexicality. In this radical perspective, pragmatic processes are required to bridge the gap between the two levels of meaning: the interpretation of (5)–(15) (the propositions they express, their truth-conditions) is the result of pragmatic processes of expansion and contextual enrichment, giving, as a result, the additional linguistic material in brackets.

In this perspective, (2) *expresses* (not merely conveys) the proposition IT RAINS IN THE PLACE RELEVANT FOR SPEAKER AND ADDRESSEE, without positing in the logical form of (2) a covert indexical element for the relevant place. Similarly, the quantificational domain of “all the bottles” isn't present in the surface structure of (3) or at logical form: it must be appropriately constrained only at the level of the semantic interpretation. Following Perry 1986, Recanati argues for the existence of pragmatic constituents in the proposition expressed by an utterance, i.e. for constituents that do not correspond to any syntactic or semantic element of the sentence (“unarticulated constituents”): “No proposition could be expressed without some unarticulated constituent being contextually provided” (Recanati 1993: 260)⁷. “What is said” is then identified with the proposition completed by primary pragmatic processes of enrichment and transfer (Recanati 2001, 2004a, 2004b).

4.2 Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, and Travis

Contextualism, we have said, is a view suggested by ordinary language philosophers, and broadly based on interpretations of the Wittgensteinian motto “meaning

is use”: to understand a word is to know how to use it.⁸ In order to show that semantic underdetermination is *essential* to natural languages, Wittgenstein varies the contexts of utterance of sentences containing empirical terms, creating unusual occasions of use, extraordinary or bizarre cases in contrast with our intuitions.⁹ He writes:

I say “There is a chair”. What if I go up to it, meaning to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight?... Have you rules ready for such cases – rules saying whether one may use the word “chair” to include this kind of thing? But do we miss them when we use the word “chair”; and are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it? (Wittgenstein 1953: § 80).

Similar examples are proposed by Waismann: is the sentence “There is a man” true or false if, when I come closer, the man disappears, or looks like a man, speaks like a man, behaves like a man, but is only four inch tall? And what about “It’s gold” uttered about a substance that looks like gold, satisfies all the chemical tests for gold, but emits a new sort of radiation (Waismann 1940: 120)? The same goes for Austin: what are we to say about “It’s a goldfinch” uttered about a goldfinch that “does something outrageous (explodes, quotes Mrs. Woolf, or what not)” (Austin 1961: 88)? It is in principle impossible to foresee all the possible circumstances which could lead us to modify or retract a sentence.

John Searle and Charles Travis explicitly take their thought experiments and their methodology from Austin, Waismann and Wittgenstein (Searle 1979, 1980, 1992; Travis 1975, 1981, 1985, 1996, 1997). For rather innocent sentences like

- (16) The cat is on the mat,
- (17) The leaves are green,
- (18) Bill cut the grass,
- (19) Tom opened the door,
- (20) Bob opened his eyes,
- (21) The surgeon opened the wound,
- (22) Sally opened the can,

Searle and Travis set up anomalous or strange contexts: the cat and the mat travelling in interstellar space, the russet leaves of a Japanese maple painted green,

Bill cutting grass like a cake, Tom opening the door with a knife. These examples are meant to show that every sentence has a literal meaning only against a background of contextual assumptions fixing its truth-conditions: the background states, for example, that gravitation is, or is not, effective, or the way people “normally” cut things, and grass in particular, or open doors, eyes, or cans. What is more, this background is not unique, stable or fixed once and for all: it may change with different occasions of use. Consequently, Searle and Travis argue that the semantic properties of an expression depend on the context of use of the expression: the conventional meaning of a sentence, if taken independently of any context whatsoever, underdetermines its truth-conditions. In examples (19)–(22), the conventional meaning of “open” does not change, but its interpretation is different in each utterance: is (19) true if Tom opens the door with a can opener, or a scalpel? The stable, conventional meaning of “open” seems to determine a different contribution to the truth-conditions of each utterance. Following this same line of thought, contextualism criticises the thesis – essential to semantic minimalism – according to which there are meanings conventionally associated with linguistic expressions, and sets of truth-conditions conventionally associated with sentences.

4.3 *Motivations for radical contextualism*

Contextualism is supported by two main arguments: (a) the “Context Shifting Argument” (CSA) and (b) the “Inappropriateness Argument”.

(a) The CSA is exemplified by sentences (16)–(19):

“Suppose someone suspects that an expression e ... is context-sensitive. How could he go about establishing this? One way that philosophers of language do so is to think about (or imagine) various utterances of sentences containing e . If they have intuitions that a *semantically relevant feature* of those utterances varies from context to context, then that, it is assumed, is evidence e is context-sensitive (Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 17).

Let’s examine more closely example (17), taken from Travis 1997. Let’s assume that (17) is devoid of indexicals (time isn’t relevant here) and with its semantics fixed: intuitively, according to Travis, “are green” – given its

meaning in English – is a device for calling things green and “the leaves” purport to speak of some leaves. Now, consider Pia’s Japanese maple, that has russet leaves: Pia paints them green. Consider two different utterances of (17). In Context 1, Pia is with her photographer friend, seeking green subjects for his photos. Pia utters (17): intuitively she speaks truthfully. In Context 2, Pia is with her botanist friend, seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry. Pia utters (17): intuitively she speaks falsely. According to Travis, in C1 and C2 (17) has the same conventional meaning, but a crucially different semantic interpretation:

If the story is right, then there are two distinguishable things to be said in speaking [(17)] with the stipulated semantics. One is true; one is false; so each would be true under different conditions. That semantics is, then, compatible with semantic variety, and with variety in truth involving properties. So what the words of [(17)] mean is compatible with various distinct conditions for its truth
(Travis 1997: 89).

The state of affairs referred to with the two utterances of (17) is the same, but their truth-value changes: it follows, according to Travis, that their truth-conditions are different in C1 and C2. Even though (17) does not contain any of the obvious indexicals (overt or hidden), it is in some sense context-sensitive: it expresses different propositions in different contexts.

(b) The second argument is the “Inappropriateness Argument”. Radical contextualists claim that the pragmatic enrichments¹⁰ are *necessary* in order to account for the intuitions speakers have about the truth-conditions of their utterances. The pragmatic processes of completion and enrichment are pervasive, and generally unconscious; the interpretation they generate is unproblematic. Nobody takes the speaker to mean, with (2), that it’s raining in some place or other of the universe; or, when uttering (3), that all the bottles in the universe are empty: the propositions expressed by (2) and (3) are enriched quite naturally and without any effort. Moreover, according to Relevance theorists, pragmatic processes of strengthening and broadening are mandatory even in cases of so-called literality: even if, uttering (14), a speaker wants to express the “literal” proposition FRANCE

IS GEOMETRICALLY HEXAGONAL, this very interpretation is still the result of a pragmatic process of modulation.¹¹

As we have said, in the minimalist perspective, every contextual contribution is triggered by a constituent of the sentence – either explicit or implicit, but nevertheless present as a variable in the syntactic structure of the sentence: such a thesis complies with the assumption of an isomorphism between syntactic structure and semantic interpretation.¹² By positing unarticulated constituents (such as those bracketed in examples (5)–(15)), radical contextualism objects to the principle of isomorphism between syntax and semantics, one of the benchmarks of the traditional view. Departure from this principle is usually justified in order to preserve the speakers’ semantic intuitions concerning truth-conditions. Radical contextualists, then, prefer to speak of “intuitive truth-conditions”: the proposition expressed by an utterance does not correspond to the logical form of the sentence, but is individuated by the truth-conditional intuitions of the participants in the conversational exchange. Understanding an utterance amounts to knowing which state of affairs makes that utterance true, i.e. under which circumstances that utterance would be true. Underlying this idea is the Gricean thesis that “saying” is a variety of non-natural meaning – and must be accessible to the addressee: non-natural meaning is a matter of intention recognition. This is the sense of the “Availability Principle”, proposed by Recanati:

In deciding whether a pragmatically determined aspect of utterance meaning is part of what is said, that is, in making a decision concerning what is said, we should always try to preserve our pre-theoretic intuitions on the matter (Recanati 1993: 248).¹³

4.4 *Objections to radical contextualism*

Radical contextualism is a bold view, criticized by both minimalists and indexicalists. Let us now examine some of the objections raised, and some tentative replies.

(1) The radical contextualist view is supported by the elegance, economy and generality of its proposal. These are unquestionable qualities, compared to the

more local strategies of the indexicalist view, or the counter-intuitive ones of the minimalist view; but they may become weak points if radical contextualists cannot posit reasonable constraints on the appeal to context. Linguists such as Stanley and Szabò express perplexity towards a view suggesting the same kind of solution for a great variety of phenomena: saturation of indexical and demonstratives, disambiguation, completion, quantifier domain restriction, free enrichment. To avoid this kind of objection, contextualists propose a range of tests (Binding, Optionality, Availability, Embedding Test) in order to provide non-controversial restricting criteria on the elements legitimately admitted in semantic interpretation.¹⁴

(2) Not everybody agrees on the fact that semantics should account for semantic intuitions, rather than semantic facts – nor that semantic intuitions could be relevant in determining what is said by an utterance, instead of, for example, what is communicated by a speaker. Moreover, intuitions on the propositional content of a sentence tend to be sensitive to extralinguistic information and are likely to reflect interpretations that are conveyed by typical, standard, utterances of that sentence.¹⁵ Cappelen and Lepore label as “Mistaken Assumption” the contextualist idea that

a theory of semantic content is adequate just in case it accounts for all or most of the intuitions speakers have about speech act content, i.e., intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, and state by uttering sentences (Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 53).

As we have said, for these two authors we must carefully distinguish between semantic content (the minimal proposition) and speech act content. The expanded propositions in (5)–(15) are those that underlie our truth-value judgements about the speech act, but they are not the propositions semantically expressed: “There is no close and immediate connection between semantic content and speech act content” (Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 58).

According to moderate contextualists, on the contrary, acknowledging that two utterances of sentences (5)–(15) have different contents is *prima facie* evidence that the sentence uttered is context sensitive (Szabò 2006: 33). Moreover, radical contextualists do not deny that we could *define* “semantic content” as content obtained via saturation only; they simply deny this notion any role in

a theory of language and communication. The notion of minimal proposition postulated by minimalists is too vague and general, does not correspond to speakers' intuitions and plays no role in their cognitive life or in the interpretative process.¹⁶ In many cases (cases of metaphor, or of loose talk, exemplified in (13)–(15)) minimalists are forced to say that speakers express trivial truths or obvious falsehoods: intuitively the minimal propositions (FRANCE IS GEOMETRICALLY HEXAGONAL, for instance) are neither *meant* by the speaker, nor recognized by the addressee.¹⁷ The strongest argument is that addressees can derive implicatures only taking into account the enriched propositions, and not the minimal ones. Suppose that Mary invites Peter for a walk, and he utters (2). Only if (2) expresses the enriched proposition IT RAINS HERE can Mary derive the implicature LET'S STAY HOME; Mary can't derive the correct implicature taking into account the minimal proposition IT RAINS (SOMEWHERE):

obvious implicatures of the utterance would depend on the enriched proposition; for instance... [in the example *I've had a shower*] the implicature that the speaker doesn't need to take a shower at that time. It is the enriched propositions that are communicated as explicatures and which function as premises in the derivation of implicatures: the uninformative, irrelevant, and sometimes truistic or patently false minimal propositions appear to play no role in the process of utterance understanding (Carston 2004a: 639).

(3) Contextualism in its radical form opts for a “deflationary” philosophy of language, in which conventional meanings are given no central role. Minimalists and indexicalists assign meaning to *types* of sentences, radical contextualists only to *occurrences* of sentences.¹⁸ As a consequence, the contextualist perspective loses much of its explanatory and predictive power – and must account for the stronger role of the contextual information versus the invariant aspects of syntax and semantics. More generally, contextualism is at risk of undermining systematic theorizing about language and communication.

Radical contextualists reply that a sentence expresses a content only in the context of a speech act. Therefore the truth-conditional content of an utterance is jointly determined by semantics and pragmatics: semantics studies linguistic

meaning (a property of expression-types), while truth-conditions are determined by pragmatics, or, better, truth-conditional pragmatics (Recanati 1993, 2001; Carston 2002; Bezuidenhout 2002).

5. Nonindexical contextualism

In very recent times, some scholars have proposed a different analysis of the cases of context sensitivity that go beyond meaning-controlled contextuality (i.e. indexicality broadly understood). Among the major alternatives to minimalism and contextualism we may list MacFarlane's "nonindexical contextualism" (MacFarlane 2007, 2009), Predelli's revised version of minimalism (Predelli 2005a, 2005b); Corazza and Dokic's "situationism" (Corazza 2007; Corazza & Dokic 2007), Gauker's objective contextualism (Gauker 2003)¹⁹ and Recanati's "strong moderate relativism" (Recanati 2007, 2008).²⁰ We will focus on MacFarlane's position.

In a contextualist perspective, different utterances of (4) or (17) say different things (express different propositions) in different contexts; in a minimalist perspective, on the contrary, there is an invariant semantic content: every utterance of (4) or (17) expresses the same minimal proposition (TOM IS TALL or THE LEAVES ARE GREEN, respectively).²¹ Minimalism must then answer the *intension problem* for minimal propositions: at which possible worlds is the minimal proposition TOM IS TALL (just plain) true? Being tall for a jockey, MacFarlane argues, is a way of being tall: the minimal proposition TOM IS TALL will be true at every world at which the proposition TOM IS TALL FOR A JOCKEY is true. If we reiterate the argument for any comparative class F, we will conclude that the minimal proposition TOM IS TALL is true at every world at which the proposition TOM IS TALL FOR AN F is true: "we are left with the surprising conclusion that the minimal proposition that Tom is (just plain) tall is true at every world at which Tom has any degree of height at all" (MacFarlane 2007: 242).²²

According to nonindexical contextualism, indexicalism and contextualism make the same error: they mistake intuitions about the truth-values

of certain utterances (intuitions revealed by the CSA) for intuitions about the truth-conditions of those very utterances (or about the propositions they express). For MacFarlane, the variation in truth-values of the different utterances of (4) or (17) is not caused by a variation in their content (or truth-conditions), but by a variation in their circumstances of evaluation. The circumstances of evaluation contain a parameter for the possible world and a parameter “counts-as” – which is a function from properties (like “tall”, “green”, etc.) to intensions:

The “counts-as” parameter is so called because it fixes what things have to be like in order to count as having the property of tallness (or any other property) at a circumstance of evaluation
(MacFarlane 2007: 246).

In other words, sentences like (4) or (17) are context sensitive not in the sense that they express different propositions in different contexts, but in the sense that the truth, or falsity, of their occurrences depends on the circumstance in which they are evaluated.

According to MacFarlane, the “counts-as” parameter is determined by certain features of the context of utterance, such as the conversation subject matter, or the speaker’s intentions. The parameter for (4) will change, for instance, if we are discussing jockeys (C1) or basketball players (C2). The circumstances of evaluation of C1 and C2 may well be different, even if they are situated at the same possible world: two occurrences of (4) may then have different truth-values even if they express the same proposition.

In a similar vein, Stefano Predelli offers an interesting alternative defence of the traditional view, indicating a form of contextuality intervening “at the post-compositional level”, i.e. not at the level of “what is said” (the level of the truth-conditions), but at the level of the evaluation of “what is said” (the level of the truth-values). Arguing in favour of traditional compositional modules, Predelli tries to provide a semantic account of sentence-index pairs that avoids the semantic opulence of the indexicalist view and the pragmatic opulence of the contextualists, who postulate pragmatic processes (such as free enrichment or strengthening) at the semantic level (Predelli 2005a, 2005b).

MacFarlane's position has been labelled "relativism" by some – for the truth-values of (4) and (17) are thought to be relative to a possible world and an additional parameter. Consider the sentences:

- (23) Pitt is more handsome than Depp
- (24) Tom knows that the bank is open
- (25) Greece might win the world cup.

In the same line of thought as MacFarlane's, some argue that the truth of (4), (17) and (23)–(25) must be relativised not only to a parameter for a possible world, but also to a "counts-as" parameter (for (4) and (17)), or to a standard of taste (for (23)), or to practical interests (for (24)), or to a state of knowledge (for (25)).²³

6. Conclusion

Several issues are still open. For one thing, some clarification on the notion of semantic intuitions would surely be welcome, along with more extensive reflection on the role that intuitions play – or must play – in semantic theories. Moreover, contextualism (even in its moderate or nonindexical versions) faces the problem of determining to what degree contextual information should enrich the minimal proposition. More generally, the contextualist view should put some constraints on the proliferation of the relevant parameters in cases like (17):

the worry is not so much that we'll have *too many* parameters, but that there will be *no end* to the addition of such parameters. The worry is that such proliferation would make systematic semantics impossible
(MacFarlane 2009: 246).

The main open point concerns the consequences the debate between minimalism and contextualism has for the semantics/pragmatics distinction (Bianchi 2004; Szabò 2005; Turner 1999). In a minimalist perspective, semantics and pragmatics are considered complementary research fields: semantics studies the

conventional meaning of linguistic expressions, while pragmatics deals with how speakers use expressions in context. In other words, pragmatic processes play a role at the *semantic* level only in cases of indexicality – in helping to determine “what is said” by an utterance. Otherwise, they are involved at the *pre-semantic* level, to pick up the appropriate syntactic construct in cases of ambiguity and ellipsis, and finally at the *post-semantic* level, for the derivation of conversational implicatures (Perry 1998). Contextualists rethink the distinction between semantics and pragmatics as traditionally conceived: they claim that semantics can offer only incomplete interpretations. From this perspective, semantics no longer has the task of giving truth-conditions: this task is now proper to pragmatics, or to “truth-conditional pragmatics”.

We face a continuum of different proposals. At one end, from the minimalist perspective, it is possible to assign truth-conditions to sentences of natural languages, relying on their conventional meaning and contextually fixing the reference of indexicals and demonstratives. At the other end lies radical contextualism, which claims that in order to obtain a complete proposition (i.e. complete truth-conditions), it is *always* necessary to resort to pragmatic processes. Indexicalism and non-indexical contextualism are intermediate positions: the former claims that all truth-conditional effects can be traced to indexicals (overt or covert) at logical form; the latter claims that the truth-conditions of an utterance are given in a minimalist way, but the truth of the utterance is relativised to an additional parameter, the context of assessment. According to many scholars, the non indexical contextualist solution succeeds in explaining away certain apparent contradictions in the linguistic practices relative to epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions, conditionals, ethical and aesthetic discourse, without jeopardising any prospect of a systematic semantic theory.

Moreover, it is important to underline that the radical contextualist perspective indicates a kind of semantic context sensitivity that has nothing to do with the forms of contextual dependence that minimalism can account for, i.e. ambiguity, ellipsis, indexicality or implicit meaning. According to radical contextualism, (a) the linguistic meaning of *any* expression underdetermines its truth-conditions – context sensitivity becomes a general *property* of meaning; (b) the contextual factors that could become relevant for determining the truth-conditions of a sentence cannot be specified in advance: they are not meaning-controlled.

The contribution of context to the truth-conditions of a sentence goes beyond what is triggered by the presence of a linguistic expression. The mode of dependence is not given – in other words it is not determined independently of the occasion of use: it depends on context itself. Independently of any context whatsoever, it is impossible to specify a state of affairs that, if realised, would make a sentence like (4) or (17) true: its conventional meaning determines a set of truth-conditions only with regard to certain assumptions, practices, goals, ways of doing things.

Notes

1. If we abstract from ellipsis, ambiguity and indexicality strictly understood: cf. *infra*, § 2.

2. Recanati 1993: 267n, 2007; this characterisation refers to the radical version of contextualism – the one defended by Recanati and Relevance theorists: cf. *infra* § 4.

3. Cf. the critique of the Incompleteness Argument in Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 33–38, 59–68. Propositions are indicated in small caps.

4. This is not the only analysis available to minimalists. According to Cappelen & Lepore 2005, for example, an utterance of a sentence expresses indefinitely many propositions: it is the thesis called “Speech Act Pluralism”. The expanded proposition IT RAINS IN THE PLACE RELEVANT FOR SPEAKER AND ADDRESSEE is the one underlying our truth-value judgements about the *speech act*, but it is not the proposition *semantically expressed*.

5. On this example see *infra*, § 5.

6. For a discussion of the quantifier domain restriction, see also Gauker 1997; for a critique, Bianchi 2006.

7. Cf. Perry 1986, § 1 and Perry 1998. Perry 1986 seems neutral with respect to the issue whether the presumed unarticulated constituent is only superficially unarticulated, i.e. whether it is at all present at logical form.

8. Cf. Wittgenstein 1953 § 43: “For a large class of cases – though not for *all* – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’, it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language”.

9. Cf. Waismann 1940: 118: “The question of the verification arises only when we come across a new sort of combination of words... when we say ‘The dog thinks’, we create

a new context, we step outside the boundaries of common speech, and then the question arises as to what is meant by such a word series". Cf. Wittgenstein 1953: § 250.

10. Exemplified by (2) and (3) in § 4.1 and represented in (5)–(15) by the bracketed linguistic material.

11. See the discussion on *ad hoc* concepts in Carston 2002, ch. 5.

12. See, for example, Grice 1989: 87.

13. See Recanati 1995, 2004a: 14, 2001: 79–80; cf. Gibbs & Moise 1997. Searle and Travis have similar views concerning intuitive truth-conditions: cf. Searle 1992 and Travis 1997.

14. The Binding Criterion is proposed by Stanley 2000: 410: "A contextual ingredient in the interpretation of a sentence *S* results from saturation if it can be 'bound', that is, if it can be made to vary with the values introduced by some operator prefixed to *S*"; the Optionality Criterion is proposed by Recanati 2004a: 101: "Whenever a contextual ingredient of content is provided through a pragmatic process of the optional variety, we can imagine another possible context of utterance in which no such ingredient is provided yet the utterance expresses a complete proposition"; the Embedding Test, proposed by Carston, is based on Recanati's Scope Principle: "A pragmatically determined aspect of meaning is part of what is said (and, therefore, not a conversational implicature) if – and, perhaps, only if – it falls within the scope of logical operators such as negation and conditionals" (Carston 2002: 191); for the Availability Principle see *supra*, § 4.3.

15. Involving what Bach calls "sentence nonliterality": Bach 2002; cf. Bach 2001: 26, Bach 2004, Taylor 2001.

16. Cf. Carston 2004a: 640: "the underlying issue is whether there is any psychologically real level of representation between encoded linguistic semantics and explicature, a level of minimal propositionality at which saturation processes alone have taken place"; cf. Carston 2004b. For a discussion, see Bianchi 2009, ch. IV.

17. Cf. Recanati 2004b: 48–49. Relevance theorists, and Carston in particular, are more cautious than Recanati about the notion of truth-conditional intuitions: cf. Carston 2002: 168–169.

18. Cf. Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 58: "semantics is a discipline that aims to characterize systematically certain features of linguistic expressions and to do so in a way that captures general truths about languages, and not just truths about particular speakers in specific contexts".

19. Sbisà dubs "evaluational contextualism" the two brands of contextualism proposed by Gauker and MacFarlane: see Sbisà forthcoming.

20. For the distinction between moderate and radical relativism, see Recanati 2007.
21. Even if, according to Speech Act Pluralism, in different contexts, it is possible to perform different speech acts having different contents.
22. MacFarlane's example is "Chiara is tall".
23. Cf. Kölbel 2008: 4. Recanati argues that his moderate relativism is equivalent to MacFarlane's nonindexical contextualism – contrary to MacFarlane's own opinion: Recanati 2008: 10n, MacFarlane 2005: 325. MacFarlane claims that his nonindexical contextualism is similar to the position held by Predelli 2005b: MacFarlane 2009: 246n. Note that merely adding an extra parameter ("counts-as") is relativistic in the moderate sense of Kölbel and Recanati, but not in MacFarlane's sense. According to MacFarlane 2009: 248, in non-indexical contextualism truth-evaluation depends on the context of the utterance to be assessed, while in relativism it depends on the context of assessment: "Whereas nonindexical contextualism lets the epistemic standard parameter be initialized by the context of use, relativism lets it be initialized by the context of assessment".

References

- AUSTIN, J. (1961). *Philosophical Papers*. J. Urmson & G. Warnock (eds.) (1979) 3rd ed. Oxford University Press.
- BACH, K. (2001). You don't say? *Synthèse* 128: 15–44.
- (2002). Seemingly semantic intuitions. In J. Keim Campbell, M.O' Rourke & D. Shier (eds.) *Meaning and Truth*: 21–33. Seven Bridges Press.
- (2004). Minding the Gap. In C. Bianchi (ed.): 27–43.
- BEZUIDENHOUT, A. (2002). Truth-Conditional Pragmatics. *Philosophical Perspectives* 16: 105–34.
- BIANCHI, C. (2003). How to Refer: Objective Context vs. Intentional Context. In P. Blackburn et al. (eds.) *Modeling and Using Context, CONTEXT '03, Lecture Notes in Artificial Intelligence*, vol. 2680: 54–65. Springer.
- (2006). 'Nobody loves me': Quantification and context. *Philosophical Studies* 130: 377–97.
- (2009). *Pragmatica cognitiva. I meccanismi della comunicazione*. Laterza.
- (ed.) (2004). *The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction*. CSLI Publications.
- BORG, E. (2004). *Minimal Semantics*. Clarendon Press.
- (2007). Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics. In G. Preyer & G. Peter (eds.) *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism. New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*: 339–359. Oxford University Press.
- CAPPELEN, H. & E. LEPORE (2005). *Insensitive Semantics. A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. Blackwell.
- CARSTON, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances: the pragmatics of explicit communication*. Blackwell.

- (2004a). Relevance Theory and the Saying/Implicating Distinction. In L.R. Horn & G. Ward (eds.) *Handbook of Pragmatics*: 633–656. Blackwell.
- (2004b). Truth-Conditional Content and Conversational Implicature. In C. Bianchi (ed.): 65–100.
- CORAZZA, E. (2007). Contextualism, minimalism, and situationalism. *Pragmatics and Cognition* (1): 115–137.
- CORAZZA, E. & J. DOKIC (2007). Sense and Insensibility Or Where Minimalism Meets Contextualism. In G. Preyer & G. Peter (eds.) *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism. New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*: 169–193. Oxford University Press.
- GARCIA-CARPINTERO, M. & M. KÖLBEL (eds.) (2008) *Relative Truth*. Oxford University Press.
- GAUKER, C. (1997). Domain of Discourse. *Mind* 106: 1–32.
- (2003). *Words without meaning*. MIT Press.
- GIBBS, R. & J. MOISE (1997). Pragmatics in Understanding What is Said. *Cognition* 62: 51–74.
- GRICE, H.P. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press.
- KAPLAN, D. (1989). Afterthoughts. In J. Almog, J. Perry & H. Wettstein (eds.) *Themes from Kaplan*: 565–614. Oxford University Press.
- KÖLBEL, M. (2008). Introduction: Motivations for Relativism. In M. Garcia-Carpintero & M. Kölbel (eds.): 1–40.
- MACFARLANE, J. (2005). Making Sense of Relative Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105: 321–39.
- (2007). Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism. In G. Preyer & G. Peter (eds.) *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism. New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*: 240–250. Oxford University Press.
- (2009). Nonindexical Contextualism. *Synthese* 166: 231–250.
- PERRY, J. (1986). Thought without Representation. In J. Perry (ed.) (1993) *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*: 205–218. Oxford University Press.
- (1998). Indexicals, Contexts and Unarticulated Constituents. In A. Aliseda, R. van Gabeek & D. Westerstahl (eds.) *Computing Natural Language*: 1–11. CSLI Publications.
- PREDELLI, S. (2005a). *Contexts. Meaning, Truth, and the Use of Language*. Oxford University Press.
- (2005b). Painted Leaves, Context, and Semantic Analysis. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28: 351–74.
- RECANATI, F. (1993). *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*. Blackwell.
- (1995). The Alleged Priority of Literal Interpretation. *Cognitive Science* 19: 207–232.
- (2001). What is Said. *Synthese* 128: 75–91.
- (2004a). *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- (2004b). ‘What is said’ and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction. In C. Bianchi (ed.): 45–64.
- (2007). *Perspectival Thought. A Plea for (Moderate) Relativism*. Oxford University Press.
- (2008). Moderate Relativism. In M. Garcia-Carpintero & M. Kölbel (eds.): 41–62.
- SBISA, M. (forthcoming) Contextualism without incompleteness. *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy*.
- SEARLE, J. (1979). *Expression and Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1980). The Background of Meaning. In J. Searle, F. Kiefer & M. Bierwisch (eds.) *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*: 221–232. D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- (1992). *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. MIT Press.
- SPERBER, D. & D. WILSON (1986/1995). *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell.

- STANLEY, J. (2000). Context and logical form. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23: 391–434.
- STANLEY, J. & Z. SZABÒ (2000) On Quantifier Domain Restriction. *Mind and Language* 15(2): 219–261.
- SZABÒ, Z.G. (2006). Sensitivity training. *Mind and Language* 21(1): 31–38.
- (ed.) (2005). *Semantics Versus Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- TAYLOR, K. (2001). Sex, breakfast, and descriptus interruptus. *Synthese* 128: 45–61.
- TRAVIS, Ch. (1975). *Saying and Understanding*. Blackwell.
- (1981). *The True and the False: the Domain of Pragmatics*. Benjamins.
- (1985). On What Is Strictly Speaking True. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15: 187–229.
- (1996). Meaning’s Role in Truth. *Mind* 105: 451–466.
- (1997). Pragmatics. In B. Hale & C. Wright (eds.) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*: 87–107. Blackwell.
- TURNER, K. (ed.) (1999). *The Semantics/Pragmatics Interface from Different Points of View. (Current Research in the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface, vol. 1)*. Elsevier.
- WAISMANN, F. (1940). Verifiability. In A. Flew (ed.) (1951) *Logic and Language*. Blackwell.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1953). *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Blackwell.