

Reframing the Debate between Contextualism and Minimalism

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Abstract. The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is often seen as a discussion about where to place pragmatic inferences: while minimalists think that they only come into play after the proposition is grasped, for contextualists, there are already pragmatic processes in the very determination of what is said, leading to *ad hoc* conceptual adjustments. There is, however, another way to look at this matter: we may keep a sensitive truth-distribution across contexts without *ad hoc* conceptual manoeuvres. An intuitive distribution of truth-values may be explained as a variation in (kaplanian) circumstances, without any tampering with sentence constituents. This way of understanding the debate connects, maybe surprisingly, a first reaction to the semantics-pragmatics divide, in Cavell, and Predelli's original stance on this debate.

Keywords: Semantics, Contextualism, Pragmatics.

1.

We may think that Cavell's claim here concerns presuppositions, but he doesn't seem to be aiming at inferences authorized by some sort of logic. In order to identify what we must do, we have to look at situations in which one's actions, both linguistic and non-linguistic, receive a negative evaluation. In order to see the importance of this sort of consideration for the debate between contextualism and minimalism, let us take a step forward.

2.

These very early reactions don't represent the complexity of the positions in the present debate. However, I think that it pays off to see a similar discussion before its terms have been settled. Here is very rough description of the theoretical landscape today. If the truth-conditions of a sentence in a context results exclusively from a compositional mechanism, pragmatic inferences enter the scene only after the proposition is grasped by the hearer (Recanati's secondary pragmatic processes). However, if there are pragmatic inferences in the very determination of what is said, pragmatics mechanisms have a pre-propositional role (Recanati's primary pragmatic processes) (Recanati 2004).

Minimalists claim that a contextual effect on the proposition expressed by a sentence results exclusively from a compositional mechanism taking as input the meanings of its

terms. This account keeps a strictly compositional determination of the truth-conditions. For contextualists, there are contextual effects on the proposition expressed that are not meaning-controlled. Let us see the different reactions to the famous story of the green leaves:

Pia's Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Believing that green is the colour of leaves, she paints them. Returning, she reports, 'That's better. The leaves are green now.' She speaks truth. A botanist friend then phones, seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry. 'The leaves (on my tree) are green,' Pia says. 'You can have those.' But now Pia speaks falsehood. (Travis 1997: 89)

Let Pia's first utterance be

1. The leaves are green,

and the second utterance be

2. The leaves are green.

1 seems to be true, and 2 false, but both talk about the same state of the world. There are some options open for the minimalist. She may consider that 1 and 2 have different truth-conditions, either in virtue of a hidden indexical component, or because 'green' has different meanings in each utterance, so that they are not utterances of the same sentence after all. The minimalist may also claim that 1 and 2 have the same truth-conditions, but different implicatures. Only in the first approach is there a contextual effect triggered by the meaning of a word, but they all deny any sort of free enrichment, that is, the truth-conditions are determined exclusively by a compositional mechanism. Let us call these solutions 'INDEXICAL,' 'AMBIGUITY,' and 'IMPLICATURE'. There is another of seeing 1 and 2 as having different truth-values and keeping a strict compositional determination of their truth-conditions: they are evaluated at different circumstances. Let us call this solution, due to Predelli (2005), 'CIRCUMSTANCE.' Contextualists claim that the difference in truth-conditions between 1 and 2 is not explained by a compositional process, but by an adjustment of the concept 'green' to the context of use, in Relevant theoretic terms, by the creation of an *ad hoc* concept. This is solution may be called 'FREE ENRICHMENT.'

There are different ways to organize the responses to this case. We may put together the solutions that keep the intuitive difference of truth-conditions between 1 and 2 (INDEXICAL, AMBIGUITY, CIRCUMSTANCE, and FREE ENRICHMENT), in opposition to IMPLICATURE. We may also use the principle of compositionality as the criterion: INDEXICAL, AMBIGUITY, IMPLICATURE, and (maybe) CIRCUMSTANCE keep a strict compositional determination of truth-conditions, as opposed to FREE ENRICHMENT. For INDEXICAL, AMBIGUITY, and IMPLICATURE, every difference in truth-conditions, if any, is explained by a difference in the stable meanings of the terms, and this is refused by CIRCUMSTANCE and FREE ENRICHMENT. But there is still another to classify these solutions: for INDEXICAL, AMBIGUITY, IMPLICATURE and FREE ENRICHMENT, the distinction of truth-conditions, if any, is traced to the different contributions of the terms of the sentence, while for CIRCUMSTANCE the difference lies in the circumstance of

evaluation.

I

Different truth-conditions	Same truth-conditions
INDEXICAL AMBIGUITY CIRCUMSTANCE FREE ENRICHMENT	IMPLICATURE

II

Difference (if any) only compositional	Differences not only compositional
INDEXICAL AMBIGUITY IMPLICATURE CIRCUMSTANCE?	FREE ENRICHMENT

III

Difference (if any) in stable meanings	Difference not only in stable meanings
INDEXICAL AMBIGUITY IMPLICATURE	FREE ENRICHMENT CIRCUMSTANCE

IV

Difference (if any) in the meanings	Difference not only in the meanings
INDEXICAL AMBIGUITY IMPLICATURE FREE ENRICHMENT	CIRCUMSTANCE

Why is CIRCUMSTANCE an outlier in table IV? In a semantic system, utterances are represented as sentence-context pairs, or, in Predelli's terminology (2005), clause-index pairs. An interpretive system should assign to a clause-index pair an intuitive assignment of truth-values across circumstances or points of evaluation, that is, an intuitive t-distribution. A formal system is empirically adequate if it has an intuitive t-distribution, in this case, the same clause-index pair being true at the point of evaluation 1, and false at 2. But this is all a semantic theory sees. The theorist should be attuned to variations in purpose leading to 1 being true and 2 false and choose accordingly a representational system with an intuitive t-distribution. This sensitivity is not, however, part of a semantic theory. While IMPLICATURE does not deliver an intuitive t-distribution, the mistake of FREE ENRICHMENT, but also of INDEXICAL and AMBIGUITY, is to construe this sensitivity back into the meanings of the terms. The reason why sentences have this t-distribution is part of the pre-theoretical task of choosing of a framework – in Carnap's terminology, it is an external question. That is why CIRCUMSTANCE is an outlier in table IV. Let us start now our way back to Cavell.

3.

Cavell has two lines of response to Mates: calling for a yet-to-be-created logic of ordinary language, and suggesting that the sort of commitment that goes beyond what is encoded in the language should be found in a more elusive understanding of what kind of action is appropriate in a given circumstance. There are different ways to deploy a logic of ordinary language, specifying inferences that will explain what is conveyed beyond what is said. In the contextualist tradition, these pragmatic inferences will find its way back into the determination of what is said, in different contextualist frameworks. (This is probably not the way Cavell would construe his answer after this paper, may not even in this paper – my claim is that this is the way the logic of ordinary language has taken).

It is less clear how this latter move could be built from Cavell's second response. Cavell's second answer and Predelli's stance converge here, surprisingly maybe, in suggesting that what explains the variation of evaluation is not be found in a semantic theory, as Predelli has it, nor in some sort of backtracking of a logic of ordinary language, as Cavell sways from his first to his second answer. For Cavell, what is appropriate or not in a given context comes naturally to us. This also seems to be a reasonable description of Predelli's semanticist, who understands the "infinitely complex contexts" (Cavell 1958: 185; Mates 1958: 168) in which 'green' is used and represents this complexity in an intuitive t-distribution, a sheer intuitive t-distribution, as it were. However, why he has made this choice is not part of the theory, or at least not of the semantic theory.

It is a sort of occasion-sensitive language, that is not built at the expenses of stable meanings, unlike FREE ENRICHMENT. If we refrain from mending stable meanings, against INDEXICAL and AMBIGUITY, we may still have an intuitive t-distribution, in contrast with IMPLICATURES, by understanding the role of the distribution of truth-evaluations across points of evaluation as responding to our intuitive judgements.

Finding Cavell and Predelli in the same neighbourhood suggests a new way of framing the debate. The sensitivity to contextual variations that is reflected in semantics doesn't have to be explained by the semantic machinery, nor by displacing pragmatics inferences. Not everything to which an agent is sensitive is represented, either via what is encoded in the language or inferentially. We are not caught in the dichotomy between conventional meanings and inferential mechanisms.

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