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**What we mean, what we think we mean,  
and how language surprises us**

Barry C Smith  
Birkbeck College  
University of London

***1. Introduction***

In uttering a sentence we are often taken to assert more than its literal meaning — though we sometimes assert less. For example, when some says ‘I haven’t eaten’ it is seldom, if ever, taken to express the improbable claim that the speaker has never ingested food. Robyn Carston and others take this phenomenon to show that what is said or asserted by a speaker on an occasion is usually a contextually-enriched version of the semantic content of the sentence uttered. I shall argue that we can resist this conclusion if we recognize that what we think we are asserting, or take others to be asserting, involves selective attention to one of the ways the sentence could be true while neglecting others. Most of the time people converge in their selective attention and so communication is not impaired; though in the case of sentences involving predicates of taste people’s selective attention to different aspect of the truth conditions of the sentence can lead to seemingly intractable disputes. I will propose a treatment of such cases on which speakers can mean the same thing by a sentence, assert no more than its semantic content, and yet hold conflicting opinions about its truth-value and both be right.

## 2. *Semantics and Pragmatics*

In ‘Linguistic Meaning, Communicated Meaning and Cognitive Pragmatics’ (2002), Robyn Carston distinguishes between a philosophical and a cognitive science perspective on linguistic communication. Philosophers of language mostly concentrate on semantic issues and regard pragmatics as concerned with the problems left over by semantics. Cognitive scientists, on the other hand, see pragmatics as concerned with the mental processes that yield interpretations of people’s utterances in a context. The two approaches seem to pass each other by, with philosophers of language concentrating on the semantic properties of *expression types*, and cognitive scientists concentrating on how speakers and listeners communicate through *utterances*. However, this division of labour understates the potential consequences cognitive pragmatics has for philosophy of language. For if pragmatic processes must be invoked in order to fix something propositional — the explicitly communicated proposition — then the standard view of semantics as accounting for the way declarative sentences express propositions falls by the wayside.

Recently, philosophers of language have begun to see the potential impact on their subject of accepting the conclusions of cognitive pragmatics and have started fighting a rearguard action (see, in particular, Cappelen and Lepore 2005). Such defenses often trade on the distinction Carston draws between semantic theories being about what *words* and *sentences* mean, and theories in pragmatics being about what *speakers* mean and *how* they communicate. Philosophers of language try to rescue the mission of semantics by making it either the study of minimal propositions (whatever they are)<sup>1</sup> literally expressed by sentences, or the sub-propositional contents sentences express<sup>2</sup>; neither of which look very much like the contents the folk consider to be the literal meaning of their sentences. In response, advocates of cognitive pragmatics suggest that what *we* mean in using a sentence is almost never what the *sentence* means; instead we rely on a great deal of non-linguistic inference to figure out what is said when a sentence is uttered in a given context. However, the ordinary speaker’s intuition is that what someone says in uttering a

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<sup>1</sup> See Cappelen and Lepore’s notion of a minimal proposition in their 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See Kent Bach’s notion of a propositional radical in Bach 1994 and 2001.

sentence is closely tied to the words they used to say it. ‘I took him at his word’, we say, and, ‘He may have meant something else but this is what he said’. I think there’s something right about the ordinary speaker’s intuition but in order to respect that intuition one must reject the view that the literal meaning of an uttered sentence is either the proposition the semantic minimalist points to, or the incomplete proposition solely determined by the meaning of the sentence’s syntactic constituents and the way they are put together. A more sympathetic construal of the (naïve) intuition — that what you said is tied to the words you used to say it— requires a re-working of the of the notion of *literal meaning* in order to connect it more closely with the thought typically, or most often, communicated by use of a sentence. Nevertheless, a distinction exists between what we *take* ourselves to be saying in our use of words, and what we *actually* say by means of them. And neither the philosopher of language nor the cognitive scientist on Carston’s picture has the relation between these two things exactly right.

The problem is the use made of the notion of *proposition* and *truth condition* in both semantic and pragmatic theorizing. The notion of proposition and truth condition are assumed to go together, on the one side, but to diverge from what is explicitly expressed by a sentence, on the other. I shall reject this assumption by offering an account involving what we say, what we think we say, and what we communicate. But before doing so, I want to examine the cognitive pragmatic view of the distance between the literal meaning of expressions and what is explicitly communicated by utterance of them.

### ***3. The Context Sensitivity of ‘What is Said’***

The key claim about context sensitivity is that a sentence uttered, in different contexts of use, or by different people in the same context, can be understood differently, even though the sentence itself is not lexically or syntactically ambiguous. Examples include utterances of:

- (1) The leaves are green
- (2) John’s car is red

- (3) It is raining
- (4) The wine is beautifully balanced

In each of these cases a speaker may mean something different by his or her utterance of the sentence in different contexts, and different speakers may mean different things by utterance of the same sentence in the same contexts. In (2) speakers may be talking about the car owned by John, stolen by John, or the car John bet on. In (3) what is said depends on the time and place of the utterance. What should we conclude from such cases? They clearly point to context-sensitivity in the *use* and *understanding* of the sentences concerned. But what, if anything should we conclude about the *semantic content* of the sentences themselves? The temptation has been to think that variability in how *utterances* of these sentences are understood across contexts means variability in what those *sentences* express in those contexts. But the conclusion is hasty. A more guarded claim is that when a sentence is uttered in different contexts, different *utterance contents*, or *speech act contents* are expressed, despite the sentence's having the same *semantic content* on each occasion. As it is often put, the utterance or speech act content goes beyond the semantic content of the sentence uttered.

What then explains the variability in utterance or speech act content? Relevance theorists like Carston assume that since the semantic content of a sentence typically fails, by itself, to determine the thought-content communicated by an utterance of the sentence, as in (2), and that cognitive processes are needed to get at the thought-content conveyed. In fact, pragmatic processes are always involved in the interpretation of speech, according to Carston, since the sentence uttered (almost) always underdetermines the content communicated by speaker to hearer. As she puts it:

The semantics of the linguistic expression type employed in an utterance, while clearly crucial to comprehension, is seen as having just an evidential role, rather than a fully determining, role in the identification of what a speaker has explicitly communicated ('what is said') (Carston, 2002 p.130)

The pragmatic processes work to make up the shortfall between what is made available to the listener by the linguistically encoded content of the uttered sentence, and the thought content conveyed to the listener by its utterance:

The linguistically encoded element of an utterance is not generally geared towards achieving as high a degree of explicitness as possible, but rather more towards keeping processing effort down (ibid. p.130)

I agree. But what should we conclude? Do speakers intend to convey more than their words alone succeed in expressing? Carston certainly thinks so:

...the linguistic contribution [of the uttered sentence] is not propositional, it is not a complete semantic entity, not truth-evaluable (ibid. p.134)

The linguistic material produced fails to fix a truth-evaluable content,<sup>3</sup> nevertheless a propositional thought is communicated, so it is the task of cognitive pragmatics to say how this achieved.

There are a several things to note about Carston's view. First, it assumes that what gets communicated or conveyed is a truth-evaluable proposition:

...what is communicated, that is the output of the pragmatic processor, is usually a set of fully propositional thoughts or assumptions, which are either true or false of an external state of affairs in the world. (ibid., p.134)

There may be more than one proposition recovered in cases where there are explicitly *and* implicitly communicated propositions. But I shall concentrate on the explicitly communicated propositions since these are, 'in some sense, built out of [upon] the semantic template contributed by the linguistic expression used' (ibid., p.134)

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<sup>3</sup> I won't discuss those who, like John MacFarlane, assume propositions can lack truth values but still be true or false relative to contexts of assessment. See MacFarlane's 2007.

Second, the picture assumes that the proposition communicated is seldom, if ever, entirely fixed by the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered:

...linguistically decoded information is usually very incomplete and...pragmatic inference plays an essential role in the derivation of the proposition explicitly communicated. (ibid., p.133)

Not only is it the case that the sentence uttered fails to provide evidence of precisely *which* proposition the speaker intends to convey, it supposedly fails to *express* a proposition at all. (On this point Carston and radical minimalists like Kent Bach agree). A successful linguistic act results in the recovery by a hearer of a proposition conveyed by a speaker. So pragmatics needs to explain the means by which the hearer derives the proposition explicitly communicated.

This programme has potentially worrying consequences for the semanticist because if it is propositions that have truth conditions, and pragmatic processes are needed to arrive at propositions, then pragmatic processes will be required to derive anything truth conditional. Hence, for anyone who thinks truth conditions belong in the domain of semantics, there would appear to be no clear boundary between semantics and pragmatics; no boundary between what is fixed by the semantic properties of expressions and what is fixed by the cognitive processing of those expressions in context. To maintain a firm boundary between semantics and pragmatics one would have to show how an uttered sentence could so much as express a proposition, or else settle for the conclusion that sentences expressed only incomplete propositional functions from which hearers somehow figured out the proposition the speaker intended to communicate.

H.P. Grice, of course, had a different story about how we get from the proposition expressed by an uttered sentence ('what is said') to a (further) proposition conveyed by its utterance ('what is meant'). But Grice was over-sanguine about being able to find a single or complete proposition determined by the semantic constituents of the sentence

and the way they are syntactically put together. That's why semantic minimalists work so hard to do to show that the constituents and structure of sentences *do* determine truth-evaluable propositions.

Contextualists and relevance theorists, if they are prepared to acknowledge the existence of such theoretically-motivated minimal propositions, can argue that they play no role in the processes by which a hearer arrives at the proposition communicated by a speaker. Pragmatics begins with processes that adjust the meanings of expressions used, and enrich the sentence structure in the light of certain features of the context to reach relevant interpretations of utterances in context. No use is made at any stage of the literal meaning of the sentence-type.<sup>4</sup> Radical minimalists, like Bach, do take sentence meanings to make a contribution to interpretation but these incomplete propositions must be augmented by the hearer to reach the communicated content of the utterance.

#### ***4. Maintaining Semantics***

So we appear to face the following options. Either the pragmatic processing of utterances, rather than the literal meaning of sentences, enables speakers to grasp the thoughts (truth-evaluable propositions) they convey; *or*, the literal semantic content of a sentence is a minimal proposition that plays no role in the interpretation of the utterance, but may be asserted alongside the propositional content(s) explicitly communicated and pragmatically retrieved by the hearer; *or*, uttered sentences express something less than a proposition.

All of these options assume that speakers assert more than, or diverging from, the literal meaning of the sentences they utter. Contextualists and relevance theorists claim that *what is said* or asserted by a speaker on an occasion is a contextually-enriched or modified version of the semantic contents of the expressions used. Semantic minimalists concede

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<sup>4</sup> Examples like 'I haven't had breakfast' 'Don't eat between meals' are almost never recognised as expressing what they literally state, but are usually interpreted as augmented or modified as follows: 'I haven't had breakfast [this morning]', 'Don't eat between {each meal you normally eat}'.

that what is said or asserted is not the proposition understood in context (and may not even be a proposition). For the philosopher of language, the crucial assumption behind these approaches is that we need something *more* than the meaningful and grammatically arranged constituents of a sentence to arrive at the truth conditional content of its utterance: the proposition communicated.<sup>5</sup> The search for the truth-evaluable propositional content conveyed drives contextualists and relevance theorists to depart from the literal meaning of the sentence uttered, and drives semantic minimalists to embrace a linguistically determined but dismally thin proposition bearing no resemblance to the contents speakers and hearers recognize as being in play in their exchanges.

But need we accept any of these views? No. There is another option overlooked by all parties to the debate: namely, that given what a sentence means there is more than one way for it to be true; and in context, users of a sentence usually entertain only one of these ways for it to be true. When we regularly take a particular sentence to be claiming only one of the things it could be taken to be claiming given what it means, this amounts to its *intuitively understood literal meaning*. Of course, a less intuitive, and highly theoretical notion of *what is literally expressed* can be constructed to bring out aspects of a sentence's meaning that were previously unnoticed. It is these other, unusual, ways of taking a sentence to be true that lead some to suppose that the same sentence can express different propositions in different contexts. However, all a sentence's meaning does is constrain the way things have to be in the world in order for that sentence to be true, and this will encompass more ways of being true than we usually consider. When thinking of what a sentence says we selectively attend to just one of the ways in which the sentence could be true. Take (1) for example:

(1) The leaves are green

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<sup>5</sup> Even less than the utterance of a sentence will do if Stainton is right and non-sentential utterances, like 'Nice dress' can also convey propositional contents. See Stainton 2005, 2006.



Most people on hearing an utterance of (1) while contemplating a tree in a garden would suppose the leaves to be naturally green. That's the natural thing to think given our usual understanding of (1). However, Charles Travis exploits this example by citing cases where Pia has painted the russet leaves on her tree green. Is (1) true here? Travis concludes that since the first way of taking the sentence to be true is not the same as the second, (1) expresses (means) different things on different occasions; that (1) can be used to assert different truths. Sometimes what it says would be true, sometimes it would be false. Travis concludes that sentences have at most occasion-sensitive meanings, and only in context can they express something capable of being true or false.<sup>6</sup>

But that's not the only way to react to such examples. We could say that the sentence is true under both conditions since, for all it says, it simply has to be that the leaves are green for it to be true. Both count as ways of making (1) true, even though the second way to take (1) is highly unnatural. The meaning of the sentence places no qualification on the way in which the leaves are green. The natural way for leaves to be green is just one way of fitting what the sentence says. In using (1) we express something about reality that could be realized in many more ways than we at first recognize. Despite that we often manage to get across something more specific than is actually said. Our use of language is not as precise or explicit as we think. Nonetheless, we succeed in communicating with others because they, like us, selectively attend to the most usual or natural way of taking what is expressed to be true: they focus on the same salient circumstances.

We are surprised to discover there are other ways for reality to fit what a sentence says. As ordinary speakers, we consider the intuitive way of understanding it as its literal meaning. The more precise and demanding notion of literal meaning is typically overlooked by all save Asperger's syndrome subjects for whom the non-obvious situations may be more accessible.<sup>7</sup> We take (1) to express the claim that the leaves are

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<sup>6</sup> See Travis 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Reported cases include a child who became distressed when told by the teacher: 'Stick your coat over there' because he could find no glue. (see Frith and Happé 1996)

naturally green. This is what we think makes (1) true. But this is not to say, with Travis, that in one context (1) would be true, and in another, it would be false. Of course, it is misleading to say (1) when the leaves have been painted green, given what we ordinarily think (1) says, but given what it actually says, the unusual situation is still a way of making it true. There is more than one way for reality to conform to what a sentence says.

We can now see that part of the trouble is due to the conception of *literal meaning*, *truth condition* and *proposition* in semantic and pragmatic theorizing. The intuitive notion of what speakers literally mean by their utterances coincides with what they intuitively take their sentences to mean, where this is just one way of taking those sentence to be true. In pragmatic theories, truth conditions enter only at the level of utterance interpretation coinciding with the explicitly communicated proposition retrieved by pragmatic processing. But that's a mistake. The sentence uttered was true (or false) all along, even be true under conditions that may surprise us. The sentence's truth conditions cover circumstances not even considered by speakers and hearers who use the sentence. When we do come to appreciate that a sentence could be true in circumstances previously unconsidered, we recognize those circumstances to be compatible with what the sentence says. Thus it is a mistake to suppose that truth conditions only appear with the proposition normally communicated. True, the natural way of take a sentence to be true pairs with our intuitive understanding of what is said in uttering the sentence, and this coincides with certain pragmatic interpretations. However, when we come to see what else could make the sentence true, consistent with what it means, we recognize something that our understanding already allowed for. The sentence's wider application gives us its explicit meaning. This is not a new meaning we confer on it to extend its application. What is explicitly expressed by a sentence is fixed by the syntactic arrangement of its meaningful constituents, and this coincides with its broad truth conditions but diverges from its intuitive meaning: the proposition speakers communicate. A sentence's truth conditions cannot be construed as narrowly as the unique set of circumstances typically considered when producing or comprehending the sentence. To construe truth conditions this narrowly — in line with the proposition communicated — leads to trouble, since these are not uniquely fixed by the spoken sentence's meaning. When we realize that a

sentence could be true under unforeseen circumstances, we realize that those circumstances were always covered by the meaning of the sentence, that they were always encompassed by its truth conditions.

### ***5. Truth Conditions, Selective Attention, and Proposition Communicated***

In cognitive pragmatics, the notions of *truth condition* and *proposition communicated* are aligned, forcing us to divorce them from what is *strictly expressed* by the sentence uttered. The ordinary notion of what (1) literally says does coincide with the proposition we typically communicate by uttering it. But in failing to anticipate all the ways (1) could be true in the world, ordinary understanding diverges from the actual truth conditions of the sentence. One could institute a special notion of *intuitive truth conditions* for a sentence, aligned with the notion of proposition communicated, but that would not be the only relevant notion of truth for the sentence, or the only thing we could recognize as compatible with its meaning. Many states of affairs could conform to what the sentence says, though we may only think of some of them. But since we could be brought to see that the meaning of the sentence uttered did not rule out or limit us to just one particular way the world had to be to make the sentence true, we must recognize more to a sentence's meaning and truth conditions than cognitive pragmatics allows. The 'more' here can be brought to light by contemplating unusual circumstances, which help us recognize the compatibility of what we said with more states of affairs than we first realized. For example, beside the alarm button in the lifts at Stockholm University it is written: 'Press the alarm button if the lift stops between two floors.' Most people take this to mean that we should press the button if the lift stops between two adjacent floors. However, for all it says, when we travel from floor five to seven, we could comply with the instruction by pressing the button when the lift stops at floor six.<sup>8</sup> Even if we don't use sentences in accordance with their full range of linguistically permissible applications, we can confirm their other rather surprising applications just by reflecting on the meaning we attach to these sentences. Language can surprise us. This doesn't mean that communication is bound to fail, or that on every occasion elaborate pragmatic inferences are to figure out what people are saying. Not all options are live, and, so long

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<sup>8</sup> I owe this nice example to Peter Pagin.

as others focus on the same condition that making a sentence true as we do, things go well. Special contexts may call for special inferences but given our selective attention, shared needs, perceptions and interests, special inferences are not always operative, or needed in the normal case. Hearing a sentence one way rather than another — focusing on a restricted way the world could be to make that sentence is true — helps to explain why we do not usually find ourselves at odds in understanding one another. No appeal to unconscious computations of others' intentions is needed each time to explain the immediate and effortless way we arrive at an intuitive understanding of what is said.<sup>9</sup>

### ***6. Thoughts and Utterances***

Carston (2002) is right to consider our use of language to concern the relation between thoughts and utterances but in stressing the role contextual inference plays in arriving at the thoughts conveyed she downplays the everyday aspects of linguistic sentence meaning of sentences and the role it plays in securing regular communication of our thoughts to one another. By focusing on the strict and hard to access notion of what is literally expressed, which diverges from our ordinary understanding of sentences, she is able to secure a premise for an argument designed to show that truth and truth conditions enter only at the level of the pragmatically derived proposition communicated.

But the intuitive notion of what is literally said focuses on the restricted application we make of sentences on a selective understanding of their truth conditions. We cannot make every bit of our thinking explicit, but we do say enough to direct one another's thinking, in context, to what we are talking about, provided we remain (unlike Asperger's subjects) unaware of the rather surprising things our utterance could be taken to mean. There is considerable slack between thought and language. Focused thoughts are not uniquely captured in the words chosen to express them, though speakers are largely unaware of this fact. The meaning of the sentence constrains the ways the world has to be in order for what we say in uttering it to be true but does not select one definite way of its being true. However, our perceiving or thinking — and other people's perceiving and thinking —

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<sup>9</sup> For an account of the immediacy of linguistic understanding see Smith 2007b and 2007c.

selectively illuminates a small number (perhaps one) of possibilities compatible with what our words say. It is not propositions — either minimally expressed or arrived at by enrichment — that we should be searching for in order to get at the truth of our utterances, so much as our selective take on the truth conditions of the sentences we utter. Room is always left for a distinction between all that is actually claimed by the uttered sentence, and what we typically take ourselves to be claiming in uttering it. Cognitive pragmatics and relevance theory can help at this point to explain our tendency to focus on only one understanding of what we actually say. Meanwhile, intelligible links can be maintained between the words people use to express themselves and what they intuitively understand themselves to be saying. This is the ordinary and intuitive notion of what is literally said. The more theoretical notion of what a sentence literally expresses is hard at first to recognize, and accessing it can be a considerable achievement.<sup>10</sup>

### *7. Predicates of Taste and What We Express*

Does this way of thinking help us to address other linguistic phenomena? I think it does, as we can see if we look at sentences involving predicates of taste.<sup>11</sup> Assessments of the truth or falsity of such sentences often leads to intractable disputes with no clear way to resolve them. No further facts can be brought to light, and neither party to the dispute has overlooked anything. The intractability leads some to suppose that there is simply no fact of the matter concerning judgements of taste. However, we should not so easily surrender the idea that these sentences are truth-evaluable, especially when a skilled wine taster utters:

(4) The wine is beautifully balanced

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<sup>10</sup> This achievement is more readily available to high functioning autistic subjects, who for reasons of executive function disorder cannot so easily selectively attend to salient features of a situation, perhaps too many. However, they still use words with the same meanings we do.

<sup>11</sup> The semantic problems raised by predicates of personal taste are brought out well in Lasersohn 2006. The underlying philosophical issues are clearly addressed in Wright 2006. A variant treatment of such disagreements can be found in Smith 2005.

Surely, such pronouncements aim to get something right, and if they succeed they do justice to the wine in question. But now suppose two experienced wine critics, contemplating a bottle of 2003 Chateau Pavie, disagree about the truth of (4). A is convinced the wine is beautifully balanced and B is equally convinced it isn't. What are we to make of their disagreement? Can we (or they) settle for the view that there is a fact of the matter, forever likely to elude both of them? Such a view is surely implausible for matters concerning how something tastes. It would be hard to settle for the view that there is *no* fact of the matter. Balance in a wine is a substantial achievement which wine makers aim for and do not always achieve, or achieve in every vintage. Still, there will be those who doubt there can be objective disagreements on judgements involving taste, and will deny sentences like (4) an objective truth value. However, wine critics are doing more than just reporting their subjective experiences; they aim to describe properties the wine has, not just their subjective experience. So how should we understand an intractable dispute between the two experts over the truth of (4)? Do they simply disagree about the meaning of (4), in which case there is no dispute? Or, is there a sense in which they are both right and we have to embrace some form of relativism? None of the options are very palatable. Can we do better?

According to critic A an utterance of (4) would be true, and according to critic B it would be false. Should we say it is true according to one, false according to the other? To make sense of this we need to make appeal to an extra parameter of evaluation:

- (5) The wine is beautifully balanced (from A's perspective)
- (6) The wine is not beautifully balanced (from B's perspective)

Described in this way, A and B no longer seem to be in conflict since (5) and (6) are not incompatible. The difficulty is to understand the appeal to perspectives and what it means for a claim to be true *relative to a perspective*. To assess truth according to A or B invites a subjectivism we were trying to avoid. But in assessing (4) we are not assessing the truth of 'The wine is beautifully balanced according to A' or 'The wine is beautifully balanced according to B'. Anyone can recognise the truth of these claims from any standpoint. No

relativism obtrudes here. And (4) says neither of these things. If it did there would be no genuine disagreement between A and B. It would be akin to assessing the truth of (3): ‘It’s raining’ with respect to different places, and this provides no ground for a disagreement.

Either A and B are in good positions to judge or they are not, and if they are, shouldn’t we say they are both right? If A is in good health, he has not just brushed his teeth, sucked a lemon, or eaten chocolate, for example — then he will be judging under ideal circumstances for him, and what he says by uttering (4) will be true. But the same goes for B. And how can the semantic content of (4) be true when said by one person and false when said by another? Instead of being absolute, the truth of (4) would be relative to an additional parameter, as in (3). So either (4) expresses a proposition that lacks a truth value, or, if one believes that propositions must be true or false, it fails to express a proposition, and needs some completion in context in order to do so.

But the example calls for neither of these options. We can argue that the sentence expresses an explicit content with a truth condition but that there is more than one way to meet that condition and different tasters will focus on just one of the ways for the sentence to be true: one way for the wine to be balanced. Let me explain.

Given A’s palate and his threshold sensitivities to alcohol, acid, sugar and tannin, ‘This wine is balanced’ is true. But given B’s palate, and very different threshold sensitivities to these elements, there is another, quite different – but unactualized – point at which the complex of the wine’s constituents would be in balance and would make it true for her that the wine was balanced. Had the wine maker picked less ripe grapes and extracted rather less from the skins, there could have been a different ratio of elements on which B would have correctly judged (4) to be true. Each taster would be right because each of these conditions of the wine would constitute a different way of making sentence (4) true. In the circumstances in which B’s palate is involved, the second way of wine making would make the sentence true but not the first. In the circumstance in which A’s palate is involved it is the first way, not the second, that would make it true. According to which

taster or critic, we ask, we could get a different though correct answer to the question of whether a wine was balanced due to the different circumstances with respect to which this could be true.

A will say under circumstance C1 that the wine is beautifully balanced. So for him sentence (4) will be true. B will demur, and according to her it is false. But there are other circumstances C2 under which the wine could have been balanced for her, lower alcohol, greater grip, less use of oak, less extraction, and according to her, in those circumstances, the sentence would have been true. Both A and B are right about their own verdicts, but wrong to criticize each other's. The wine would be balanced in both conditions, but is only recognizable as balanced for A in circumstances C1 and only recognizable as balanced for B in circumstances C2.<sup>12</sup> Is truth relative to the context of judgement, or from a perspective? No. But our take on truth is, very likely, relativized in just this way.

The truth of (4) is not sensitive to aspects of the context of assessment. Its truth-value does not vary from one circumstance to another. Nor does (4) need to be contextually enriched to determine the proposition expressed by A or B. Instead (4) simply leaves things open as to how the world could be when (4) is true. There can be more than one point at which a wine could be balanced, and judged so by different tasters (or populations of tasters); the sentence simply doesn't pick out any of them in particular. Different tasters will think of the conditions for (4)'s truth that they can access as *the* way for (4) to be true. They will selectively attend to just those conditions: the others being out of reach given their palates and sensitivities.

When judging in different samples of the same wine, critics may disagree with each other on when it is true to say the wine is balanced. They may each be right in what they judge but wrong to discount the other's judgement. (4) is not, as they think, false with respect to those other circumstances, or samples. Nor is it only true in their favoured conditions, it

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<sup>12</sup> For a defence of the claim that there are objective properties of taste that tasters can fail to recognize subjectively, see Smith 2007(a).



is simply that each critic has no way of grasping the truth when confirmed by another critic with a different palate.

Is the sentence or the condition it imposes somehow vague or indeterminate? No. We can all agree that for a wine to be balanced all its parts must be in harmony and no single taste must dominate the others. This is what we are saying, and agree that we are saying, whenever we say a wine is beautifully balanced. But what makes it true according to me, may not be what makes it true according to you. Nevertheless, under these very different conditions we may both have a way of recognising the truth of the proposition expressed by sentence (4) — just as we do with (1).

What conclusions are there for belief and action on this view of linguistic meaning? What should I conclude from someone's saying that a given wine is beautifully balanced? The answer is that it depends on who said it. If it was someone in *my* population of tasters, it is true for me (as the relativists like to say). I assess the truth of what is said with respect to the sayer, and whether I buy a case of this wine depends on the reported sentence having been true according to a critic who judges as I do. Endorsing the truth of (4) is relative to who says it, and assessor relative to which sort of palate and sensibilities one has as a taster. But of course it is only the *endorsement* or *taking something to be true* that is assessor relative, not truth itself. There are other ways for the sentence to be true. But they are not the ways that count *for me*.

## **8. Conclusion**

Language doesn't do everything we think it does. It seldom achieves a precise encapsulation of our thoughts: though we may be blind to this fact as speakers and imagine we are expressing ourselves perfectly. Sometimes it does more than we think: unlike logic, there are surprises in language. We need to distinguish between how *we* apply a sentence – the conditions under which *we* assert or assess it– and the various ways the world could be that would make the sentence true. Failure to note these distinctions makes for quick though perhaps faulty argument about what is (or isn't) expressed by a sentence, and what is required to engage in explicit communication;

conclusions of considerable significance for the semantics-pragmatics distinction. There may be more room for a truth-conditional semantics than cognitive pragmatics currently acknowledges, though pragmatics will still have the central role to play in explaining how we make selective use of what our linguistic capacities makes available.<sup>13</sup>

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