

To appear in *Explicit Communication* edited by B.Soria and E.Romero (Palgrave 2007)

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

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1. Introduction

In uttering a sentence we are often taken to assert more than the literal meaning of the sentence; though we sometimes assert less. Robyn Carston and others take this phenomenon to reveal that what is said or asserted by a speaker on an occasion of utterance is a contextually-enriched version of the semantic content of the sentence. But we need not always accept this conclusion. Sometimes what we think we are asserting, or what we take others to be asserting, involves selective attention to just one of the ways the sentence could be true and fails to recognize others. Most of the time people converge in their selective attention and communication is not impaired, but in the case of sentences involving predicates of taste, variations in our selective attention to truth condition can lead to seemingly intractable disputes. I propose a way of handling such cases on which speakers mean the same by a sentence, assert no more than its semantic content, hold conflicting opinions about its truth-value, and are both right.

2. Semantics and Pragmatics

In her paper, 'Linguistic Meaning, Communicated Meaning and Cognitive Pragmatics (2002), Robyn Carston distinguishes between the philosophical and the cognitive science perspective on linguistic communication. Philosophers of language mostly concentrate on

semantic issues and take pragmatics to be 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 context. As such the two approaches seem to pass each other by: philosophers of language concentrate on the semantic properties of expression types; cognitive scientists concentrate on how speakers and listeners communicate. However, this division of labour understates the potential consequences the findings of cognitive pragmatics have for the philosophy of language. For if pragmatic processes must be invoked to arrive at something fully propositional — the proposition explicitly communicated — then the standard view of semantics as focusing on how declarative sentences are able to 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 begun to fight a rearguard action (see, in particular, Cappelen and Lepore 2005). Such defenses often trade on the distinction Carston draws between theories in semantics 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 interest of semantics by making it either the study of minimal propositions (whatever they are) ¹ or sub-propositional contents expressed by sentences ²; neither of which look very much like what the folk consider to be the literal meaning of their sentences. In response, advocates of cognitive pragmatics suggest that what *we* mean by using a sentence is almost never what the *sentence* means, and they suppose that a great deal of non-linguistic inference goes into figuring out what someone said in using a sentence. However, the ordinary speaker's intuition is that what someone said 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 what he said was such and such'. I think there's something right about the ordinary speaker's intuition here but to respect it one must reject the view that the literal meaning of an uttered sentence is either the proposition the semantic minimalist points to or an incomplete proposition determined by the meaning of the sentence's syntactic constituents and the way they are put together. A more sympathetic construal of

¹ See Cappelen and Lepore's notion of a minimal proposition in their 2005.

² See Kent Bach's notion of a propositional radical in Bach 1994 and 2001.

the (naïve) intuition — that what you said is tied to the words you used to say it— requires a re-working of the notion of literal meaning in order to connect it more closely to the thought typically, or most often, communicated by use of the sentence. However, there is what we *take* ourselves to be saying by the use of words, and there is what we *actually* say by means of them. And neither the philosopher of language nor the cognitive scientist has got the relation between these two exactly right. The reason has to do with the use made of the notion of proposition and truth condition in both semantic and pragmatic theorizing. They are typically thought to go together and seldom thought to coincide with what is explicitly (or recognizably) expressed by a sentence. I shall reject this assumption and offer a way of relating 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 uttered and what is explicitly communicated by their utterance.

3. The Context Sensitivity of What is Said

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 uttering the same sentence in the same contexts. In (2) speakers may be talking about the car owned by John, stolen by John or bet on by John. 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 a context-sensitivity in the use and understanding of the sentences as used. But what, if anything should we conclude about the contents of the sentences themselves? The temptation for some philosophers and linguists is 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 well 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 that the semantic content of a sentence fails by itself to determine the thought content communicated by its utterance, cognitive processes are needed to get at this content. 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 or expression, and the thought content conveyed to the listener by that utterance:

The linguistically encoded element of an utterance

...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 articulated by the speaker fails to fix a thought content,³ nevertheless a propositional thought is communicated, and it is the task of cognitive pragmatics to say how this happens.

There are 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. 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)

Second, the picture assumes that the proposition communicated is (almost) never 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)

³ 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 forthcoming.

So not only is it usually the case that the sentence uttered fails by itself to provide evidence of which proposition the speaker intends to convey, it often fails to express a proposition at all. (On this point Carston and radical minimalists like Bach agree). And since the terminus of a successful linguistic act is recovery by the hearer of the proposition conveyed by the speaker we need to explain the means by which the hearer derives the proposition explicitly communicated.

This programme has potentially worrying consequences for the semanticist, or philosopher of language. Why? 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 determine something truth conditional. So for anyone who thinks truth conditions belong in the domain of semantics, there would appear to be no clear boundary between semantics and pragmatics; between what is fixed by the properties of expressions and what is fixed by the cognitive processing of those expressions in context. On the other hand, those who wish to maintain a firm boundary between semantics and pragmatics have to show how an uttered sentence can so much as express a proposition, or settle for incomplete propositional functions as what is expressed and then explain how we figure out from these entities the proposition the speaker intended to communicate.

Grice, of course, had a different story about how we get from the proposition expressed by the sentence uttered ('what is said') to a (further) proposition conveyed by its utterance ('what is meant'). But Grice was over-sanguine, it is thought, about being able to find a single or complete proposition determined by the semantic constituents of the sentence and the way they are put together syntactically. That's why semantic minimalists have much work to do to show that the constituents and structure of sentences *do* determine a truth-evaluable proposition. 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. Pragmatic processing begins with processes that adjust the meanings of words used, and perhaps

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. Radical minimalists, like Bach, do take sentence meanings to make a contribution but these incomplete propositions must be augmented by the hearer in context to reach the communicated content of the utterance.

So we appear to have the following options. Either the pragmatic processing of utterances, not the literal meaning of sentences (alone), provides hearers with truth-evaluable propositions or thoughts to consider; 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 along with the propositional content(s) explicitly communicated and retrieved by pragmatic processing.

On each option, speakers are assumed to be asserting 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 of utterance is a contextually-enriched version of the semantic content of the expressions used. Semantic minimalists concede that what is said or asserted is not the proposition (or not even a proposition) understood in context. The crucial assumption of these approaches, as far as philosophers of language are concerned, is that we need something more than the grammatically arranged meaningful constituents that make up a sentence to arrive at the truth conditional content of an utterance: the thought or proposition communicated.⁴ The search for what has truth conditions — the propositional content conveyed by a speaker — 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 that seems to bear little or no relation to the content of the thoughts speakers and hearers entertain when they speak.

⁴ Even less than the utterance of a sentence will do if Stainton is right and non-sentential utterances can also convey propositional contents. See Stainton 2005, 2006.

But need we accept either view? I will suggest another way to see things, overlooked by most parties to the debate. Instead of seeking a semantically minimal and perhaps unasserted truth-evaluable proposition, or a fuller proposition given by the output of pragmatic processing, why not acknowledge that given what the uttered sentence means there is more than one way for it to be true, more than one way to consider what is being claimed to be the case, and that in any given context we usually entertain only one way of thinking of it as being true. When we regularly take what a given sentence says one way rather than another, even though there are other ways for it to be true, this is our ordinary notion of the sentence's literal meaning. Of course, a less intuitive, and highly theoretical notion of what the sentence literally expresses can be constructed to bring out aspects of a sentence's meaning that were previously unnoticed. It is these other, unusual ways of understanding sentences that lead some to suppose that the same sentence can express many different propositions. But really all its meaning does is constrain the way things have to be in the world in order for the sentence to be true, and this will encompass more ways for it to be true than we consider. When thinking of what a sentence says we typically focus rather selectively on just one way things could be that would make it true. Take sentence (1) for example:

(1) The leaves are green

Most people who are told (1) when contemplating a tree in someone's garden would suppose the leaves to be naturally green. That's the natural thing to think given our understanding of (1). However, Charles Travis exploits this example in cases where the leaves on Pia has painted the russet leaves on her tree green. This is a very unnatural way to understand (1). Travis concludes that since the first way of taking the sentence to be true is not the same as the second, (1) expresses 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. Sentences, Travis concludes, have at most occasion-

sensitive meanings. Only in context can they express something capable of being true or false.⁵

But that's not the only way to react to such examples. We could say is that the sentence is true under both conditions since for all the sentence says the leaves just have to be green. Both ways count as ways of making it true, even though the second is highly unnatural. The sentence places no qualification on the way in which the leaves are green. The natural way for things to be to make this sentence true is just one way of the world's fitting what the sentence says. When we use (1) we express something about the reality that could be realized in many more ways than we at first recognize. We somehow get across something more specific than we have actually said. Our use of words is not as

utterance interpretation with the explicitly communicated proposition retrieved by pragmatic processing. But that cannot be right. The sentence uttered was true or false all along, and could even be true under conditions that may surprise us. A sentence's truth conditions cover circumstances extending beyond the ones featuring in what speakers and hearers take to be explicitly communicated by their uses of sentences. We come to recognize that a sentence could be true independently of the way we think of it as being true when we recognize an unusual situation to be entirely compatible with what it says. Thus it is a mistake to suppose that truth conditions enter the picture only with the proposition communicated. The natural way of thinking of a sentence's truth conditions pairs with the intuitive understanding of what we say in uttering the sentence. However, when we come to see what else could make the sentence true, consistent with what it means, we recognize something our understanding already allowed for. The sentence's wider fit with reality pairs with its explicit meaning. It is not a new meaning we confer on it to extend its application to such cases. The strict notion of what is explicitly expressed by a sentence as fixed by the syntactic arrangement of its meaningful constituents, pairs with this broad notion of truth conditions but diverges from the intuitive notion and the proposition speakers communicate. A sentence's truth condition cannot be construed so narrowly as the single set of circumstances we mostly naturally think of when producing or comprehending the sentence. To construe truth conditions as narrowly along with the proposition communicated by an utterance of the sentence leads to trouble, for they are not fixed by the sentence's meaning. When we realize that the sentence could be true under unforeseen circumstances, we realize that those other circumstances were also covered by the meaning of the sentence, and encompassed by its truth conditions.

In cognitive pragmatics, the notions of *truth condition* and *proposition communicated* are aligned, forcing us to divorce them from what is *literally expressed* by the sentence uttered. The ordinary notion of what (1) literally says does coincide with the thought or position we communicate by uttering it. But in failing to anticipate all the ways (1) could be true in the external world the ordinary understanding diverges from the sentence's actual truth condition. One could institute a notion of the intuitive truth conditions of a sentence that lines up with the notion of the proposition communicated, but that will not

be the only notion relevant to the truth of the sentence, or all we recognize as compatible with its meaning. Many states of affairs could be compatible with what the sentence says. We may only think of some of these ways but since we can be brought to see that, for all that is strictly and literally expressed by the sentence uttered, it did not rule out or limit us to one particular way to think of the world as being when it is true, we are forced to recognize more to a sentence's meaning and truth conditions than cognitive pragmatics allows. The notion of something more can, under unusual circumstances, be recognized as encompassed by what the words mean.

Language can surprise us. We can come to recognise that what we said was compatible with more states of affairs than we first realized. In the lifts in Stockholm University a message is written beside the alarm button: 'Press the alarm button if the lift stops between two floors.' Most people would take the message to have as its ordinary literal meaning that we should press the button only if the lift stops between two adjacent floors. Though, for all it says, we would be complying with the instructions were we, in travelling between floors five and seven, to press the button when the lift stops on six.⁶ Even if we don't use sentences in accordance with their full range of linguistically permissible applications, we can confirm that rather surprising further applications were all the time compatible with the meaning we attached to our sentences. This view of the wide range of application of linguistic expressions doesn't mean communication is likely to fail, or that elaborate pragmatic inferences are needed on every occasion to figure out what people mean. Not all options are live, and as long as others tend to take sentences to be true in the same circumstances we do things go well. Special contexts may call for special inferences but given our selective attention, our needs, perceptions and interests, special inferences will be not operative everywhere, nor be part of the normal case. Hearing a sentence one way rather than another, focusing on a restricted way the world could be when that sentence is true, helps to explain why we do not usually find ourselves in difficulty in understanding one another, even though further uses of our words are always possible. No appeal to unconscious computations of others' intentions is needed to explain the immediate and effortless way we usually understand one another.

⁶ I owe this nice example to Peter Pagin.

Carston is right to consider our use of language to concern the relation between thoughts and utterances (as she does in her 2002) but in stressing the role contextually based non-linguistic inference plays in arriving at the thoughts conveyed she downplays aspects of the linguistic meaning of sentences and the role they play in securing the regular communication of our thoughts to one another. It is by focusing on the strict notion of the literal meaning that departs from our ordinary understanding that she arrives at the premise for arguments designed to show that truth and truth conditions enter only at the level of the pragmatically derived proposition communicated.

The intuitive notion of what is literally said focuses on the particular use we make of sentences on the restricted understanding we have of their truth conditions. We do not, and perhaps cannot, state every part of our thinking explicitly. But we do say enough to constrain one another's thinking, in a context, to what we are on about; provided we remain unaware of the rather surprising things we could be taken to mean by the words we use. It is here that we see the slack between thought and language. Our thoughts are not always precisely captured by the words we chose to convey them, though we may be unaware of this fact. What we say only constrains the ways the world would have to be in order for what we claim to be true. It does not select one definite way of making a sentence true. However, perceiving or thinking — and if all goes well, other people's perceiving and thinking — selectively illuminates a small number (perhaps one) of the 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 way of taking the truth conditions of the sentences we utter to voice our thoughts. Room is always left for a distinction between all that is actually claimed by the sentence uttered, and what we typically take ourselves to be claiming when using it in a context. Cognitive pragmatics and relevance theory can help at this point to explain our tendency to focus selectively on only understanding what we actually said. We should try to maintain intelligible links between the words people use to say what they are trying to express and what they intuitively understand themselves to be saying. Here we are concerned with the ordinary

and intuitive notion of the literal meaning of the words they utter. The more precise notion of what is literally expressed by a sentence may be hard for us to recognize, and recognizing it in full may be a considerable achievement.⁷

4. 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 examples of sentences involving predicates of taste.⁸ Assessments of the truth or falsity of such sentences often leads to intractable disputes. There is 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 are 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

Surely, such pronouncements aims to get something right, and either they do or do not 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 that it is forever likely to elude both of them? Such a view is surely implausible for matters concerning how something tastes. Equally, it would be hard to settle for the view that there is no fact of the matter. Balance in a wine is a substantial

⁷ 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, but who still use words with the same meanings we do.

⁸ 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.

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 a wine actually has. 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 appears 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. But the difficulty is to understand the appeal to perspectives and what it is for a claim to be true relative to a perspective. To assess truth according to X or Y 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 'It's raining' with respect to different places.

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, etc. — 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

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. Is truth relative to the context of judgement, or only from a perspective? No. But our take on truth may be.

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 freely 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 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 in discounting 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 is simply that each critic has no way of grasping the truth when confirmed by a critic with a quite 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 taste must dominate the others. This is what we are saying, and agree that we are saying, whenever we say that 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? Well, suppose it has been said that a given wine is beautifully balanced. What should I conclude? 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. My endorsing the truth of (4) is therefore relative to who says it, and assessor relative to which sort of palate and sensibilities I have as a taster. But of course it is only my *endorsement* or *taking something to be true* that is assessor relative. There are other ways of judging the sentence true. But they are not the ways that count *for me*.

5. 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 when expressing ourselves linguistically. 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 would assert 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 conclusions about what it (or isn't) expressed by a sentence, and about what is required to engage in explicit communication — conclusions of 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 capacity makes available.⁹

⁹ A version of this paper was given at a conference on Explicit Communication in Granada. I am grateful to members of that audience, Belen Soria, Esther Romero and Robyn Carston. I am also grateful to Ophelia Deroy for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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