Introduction for *Inquiry* Symposium on *Imagination and Convention*

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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The late 90's to mid 00's played host to all manner of fashion faux pas: trucker hats, denim suits, the mullet, rap metal. Pop culture has by now moved on from most of these. Philosophy of language, on the other hand, is still largely mired in its turn-of-the millennium obsession with policing the boundary between semantics and pragmatics. Thankfully, having co-authored one of the most notorious texts of these earlier debates,[1] Ernie Lepore has recently returned with Matthew Stone to help push us out of this rut. If we are to make real progress in semantics, Lepore and Stone urge us, we need to stop worrying about strict truth and falsity and learn to start loving context-change potential. Semantics, on Lepore and Stone's picture, runs to the bounds of conventionalized ways of updating the conversational context. Punkt.

Lepore and Stone are hardly the first to urge that dynamic updating—or, roughly, a conception of expression- and sentence-meaning according to which an expression or sentence's primary role is to change the information mutually presupposed by the speaker and listener—represents the way forward for semantics. What sets their volume apart from earlier dynamic systems is, in the first instance, the scope of the project. The foundation on which Lepore and Stone's account is built is not just the more familiar work of David Lewis and Robert Stalnaker, but also more recent work in linguistics, i.e. work on the formal features of richly structured conversational contexts.[2] By following e.g. Craige Roberts and Rob van der Sandt in conceiving of conversational contexts as tracking not just information presupposed, but also *inter alia* the interests of the conversational participants and the question or questions under discussion, Lepore and Stone hope to account not just for presupposition, but also anaphora, nonce words, indirect speech, and a good bit of the sort of disambiguation that philosophers have typically taken to be beyond the purview of semantics proper.[3] Toward these various ends, they propose a fairly radical revision of the way we typically think about logical form—in line with a broader attack on the commonly accepted idea, derived largely from the work of Grice and his successors, that general

[1]Cappelen, Herman, and Lepore, Ernie. *Insensitive Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
[2]Lewis, David. 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game,' *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, No. 3 (1979), pp. 339–359; Stalnaker, Robert. 'Presuppositions,' *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2, No. 4 (1973), pp. 447–457.
[3]Roberts, Craige. 'Information structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics,' *Semantics and Pragmatics* 5, No. 6 (2012), pp. 1–69; van der Sandt, Rob A. 'Presupposition Projection as Anaphora Resolution,' Journal of Semantics 9, No. 4 (1992), pp. 333–377.

purpose reasoning has an outsized role to play in explaining the mechanics of human communication.

Allow us to expand on this last point, since we find it to be perhaps both the most interesting aspect of Lepore and Stone's new work, and also the key to discerning a certain sort of unity between Lepore's earlier projects and this one. In his *Insensitive Semantics* of the mid 00's, Lepore (along with Herman Cappelen) proposed that we restrict the class of semantically relevant context-sensitive phenomena to just the patently obvious expressions: this, that, he, she, it, I, here, now, etc. Many a cherished philosophical and linguistic analysis turned out to be in conflict with this list; for instance, we were told that the strict meanings of relative adjectives were not actually context-sensitive. Suffice it to say that more than a few philosophers found themselves asking what exactly the criteria were for membership in this elite set. The response from Cappelen and Lepore was effectively the verbal equivalent of the incredulous stare: unless we constrain the list of expressions in this way, we will be forced to recognize pervasive and open-ended effects of context.

Now, on the other hand, Lepore and Stone seem perfectly willing to allow discourse relations like SUMMARY or EXPLANATION—relations with no apparent traces at the level of surface grammar—into the logical form of sentences. Consider, for example:

(1) There's your omelet, forming at the bottom of the pan.[4]
(2) John took the train from Paris to Istanbul. He has family there.

According to Stone and Lepore, the basic form of (1) is: SUMMARY (*s*, *e*). In other words, (1) conventionally updates the context with the claim that there is a certain sort of (context-invariant) relation that obtains between the real-world state the speaker is characterizing and the event of the omelet forming at the bottom of the pan. (2), on the other hand, contributes to the context an (again, context-invariant) explanation relation between an event and a real-world situation: EXPLANATION (*e*, *s*). John took the train from Paris to Istanbul *because* he has family there. All of this is encoded at the level of logical form; all of this falls squarely within the bounds of semantic theory, according to Lepore and Stone. We have certainly come a long way since Lepore's incredulous stare of yesteryear.

But there is also a sense in which the present project is not so unlike the minimal semantics of old, and in fact stands as a development of at least certain facets of that earlier project. This is worth stressing not least because it is this aspect of Lepore and Stone's present theory that stands at the center of each of the three responses included in this volume. Minimal semantics, as developed

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[4]This example is drawn not from Lepore and Stone 2015, but rather from a related paper with Una Stojnic, 'Deixis (Even Without the Pointing),' *Philosophical Perspectives* 26, No. 1 (2013), pp. 502–525.

both by Cappelan and Lepore and, separately, by Emma Borg, stood in opposition to what has often been called 'radical contextualism'.[5] The standard bearer for this latter view is often taken to be Charles Travis, though Travis himself prefers the term 'occasion sensitivity'. Regardless of what we call the view, it is comprised of two main theses: (i) context-sensitivity is pervasive in semantics, evinced in particular by its near universal influence on truth-conditions; and (ii) no finite set of rules can adequately capture this context-sensitivity. Minimal semantics set itself in opposition to both (i) and (ii). As we understand Lepore and Stone's project, it seeks to buttress opposition to (ii) by effectively conceding (i). In so doing, it effectively sets itself against a very significant group of linguists and philosophers of language—probably the majority working today—who accept (i) in a significantly weaker way than do Lepore and Stone, and who reject (ii) in a way that Lepore and Stone find ultimately wanting. We have in mind here, in particular, all those who have taken on significant bits of the Gricean apparatus: from Relevance Theorists to more run-of-the-mill neo-Gricean pragmatists.

What binds together this latter sort of theorist is their shared commitment to the claim that there is some core-level of meaning, conventional meaning, that plays a basic explanatory role in the process of communication, and which nonetheless fails to exhaust what is communicated. The idea is that this core type of meaning is recoverable via a mechanistic process of interpretation. This core, interpreted meaning can then be fed into the interpreter's general-purpose reasoning mechanisms to infer what all else the speaker may have been trying to convey. Lepore and Stone take serious issue with this picture, effectively aligning themselves with Travis in contending that standard communicative contexts effectively allow for too many possibilities for the sorts of rational reconstructions to which neo-Griceans or Relevance Theorists appeal to serve as adequate explanations of how we manage to communicate with each other. Unlike Travis, however, Lepore and Stone treat this threat to the standard picture as a reason to posit *more rules*, more conventionalization, than most neo-Griceans and Relevance Theorists had been willing to countenance.

Allow us to clarify this dispute by means of an example: for traditional Griceans, it is general reasoning that takes us from an instance of hearing that 'some students passed the exam' to inferring the stronger claim that 'some *but not all* students passed the exam.' Similarly, Relevance Theorists will be apt to contend that this is a productive inference that comes at a minimal cognitive cost. Perhaps we should also infer that the speaker intended for us to reason in this way. The idea is twofold: first, if all of the students had passed, the speaker would have just said so; second, since the speaker should be assumed to be making her utterances maximally compact, she won't have bothered to literally say 'some but not all'. Essentially, on various sorts of Gricean accounts, we are

[5]Borg, Emma. *Minimal Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Borg, Emma, *Pursuing Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

trying to extrapolate what sorts of trade-offs between informativity and concision the speaker opted to make, and to recover what she intended to get across by working backward from there. Not all pragmatic 'reinterpretation' strategies will involve just these trade-offs. The important thing is that all of these—from Gricean implicatures to Stalnakerian diagonalization—involve broad reasoning about what the speaker must be intending rather than special-purpose reasoning about the conventions of language.

Lepore and Stone argue *inter alia* that this sort of reasoning won't suffice to cut off enough of the relevant alternatives. For instance, 'some' is indeed weaker than 'some but not all', but it is also weaker than 'most' and 'many'. In contrast to 'some but not all' though, the latter are equally concise. Thus, the listener should be able to infer not only that not all of the students passed the exam, but that most of them actually failed the exam. Intuitively, however, this inference is *not* licensed. If that's right, then some alternative explanation is required here. Following Horn, Lepore and Stone propose to think of inferences of this sort as conventionalized.[6] In contrast to Horn, however, Lepore and Stone suggest that, because these inferences are conventionalized, they should be understood as encoded in the logical form of what is expressed by utterances like 'some students passed the exam'.[7] The reason that we don't have to wonder whether the speaker meant that many or most of the students passed the exam is that there is simply a convention to the effect that 'some' answers the question 'How many of your students passed the exam?' in a manner that excludes the answer 'all', but leaves open the alternatives 'many' and 'most'.

At this point, two significant concerns arise. Suppose for the moment that Lepore and Stone are correct, and that there are far, far more conventionalized linguistic rules than we had previously thought. First, how are we supposed to distinguish between those sorts of conventions that predictably affect interpretation and should genuinely count as linguistic from those which predictably affect interpretation but which are not genuinely linguistic in their nature? Second, would not Lepore and Stone's suggested promiscuity regarding linguistic conventions saddle us with an impossible picture of linguistic interpretation, a picture according to which the listener must sort through an absolutely immense number of abstruse, possibly applicable rules to even begin to parse the strings she hears and assign to them a grammatical form and, ultimately, an interpretation? In other words, how does Lepore and Stone's proposal amount to anything other than positing that we are forced through a jungle of

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[6]Horn, Laurence R. 'Toward a new taxonomy for pragmatic inference: Q-based and R-based implicature.' In Deborah Schiffrin (ed.), *Meaning, Form, and Use in Context: Linguistic Applications*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press (1984), pp. 11–42.
[7]In this, Lepore and Stone are following Chierchia, Gennaro. 'Scalar Implicatures, Polarity Phenomena and the Syntax/Pragmatics Interface.' In Adriana Belletti (ed.), *Structures and beyond: The cartography of syntactic structures*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004), pp. 39–103. It is worth noting that, in contrast to Chierchia, Lepore and Stone nowhere commit themselves to this logical structure being realized at the level of syntax.

criss-crossing conventions, which we must somehow weigh against each other (via some higher level convention?) in order to generate an unconventional meaning on the spot? The two concerns are not unrelated: the less restrictive Lepore and Stone ultimately decide to be with regard to the nature of linguistic conventions, the more pressing the second worry becomes. It is these twin concerns which we see as the common theme running through the three responses to Lepore and Stone's work to be found in this volume—though none of the authors puts their worries in quite the way we have here.

To clarify where we believe that things stand: As indicated at the outset, we take Stone and Lepore to be staking out the fairly radical position that the bounds of linguistic conventions stretch right up to the bounds of conventionalized methods for updated the conversational context. Thus, if retrieving an object from the next room and setting it in the middle of the floor proves, repeatedly, to be an effective strategy for focusing attention on that object, then this strategy will count as a *linguistic* convention for updating the context with a state of co-attending to the relevant object. (As Lepore and Stone would likely point out, such movement can certainly have real effects on what sort of deictics might prove optimal for referring to it—so an object's movement looks to be just the thing to interact with other aspects of grammar!) What Lepore and Stone are proposing, effectively, is a broad-church approach to linguistic conventions; anything conventional that affects how conversation unfolds, that will count, according to them, as a linguistic convention. Some are likely to scoff at this, and while we are not unsympathetic to such a response, the following is worth stressing: despite what seems to be a rather common confusion in the profession at present, scoffing still doesn't constitute an argument in philosophy. The reader is invited to see for herself in what follows just how difficult it proves to be to generate an actual argument against Lepore and Stone's bold conjecture on the nature of our knowledge of language.

This is hardly to say that Bezuidenhout, Szabo, and Horn fail to make any progress towards this end. Bezuidenhout, for instance, argues that Relevance Theory can, in fact, offer a far more unified explanation for the sorts of linguistic phenomena that Lepore and Stone are interested in than they have claimed. If this is right, it would threaten to sap a good deal of the motivation for Lepore and Stone's highly revisionary view of semantics. Szabo, on the other hand, pushes Lepore and Stone on two main fronts: first, he argues that much of the background knowledge plausibly involved in interpreting paradigmatic Gricean implicatures looks to be *very* far from what might plausibly count as knowledge of a linguistic convention; second, he points out that such utterances typically convey a good many propositions, in contrast to the sorts of predictions one might expect for Lepore and Stone's theory to make, given that they consider communication to be a matter of *disambiguation*, which suggests a single, determinate endpoint. Finally, Horn presses Lepore and Stone on the different normative statuses that contents conveyed in different manners, via different linguistic mechanisms, seem to acquire. If all of these are instances of meaning—that is,

of conventional updating of the conversational record—one might not expect such differences in normative status to obtain.

Lepore and Stone offer extensive responses to each of these concerns, and we shall leave it to the reader to decide how satisfactory she finds each of these. In conclusion, we will offer a few parting thoughts of our own. As we have repeatedly stressed, one of Lepore and Stone's core theses is that linguistic conventions just are predictable strategies for updating the conversational context. In their response to the present commentators, however, they make explicit something that they do not mean by this: that all predictable strategies for updating the conversational context are exactly the same sort of thing. Perhaps this should have been clear early on; after all, Lepore and Stone certainly talk about certain sorts of linguistic conventions as having to do with presuppositions, or aspect, or coherence. In their volume, Lepore and Stone are at pains to point out that they are in search of a unified framework for understanding the meaning of each of these. But treating these phenomena in a unified framework is hardly to efface the important differences between each such phenomenon. What many of the commentators in this volume seem to be motivated by is a serious concern for whether or not Lepore and Stone have the resources to recognize that different sorts of meaning have different sorts of conversational effects, or whether their subsumption of all meaning to conversational-updating cuts off the possibility of fully respecting these differences. If Lepore and Stone are ultimately correct, and if there is no principled reason why their unified framework cannot still allow for significant differences in how conversational contexts update owing to differences in the *sorts of* linguistic conventions forcing the update, then it seems that the theoretical space between them and their opponents might well be slimmer than either party has made it out to be. What would remain is a deep difference of opinion regarding the role that general-purpose reasoning plays in linguistic exchange: on more traditional views, this will play an outsized role; on Lepore and Stone's view, the entrance of general-purpose reasoning in phenomena like metaphor or sarcasm actually undermines, in large part, the hope for coordination on a thought. As such, although there may be some notion of communication involved in such instances, it looks to be nothing like the more core instances of communication that they recognize—which now include, among other things, most of what we are used to calling conventional implicature, conversational implicature, and explicature.

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