

Context Sensitivity and Indirect Reports

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In this paper, I argue that Contextualist theories of semantics are not undermined by their purported failure to explain the practice of indirect reporting. I adopt Cappelen & Lepore's test for context sensitivity to show that the scope of context sensitivity is much broader than Semantic Minimalists are willing to accept. The failure of their arguments turns on their insistence that the content of indirect reports is semantically minimal.

The strategy of Cappelen & Lepore's (2005) *Insensitive Semantics*¹ against various forms of Contextualism is to collapse the Contextualist positions, subject purportedly context sensitive expressions to empirical tests for context sensitivity, conclude that those expressions that fail the tests are not in fact context sensitive, and *a fortiori* conclude that only a tightly circumscribed list of expressions are context sensitive. Cappelen & Lepore call this list the Basic List and restrict its contents to the obvious indexicals and demonstratives. The Basic List does not include expressions such as 'is red' that some Contextualists have argued are in fact context sensitive.² Cappelen & Lepore argue

¹ Cappelen, H. and E. Lepore. (2005). *Insensitive Semantics*. Malden: Blackwell.

² The general strategy of *Insensitive Semantics* is to collapse the various Moderate Contextualist positions into Radical Contextualism, and then pose several tests for context sensitivity. Cappelen & Lepore conclude that Radical Contextualism fails all of these tests and brings all of the Moderate Contextualist positions down with it. Although it is, perhaps, most reasonable to defend some version of Moderate Contextualism against the collapse into Radical Contextualism (and then cease to worry about Cappelen & Lepore's arguments against the radical position), the strategy I have adopted here is to accept their general strategy and yet argue that it fails in the case of indirect reports. This leaves open the possibility of an independent defense of Moderate Contextualism, and insofar as my arguments are successful in defending Radical Contextualism, a defense of Moderate Contextualism may be overdetermined. However, I will not make that explicit or pursue an independent defense of Moderate Contextualism at this point.

that there are three tests for context sensitivity: (i) context sensitivity blocks inter-contextual indirect reports; (ii) context sensitivity blocks collective descriptions; and, (iii) context sensitivity passes an inter-contextual disquotational test and admits of real context shifting arguments. Furthermore, they argue that accepting the Contextualists' arguments regarding the extent of context sensitivity would make it difficult to explain the pervasive success of communication. In what follows, I make the case that Contextualist semantic theories are not undermined by their purported failure to explain the practice of indirect reporting since they can, in fact, do so. I concentrate on what they call, "Test 1: An Expression is Context Sensitive Only if it Typically Blocks Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports" (2005: 88). I think there are good arguments that show that expressions outside of the Basic List also block collective descriptions (and so satisfy (ii) above); and, quite plausibly, the central argument of this paper will also work to show that expressions outside of the Basic List admit of real context shifting arguments (thereby satisfying (iii)). However, my present aims are much more modest and I only aim to defend Contextualism against one of Cappelen & Lepore's important arguments.

One of the keys to the success of the arguments of *Insensitive Semantics* is establishing that the Contextualists' favored expressions—such as 'is red'—do not in fact block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports and so are *not* context sensitive. According to Cappelen & Lepore, it is the literal meaning of expressions that grounds communication between speakers and across contexts and is what, in particular, makes indirect reports possible. Here, I will argue that it is Semantic Minimalism that is empirically inadequate and handicapped in its ability to explain the practices of speakers in contexts of indirect reporting. Despite claiming that, "Semantic Minimalism is both sufficiently attentive and adequately respectful of our actual linguistic practices" (2005: 87), Cappelen & Lepore confuse indirect semantic reports with indirect phonetic reports, thereby failing to explain how it is that speakers achieve the former most of the time and rarely aspire to achieve the latter. We will see in what follows that the problematic assumption by Semantic Minimalists is that the content of indirect reports is not itself context sensitive but is instead semantically minimal.

First, let's reproduce Cappelen & Lepore's terse and elegant argument for their claim that the Contextualists' favorite expressions are not context sensitive. They describe their test for context sensitivity as:

- (1) If an expression is context sensitive, then it typically blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports.³

The rest of Cappelen & Lepore’s argument (with (1) as the first premise) against Contextualism goes:

- (2) The Contextualists’ favorite expressions (such as ‘is red’, ‘every’, ‘enough’, ‘ready’) do not block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports.

Therefore,

- (3) The Contextualists’ favorite expressions are not context sensitive.

What is left for the Contextualists to do is either falsify (1) by presenting independent arguments for why some expressions are context sensitive that do not block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports, or to falsify (2) by showing that their favorite expressions do block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports. Let’s consider the second approach: falsifying (2).⁴

In order to do this, we first need an example of a purportedly context sensitive expression. A good place to start is with color predicates, such as ‘is red’. Let’s consider Anne Bezuidenhout’s original example as deconstructed and represented by Cappelen & Lepore:

Context of Utterance C1. We’re at a county fair sorting through a barrel of apples. The apples are sorted into different

³ Please see (2005: 88–99) for Cappelen & Lepore’s extended argument. They claim that context sensitive expressions will *typically* block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports, and it will be an *accident* if they fail to do so in some circumstances. Cappelen & Lepore demonstrate this using examples with obvious indexicals such as ‘tomorrow’. If I report on John’s utterance using the indexical ‘tomorrow’, that expression will only fail to block my report in the limited cases where I report his utterance on the same day (see especially 2005: 89 for their defense of this claim). However, a Contextualist may argue that the “typically” clause is too strong and that Contextualists are only claiming that many expressions *can* change meanings from one context to another, but need not. Although I think this is a perfectly reasonable position to take, Cappelen & Lepore saddle Contextualism with a much starker position and subsequently argue that *any* utterance using expressions outside of the Basic List can be reported disquotationally in *any* context without changing truth-value (2005: 91). I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

⁴ Cappelen & Lepore consider this approach (2005: 97) under “Reply 1: The indirect reports are false.” I’ll try to provide a better version of Reply 1 in what follows.

bags according to the color of their skin. Some have green skin; others have red skin. Anne utters:

(u_1) The apple is red.

Context of Utterance C2. We're sorting through a barrel of apples to identify and discard those afflicted with a horrible fungal disease. This fungus grows out from the core and stains the flesh of the apple red. One of us is slicing apples open, placing the good ones in a cooking pot. The bad ones are tossed. Cutting open an apple Anne again utters (u_1). (2005: 92, with slight modification)

Contextualists call the kind of context sensitivity in (u_1) 'part-dependent' because the part of the apple of which 'is red' is being predicated is underdetermined. If we apply Cappelen & Lepore's test to (u_1), though, it appears to fail. Cappelen & Lepore go on to imagine they are in a third context ($C3$) when they utter (u_2):

(u_2) Anne said that the apple is red.

If the Contextualists are correct, (u_2) need not be true in $C3$, and yet Cappelen & Lepore think it is. The Contextualist needs to show, perhaps counterintuitively at first, that (u_2) could be false. But this can be done. I'll explain how below.

In order to show this, the Contextualist needs to dissect the above example in the following ways:

Step 1: Distinguish between Anne's two utterances. By writing that "Anne again utters (u_1)," Cappelen & Lepore beg the question against the context sensitivity of the expression 'is red'. Suppose that 'is red' is in fact context sensitive, then presumably the utterance in $C1$ does not have the same content as the utterance in $C2$. However, we haven't yet determined if the utterance in $C1$ and the utterance in $C2$ express two different propositions. Since the Contextualist thinks that, if Contextualism is true, then two different propositions could plausibly be expressed, and the Semantic Minimalist thinks that, if Semantic Minimalism is true, then one minimal proposition is expressed in both $C1$ and $C2$, it is question-begging for the Semantic Minimalist to presuppose that Anne uttered one utterance (with one content) twice. To avoid this, let's assume

instead that the utterances in *C1* and *C2* are distinct. We'll call the utterance in *C1* (u_1), and the utterance in *C2* (u_{1*}).

Remember that Cappelen & Lepore's report is supposed to be *inter-contextual*, and in this case (u_2) reports across both (u_1) and (u_{1*}). Cappelen & Lepore should accept this thus far. It shouldn't bother them to distinguish (u_1) from (u_{1*}); they think it is this *identical* literal semantic content that (u_2) reports: "It is worth pointing out here that...a single proposition is expressed by all these utterances. We'll later suggest that this might be the proposition which, according to Semantic Minimalism, is *semantically expressed*" (2005: 92). Further, they hold that the content of the report in (u_2) can only be semantically minimal. (We will see below that this last point is a particular problem for Semantic Minimalism.)

Now, from the perspective of the Contextualist, (u_1) and (u_{1*}) are both semantically underdetermined. Their decomposed linguistic contents do not determine complete propositions independently of speaker intentions and the contexts in which they were uttered. Since the complete propositions intended by the speaker Anne are something like *the apple is red-skinned* and *the apple is red-fleshed* respectively, the Semantic Minimalist proposes that in reporting contexts, what is reported is what is common (semantically speaking) between (u_1) and (u_{1*}), namely the proposition that *the apple is red*. This is what Cappelen & Lepore think is happening in the reporting context and they think the report is true.

Cappelen & Lepore's claim that the report in utterance (u_2) is true hangs on one critical assumption: that the content of the report in (u_2) is semantically minimal. We can ask a couple of questions about this assumption: Is it possible to utter a sentence with semantically minimal content? I think the answer to this is "no." But let's give Cappelen & Lepore the benefit of the doubt and assume the answer is "yes." If an utterance can have semantically minimal content, how can we distinguish it from those utterances that are not semantically minimal? This should lead the Contextualist to Step 2.

Step 2. Distinguish the contents of the original utterances. Let's stipulate that the content of (u_1) is (p_1): *The apple is red-skinned*, and that the content of (u_{1*}) is (p_{1*}): *The apple is red-fleshed*. In this step, the Contextualist should make it clear that, for any given utterance, there is some proposition expressed and some propositions that are not expressed. So, while it's possible that a single utterance could express both (p_1) and (p_{1*}) (or some other indefinite set of combinations), in

the case of our example, there is no utterance that does that. The utterances are discrete and determinate given the context.

At first, this may look like something to which the Semantic Minimalist would not assent. But this isn't the case. Cappelen & Lepore explicitly assent to it: "Not only is there *no* one correct answer to what was said by an utterance, there's *no* one correct answer to what was said by a report of what was said by an utterance either. There's no meta-language in which the speech act content is fixed and determinate. Pluralism applies *all the way through*" (2005: 199, emphasis added). So, it's fine for the Semantic Minimalist to assent that the content of (u_1) is (p_1) and the content of (u_{1*}) is (p_{1*}).⁵ However, I think that they would respond by saying that whereas the *speech act* content of (u_1) is (p_1), the *propositional* content of (u_1) is something else, namely, that which they argue is semantically expressed by the utterance. Let's set this aside for the moment because it isn't obvious that the Contextualist has to worry about the legitimacy of that distinction for the purposes of accounting for indirect reports.

Step 3. Enumerate the possible content ascriptions of the indirect report. Here are the contenders: (i) the content of (u_2) is *Anne said that* (p_1), (ii) the content of (u_2) is *Anne said that* (p_{1*}), and (iii) the content of (u_2) is *Anne said that* (p), where (p): *The apple is red*.

Step 4. Make explicit that if the content of (u_2) is (p_1), (p_{1*}), or (p), then (u_2) is false. That is, the context sensitivity of 'is red' blocks at least some inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports. Why is (u_2) false in each of these three cases? If the content of (u_2) is *Anne said that* (p_1), then (u_2) falsely reports the content of (u_{1*}). If the content of (u_2) is *Anne said that* (p_{1*}), then (u_2) falsely reports the content of (u_1). If the content

⁵ Here one might worry about assigning (p_1) to (u_1) and (p_{1*}) to (u_{1*}) given that Cappelen & Lepore write that there's "no one correct answer to what was said by an utterance." I interpret their remark as claiming that there's no theoretical way to determine what the speech act content of an utterance will be even though there is a way to know what the speech act content of an utterance is in particular concrete cases. They claim that their method for discovering speech act content is governed by "intuitions and nontheoretic assumptions" and that they just "think about what people say" (2005: 191). I am adopting this same naive approach here in assigning (p_1) to (u_1) and (p_{1*}) to (u_{1*}). I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this possibility to me.

of (u_2) is *Anne said that (p)*, then (u_2) falsely reports the content of both (u_1) and (u_{1*}).

This should be the end of the counter-argument for the Contextualist; she has shown that the indirect report (u_2) is false. Of course, the Semantic Minimalist won't accept this lying down. Their response should be that, whereas the content of (u_1) is (p_1), it is also (p), and whereas the content of (u_{1*}) is (p_{1*}), it is also (p). So, when the indirect report reports that Anne said that (p), the report is true that Anne *at least* said that. What needs to be the case for this argument to be sound? The Semantic Minimalist needs to establish two claims:

- (i) For any given utterance, at least one of the propositions expressed is the semantically minimal proposition.
- (ii) For any given indirect report, what is reported is the semantically minimal content of the original utterance(s).

Since an indirect report is also an utterance, (ii) should collapse into (i). We *could* grant that for any given utterance, one of the propositions expressed is a semantically minimal proposition, and that for any given indirect report, one of the propositions expressed is a semantically minimal proposition. But the Contextualist *need not* grant this to the Semantic Minimalist because Semantic Minimalists are trying to establish (i) and (ii) *by means of* the indirect report test for context sensitivity. If the only reason to believe that expressions containing color predicates fail this test (that is, are *not* context sensitive) is (i) above, then the Semantic Minimalist's argument is circular.

More to the point, as mentioned above, Cappelen & Lepore have claimed that, "Semantic Minimalism is both sufficiently attentive and adequately respectful of our actual linguistic practices" (2005: 87). What they seem to have in mind here is that in actual linguistic practice we indirectly⁶ report the utterances of others, but in new contexts, and yet truth conditions are maintained. By saying this, they are saying that intercontextual indirect reporting is not only possible, but semantically minimal reporting is the principal kind of reporting that takes place. Allowing for semantically minimal indirect reporting is what makes communication possible (this is the argument of their Chapter 8) and reflects actual linguistic practice. But, this just isn't true. Most of the time indirect reports are used in order to convey whatever non-minimal

⁶ A direct report would be transcribed as, "Anne said, 'the apple is red.'" An indirect report is the kind being discussed here, namely, "Anne said that the apple is red."

content was uttered in the original context of utterance. So, for instance, if someone utters (u_1^*) to me they are probably trying to tell me whether an apple is suitable for eating or better thrown away. It would be the exception to this widespread practice to report the semantically minimal content of a speaker's utterance (if such a thing were possible).⁷

Cappelen & Lepore are confusing measures of success that shouldn't be confused. One measure of success is whether an indirect intercontextual report has a determinate truth-value; another is whether communication is possible given one semantic theory rather than another. What we know when we reflect on our own linguistic practices is that intercontextual reports that do not invoke a relevant degree of the original context cause communication breakdowns. The problem is actually the reverse of what Cappelen & Lepore suppose: semantically minimal indirect reports would be a real problem for communicative success.⁸ Imagine again that I am in *C3* with Lepore and looking in the kitchen for an apple to eat. I am hungry, and want a tasty red apple. The lights are out but I can just barely see an apple on the shelf that Anne has put there. I ask Lepore if the apple is red because I can't see it. He utters (u_2). Biting into the apple I discover a mouthful of fungal-diseased apple. Disgusted I say, "Dammit, Lepore, you knew I was looking for an apple to eat and there you go reporting minimal

⁷ In the text below I consider a possible case of reporting semantically minimal content (i.e., passing coded messages from one spy to another). While I concede that this kind of case might be a possible case of reporting semantically minimal content, I am in fact dubious. Rather, I think a more detailed description of the case is warranted and, under this description, the reporter does not know the content of the sentence being reported, but this does not mean its content is semantically minimal. Its context is probably richly context sensitive: the original speaker is entrenched in this context, and the ultimate hearer is also entrenched in this context; it's just that the medium between the original speaker and the ultimate hearer is not entrenched in this context and so does not know what the utterance means. Imagine for a moment if this were incorrect: if the reporter knew what was being said via a literal semantic analysis, *this would make for a lousy means of communication between spies!* It is the very vacuity that comes from context-free reporting that allows for the secrecy of spy language.

⁸ Under a section titled "Argument from Explanatory Force: The Seven Virtues of Semantic Minimalism," Cappelen & Lepore write, "Semantic Minimalism, and no other view, can account for how Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports can be true where the reporter and the reportee find themselves in radically different contexts. In such cases, *the reported content is the semantic content*" (2005: 152, emphasis mine). There are two claims here: one is that the content of indirect reports is the minimal semantic content, and the second is that only Semantic Minimalism can explain this. *If it were true that reported content were ever the minimal semantic content, then Semantic Minimalism would be the theory to explain this fact. But reported content is rarely, if ever, minimal semantic content and so Semantic Minimalism is rarely, if ever, a useful semantic theory. However, this is not worth pursuing because Cappelen & Lepore go on to recant this claim of pg. 152 later on in *Insensitive Semantics*.*

semantic content!” How does the reader know that I am looking for a red apple in the sense used in *C1* and not the sense in *C2*? I established the context: I said I was hungry, and hungry humans don’t like diseased apples. I provided enough context to frame the relevant meaning of the color predicate. That’s all it takes; there’s nothing magical about intercontextual reporting other than the building of these everyday contextual bridges. But without them—in utterances like Cappelen & Lepore claim (u_2) to be—communication goes dreadfully wrong.

Cappelen & Lepore trade on the mere ability to reproduce the words used in the original utterance, as if mere phonetic reduplication itself captures the practice of reporting what was said in another context. In their analysis, indirect reporters resemble tape recorders conveying the sounds that were uttered in the original context, but without conveying what was meant. For example, imagine the Secret Spy context in which I am having a conversation with Secret Spy Bill and he says to me, “Listen, when you see Secret Spy Frank pass on this message: ‘Anne said that the apple is red.’” Confused, I ask Bill, “But what does that mean, ‘Anne said that the apple is red’? What shall I tell Frank?” Secret Spy Bill elusively responds, “Never mind. Just report what I said and he’ll know just what it means.” In such a case, it’s perfectly plausible for me to meet Secret Spy Frank and say to him, “Anne said that the apple is red.” And when I do this, it’s plausible that I’m *reporting* minimal semantic content, although it will not be *interpreted* by Frank as semantically minimal—he will, of course, invoke earlier contexts in which he and Bill established this secret spy language. As this kind of reporter, I am no different from a tape recorder that can play sounds in multiple settings.⁹ But this context is so contrary to our ordinary reporting practices that we can see that it is the peculiarity of this context that makes the falsity of (u_2) in other, more ordinary contexts appear counterintuitive, and not some strange and dogmatic conviction of Contextualism. As it turns out, it is our ordinary practices of indirect reporting that Semantic Minimalism fails to explain; merely disquotational semantic analyses of indirect reports would make most reports inscrutable. Of course, the context sensitivity of predicates such as ‘is red’ is quite different from the context sensitivity of indexicals such as ‘tomorrow’ and it is these nuanced differences that will make them look so different when it comes to handling tests such as Cappelen & Lepore’s Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test. But the difference lies not in whether or not each of these expressions is in fact context sensitive, but rather in the ways in which it is context sensitive.

⁹ Indeed, this is no different from a direct report. Secret Spy Bill said “say ‘x’” and I said “x.”