

Cappelen and Lepore, Insensitive Semantics

Chapters 3 and 4

- Chapter 2** sketches the two types of arguments typically used in defenses of C&L's two targets, i.e. Moderate Contextualism (MC) and Radical Contextualism (RC):
- Context-shifting arguments (CSA)
 - Incompleteness arguments
- Chapter 3** gives a detailed presentation of the first class of arguments (CSAs), and argues that they fail.
- Chapter 4** offers a diagnosis explaining why CSAs, although they are 'unsound', are so pervasive.

Chapter 3 Context-shifting arguments proliferate

CSAs are an unsound basis for MC because they proliferate and prove too much: if they are legitimate at all, then RC, not MC, is true. Accepting the general form of CSA as valid leads a Moderate Contextualist, on pain of inconsistency, to RC.

The next step will then (in chapters 7-9) be to show that RC is untenable, so that an argumentative strategy which leads to the conclusion that RC is true is in fact a *reductio*.

(GEN) With sufficient ingenuity, a CSA can be provided for any sentence whatsoever, and consequently, for any expression.

(NB: it is not clear how we get from “any sentence” to “any expression.”)

GEN is an empirical claim.

C&L justify it by a list of examples. The claim will be sufficiently justified if the sample is “large”, “representative”, and cannot be dealt with by using “local” contextualist strategies of explanation (adding surprise/hidden indexicals or inarticulated constituents here and there). Furthermore, to be relevant to the debate, the examples shouldn't be accountable to factors extraneous to change of meaning in context, such as

- Ambiguity
- Syntactic ellipsis
- Polysemy
- Nonliterality
- Vagueness

It seems to me that:

- the 6 or 7 examples given by C&L are a rather meagre statistical basis for generalization.
- in all cases, an explanation based on the irrelevant factors listed above could be hypothesized.

Discussion of possible moves contextualists could make in response to C&L's examples.

Chapter 4 The faulty use of CSA rests on a mistaken assumption about the relation between semantics and pragmatics

Why are CSAs so widely used, although they are 'unsound'?

A widespread assumption:

(MA) A theory of semantic content is adequate just in case it accounts for all or most of the intuitions speakers have about speech act content, i.e., intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, and state by uttering sentences.

(MA) entails in particular (MA*) :

(MA*) Ifs CSAs [...] trigger the intuition that proposition p is said, claimed, stated, or asserted by an utterance u of sentence S in language L, then an adequate semantic theory for L should assign p as the semantic content of u.

The entailment is questionable, since (MA) doesn't posit a relation of *identity* between semantic content of S and proposition asserted by utterance u of S: it says, more modestly, that the former *accounts for* the latter, which it could do if the semantic theory provided a systematic way to get from the former to the latter, given specific contextual parameters. This could be achieved even if the semantic content is not a proposition, but a propositional function/radical, or something like a Kaplanian character, for instance.

C&L claim that

- Kaplan, Travis and Davidson, at least, explicitly commit themselves to (MA)
- The particularized variant (MA*) of (MA) is tacitly (or even unconsciously) assumed "by those who freely use CSAs, and more generally, by all Moderate (and Radical) Contextualists"

But the second claim at least is unfair. There is considerable discussion in contextualist/relativist circles as to the exact nature of the relationship between semantic content / propositions / what-is-said (e.g. Stojanovic). The identity is far from being universally taken for granted, and many explicitly question it.

(MA)/(MA*): the additional premise necessary to transition from CSAs to (Radical) Contextualism.

From (MA*) to RC:

- (1) (CSA) What is said, stated, asserted or claimed by an utterance u of an (unambiguous) sentence S containing e need not be the same as what is said, etc., by another utterance u' of S (and this difference is not due to any other context sensitive expression in S).
(p 40)
- (2) (GEN) With sufficient ingenuity, a CSA can be provided for any sentence whatsoever, and consequently, for any expression.
(p 40)

- (3) (MA*) If CSAs [...] trigger the intuition that proposition p is said, claimed, stated, or asserted by an utterance u of sentence S in language L, then an adequate semantic theory for L should assign p as the semantic content of u.
- (4) Each CSA trigger the intuition that in different contexts c1, c2, ..., cn, different propositions p1, p2, ..., pn are said, asserted, etc. by S, as uttered in these contexts.
- (5) From 2), 3) and 4), an adequate semantic theory for L should assign a set of propositions p1, p2,...pn as a semantic content to any sentence in L.
- (6) (RC1) ? No English sentence S ever semantically express a proposition. (see p 6)
- (7) Conclusion Either RC1 is true, or (if there are independent reasons to reject it) one must consider the above reasoning as a *reductio*, and reject one or another of premises (1)-(5).

C&L argue for the second disjunct because they think that RC is “not only empirically inadequate” but “also incoherent”. (Arguments are postponed to chapters 7-9.)

C&L claim that the faulty premise in the *reductio* is (MA).

“Put succinctly: liberate semantics from MA or endorse RC.”

The argument as reconstructed above poses a number of problems.

- (1)-(5) don't really yield (6). They entail at most that no English sentence has one and only one atomic proposition p as its semantic content. But that's compatible with sentences having disjunctive propositions of the form p1 V p2 V ... V pn as their semantic content. That the set of propositions p1, p2, ..., pn asserted (and, by (MA*), expressed) by each sentence S is larger than a singleton doesn't mean that the list p1, p2, ..., pn is open-ended, or indeterminate.
- Even granting that the argument is sound, it is not obvious that the defective premise is (MA*).
 - First, C&L have not really proved (GEN). (Chapter 3 provides only a weak justificatory basis : universal statement only justified by induction from a limited sample of questionable examples.)
 - Second, it is not clear whether (CSA) is acceptable in C&L's theory. Is it just that CSAs are legitimate, but won't support MC? Or are CSAs unsound by themselves? Terminological confusion in the book: C&L indiscriminately use the label “CSA” for arguments similar to (1) – which they accept – and arguments where the variation of meaning across contexts is interpreted as a variation in semantic content rather than in speech-act content – which they reject.
 - It is not obvious that one can afford to discard (MA*), or at least (MA).

Problems with the rejection of MA:

1) Is semantic content is theoretically inert?

- C&L's solution to dilemma (7): fully acknowledging the data from which CSAs arguments are constructed, but channelling the (contextually dependent) variability of meaning they exhibit into the speech-act stage of communication.

- Consequence: a complete divorce between semantics and pragmatics (as stressed by the slogan “liberate semantics from MA”).

Rejecting MA amounts to claiming that there is no systematic/lawlike contribution of semantic content to what is communicated (said, stated, asserted, etc.).

- No regular inferences can be drawn from semantic content and facts about the context of utterance, to the content of the information communicated and processed by interlocutors. See p 4:

“It follows from Speech Act Pluralism that an utterance can assert propositions that are not even logical implications of the proposition semantically expressed. Nothing even prevents an utterance from asserting [...] propositions incompatible with the proposition semantically expressed by that utterance.”

- Consequence (?): Semantic content becomes a useless abstraction.

Semantic content, in C&L's framework, may fall prey to a criticism analogous to one they formulate while discussing Kaplan's notion of what-is-said (top of p 55):

“Were this notion entirely theoretical, it would be unclear exactly which phenomenon the technical apparatus was attempting to explicate or clarify or even describe.”

- So why bother to preserve the notion of semantic content at all, if it has no explanatory use?

C&L are not very clear about what role “semantic content” plays in their theory, and why the notion is worth preserving.

- On the one hand, C&L defend themselves from reducing the notion of semantic content to an empirically irrelevant abstraction. See p 57:

“We are *not* claiming there are *no* interesting or informative connections between intuitions about speech act content and semantic content.”

- At the same time, C&L challenge the assumption that the starting point and motivation for semantics is the empirical fact that there is such a thing as intentionality, that we in fact use sentences to say, assert, claim, etc. certain things. They deny that the *explananda* of semantics are facts about human communication. (see p 58).

- But if that isn't what the semanticist should be trying to (partially) explain, then what is the object of semantics? Isn't it reasonable to view semantics as part of a larger project of understanding human communication?

- The picture of semantics' goals and objects on p58 is (I think!) unconvincing.

In short: if C&L want to reject MA, then they need to give the notion of “semantic content” a clear role to play in the theory.

2) Scepticism about the psychological accessibility of semantic content

The disconnection between the processing of meaning in concrete communication and the semantic content of sentences uttered makes it unclear how we come to ascertain the latter. What could possibly count as tests for establishing/verifying the semantic content of a particular expression in a given natural language, if nothing we do when we talk is relevant to that?

3) Pragmatics as a scientific discipline is irrelevant (and maybe impossible)

P 58: There shouldn't, and in fact cannot be any theorizing about what is communicated in concrete situations of interlocution, because

- Facts about individual events of communication are “specific”, not general. So speakers are not interested in generalities about how expressions combine their semantic contents to form the semantic contents of more complex expressions. They are only interested in what is communicated here and now. Therefore, there is no point to pragmatics as a theory.
Questions: is it plausible to say that speakers/hearers somehow access meaning in a “naive”, untheoretical way, and not by making comparisons/generalizations from a range of analogous cases? How are reports of same-saying, for example, even possible if speakers/hearers, when decoding utterances, are engaged in a completely untheoretic activity, and are not interested in facts beyond the particulars of the present communication context?
- Facts about individual events of communication are “specific”, not general. Reports about them cannot be organized in systematic ways, or generalized. (How does that follow? Why couldn't specific features in a speech situation be subsumed under general categories?) Since science requires generality, there can be no theory about concrete communication.