

Semantics and Pragmatics: Some Central Issues

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If you vary the context of utterance enough, i.e. vary the audience, the conversational context, the background knowledge, etc., you can get any sentence to communicate different propositions. One central task for those interested in the semantics–pragmatics distinction is to identify and classify such patterns of inter-contextual variability. Having identified such patterns, we develop models that can explain them. In what follows, I first present some versions of three important models: the Semantic Model, the Pragmatic Model, and the Index Model. In the second half of the chapter, I present what I take to be some of the most pressing challenges facing those working in this field.

The goal is to present these issues and challenges, not to defend a theory. In particular, this is not a chapter meant as a defence of Cappelen and Lepore (2004). As this volume of essays clearly shows, the number of powerful objections and alternatives is now so large that responding to all of them would take a new book. This chapter is meant, rather, as a brief overview, written in the light of these criticisms, of how these issues are best structured, and so might serve to frame some of the debates triggered by the book.

There is, however, one small point I will try to promote, at least indirectly: there's no such thing as *the semantics–pragmatics distinction* and looking for it is a waste of time. No such distinction will do any important explanatory work. You can, as I will below, label some level of content 'semantic content', but in so doing no interesting problem is solved and no puzzling data illuminated. To explain inter-contextual variability across different areas of discourse we will need an arsenal of explanatory models and data-gathering procedures. In the light of recent work in philosophy and linguistics, we should be sceptical of any suggestion to the effect that just a couple of such models will do all the work for us. Our bias, I suggest, should be in favour of

methodological and explanatory pluralism. I return to this point at the end of the chapter.¹

1. TERMINOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES: ‘SEMANTIC’, ‘CONTENT’, AND ‘CHARACTER’

I will talk about *the semantic content of a sentence relative to context of utterance*, and of *the semantic content of an expression relative to a context of utterance*. By this I will mean, more or less, what David Kaplan (1989) means when he talks about the ‘content’ of a sentence and an expression. The content of a sentence, S, in a language, L, relative to a context, C, is found by taking the semantic values of the parts of S and combining them in accordance with the semantic and syntactic composition rules of L.

I’ll take the semantic values of singular terms to be objects, and assume that properties and functions are the semantic values of other terms, though nothing in what follows will crucially depend on these assumptions. What will matter is how we think of the semantic values of those terms that shift content between contexts of utterance. Kaplan takes terms like ‘I’ and ‘that’ as paradigms, and says about them:

What is common to the words or usages in which I am interested is that the referent is dependent on the context of use and that the meaning of the words provides a rule which determines the referent in terms of certain aspects of the context. (Kaplan 1989: 490)

These rules Kaplan calls ‘character’. For example, the rule:

‘I’ refers to the speaker or writer

is, according to Kaplan, the character of ‘I’.² This rule determines a referent for an occurrence of ‘I’ relative to a context of use. So, in a context where Tim is the speaker, the content is Tim. When Samantha is the speaker, she is the semantic content. Kaplan sometimes represents characters as functions from contexts of utterance to contents. So understood, indexicals are those expressions that have such non-stable functions as characters. Non-indexical expressions have fixed characters³ (Kaplan 1989: 506).

¹ In part as a result of this bias, I will have nothing to say about how philosophers have used the words ‘semantic’ and ‘pragmatic’ over the last 100 years. Though this no doubt is a fascinating historical topic, it’s not one that will be of any use to those of us trying to solve problems in this area.

² Kaplan 1989: 505.

³ So understood, terms that are not semantically context-sensitive, e.g. ‘two’, have a character, i.e. a function from contexts to contents. This is a stable function, one that yields the same object for all contexts.

Note that while the character of an expression is part of its linguistic meaning, it does not enter into a specification of its semantic content. Characters *determine* semantic contents; they are not *constituents* of semantic contents. The semantic content of, for example, an utterance by A at time *t* and location *l* of “I’m here now” is the proposition *that A is at l at t*. The constituents of this proposition are determined by the character of the corresponding lexical elements, but this proposition doesn’t in any way ‘contain’ these rules.

Four points are important to note in connection with the decision to use ‘semantic’ in this way:

1. Semantic content is determined compositionally and every element in the semantic value of the sentence is syntactically triggered, i.e. is triggered by elements in the syntax of the sentence.
2. The definition remains neutral about whether these syntactic elements are all articulated in the surface grammatical form of the sentences. Some elements in the semantic value of S relative to context C might correspond to syntactic components that occur only in S’s logical form.
3. The definition remains neutral about whether semantic contents are propositional. They might be sub-propositional objects (also known as ‘propositional skeletons’—more about these below).
4. Finally, the definition remains neutral about whether the semantic content of an utterance, *u*, is what was said or asserted by *u*.

Before moving on, it is worth emphasizing the obvious: choosing to use the word ‘semantic’ in this way is a purely terminological matter. As will become clear below, no interesting issues are settled by this (or any alternative) stipulation.

2. INTER-CONTEXTUAL CONTENT VARIABILITY: SEVEN ILLUSTRATIONS

In what follows, I’ll use the expression variability of S’s or just ‘variability’ as a shorthand for talking about some sentence, S, being used in different contexts to express different contents. Talk about ‘content variability’ is neutral about what *kind* of content varies; it might be semantic content, asserted content, implicatures, or some other level of content. In this section I present some cases of variability and then match them with various explanatory models in §§3–5.

- (1) Kiara has had enough

An utterance *u* of (1) can be used to communicate *that Kiara has had enough pasta*. Another utterance, *u'*, can be used to communicate *that Kiara has had enough chocolate*.

(2) The kettle is black

An utterance *u* of (2) can be used to communicate *that the kettle is black on the outside when washed*. Another utterance, *u'* of (2) can be used to communicate *that the kettle is black all over before being washed*.

(3) Samantha knows that Tim is in Paris

An utterance *u* of (3) in a ‘high stakes context’ might communicate *that Samantha knows by high epistemic standards that Tim is in Paris*. In ‘low stakes context’, an utterance *u'* of (3) might communicate *that Samantha knows by low epistemic standards that Tim is in Paris*.

(4) Sabrina has travelled to Leeds quite often

An utterance *u* of (4) in response to the question “Does Sabrina have a girlfriend these days?” can succeed in communicating *that Sabrina has a girlfriend in Leeds*. An utterance *u'* of (4) in response to the question “Where does Sabrina meet her business partners these days?”, can succeed in communicating *that Sabrina meets her business partners in Leeds*.

(5) I’m here now

An utterance *u* of (5) can be used to communicate *that Nelib was in Florence 29 May 2006*. An utterance *u'* of (5) can be used to communicate *that Alex is in Buenos Aires 15 December 2006*.

(6) Every book is in the left corner

An utterance *u* of (6) can be used to communicate *that every book Alex bought is in the left corner*. Another utterance can be used to communicate the proposition *that every book Nelib wants moved is in the left corner*.

(7) It’s raining

An utterance *u* of (7) can be used to communicate *that it is raining in Buenos Aires*. Another utterance *u'* of (6) can be used to communicate *that it is raining in Oxford*.

These are all cases of one sentence being used to express different contents in different contexts of utterance. It is *obvious* that no single theory can explain how this happens. That said, there are various patterns of explanatory models and in what follows I focus on three of them: the Semantic Model, the Pragmatic Model and the Index Model.⁴

3. SEMANTIC EXPLANATIONS (S-EXPLANATIONS)

The variability in (5) is easy to explain: the sentence contains semantically context-sensitive terms and will, as a result, express different semantic contents relative to different contexts of utterance. Not all S-explanations are that simple. S-explanations can differ along two important dimensions: whether they appeal to *obvious* or *non-obvious* indexicality, and whether they appeal to *overt* or *hidden* indexicality. I discuss each in turn.

Obvious vs. Non-Obvious Indexicality

Some terms, like ‘I’ and ‘that’, are obviously context sensitive. If you ask for a list of terms that change semantic value between contexts, these would be on anyone’s list. Some philosophers claim to find evidence that terms that are not on any initial such list should be. A paradigm is the verb ‘know’. Some philosophers claim that a careful study our usage of ‘know’ reveals that it has a non-stable character so that in this respect it belongs semantically with ‘you’ and ‘I’ (this is, for example, one way to interpret, Cohen 1988, 1999, and Lewis 1996). So two utterances of (3) can vary in content because the context of utterance determines different semantic contents for ‘know’.

The central challenge for those promoting non-obvious indexicality is to provide evidence that a term which doesn’t *seem* to belong with ‘I’ and ‘that’ does. One danger here, emphasized in Cappelen and Lepore (2004), is that whatever conditions are specified may over-generate non-obvious indexicality. The relevant evidence must be such that it includes the proponent’s favoured cases, but doesn’t include every term in the language (unless, of course, you are tempted to conclude that every term in the language is an indexical).

Overt vs. Hidden Indexicality

According to most philosophers and linguists, the *logical form* of a sentence can be radically different from its surface grammatical form. There can be

⁴ I don’t claim that these are the only important explanatory models. For example, I say nothing here about syntactic ellipsis or about models developed in Dynamic Semantics.

constituents in a sentence's logical form that are not phonologically realized. This opens up the possibility that there can be, so to speak, 'hidden' indexicality in sentences. I'll call this 'hidden indexicality' because you can't hear (or see) these indexicals. Note that these are still S-explanations, given the definition of 'semantic' in §1. (6) provides a much discussed illustration. (6) doesn't seem to contain a context-sensitive component, but it is widely believed that its logical form contains an indexical that refers to a domain. According to this view, the logical form of (6) can be (at least partially) represented by (6.1):⁵

(6.1) Every book_(D) is in the left corner

According to this view, 'D' is an indexical expression that refers to a set (or a property) and the semantic value of "NP_(D)" can be thought of as the intersection of the semantic values of 'NP' and 'D'. The variability in content between different utterances of (6) is thus explained by variability in what the 'hidden indexical' refers to.

The central challenge for those promoting S-explanations that appeal to hidden indexicals is to specify what counts as evidence for their existence. As with non-obvious indexicality, there's the danger that the procedure will over-generate. If there are hidden indexicals that refer to domain restrictions, what prevents us from saying there are hidden indexicals in (2) specifying the side on (or way in which) the kettle is black? Again, some might welcome a proliferation of indexicals in logical form, but more moderate proponents of S-explanations will want to avoid over-generation. (For further elaboration on this, see discussion of the binding argument in §6 below.)

I-Explanations and Intentional vs. Non-Intentional Indexicals

One point to note in connection with all S-explanations is that some authors make a great deal out of the distinction between those indexicals that have their semantic values determined by the speaker's intentions and those that are determined solely by the non-intentional features of the context utterance (such as the speaker, time, and place) (see Recanati 2002, 2004; Carston 2004). They argue that this distinction is of enormous significance and insist on using the term 'semantic content' only about those indexicals that have their semantic values fixed non-intentionally. Others (e.g. Cappelen and Lepore 2004: ch 11) argue that this is a paradigm of a pointless dispute about how to use the term 'semantic' and that no substantive or even remotely interesting issue depends on this distinction.

⁵ For sophisticated versions and discussions of this idea see Stanley and Szabo 2000; Stanley 2000a; Westerstahl 1985.

4. PRAGMATIC EXPLANATIONS (P-EXPLANATIONS)

According to P-explanations of variability, utterances of S communicate distinct non-semantic (that is, pragmatic⁶) contents. For those trying to navigate the current literature on these topics, it might be helpful to classify P-explanations according to the various levels of non-semantic content the variability can be attributed to. Two non-semantic levels can usefully be distinguished: implicatures and asserted content.

Variability in Implicatures

(4) is the paradigm of variability in what Grice called an ‘implicature’ (Grice 1989*b*). Implicatures, according to Grice, occur when the speaker says that *p* (or makes as if to say that *p*) and intends for the audience to recognize that the purpose of the speech act is to communicate something other than what was said. Grice thought of conversations as cooperative enterprises and argued that what enables an audience to derive an implicature is the assumption that the speaker is cooperative. Implicatures are generated when the audience realizes that this assumption is incompatible with the speaker intending to communicate what was said by the utterance. The audience is led to look for some other content the speaker might intend to get across. This other content is the implicature. Consider again the two utterances of (4) in §2. We can assume that both utterances have the same semantic content and that what is said (or made as if to say) is the same proposition. At that level, there is no variability. In both cases, the assumption that the speaker is being cooperative (combined with certain assumptions about what that consists in) leads the audience to figure out that the speaker means for them to interpret the utterance as communicating a content different from what was asserted (or said) by it.

This is the most familiar and generally accepted version of P-explanation. That there are implicatures is generally accepted, but the mechanism through which the audience goes from an utterance to an implicature is more controversial.⁷ I’ll have some more to say about this in §6 below. First, I turn to another, more controversial type of P-explanation.

Variability in Speech Act Content, i.e. in What Was Said/Asserted

Some P-explanations appeal to variability in what was said or asserted by the utterances. Since P-explanations assume that the semantic content is stable, these

⁶ I use ‘pragmatic’ to mean ‘non-semantic’.

⁷ See e.g. Wilson and Sperber 1981; Sperber and Wilson 1986; Davis 1998; Levinson 2000.

explanations must incorporate the view that semantic contents are not (always) asserted. Two versions of this view can be usefully distinguished: according to the first version, the semantic content is not asserted (or said); according to the second, the semantic content is only a part of what is asserted. I discuss these versions in turn.

Version 1

According to Version 1, two utterances u and u' (of S) can have the same semantic content, p , but p is not what was said or asserted by either of them; u asserts that q and u' that q' . According to some philosophers, (1) provides an illustration: “Kiara has had enough” has as its semantic content a propositional *fragment* or *skeleton*. Let’s call it “that Kiara has had enough”. This is not asserted by either u or u' . Various non-semantic mechanisms take the audience from the non-propositional semantic content to the asserted proposition; in the example in §2, *that Kiara has had enough pasta* is what u asserts and *that Kiara has had enough chocolate* is what u' asserts.

Some philosophers go to town on this kind of P-explanation.⁸ They think (almost) no semantic values are propositional. If practically no semantic contents are propositional, it is tempting to explain a whole lot of variability in the way just described; there is, after all, no other propositional content around, so variability in what was said (assuming this must be a complete proposition) *must* be given a P-explanation. Such philosophers typically have two primary motivations for denying that semantic values are propositional:

- (a) They are unwilling to postulate elements not in the surface syntax of sentence. If, for example, there’s no syntactic element corresponding to what Kiara has had enough of in the sentence, “Kiara has had enough”, then, by most standards, it is hard to see that semantic composition alone will give you a proposition. If semantic content is non-propositional, it can’t account for the variability in content between the two utterances of (1).
- (b) They are also typically conservative about what they count as propositions. They often think it is exceedingly hard for a semantic value to reach the level of propositionality. If so, you might think that no matter how many syntactic elements you dump into a sentence’s logical form, you won’t end up with a proposition. For some classical arguments to this effect, see Travis 1985. For arguments in favour of liberalism with respect to what should count as a proposition, see Cappelen and Lepore 2004; ch 12.

⁸ See e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1986; Carston 2002; Recanati 2004. For more moderate appeals to such explanations, see Perry 1986; Crimmins 1992; Bach 1994; Soames forthcoming.

Version 2

Closely related to the previous strategy, but also importantly different from it, is the idea, emphasized in Cappelen and Lepore 1997 and 2004, that an utterance of a sentence can assert a *plurality* of propositions.⁹ According to this view, the semantic content could be *one* of these. This opens up the following possibility: two utterances, *u* and *u'*, of the same sentence *S* have the same semantic content, and the semantic content is one of the propositions said/asserted by both. However, other propositions are also asserted and these vary between *u* and *u'*.

This strategy can be applied to a wide range of cases. (6) can serve as an example. The semantic content is the unrestrictedly quantified proposition. This is the semantic content of both utterances of (6) and it is asserted by both utterances of (6). It is not, however, *saliently* asserted by either *u* or *u'*: *u* saliently asserts *that every book Alex bought is in the left corner*, *u'* saliently asserts *that every book Nelib wants moved is in the left corner*.

P-Explanations and Unarticulated Constituents

In some of the semantics–pragmatics literature there's a lot of talk about 'unarticulated constituents' (see e.g. Perry 1986; Recanati 2002; Stanley 2000). There's debate about what they are and whether they exist. Here is how to place this issue within the framework outlined above: unarticulated constituents refer to elements in what is said (asserted) by an utterance that have no syntactic correlate in *S*. So understood, to believe in unarticulated constituents is nothing more radical than to think that some cases of variability have P-explanations of Version 1 or 2. Opposition to unarticulated constituents amounts to the claim that no good such explanations are adequate. As I argue in §6 below, given the complexity of these issues, that seems an exceedingly implausible assumption to make. It is also a bit hard to see why so much controversy surrounds this question. If in some cases these explanations turn out to be successful, it's not a big deal.

5. INDEX-EXPLANATIONS (I-EXPLANATIONS)

Some of the basic distinctions from Kaplan are needed to present the idea behind index-explanations. Kaplan says: "we must distinguish possible occasions of use—which I call contexts—from possible circumstances of evaluation of what is said on a given occasion of use" (Kaplan 1989). When defining what it is for an occurrence of a sentence to be true in a context, Kaplan talks about what he calls 'the circumstance of the context'. He says:

⁹ A related idea is found in Soames 2002. On one interpretation, this view is also present in Sperber and Wilson 1986.

If c is a context, then an occurrence of ϕ in c is true iff the content expressed by ϕ in this context is true when evaluated *with respect to the circumstance of the context*. (Kaplan 1989: 522; my italics)

According to an I-explanation of variability, two utterances of S , u in C and u' in C' , can differ in truth-value because the circumstance of C differs from the circumstance of C' . This is compatible with the two utterances expressing the same contents. So, strictly speaking, this is not a model for explaining what I've called 'content variability'; it is, rather, an explanation of the illusion of content variability.

Before showing how this strategy can be put to work, it is worth noting that this is an explanatory strategy that directly contradicts the central claim in the famous passage from Kaplan where he introduces the notion of *content*. Kaplan says, "If what we say differs in truth value, that is enough to show that we say different things" (Kaplan 1989: 500).¹⁰ According to proponents of I-explanations, this is false. We can have variability in truth-value between u and u' because the circumstances of their respective contexts differ.

Of course, if circumstances of evaluation are just worlds, this won't do any work explaining (away) the cases of variability that I have focused on so far. It becomes a more plausible strategy only when more parameters are added to the circumstance of evaluation.¹¹ Kaplan 1989 makes one move in this direction. He treats circumstances of evaluation not just as worlds, but as (world, time) pairs. According to this view, an utterance u of "Tim is wearing blue socks" at time t expresses a *temporally neutral* proposition (though as Kaplan points out (1989: 504), this is a potentially misleading label, because such things are not propositions in the classical sense). On this view, u does not express the proposition *that Tim is wearing blue socks at t*. It expresses the temporally neutral proposition *that Tim is wearing blue socks*. Such propositions can be true at some times, and false at others, in the way classical propositions can be true at one world and false at others.

This becomes a general strategy for explaining (away) variability when even more parameters are added to the circumstance of evaluation. Lewis 1980 adds locations and standards of precision as indices of circumstances of evaluation. MacFarlane (this volume) suggests that a 'counts as' parameter be added. According to this latter proposal two utterances of (2) can differ in truth-value, not because they differ in content (they both express the propositional skeleton *that the kettle is black*) but because the circumstances of their respective contexts differ with respect to the *counts as* parameter. We have variability in truth-value, without variability in content.¹²

¹⁰ Remember, for Kaplan, what is said = content.

¹¹ Lewis 1980 calls the parameters 'indices', hence the somewhat confusing label 'index-model'.

¹² Lewis and Kaplan are moved to this view not because they want to develop an alternative model of variability, but because they think of tense as an operator and they think that requires

Three final remarks about I-explanations:

- (a) Proponents of I-explanations need an account of the conditions under which parameters can be added to the circumstance of evaluation. As Lewis 1980 points out, we could have a ‘person’ parameter to fix the value of ‘I’ or ‘you’, but we don’t. Lewis and Kaplan put strict constraints on when the index-strategy should be invoked. They thought the strategy was acceptable only when an operator could shift the parameter. If that’s correct, this model has limited applicability.¹³
- (b) It is not clear how proponents of I-explanations think of the relationship between semantic contents and speech act content. Consider temporally neutral propositions. It is certainly peculiar to hold that these are said or asserted by utterances of sentences. Some new story about the nature of saying or asserting needs to accompany such views (this point is emphasized in Lewis 1980).
- (c) The index model is associated with some contemporary versions of relativism. For example, something in the neighbourhood of what has been called ‘relativism’ results if we introduce people as parameters in the circumstance of evaluation. This would imply that some semantic contents are true only relative to people and worlds (and whatever else goes into the circumstance of evaluation).¹⁴

6. SIX CHALLENGES

Debates about the context sensitivity of different parts of discourse have a lot in common, but it’s dangerous to be seduced by the similarities, and important to pay close attention to the details of each case. To see this, consider the following (far from complete) list of areas where there is currently a lively debate about how to explain variability: quantified noun phrases, focus, adjectives, epistemic terms, vague terms, moral terms, definite and indefinite descriptions, conditionals, names, attitude reports, quotation, tenses, and modals. Understanding each of these will not simply be a matter of finding which explanatory model to dump them into. The patterns of variability will vary from case to case and so will the details of successful explanatory models.

That said, there are a number of connected challenges that face anyone working in this field. I will mention six that seem to me particularly pressing.

postulating a time parameter in the circumstance of evaluation. For an important criticism of this view, see King 2003. For further examples of appeals to I-explanations, see Egan et al., 2005; MacFarlane 2005; Lasersohn 2005. See also discussion in Stanley 2005*b*.

¹³ For a useful discussion of this issue, see Stanley 2005*b*.

¹⁴ Some proponents of relativism, e.g. John MacFarlane, claim that this is not relativism *proper*. It becomes relativism *proper*, MacFarlane claims, only when truth is relativized to what he calls ‘contexts of assessment’.

Challenge 1: Develop New Diagnostics and Data-Gathering Procedures

Consider someone who proposes an S-explanation to account for the variability of some sentence, S. Such an explanation will appeal either to obvious, non-obvious, or hidden indexicality. For the debate between proponents and opponents of this S-explanation to be constructive, we need diagnostics to help determine when an expression is a non-obvious indexical and when we can legitimately postulate hidden indexicals. We need ‘data-gathering procedures’ that will help adjudicate between the competing explanations. Similarly, if an S-explanation is ruled out, we need diagnostics to determine which kind of P-explanation we should appeal to.

It’s hard to overestimate the importance of trying to develop such diagnostics: if we don’t have more or less theory-neutral diagnostics, the prospects of constructive debate between proponents of different explanatory models are dim. Here are three illustrations of the kinds of diagnostics I have in mind:

- (a) *Grice on cancelability and non-detachability*: Grice proposed two procedures to help distinguish variability in what is said from variability in implicatures: cancelability and non-detachability. According to Grice these are only necessary, not sufficient conditions for being implicatures.¹⁵ Grice’s diagnostics have been subject to extensive criticism over the years, but note that even if these tests conclusively established that a certain kind of variability was not at the level of implicatures, that would leave us with a lot of options. It doesn’t rule out any of the other P-explanations discussed in §4 nor any of the S-explanations discussed in §3. So even if Grice’s tests were necessary and sufficient conditions, they wouldn’t take us very far.
- (b) *Disquotational reporting tests*: A recent development in this field is the proposal that data gathered from so-called ‘disquotational reports’ can be used to adjudicate between competing explanatory models (see Cappelen and Lepore 2004: ch. 7). Such data play a central role in recent work by various philosophers opposed to S-explanations (e.g. Cappelen and Lepore 2003, 2004; Hawthorne 2003; MacFarlane 2005; Egan et al., 2005). There’s already a rather extensive literature on how best to interpret this data. (See e.g. Hawthorne (forthcoming); Cappelen and Lepore (forthcoming b); Humberstone 2006; Lesley (this volume).) This is not the place to go into this debate, but one point worth emphasizing is that all those who appeal to such diagnostics are clear on not treating them

¹⁵ The non-sufficiency of the cancelability test is a much-overlooked feature of Grice’s view. He says: “unfortunately one cannot regard the fulfilment of a cancelability test as decisively establishing the presence of a conversational implicature” (Grice 1989b: 44). Grice’s argument for this appeals to what he calls ‘loose talk’ (see pp. 44–5),

as necessary or sufficient conditions for the applicability of any particular explanatory model. So to object that they fail to *conclusively establish* that one or the other of the other explanatory models applies is a mistake. These diagnostics are devices we use for gathering data. It might be that certain kinds of data patterns are best explained by one of these models (that's the structure of one of the central arguments in Cappelen and Lepore 2004), but the data-gathering procedures alone do not dictate that.

- (c) *Binding data*: Neither Grice's tests nor the disquotational reporting diagnostics will help us decide when it is acceptable to add hidden indexicals to logical form (LF). Important work on this issue has been done in a series of papers by Jason Stanley (2000*a*, 2000*b*, 2005). According to Stanley, we can use bindability as a diagnostic for when elements should be postulated in LF: if there is data that is best explained by the hypothesis that an element hidden in LF is bound, then we have evidence of its existence. Stanley's view has been subject to much recent criticism.¹⁶ Despite these criticisms, there is no doubt that bindability is an important piece of data and that it will play a significant role in evaluating S-explanations that appeal to hidden indexicals.

As the various debates about (a)–(c) show, there's little agreement on the correct interpretation of, or even the usefulness of, the diagnostics currently on the market. That's a problem. We're unlikely to make any progress on choosing between competing explanations unless someone can come up with improved tests of these kinds. Those unhappy with the diagnostics currently on the table should be hard at work trying to come up with new and less controversial strategies.

Challenge 2: Metaphysics of Propositions

One important issue in many of these debates is how we determine when a semantic value reaches the level of propositionality. As emphasized in §4, a number of P-explanations presuppose that some semantic values are non-propositional. That assumption is also built into all I-explanations. Remember, according to I-explanations, semantic values don't have truth-values *simpliciter*, they are not true or false at worlds and so do not reach the level of propositionality. In the light of this, someone new to these debates might reasonably expect an extensive literature on how we distinguish between semantic values that are propositional and those that are not. That, however, is not the case. It is surprising how little work has been done on developing tests for propositionality.

¹⁶ See e.g. Carston 2002; Cappelen and Lepore 2002; Recanati 2004; Marti 2006; Cappelen and Hawthorne 2007; Stanley's reply to some of these criticisms in Stanley 2005.

Challenge 3: Relate Semantic Content and Speech Act Content

In many of the current debates a big fuss is made about how we should think of the relationship between the semantic content of an utterance and what's intuitively asserted or said by that utterance. Some are committed to the view that they practically never come together (Salmon 1991; Cappelen and Lepore 1997), others to the view that they practically always do (Stanley 2000*a*). The issue is connected to a number of other topics mentioned above. Some of the more obvious connections are these:

- Where the line is drawn between propositions and proposition skeletons: if you think that it is really hard for a semantic value to reach the level of propositionality, then many semantic values will be non-propositional, and the semantic value will not be what is said (on the assumption that what is said must be propositional).
- How liberal you are with respect to postulating syntactic elements 'hidden' in LF: the more of these you have, the more likely you are to get close to the intuitive speech act content. How many elements you are willing to postulate in LF will depend on your attitude towards, for example, the binding tests mentioned under Challenge 1 above.
- How you describe the intuitive speech act content: there is no consensus on how we should describe what's said (or asserted) by utterances. If, for example, there's no *unique* correct such description (i.e. if there are several distinct equally correct ways to describe what is said by an utterance), as is argued by Cappelen and Lepore 1997 and Soames 2002, then, if there is only *one* semantic value, there will always be a significant gap. If you think what's said can vary from one context of interpretation to another (again see Cappelen and Lepore 2004) and that semantic contents cannot so vary, then once again there will always be a gap.

Note that since this is just the beginning of a long list of issues that will determine how you think of the relationship between semantic contents and speech act content, it is *prima facie* implausible that we will have a unified account of this relationship. We are more likely to find that it will vary from one part of discourse to another. It's not a topic that we'll settle by working on *it*. Rather, patterns might emerge as we get clearer on other issues.¹⁷

¹⁷ One worry that often comes up in these discussions is a concern about the so-called *cognitive role* of semantic values if these are *not* identical to what the speaker said. Sometimes this is raised as a particular concern for those who postulate so-called minimal propositions that are not identical to what was said. Two quick and programmatic comments on that alleged problem: (a) this is no more of a problem for those who have minimal propositions as semantic values than it is a problem for those who have non-propositional semantic values (this is important since many of those running this objection to minimal propositions are happy to have non-propositional semantic values all over

Challenge 4: Describe Contextual Mechanisms and Understand the Nature of Contexts

All the explanatory models discussed above are in agreement that context can, in part, contribute to determining content.¹⁸ So all these models need to combine with an account of *how* contexts do what they do. They need an account of the contextual mechanisms that contribute to content. Some illustrations of what I have in mind:

- Proponents of surprise indexicals owe us a story about how their semantic values are fixed in a context of utterance. If, for example, you think ‘know’ is a context-sensitive term, you need to tell us how that term gets its semantic value in a context of utterance.
- Hidden indexicalists need to tell us how the semantic values of hidden indexicals are fixed in the context of utterance.
- If you are moved by any of the standard criticisms of Grice, appeals to implicatures are in need of an improved account of the contextual mechanism that takes the audience from what the speaker says to what she implicated.
- According to some P-explanations, contexts of utterances help interpreters get from non-propositional semantic values to speech act content. Such explanations need an account of the contextual mechanisms involved.
- I-explanations need an account of how the relevant circumstance of evaluation is fixed in a context of utterance.
- Those who think many propositions are asserted by any utterance (so-called speech act pluralists) need an account of how this plurality of propositions is generated in a context of utterance and how it is related to the semantic value of the sentence uttered.
- Even for the classical, obvious indexicals, it is not at all clear what the reference-fixing mechanisms are. There’s no agreement, for example, on the role of demonstrating intentions for demonstratives and on how terms like ‘local’ and ‘left’ have their referents determined.

One’s view of these issues will have important implications for how other challenges can be met. If, for example, no plausible mechanisms can explain how we get from a non-propositional semantic value to a proposition that is asserted,

the place); (b) an assumption underlying this criticism is that we’ll have a unified account of the so-called cognitive role of semantic contents—that’s an unjustified assumption. A more plausible assumption is that not only will the cognitive role of semantic content vary between sentences, but also between utterances of the same sentence.

¹⁸ Of course, this is a bit misleading since, in the case of I-explanations, context contributes to fixing parameters. There is no variation in content.

then certain P-explanations become considerably less plausible. If you think no plausible account can be given of how the semantic value of hidden indexicals are fixed in context, then certain S-explanations will seem considerably less plausible. And so on.¹⁹

Challenge 5: Explain the Possibility of Shared Content

The thought that we are capable of sharing contents across contexts is a central feature of our self-conception as communicating creatures. This is exhibited in a number of ways, including (a)–(c):

- (a) We typically think we can understand what someone has said in uttering some sentence *S*, even if we don't have extensive knowledge of her intentions, context, or audience. So even if we are eavesdroppers, we think we can understand what someone said by uttering "It might be that most linguists read few books". (Hint: she said that most linguists read few books.)
- (b) We think we can use a sentence, *S*, in a context, *C*, to say what someone else said by using that sentence in some other context, *C'*, even though *C* and *C'* are quite different. For example, if we hear an utterance of "It might be that most linguists read few books" in *C'*, we think we can use this sentence in some different context, *C*, to say what the original speaker said.
- (c) We think disquotational indirect reports often succeed in correctly reporting on what other people said. So we think we can report an utterance of "It might be that most linguists read few books" in *C* by an utterance of "She said that it might be that most linguists read few books" in *C'*.²⁰

(a)–(c) might seem obvious, but are in constant danger of being undermined by the discovery of various kinds of context sensitivity. By some accounts, "It might be that most linguists read few books" contains five hidden or non-obvious indexicals, and the semantic values of these depends on very complex aspects of the context of utterance. How, then, can someone not familiar with the context of utterance grasp the proposition expressed? How can someone succeed in expressing the same proposition in a very different context?

The idea that we can share content seems to be embedded not just in how we talk about contents. It is also interwoven with important non-linguistic

¹⁹ Closely connected to this is the challenge of saying something precise about what exactly a context is. This is currently an under-explored question. There's a lot of talk about contexts-this and contexts-that, but very little in the way of a precise account of what sorts of things contexts are. See Gauker 1998 and 2003 for interesting discussions of this topic.

²⁰ Note that while (b) does not rely on our intuitions about indirect reports, (c) does. So, while it might be tempting to explain some (c) phenomena by appeal to special feature of our indirect reporting practices, that strategy does not extend to (b).

practices. When, for example, we hold people responsible for what they have said, we assume that we can grasp what they have said. When we articulate rules, directives, laws and other action-guiding instructions, we assume that people, variously situated, can grasp that content in the same way. When we deliberate over long periods of time, we assume that there is a stable content we deliberate over. Any theory of context sensitivity should have something to say about how these intuitions are preserved.²¹

As Sarah-Jane Leslie points out (this volume, appendix), this is not a problem just for those who postulate a lot of semantic context-sensitive terms in sentences. It is a problem for any theory according to which the speech act content is context-sensitive, even if this content is not identical to the semantic content. Consider again an utterance of “It might be that most linguists read few books”. If you hold, as Cappelen and Lepore (2004) do, that what is saliently asserted by such an utterance is context-sensitive, even though the semantic content is not, the assumption of shared content is still threatened.

Challenge 6: Compositionality and the Semantics—Pragmatics Distinction

The way I have set things up in this chapter, semantic values are, by definition, compositionally determined. There are some important advantages to that way of framing these issues. It becomes relatively easy to formulate the central issues, such as: *Is speech act content ever/sometimes/always the semantic content? Is semantic content (i.e. compositionally determined content) always/sometimes/never propositional?*

No matter how you come down on these issues, there remains the challenge of actually working out a compositional semantic theory. How difficult that will be depends, in part, on how you think of the relationship between semantic content and speech act content. The following generalization is roughly correct: if you are willing to have a significant gap between semantic content and speech act content, constructing a compositional semantic theory will be considerably easier than if you insist on keeping them close together. For an illustration consider the semantic for propositional attitude reports. Someone who tolerates a significant gap between semantic content and what speakers intuitively say (and assert) could avoid worrying about how a semantic theory should account for substitution failures in attitude reports. The intuition that substitutions of co-referential terms in such contexts can result in a changed truth-value can be attributed to an effect on non-semantic content. The semantic content stays the same under such substitution, the speech act content (what was said and asserted) changes. On this view, the intuitions that underpin claims about

²¹ For further discussion of this view, see Cappelen and Lepore 2006.

substitution failures are intuitions about what speakers succeed in saying, not intuitions that reflect variability in semantic content. The semantics is then pretty straightforward.

The flip side of this is that hard work awaits those who like to keep semantic content close to speech act content. A philosopher with such predilections must, for every contextual variation in content, find a semantic explanation. As a result, she is typically forced to postulate lots and lots of syntactic elements in the LF. That makes doing compositional semantics more complicated.

7. DO WE NEED THE SEMANTICS–PRAGMATICS DISTINCTION?

No, we don't. Philosophers and linguists have used the words 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' in an extraordinarily confusing array of ways over the last 100 years. In part as a result of this, the field is highly susceptible to terminological disputes. The best solution would be for all of us to decide never to use these dreaded words ever again. That, unfortunately, is unlikely to happen.

The danger of thinking that the semantics–pragmatics distinction matters is not just that it leads to terminological disputes because philosophers use these words in different ways. That would be a somewhat serious problem, but not all that hard to get around. More serious, I think, is that it encourages a simplified idea of how to solve the central challenges in this field. Put very simply, it encourages the absurd idea that, if we can just get the semantics–pragmatics distinction right, we will have made progress. Put like this, everyone, I suppose, would agree that it's a mistake. But there's a related idea that's less obviously false. It's the idea that the solutions to a whole range of problems in this field will be aligned—that we can get neat little packages of solutions. In the light of work done by philosophers and linguists on context sensitivity over the last thirty years, the following doesn't seem too bold a conjecture: no neat, general, and grand solutions are likely to succeed. The patterns of usage for various categories of expressions will differ radically and so will the successful explanations.

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