Is there such a thing as "semantic content"?

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Comments are welcome!

Abstract The distinction between the semantic content of a sentence or utterance and its use is widely employed in formal semantics. Semantic minimalism in particular understands this distinction as a sharp dichotomy. I argue that if we accept such a dichotomy, there would be no reason to posit the existence of semantic contents at all. I examine and reject several arguments raised in the literature that might provide a rationale for assuming semantic contents, in this sense, exist, and conclude that Ockham's razor should be applied to these postulated entities. Since the notion of "semantic content" doubles both as what a semantic theory is *a priori* supposed to account for and as the product of that same theory, it is methodologically unsound to appeal to this notion to fend off criticisms of and counterexamples to semantic theories.

 Keywords: semantic content, use, formal semantics, semantic minimalism, methodology

1 Introduction

Is there such a thing as "semantic content"? In some senses the answer is trivial. If we use the term "semantic content" as merely a fancy way of talking about meaning, denying there is such a thing would amount to denying that the things we say and hear mean something to us. It is not this broad use of the term that I will be challenging here. I will be speaking about "semantic content" in the technical sense, or senses, in which this term is used in formal semantics. In particular, I will be challenging the attempt to maintain a sharp dichotomy between "semantic content", or "meaning" (also in a technical sense), and "use".

Now, in this narrow sense, too, my question might seem strange. Of course there is such a thing as "semantic content". This term is defined more or less precisely in several variants of semantic theory as (roughly) a certain logical or conceptual entity that corresponds to a sentence in a natural language, in a way that connects the literal senses of the words making

up this sentence to one another and reflects its syntactic structure. Scholars have offered methods for computing the semantic content of any given sentence, and once it has been computed – who would deny that it exists?

Indeed. But then, epicycles are equally real. The term was defined with some precision in late Ptolemaic astronomy and algorithms for calculating the epicycles on the perfect circular orbit of a heavenly body exist for every observed trajectory it may follow in the sky. Do epicycles exist? Of course, but only as a (discredited) theoretical entity. We no longer believe these epicycles exist "out there", in the orbits of the planets.

It is in that latter sense that I claim that "semantic contents" do not exist. If, for example, a speaker utters the words: "I'm dying to meet her!" she seems to be expressing her desire and impatient eagerness to meet a certain person that has been mentioned before. One might argue that this is precisely what her utterance means. But, we are told, this is merely the *use* of the sentence. Its *semantic content* would have something to do with the speaker's imminent death. I argue that there is no real justification for positing this extra entity, and that therefore Ockham's razor should be applied to it.

Also, as hinted above, I consider appealing to the notion of semantic content to be especially problematic in terms of the methodology of semantics as a scientific endeavor. The term "semantic content" designates the thing that a semantic theory is supposed to account for. Much of what the layperson would call "meaning" is habitually classified as "use" and thus declared to be theoretically irrelevant to semantics (especially in its minimalist varieties). But if indeed, as I argue, semantic content is purely the product of the theory that posits it, appealing to the notion of semantic content thus understood would make the semantic theory circular and cut it off from the empirical phenomena of language and meaning.

I will first say a few things about the notion of "semantic content" itself and suggest that it is perfectly possible to do without it. I will then discuss some attempts in recent literature to

justify the existence of semantic content and show them to be unsatisfactory. I will return to the methodological issue in the final section.

2 What is "semantic content"?

Debating the necessity of the notion of semantic content might have been easier had there been agreement on precisely what it is. But in fact, while on the whole formal semanticists seem to take for granted that the words "semantic content" refer to something, the nature of this something is a hotly debated issue.

One focus of debate is whether semantic contents belong to sentences (as argued, for example, by Kaplan 1989) or to the utterances of sentences (for instance in Perry 2001). Then there is the question of whether they make up complete propositions or merely proposition stems to be filled in somehow (as proposed by Bach 1994). Another debate is on whether or not semantic content is truth-conditional (see Cappelen and Lepore 2004 for a recent attempt to maintain that it is), and of course, there's the big debate on context: does context play any role in determining semantic content, and if so, can its effect be limited to specific contextual factors determined by elements of the sentence itself, or does full-fledged pragmatics have to enter the picture (for different positions on the issue see Montague 1974; Stanley 2000; Levinson 2000; Travis 1996; Recanati 2001)?

Thus, if Ruth says to Richard: "Give me a ring at nine and we'll talk" (the two are considering going out that evening), the semantic content of this sentence or utterance might be informally construed as (among other options): a. An incomplete proposition to the effect that whoever is (or are) the addressee(s) of this utterance moves a ring (sound produced by a telephone) into the possession of whoever is the speaker at nine o'clock (a.m. or p.m., on a date to be specified) and that a number to be specified (but greater than one) of people, one of whom is the speaker, will talk (whether or not they will be talking among themselves, rather than each to herself or with some other people, remains unspecified) at an unspecified point in

time; b. A proposition true if and only if Richard gives Ruth a ring at nine and any number of people greater than one, one of whom is Ruth, will talk (whatever 'give', 'ring', 'nine' and 'talk' might be taken to mean); c. A proposition true if and only if Richard calls Ruth on the phone at nine o'clock (a.m. or p.m., any date) and any number of people greater than one, one of whom is Ruth, will talk (not necessarily among themselves) at a time later than the time of utterance; d. A proposition stating that Richard will call Ruth on the phone at 9 o'clock (9 p.m. on the day of utterance or either 9 a.m. or 9 p.m. on some other date made salient by the context) and that Ruth and Richard will talk (not necessarily to one another) at some point in time after the time of utterance; e. A proposition stating that Richard will call Ruth on the phone at 9 o'clock (specified as above), the hour not taken to be a very precise designation, and that Ruth and Richard will talk to each other at some point in time after the phone rings.[1]

The latter options on the list veer towards extreme contextualism, and yet, there is still a lot of information that the notion of semantic content does not seem to carry even on the contextualist account. Thus, it is *not* part of the semantic content of our sentence that it is an invitation or request, that Ruth and Richard will be talking to one another – if indeed Richard acts as Ruth suggests – *over the phone*, that the two will be talking to one another (roughly) *at 9 o'clock*, and that the subject of this phone call is going to be the planned date.

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[1] Note that there are several disambiguation issues with this sentence that make the attempt to construe a context-free reading of it ring hollow. Wherefrom comes the information that "at nine" refers to an hour, rather than to a phone number, a flat or house number or some code? Worse still, what grounds do we have for determining that the ring here is a phone ring, rather than a piece of jewelry? One may claim that "give someone a ring" is an idiom with the conventional meaning of calling someone on the phone. But there is also an idiom: "give someone a ring" with the conventional meaning of proposing marriage to someone, so, again, how do we know it is an idiom, and if it is an idiom, how do we find out which? In my discussion I am assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that disambiguation has already been performed, but this assumption is perhaps too charitable.

All these facts about the utterance belong firmly in the realm of pragmatics and of use, rather than of semantic content, and yet they are clearly part of what Richard or anybody else is liable to understand from what Ruth said. Indeed, no reasonable listener would be tempted for one moment to believe that Ruth did not ask Richard to call her, but merely stated he will do so, or that she invited him to call her on the subject of his mother's latest electricity bill, or that she thus foresaw a situation in which she, a certain Mr. Smith from Newcastle and a certain Ms. Ismail of Kinshasa will be talking, to somebody, in their respective whereabouts and at different times (although such a prediction is most likely to turn out to be correct).

So what sets apart what might be considered as "semantic content" by some formal semanticists from what would not be considered under this heading? The simple answer is that "semantic content" is what a semantic theory is supposed to yield as a product of analyzing (on most accounts – compositionally) the sentence word by word. From there pragmatics is supposed to take over. The differences between the various understandings of "semantic content" stem not from semanticists' differing perspectives on the object itself, if any, but from differences between these scholars' semantic theories of choice and from their differing views on the interface between semantics and pragmatics.

In turn, these theoretical differences cannot really be settled empirically. After all, as mentioned above, the different understandings of "semantic content" also delimit what kinds of data would be acceptable as evidence.

Originally, "semantic content" was thought to reflect what a sentence means, regardless of whether or not it is appropriate to utter it (hence the distinction between "semantic content", or "meaning", as it was more often called back then, and "use"). As such, it was taken for granted that the "semantic content" of a sentence should be easily recognized by any competent speaker of the relevant language as what this sentence indeed means. It was also claimed that one or another kind of formal compositional semantic theory calculates the semantic content of any given sentence.

Alas, over the years it became increasingly clear that these two claims are incompatible. At first it was thought that cases in which speakers' understanding of sentences departs from what a formal analysis yields are relatively exceptional, and can be dealt with by applying various pragmatic procedures, such as Gricean implicature (Grice 1989). But soon enough it became clear that such situations are not the exception, but the rule (Bach 2005, 15–16), and that even the truth-conditions of sentences cannot be determined independent of context and of pragmatic considerations (Travis 1996).

In the dilemma that thus arose, contextualists (e.g. Recanati 2001; Travis 1996) generally opted for accepting the validity of some of the speakers' intuitions about meaning, while semantic minimalists (e.g. Bach 2005, Borg 2010; Cappelen and Lepore 2004; Stanley 2000) preferred to stick to the formal apparatus of the semantic theory.[2] Contextualists thus deemphasize the distinction between "semantic content" and "use" and admit that pragmatics can affect the semantic content of sentences. Minimalists, on the other hand, turn the distinction between "semantic content" and "use" into a sharp dichotomy and rely on it as a central premise in their line of argument. A typical minimalist account will consider any pragmatic aspect of meaning as *a priori* not belonging to the "semantic content" of a sentence, and therefore also as *a priori* not the business of semantics to deal with.

For a while it was thought that the distinction between "semantic content" and "use" can be justified by the psychology of language comprehension, that is, that people first conduct a formal semantic analysis of the sentences contained in utterances they hear, and only then do they add onto this semantic layer various forms of pragmatic "enrichment". But empirical studies (see especially Gibbs 2002 and the brief survey in Borg 2010) soon put this to rest.

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[2] I use the labels "contextualism" and "minimalism" here in a somewhat broader sense than usual (Jason Stanley, for instance, would probably not classify himself as a minimalist).

Borg (2010) still tries to argue that minimalist semantics reflects the functioning of some structures in the human brain. Unsurprisingly, she neither brings nor cites any empirical neurological evidence to support this claim. She merely claims that these brain structures belong to the Language Faculty postulated by Chomsky – itself a highly controversial notion by now (Evans and Levinson 2009; McClelland and Bybee 2007).[3]

3   Semantics without semantic content

But despite the lack of empirical support, the notion of "semantic content" in its minimalist version maintains its appeal for many semanticists. What makes this notion so attractive is the sense that it is self-obvious, that it has no alternative. After all, how else can we understand a sentence other than by going through it word by word and putting the meanings of the words together?

As a matter of fact, this sense of no alternative is quite misleading. In this section I will explain in brief about a range of alternatives offered by cognitive and functional linguists (e.g. Croft 2001; Gasparov 2010; Goldberg 2006; Hopper 1998; Langacker 1987).

Cognitive-functional linguistics is a central direction in linguistic research in recent decades which radically reconceptualizes both syntax and semantics. Its account of grammar is either construction-based (e.g. Croft 2001; Goldberg 2006) or collocation-based (e.g. Gasparov 2010; Hopper 1998), in both cases rejecting the distinction between lexicon and syntax. That is, all linguistic units are taken to be meaningful in their own right (as words or morphemes are in a more traditional approach), over and above the import of smaller units

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[3] Levinson and Evans (2010, 2746) remark that "There have been cases where eminent [Chomskian] linguists have been heard to say to top brain scientists 'you are wrong, this is how it must work in the brain', or to leading geneticists 'there must be a gene for Merge'". Borg's claims seem to be a case in point.

they may be analyzable into. Moreover, pragmatic point is taken to be an inherent part of meaning for smaller and larger constructions alike (Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor 1988).

On top of that, cognitive-functional linguistics conceives of meanings as such as prototypes (or, in Gasparov 2010, as fuzzy images), so it is impossible to specify the meaning of a unit with precision without taking into account the context of its use, and indeed, the way in which the speaker and listener actively construe the linguistic units they are using.

Cognitive-functional linguistics offers several possible analyzes for the utterance I used as an example above ("Give me a ring at nine and we'll talk"). On one of these accounts, "Give me a ring at nine" is one instance of a grammatical construction (or formal idiom) of the form "X give Y a ring (at time) T".[4] Here X and Y are two (different) people, T indicates a time range and the verb "give" can come in all tenses and moods. Other acceptable forms would include "Jane gave John a ring yesterday", "He's never given me a ring", etc. Semantically, this construction indicates *a phone call* made by X to Y within the time range indicated by T. Note that this is a meaning contributed by the construction itself, and not by the words appearing in it. "We'll talk" is also a construction on this account, which has roughly the meaning of "you and I will further discuss a certain contextually salient matter". The entire sentence, conjoined by "and", is also a construction, and the pragmatic implication that the conversation will be conducted following the phone call is already included in its meaning.

A different functional-cognitive account would rather view "Give me a ring [time indicator]", "at nine", and "and we'll talk" as three collocations, with the conventional meanings of "call me on the phone", "at nine o'clock" and "we will then discuss the issue further". Here other possible forms of the "X give Y a ring (at time) T" construction would be viewed as different, though related, collocations, and the entire sentence will, of course, not be

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[4] To make the presentation less cumbersome, I am using a loose and informal notation.

analyzed as a collocation in its own right (though see the notion of Communicative Contour in Gasparov 2010).

Note that while the same words could conceivably be uttered in such a context that they would mean something else, the context in which this utterance is made (Ruth and Richard are discussing going out) blocks irrelevant construals from the outset.[5] In other words, the context is given *before* the words are processed, which is indeed the order of events in real life, and not the other way around. The semantic analysis thus includes pragmatics on all stages, rather than excluding it *a priori.*

On the philosophical level, most cognitive-functional linguists consider language, in form and in meaning alike, to be usage-based. They align themselves with the use theory of meaning. On such an account words and sentences (and other grammatical constructions) strictly speaking have no meaning other than the habitual ways people use them to mean this or that; they are like the moon, not shining a light of its own but reflecting the light of the sun.

It goes well beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this approach to semantics in greater detail. My point here is that there are several ways to account for the meaning of what people say (in the lay sense of "meaning", which in formal semantics is called "use") without resorting to the notion of "semantic content" or to the distinction between semantic content and use. According to such alternative theories, there simply is no stage at which we analyze a sentence word by word to produce some raw "semantic content" to be then contextualized and

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[5] Note that the disambiguation problems noted above are easily solved on both these accounts even when much of contextual information is missing. The "give someone a ring" construction / collocation that means "propose marriage to someone" is less likely to include a time indicator and does not normally come in the imperative with a first person pronoun as object (it also, of course, belongs to a different register). Only in some very specific contexts can these considerations be overridden. The presence of "at nine" naturally leads to the interpretation of "give me a ring" as referring to a phone call and of "at nine" itself as a time indicator, due to the form of the relevant construction or collocation.

pragmatically enriched. We start off with the context of utterance already given and go straight for the "use", which is, after all, the one *empirically observable* fact a theory of meaning in language can deal with.

The notion of semantic content may be necessary for some philosophical and linguistic theories to work, but not for our ability to provide a workable account of the observed phenomena of language. If this is so, one could still use the notion of "semantic content" when working strictly within a theory that posits it, but it would not be legitimate to appeal to the distinction between semantic content and use to fend off external criticism of the theory itself, nor to use it to argue that apparent counterexamples to such theories are irrelevant.

But are there then some *theory-independent* grounds on which we would be obliged to posit the existence of "semantic contents"? Let me now turn to examining some prominent attempts to argue in this direction.

4   An algorithm on the loose

Kent Bach's paper "Context *ex Machina*" (Bach 2005) contains one of the most elaborate discussions of the notion of semantic content in recent literature. Bach is fully aware that semantic content does not represent a psychological reality. When hearing "I'm dying to meet her!" people do not normally have anything about death pass through their minds, not even momentarily (Bach 2005, 35). But this only strengthens Bach's firm belief in the sharp analytic distinction between "semantic content" and what people are liable to understand from an utterance.

According to Bach, for every string of words ordered according to the rules of grammar (a sentence), there is an algorithm (a semantic theory) that would compute *something* from it. This something, whatever it is, is the "semantic content" of that sentence. Counting anything non-literal in or admitting that the same sentence may mean (in the semantic sense) different things in different contexts is, for Bach, nothing but an obvious absurdity.

Does this "semantic content" play any role in how people speak and understand one another? Not really. In fact, Bach insists that it is the business of semantics to compute the "semantic content" of any possible string of words, whether or not it has been uttered or will ever be uttered. Indeed, most sentences are too long or too bizarre to be uttered at all.

Here's one of the examples Bach brings:

"Three triangular raisins and an active, orbital clone brainwashed some unusually packaged concubines" (Bach 2005, 33).

Of course, in order to actually compute its semantic content we have to *examine* the sentence in question, that is, we have to examine an *utterance* of it. Whether or not he has noticed it, Bach actually *uttered* that sentence about the triangular raisins in his paper, and so did I, when I quoted him here. We both had (different) intentions in making these utterances, and people reading them understood these utterances in the contexts of the respective arguments we are trying to make (in both cases the context obviates the need to examine the sentence's "semantic content" in any detail).

It is impossible in principle to actually find out the "semantic content" of an unuttered, context-less, sentence, but the *algorithm* for computing it exists, and that seems to be enough for Bach. His notion of semantics is that of an algorithm on the loose, of a mathematical exercise, unfettered by the need to find any use for it in the real world.

It's time to take out Ockham's razor. Is there really any point in positing the existence of "semantic content" in this sense? Again, the algorithm is there and it is undisputable that it computes something. But is there a point in troubling the minds of linguists and philosophers of language over such an entity? Is there a point in implying (by using the word "semantic") that such entities have something to do with what linguistic expressions actually mean? What will we lose in our account of the actual observed phenomena of language if we just do without the notion of "semantic content" thus conceived?

Bach (2005, 25) does try to offer a rationale for maintaining such a notion. He claims that it is necessary to account for the work of actors or interpreters, for slips of the tongue, for figurative and other non-literal utterances, and for implicatures and indirect speech acts. In all these cases, Bach contends, what the speaker says differs in one way or another from what she intends to communicate. What she intends to communicate is a matter for pragmatics to deal with, but what she says can only be accounted for by the semantic content of the sentences she utters.

But is there really a problem here, to which semantic content would supply the solution?

Figurative utterances do not really pose a problem. When someone says "I'm dying to meet her!" she normally doesn't say anything about her death. We will only have a problem here if we insist, on some theoretical grounds, that there *must* be some entity linked to this sentence in which the word "dying" figures in its literal sense. That entity would, of course, be the same "semantic content" that is deemed necessary to account for it.

The work of actors and interpreters is in truth an interesting subject for inquiry for a philosopher of language, but it is not really a convincing example when arguing for the necessity of semantic content. After all, figurative language used in a play does not become literal when uttered by an actress on stage, so whatever difference there is between what the actress says and what she intends to communicate is not really accounted for by the notion of semantic content.

What about slips of the tongue? Suppose Jane wanted to say to her friend Kate, "I'm going to skip school tomorrow", but had a slip of the tongue and pronounced the /k/ sound in 'skip' as /g/. Of course, there is a sense in which we would describe Jane as *saying* "I'm going to sgeep school tomorrow", but that would not be a semantic sense of "say". It would rather be the phonetic sense, the sense in which cats *say* "meow". That's not what Bach has in mind.

Suppose now Jane had a different slip of the tongue, and pronounced the same /k/ sound as /l/. If Bach is right, she must have said, in the strictly *semantic* sense, either "I'm going to slip

school tomorrow" or "I'm going to sleep school tomorrow". But which of these sentences did she say? There's no way of telling.

If Kate then replies: "You should get some *sleep* right now", suddenly an answer emerges: Kate understood it was "sleep". But now it's again not the semantic sense of saying that is at play, but rather a pragmatic one, that has to do with the *interaction* between Jane and Kate. While, following Grice (1989), it has become customary to restrict pragmatics to the study of the *speaker's* intentions, there is in fact no reason to exclude other participants of the interaction from affecting what people's utterances mean.[6]

So, between the phonetic sense of "say" and the pragmatic sense of "say", there is no need to posit a strictly semantic sense to account for slips of the tongue and the like.[7]

Finally, what about implicature? It is true that Grice himself identified "what is said" more or less with the literal meaning of the sentence uttered (Grice 1989, 25), but a closer look shows a different picture. Thus, irony is considered a classic case of implicature. The already familiar sentence "I'm dying to meet her!" can surely be uttered ironically, and in this case, "what is said", that is, the ground meaning from which the implicature is derived, is itself the *figurative* meaning of the sentence uttered.

It is tempting to assume that what people say explicitly is the semantic content of the sentence they have uttered, while what they imply is its use. But in fact, what is explicitly said

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[6] There is also nothing problematic about the pragmatic meaning of utterances being changed *retroactively*, as we saw here. Indeed, pragmatic meanings are routinely *negotiated* in interaction (Linell 1998, 74).

[7] The same goes for Freudian slips, malapropisms, misuses of words, etc. The meaning of the "wrong" word (as opposed to its mere sound) enters the picture when somebody (the listener, the speaker, or a third party) *notices* it, and brings into play a possible *pragmatic understanding* of the same sound sequence, that was not the one originally intended by the speaker. Note also that a speaker may simultaneously intend to communicate two different and incompatible understandings of the same sound sequence she utters, for instance if she makes a pun.

is already pragmatic (Levinson 2000; Recanati 2001), is already "use", and when something else is implied, another pragmatic procedure is added on top of the already-pragmatic meaning.

In Bach's view, it is self-evident that "semantic content", as calculated by applying the algorithm of semantic theory, is real. But when we look at his arguments for maintaining such a notion, we find that they all ultimately rest on this confidence of his and cannot support it.[8]

5 "Semantic content" and truth

There is, however, another line of defense for the notion of "semantic content". Indeed, this notion may not play any clear role in our understanding of people's utterances, but what about the question of their *truth*? Perhaps it is needed to ensure true statements remain true and false ones remain false? This is more or less what has been argued by some philosophers when dealing with Keith Donnellan's referential / attributive distinction.

Here's the story. A murder took place in a small town. Smith was killed by Jones, acting on his own. However, an innocent man, Johnson, became the main suspect. Indeed, people in town started referring to Johnson as "Smith's murderer", or simply as "the murderer". Donnellan's (1966) position is that if Green tells Brown that he saw the murderer at the gas station, when it is clear to both that he means Johnson, we can say that Green's words, "the murderer", indeed refer to Johnson, even though Johnson is not a murderer. Green's statement would be true if and only if he saw Johnson, not Jones, at the gas station. The statement "Johnson is the murderer", on the other hand, would be false. In the former case the definite description "the murderer" is used referentially, while in the latter case it is used attributively.

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[8] Note that it makes little difference to insist that semantic content is to be understood as part of a rational reconstruction of how people understand utterances, rather than as a description of how they actually understand them (Bach 2006, 25; Borg 2010). My claim is simply that there is no need for this element in such a reconstruction.

To this Kripke (1979) and others (e.g. Salmon 1991, whose rendition of Donnellan's original example I used in the previous paragraph) replied that such a distinction would be intolerable. Green's sentence can be true if and only if he saw the *real* murderer at the gas station. The words "the murderer" may only refer to the one person (in the universe of discourse) who is a murderer. That Green thus successfully communicates information to Brown about Johnson, and not Jones, is explained using the distinction between "semantic content" and "use". Green's sentence is *used* to convey information about Johnson, but its semantic content follows a strict Russellian analysis. The sentence *itself*, unlike the statement it is *used* to make, would be true if and only if Green saw whoever is the murderer, that is Jones, at the gas station.

This argument does seem to provide a rationale for positing the existence of "semantic content" in the required sense. But is it really a *theory-independent* rationale for doing so? I would argue that it is not. For this purpose, let us examine another scenario.

A speaker at a rally in Washington DC in 2003 declares: "The war started by the 43rd President of the United States is a war of aggression". About two hundred years later, old documents are discovered, revealing that Benjamin Franklin was sworn in as the first President of the United States in 1789 for a symbolic term of three days before George Washington took office.

It turns out the rally speaker got it all wrong. She thought she was talking about George W. Bush and the war in Iraq (or, given the right context, in Afghanistan), but the truth of the matter is that she was talking about the NATO attack on Yugoslavia in 1998 and Bill Clinton. And she's never even suspected it. Nor has anybody in the audience. Nor did any of them live to find out.

It is true that a historian in the 23rd century may use the very same sentence in a debate with colleagues about the attack on Yugoslavia. But even that historian would obviously agree with all other English speakers that facts about George W. Bush and Iraq are relevant to

evaluating the truth of the rally speaker's statement in a way that facts about Bill Clinton and Yugoslavia are not.[9]

Of course, the true adepts will not see any problem here. Some may simply say that, well, everybody just got it wrong, and that's it. Others would comment that what facts are and are not relevant to evaluating the truth of a statement is not a matter for semantics to concern itself with. Alternatively, some may claim that the facts that are relevant to evaluating the truth of the rally speaker's statement are facts about the 43rd President of the United States and the war started by the 43rd President of the United States (without specifying names of Presidents and countries attacked). And of course, the most obvious response would be to say that facts about Bush and Iraq are merely relevant to evaluating the truth of the statement the rally speaker *used* that sentence to make, and not the actual statement itself.

But what is it that motivates all these evasion maneuvers? Just one thing: a semantic theory according to which "The 43rd President of the United States" is a phrase that *must* be analyzed compositionally and cannot be seen simply as an alternative way of referring to George W. Bush, as most of us ordinary folk have it. So we do not have here a *theory-independent* justification for the existence of "semantic contents" after all.

This is easy to see if we examine the same example under the assumption that there is no such thing as "semantic content". It is uncontroversial that the rally speaker *used* that sentence

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[9] It's not just US Presidents or the use of ordinal numbers in general. Many things can go wrong: kinship terms are all suspect (as the story of Oedipus illustrates so well), proper names too (people are often known by a name other than the one that appears in official documents, and some even assume fake identities), scientific terms are even less reliable (the next scientific revolution may be right around the corner). I may think I can at least safely speak about the first thing I did when I woke up today, but what if I woke up at 3 am, sneezed, fell asleep again and forgot all about it? The insistence on a sharp distinction between "semantic content" and "use" leads to the conclusion we can *never* be sure if what we say and hear really means what we think it means.

to refer to Bush and the Iraq War. What does the sentence in and of itself refer to? Nothing. Strictly speaking, sentences don't refer to anything and don't mean anything. People do.

The statements we make, when we use our utterances to make statements, may still be true or false, and we may still be right or wrong in making them, but now at least we get to know the meaning of what we say. Ockham's razor can again be used to cut the notion of "semantic content" out.

6 The use of "semantic content"

But am I not ignoring the obvious? As I noted from the outset, the "semantic content" of a sentence is simply whatever one's semantic theory of choice gives as output when analyzing that sentence. Can't the notion of "semantic content" be defended on the authority of the semantic theory that postulates it?

It can, of course, if we have good independent grounds for accepting the semantic theory itself. Alas, it is by now uncontroversial that when it comes to accounting for what human utterances mean (in a pre-theoretical sense), formal semantic theories are not very successful. Pragmatic add-ons, such as Gricean implicature, may help sometimes (not nearly as much as many assume – but that's a different discussion). But then pragmatic accounts of meaning can also stand on their own, and from a contemporary pragmatic perspective the need to account for semantic contents, in the sense discussed here, is just an unnecessary complication.

As noted above, empirical findings in psychology and brain science lend no more credence to formal semantic theories of the minimalist variety than do the data contained in linguistic corpora.

Finally, there is the option of arguing for a formal semantic theory of meaning, and the notion of semantic content it postulates, on *a priori* grounds. In formal semantics there is a standard argument, sometimes attributed to Frege and best known in its rendition in Davidson (1984, 8–9), which is used to prove the necessity of maintaining a formal, compositional

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semantic theory. King and Stanley (2005, 140) indeed used a variant of it to provide a rationale for the notion of "semantic content". The argument is that a compositional semantic theory is the only thing that could account for people's ability to grasp the meanings of novel sentences, that is, sentences that they have never heard before.

I will not discuss the merits of this argument here.[10] But let me just wonder: is it really the case that compositionality is required to explain people's grasp of what other people say? Exactly how does compositionality explain my grasp of the sentence "I'm dying to meet her!" discussed above, or of any other sentence that uses figurative language, extended metaphors, partially productive idiomatic constructions, and the like?

This question has a simple, well-rehearsed answer: the compositional semantic theory is not supposed to account for the *uses* of sentences but only for their *semantic contents.* Indeed, this is precisely the main use to which the notion of "semantic content" is put in formal semantics, especially of the minimalist variety: to assert that the consistent failure of such semantic theories to account for what people's utterances *mean* (in a pre-theoretical sense) is not anything to worry about, as the *uses* of sentences are none of the theory's concern.

So it turns out that it is not the semantic theory that supports the notion of "semantic content", but the other way around – the notion of "semantic content" supports the semantic theory. And it lends the theory exactly the kind of support that Karl Popper (2002) warned against long ago: it seals the semantic theory off from refutation by empirical evidence.[11]

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[10] See Baker and Hacker (1984, 316 ff) for a principled philosophical critique. See Hall (2009) and Gasparov (2010) for two quite different possible alternative solutions to the problem of grasping the meaning of novel sentences.

[11] While, like most philosophers today, I do not fully subscribe to Popper's philosophy of science, I still believe that the refutability requirement reflects an important ideal embodied in the scientific method. If a theory is irrefutable, this may not automatically turn it into pseudoscience, as Popper implied, but it certainly poses a grave methodological problem for it. Surely, the refutability requirement should not be simply flouted.

After all, all *observable* phenomena of language are phenomena of language *use*. The merits of a semantic theory should thus be judged by its ability to account for these observable phenomena.

The distinction between "semantic content" and "use" is in effect used to screen out *all* the observable phenomena of language from figuring as possible counterexamples to any formal semantic theory.[12] We thus no longer expect a semantic theory to be able to provide an account of what actual utterances mean to actual people – this is relegated to pragmatics. Instead, we expect a semantic theory to be able to account for the "semantic contents" of sentences, and these "semantic contents", let us bear in mind, are nothing but the output of that same semantic theory. In such conditions, afforded by the notion of "semantic content", the theory just can't go wrong.

In fact, this may be the most important reason why we had better get rid of the notion of "semantic content". The study of language as it is used, uttered, and understood is well underway in pragmatics, cognitive-functional linguistics, conversation and discourse analysis, communication studies, and other disciplines. It has much to teach us about language, and there is no point in marginalizing its place in the philosophy of language only because it pertains to language *use*.

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[12] It is often argued that some level of idealization of the empirical data is unavoidable in all science, but this meme has its limits. This argument cannot license simply throwing out all empirical data as theoretically irrelevant. The idea is to study the data with as little idealization as possible, and it surely is possible to study language *use* in a far less idealized form than that of "semantic content".

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