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Semantic Minimalism

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INTRODUCTION

Semantic minimalism is primarily a position about the semantic content of sentences. It is defined by the thesis that sentences have a truth-conditional or fully propositional content mostly independent of contextual factors. It limits the contribution of context to the saturation of a narrow class of indexical expressions. Semantic minimalism thus has contextualism as its main (but not sole) opponent, contextualism being characterized by the thesis that the bearers of propositional content are utterances, not sentences, given that the semantic information carried by sentences fails to determine a truth-conditional content. Semantic minimalism is committed to an orthodox view on semantic compositionality, according to which, barring explicit indexicals, the content of a sentential expression is a function of the stable semantic values (literal meanings) of its constituents and the syntax of the sentence. Semantic minimalism is thus able to draw a neat boundary between semantics and pragmatics: semantics has as its focus the truth-conditional content of sentences, while pragmatics is concerned with the various uses speakers make of language in communicative exchanges.

GENERAL OVERVIEWS

Most overviews pertaining to semantic minimalism present the issues intertwined with more general concerns of the semantics-versus-pragmatics debate—for example,

Stojanovic 2008, which is a good introduction to the different positions surrounding the debate, or Korta and Perry 2006, in which the exposition dedicated to semantic minimalism and its opponents is developed only in a subsection. Borg 2007 and Cappelen and Lepore 2005 offer more specific overviews, even if centered on their own conceptions of minimalism. Borg 2009 is a concise but very good account of semantic minimalism. Jaszczolt 2007 also presents a helpful overview from a more neutral point of view. All the introductions that open the books and journals listed under *Anthologies* are also typically useful.

Borg, Emma. "Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics." In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 339–359. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780199213320] [class:bookChapter]

[Outlines the minimalist and contextualist positions, paying special attention to the defining features of minimalism. She contends that Cappelen and Lepore's minimalism turns out not to be minimal enough.](#)

Borg, Emma. "Semantic Minimalism." In *The Routledge Pragmatics Encyclopedia*. Edited by Louise Cummings, 423–425. London: Routledge, 2009. [ISBN: 9780415430968] [class:bookChapter]

[A 1000-word, very clear explanation of the main tenets of semantic minimalism.](#)

Cappelen, Herman, and Ernie Lepore. "A Tall Tale: In Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism." In *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*. Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 197–219. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. [ISBN: 9780199267408] [class:bookChapter]

[A bare-bones presentation of the main points addressed in their 2005 book *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism* \(Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005\).](#)

Jaszczolt, Katarzyna M. "On Being Post-Gricean." In *Interpreting Utterances: Pragmatics and Its Interfaces*. Edited by Randi A. Nilsen, Nana A. A. Amfo, and Kaja Borthen, 21–38. Oslo, Norway: Novus, 2007. [ISBN: 9788270994557] [class:bookChapter]

[A clear account of the debate between contextualism and minimalism in semantics, which also explores the perspectives on coexistence between both positions. Jaszczolt also devotes some attention to her own view, which she calls "Default Semantics." She has an even shorter piece on "post-Gricean pragmatics" in the *Routledge Pragmatics Encyclopedia* \(see Borg 2009\).](#)

Korta, Kepa, and John Perry.

"*Pragmatics[<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatics/>]*." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. 2006. [class:bookChapter]

[A comprehensive introduction to the field of philosophical pragmatics. It is good as an introduction to Grice's work and post-Gricean developments, the proximate precursors of the current debate. However, the space devoted to current semantic minimalism is a bit scarce.](#)

Stojanovic, Isidora. "The Scope and the Subtleties of the Contextualism/Literalism/Relativism Debate." *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2.6 (2008): 1171–1188. [class:journalArticle]

A good introduction to a variety of positions concerning semantic content, with a special focus on context-sensitive expressions. Very helpful as a clarification of the very different “isms” currently in the debate.

MONOGRAPHS

There are currently no introductory textbooks to semantic minimalism; however, the books listed here, which in principle develop particular positions in the debate around this subject, do help to provide a good general idea of the state of the art. Borg 2004 and Cappelen and Lepore 2005 are the two milestones of semantic minimalism, while Carston 2002 and Récanati 2004 elaborate in depth the contextualist positions that minimalism opposes. Obviously, the space devoted to minimalist theses is greater in Borg and Cappelen’s and Lepore’s books. Even with interests derived from a different agenda, Soames 2002 presents a thorough defense of minimalism. Atlas 2005 helps to set the discussion within its Gricean roots. Travis 2000 is also an important contribution that pushes contextualism to its limit, yet cannot be recommended as an introduction to the topic, given the way it is structured and written.

Atlas, Jay David. *Logic, Meaning and Conversation: Semantical Underdeterminacy, Implicature and Their Interface*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. [ISBN: 9781423719946]

Develops a neo-Gricean theory of semantics and pragmatics. Contains an excellent introduction to Grice’s views (clearly the precursor of semantic minimalism) and to the opposed contextualist thesis of semantic underdeterminacy.

Borg, Emma. *Minimal Semantics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. [ISBN: 9780199270255]

Together with Cappelen and Lepore 2005, but more cognitively oriented, this book constitutes the main defense of minimalism in the contemporary debate. The whole book is worth reading as an introduction to semantic minimalism, its strengths and the ways it can respond to its weaknesses.

Cappelen, Herman, and Ernest Lepore. *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. [ISBN: 9781405126748]

A hotly debated book that defends semantic minimalism from its various opponents. Its first and third parts are good introductions, full of arguments and pros and cons, to contextualism (moderate and radical) and to minimalism, respectively.

Carston, Robyn. *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. [ISBN: 9780631214885]

Very important in the development of Relevance Theory, probably the most influential post-Gricean theory in semantics and pragmatics. Further advances the initial contextualist commitments of Relevance Theory and argues forcefully in favor of the semantic underdeterminacy thesis. The first chapter is an indispensable introduction and defense of semantic underdeterminacy.

Récanati, François. *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. [ISBN: 9780511067310]

Argues for a contextualist position, according to which the truth conditional content of sentential utterances involves a lot of pragmatic processing apart from the saturation of indexical expressions. Pursues a line that coincides at some points with Relevance

Theory, but differs significantly from it at others. The first and fourth chapters are helpful as introductions to minimalism and contextualism.

Soames, Scott. *Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Agenda of Naming and Necessity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. [ISBN: 9780195145281]

Goes beyond the minimalism/contextualism debate. However, develops one of the most important defenses of semantic minimalism yet written. Its third and fourth chapters can be used as introductory texts.

Travis, Charles. *Unshadowed Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. [ISBN: 9780674003392]

Takes a Wittgensteinian approach to the debate, arguing that neither language nor thought are the representational devices we think they are. Presents and discusses many examples that reveal the extreme context-sensitivity of natural language. Not an easy read.

ANTHOLOGIES

The number of recent anthologies on this semantic minimalism is definitely big, and growing. There are some interesting books, such as Bianchi 2004, Preyer and Peter 2007, and Szabó 2005, which contain some widely discussed influential papers. However, most of the recent anthologies have the form of special issues published by journals such as *Synthese* and *Mind and Language*. An issue of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* and another of *Mind and Language* focus exclusively on Cappelen and Lepore's *Insensitive Semantics* (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, cited under *Monographs*). Although their focus is thus limited, they certainly provide a useful guide into the terrain.

Bianchi, Claudia, ed. *The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction*. CSLI Lecture Notes 155.

Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2004. [ISBN: 9781575864570]

The first sentence of the synopsis of this book claims that "semantic theory in linguistics cannot retain its traditional purity, free of pragmatic contextual considerations." Contains interesting articles by Carston, Récanati, Bezuidenhout, Bianchi, Bach, Predelli, and García-Carpintero.

Special issue on Pragmatics and Cognitive Science. *Mind and Language* 17.1–2 (2002). [class:journalArticle]

Introduced by Carston, Guttenplan, and Wilson, the primary focus is on the development of a psychologically realistic account of linguistic communication (see *The Psychological Reality Issue*). Includes influential papers by Récanati, Carston, and Stanley's widely debated "Making it Articulated" (Stanley 2002, cited under *Unarticulated Constituents*), where this author develops his argument from binding for indexical contextualism.

Multiple reviews of *Insensitive Semantics*. *Mind and Language* 21.1 (2006).

[class:journalArticle]

Contains five reactions by keynote authors (Bezuidenhout, Gross, Récanati, Szabó, and Travis) to Cappelen and Lepore's *Insensitive Semantics* (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, cited under *Monographs*) along with their response.

Preyer, Gerhard, and Georg Peter, eds. *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780199213320]

A collection of essays mainly focused on moderate contextualism and semantic minimalism. The final chapter by Borg (Borg 2007, cited under *General Overviews*) is particularly apt as an introduction to minimalist positions. Also contains “Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism” (MacFarlane 2007, cited under *Semantic Minimalism and Its Other Opponents*), which introduces the relativistic position to the debate, and “Context, Content, and Composition” (Pagin and Pelletier 2007, cited under *Semantic Minimalism and Compositionality*).

“Book Symposium on *Insensitive Semantics*, by H. Cappelen and E. Lepore.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73.2 (2006). [class:journalArticle]

Four papers by relevant authors (Bach, Hawthorne, Korta and Perry, and Stainton) on Cappelen and Lepore’s book, plus a précis and replies from the latter.

Special issue on Semantics and Pragmatics. *Synthese* 128 (2001): 1–2. [class:journalArticle]

Contains some of the most cited journal articles on the topic, such as K. Bach’s “You Don’t Say?” (Bach 2001, cited under *Semantic Minimalism and Its Other Opponents*), M. García-Carpintero’s “Gricean Rational Reconstructions and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction” (García-Carpintero 2001, cited under *Conceptual Issues*), F. Récanati’s “What Is Said” (Récanati 2001, cited under *Conceptual Issues*), and K. A. Taylor’s “Sex, Breakfast and Descriptus Interruptus.” Semantic minimalism as such is not represented in the volume.

Stojanovic, Isidora, ed. “Special Issue: The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction.” *Synthese* 165.3 (2008). . [class:journalArticle]

Deals with the semantics/pragmatics distinction, seen from different points of view. Of especial interest is Robyn Carston’s contribution, in which she puts forward the idea—timidly advanced in Carston 2002 (cited under *Monographs*)—that sentences do not have propositional content. Rather, the semantic content of a sentence is located at a level intermediate between the syntactic and the conceptual.

Szabó, Zoltán Gendler, ed. *Semantics versus Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. [ISBN: 9780199251520]

Semantic minimalism is here represented by Cappelen and Lepore, who criticize the idea that sentence meaning does not determine truth-conditions. King and Stanley introduce a new position on a cognitively oriented theory of semantic compositionality. The paper is also found in Stanley’s *Language in Context: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

PRECURSORS

Semantic minimalism is mainly committed to a defense of H. Paul Grice’s conservative attitude toward semantics and to the formalist program (see Grice 1989). His theory of implicature provided a way to distinguish the semantic content of an utterance from the meaning communicated by it, thus making possible the formal and autonomous study of semantics, under attack by the philosophy of language inspired by Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Austin. Richard Montague’s seminal work was written to give shape to the formal study of linguistic meaning in terms of truth-theoretic notions (Montague 1974). Some followers of Grice, paradigmatically Sperber and Wilson, unconvinced by his semantic conservatism, argued in favor of a major role for pragmatic factors in the determination of utterance truth-conditional meaning (Sperber and Wilson 1986). This

amendment to Grice's work and, in general, formalist views gave rise to contemporary contextualism. Among the post-Gricean precursors of contextualism, we can also include Clark 1992 and Atlas 1989. Other precursors of much of the current debate on minimalism are Perry's "Thought without Representation," (Perry 1986, cited under *Unarticulated Constituents*), in which Perry defends the existence of unarticulated constituents, and Searle 1978. Although focused on figurative speech, Gibbs 1994 is a precursor of the current contextualist tenet that minimal propositions lack psychological reality. Dascal 1987 is a response to Gibbs's former works, which, although presented as a defense of literal meaning, could be considered more contextualist than minimalist.

Atlas, Jay David. *Philosophy without Ambiguity: A Logico-Linguistic Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. [ISBN: 9780198244547]

Resumes earlier work arguing that truth-conditional meaning is underdetermined. According to Atlas, sense-general sentences are un-specific when found in truth-conditional content. Reprinted in 2002.

Clark, Herbert H. *Arenas of Language Use*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. [ISBN: 9780226107813]

Preceded by *Semantics and Comprehension* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976) and succeeded by *Using Language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996). This psychologist develops an utterance-based (instead of a sentence-based) approach to meaning. Clark is better known for his theory of the "common ground" in communication, but his approach to meaning is worth considering.

Dascal, Marcelo. "Defending Literal Meaning." *Cognitive Science* 11 (1987): 289–251.

Defends the psychological reality of literal meanings. However, such literal meaning is not truth-conditional, which means that Dascal is not defending minimalism as such.

Gibbs, Raymond W., Jr. *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. [ISBN: 9780521419659]

Focused on figurative speech comprehension, Gibbs presents and discusses empirical evidence, accumulated over the years, in favor of the view that we do not process literal meanings before we reach the intended figurative contents.

Grice, H. Paul. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. [ISBN: 9780674852709]

Contains two of the most influential articles in the history of the philosophy of language: "Meaning" and "Logic and Conversation." The latter, originally published in 1975, expounds his distinction between linguistic and speaker's meaning and the notion of implicature. This article is an inflexion point in the philosophical study of language after the heyday of ordinary language philosophy and its insistence on unsystematicity.

Montague, Richard. *Formal Philosophy. Selected Papers of Richard Montague*. Edited by Richard H. Thomason. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974. [ISBN: 9780300015270]

Montague is the father of formal semantics, the approach to meaning that semantic minimalists defend in the philosophical arena. Using a possible-worlds model theoretic approach, Montague formalizes the principle of compositionality as the principle that there is a homomorphism between a syntactic and a semantic algebra.

Searle, John R. "Literal Meaning." *Erkenntnis* 13 (1978): 207–224. [class:journalArticle]

Argues that sentences do not have a literal meaning if this is understood as the meaning they have in a “zero context.” Sentences, according to Searle, have only literal meanings relative to a set of background contextual assumptions. Reprinted Searle’s *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Language and Thought Series. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986. [ISBN: 9780674754751]

The foundation of Relevance Theory, characterized by the reduction of Grice’s maxims of communication to the principle of relevance. Involves other departures from Grice’s views, particularly the claim that the encoded meaning of a sentence underdetermines its propositional content. Arriving at the proposition expressed by an utterance involves using contextual knowledge and thus pragmatic processing. Second edition published in 1995.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITY ISSUE

Semantic minimalism claims that all the utterances of a sentence that does not include any of the obvious indexicals have the same semantic content—a minimal propositional content usually called “the minimal proposition.” Contextualists and other opponents of minimalism reject the existence of such minimal propositions. What is relatively new in recent contextualism is that such a rejection is often based on psychological grounds, because the majority of contextualists are now attempting to build a theory of linguistic comprehension. The discussion is mostly conceptual and quite often left at the intuitive level, but it has been drawn to the terrain of empirical research by means of attempts to devise psycholinguistic experiments that probe a number of hypotheses about semantic and pragmatic processing.

Conceptual Issues

Contextualists typically aim to develop a theory of linguistic comprehension (see Sperber and Wilson 1986, cited under *Precursors*; Carston 2002, cited under *Monographs*; and Récanati 2004, cited under *Monographs*). It is crucial in this project that the elements posited by the theory are anchored in actual representations, processes, and capacities involved in linguistic understanding. The typical accusation is that minimalist theoretical ingredients do not meet such requirements. Récanati 2001, for instance, claims that minimal propositions are “monsters” with no psychological reality. Most minimalists try to meet the challenge and argue in favor of the psychological reality of minimal propositions (Borg 2004 and Cappelen and Lepore 2005, both cited under *Monographs*). Yet it is not clear what sort of reality commitment is involved in minimalism (Martínez-Manrique and Vicente 2009). On the other hand, there are authors that deny that the debate over minimalism should incorporate this psycholinguistic dimension. According to them, semantics in general, and minimalist semantics in particular, is not concerned with how we process linguistic utterances (García-Carpintero, 2001, Saul 2002, and Bach 2006).

Bach, Kent. “The Top Ten Misconceptions about Implicature.” In *Drawing the Boundaries of Meaning: Neo-Gricean Studies in Pragmatics and Semantics in Honor of Laurence R. Horn*. Edited by Betty J. Birner and Gregory L. Ward, 21–30. Studies in

Language Companion. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006. [ISBN: 9789027230904]
[class:bookChapter]

Argues that Grice did not intend his account of how implicatures are recognized as a psychological theory but as a rational reconstruction. The consequence of this view, shared by García-Carpintero 2001 and Saul 2002, is that Grice's minimalism is immune to any kind of psycholinguistic evidence.

Borg, Emma. "Semantics and the Place of Psychological Evidence." In *New Waves in Philosophy of Language*. Edited by Sarah Sawyer, 24–40. New Waves in Philosophy. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. [ISBN: 9780230224360]
[class:bookChapter]

Argues that, even if hearers often access speaker's meanings directly, minimal propositions are always available to competent speakers as part of their linguistic knowledge and do play a role in communication. Borg 2004 (cited under *Empirical Research*) goes further, arguing that minimal propositions are the outputs of a semantic module.

Cappelen, Herman, and Ernest Lepore. "Semantics and Psychology." In *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. By Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore, 176–189. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. [ISBN: 9781405126748] [class:bookChapter]

Discuss what they call the Psychological Objection to semantic minimalism, namely, that it provides a semantic content that does not play any role at all in the mental life of communicators.

García-Carpintero, Manuel. "Gricean Rational Reconstructions and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction." *Synthese* 128.1–2 (2001): 93–131.
[class:journalArticle]

Rejects the psychologically loaded interpretation of Grice's minimalism.

Martínez-Manrique, Fernando, and Agustín Vicente. "On the Psychological Reality of the Minimal Proposition." In *Utterance Interpretation and Cognitive Models*. Edited by Philippe de Brabanter and Mikhail Kissine, 1–25. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2009. [ISBN: 9781848556508]

Consider three types of commitment to the psychological reality of minimal propositions while examining the very cogency of this notion.

Récanati, François. "What Is Said." *Synthese* 128 (2001): 75–91. [class:journalArticle]

Considers minimal propositions "monsters" with no psychological reality. Argues that they play no possible role in communicative exchanges.

Saul, Jennifer M. "What is Said and Psychological Reality: Grice's Project and Relevance Theorists' Criticisms." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 (2002): 347–372.
[class:journalArticle]

Argues that Relevance Theory misfires when it corrects Grice's account for a cognitively more adequate one. Contends that Grice is not in the business of producing a psychologically sound theory.

Empirical Research

Questions pertaining to the semantics/pragmatics debates have motivated an increasing amount of experimental research, which has taken shape in the recently formed subfield of "experimental pragmatics" (see <http://www.experimentalpragmatics.org/>). A good deal

of the research has focused on the particular issue of scalar implicatures, i.e., those that employ quantifiers ordered on a scale of strength, such as “none,” “some,” and “all.” Part of the work addresses, in different ways, the question of the psychological reality of minimal propositions, probing whether they play any role in linguistic comprehension processes. The results are still inconclusive. Some appear to be favorable to the minimalist enterprise (Bezuidenhout and Cutting 2002, Giora 2003). Others yield differing results (Breheny, et al. 2006, Gibbs 2002, Katsos 2008). Borg 2009 discusses some of the evidence and defends the minimalist approach to scalar implicatures. A different strand of evidence comes from the question whether semantic comprehension has a modular character. Fodor’s modularity theory offered a number of features that modular systems typically exhibit. Even if this account has been contested, those features can be used, as Borg 2004 does, as a sort of checklist to assess the putative modularity of a processing mechanism. Robbins 2007 disputes Borg’s conclusions, while Giora 2003 appeals to different sources of evidence to support the coexistence of modular mechanisms—albeit different from those defended by Borg—with top-level context-sensitive processes.

Bezuidenhout, Anne, and J. Cooper Cutting. “Literal Meaning, Minimal Propositions and Pragmatic Processing.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34.4 (2002): 433–456.

Presents evidence in favor of the hypothesis that we do process minimal propositions, albeit not as first steps in the comprehension process, but in parallel with non-minimal propositions. The research focuses on scalar implicatures.

Borg, Emma. *Minimal Semantics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. [ISBN: 9780199270255]

On the basis of chapter 2, “Modularity,” argues that (minimal) semantic comprehension is modular, explaining in which ways it fulfills Fodor’s classical list of features for modularity, and alleging that relevant empirical evidence can be found in certain specific patterns of breakdown, such as aphasia, Asperger syndrome, Williams syndrome, or schizophrenia.

Borg, Emma. “On Three Theories of Implicature: Default Theory, Relevance and Minimalism.” *International Review of Pragmatics* 1 (2009): 1–21.

[class:journalArticle]

Examines the experimental evidence concerning the recovery of scalar implicatures and argues that minimalism accommodates it better than does Relevance theory or Levinson’s theory of default meanings (see *Semantic Minimalism and Its Other Opponents*).

Breheny, Richard, Napoleon Katsos, and John Williams. “Are Generalised Scalar Implicatures Generated by Default? An On-Line Investigation into the Role of Context in Generating Pragmatic Inferences.” *Cognition* 100 (2006): 434–463.

[class:journalArticle]

The focus is not the psychological reality of minimal propositions, but the dispute between Relevance theory and Levinson’s account concerning generalized scalar implicatures. However, the results reported seem to contradict the minimalist-friendly results of Bezuidenhout and Cooper Cutting 2002. Available

online[http://www.rceal.cam.ac.uk/People/Staffpages/GSI_default.pdf].

Gibbs, R. W., Jr. “A New Look at Literal Meaning in Understanding What Is Said and Implicated.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 457–486. [class:journalArticle]

Defends his “direct access view,” according to which listeners do not analyze the complete–propositional-literal meanings of linguistic expressions before reaching communicated content. Gibbs’s research has mainly focused on figurative speech comprehension.

Giora, Rachel. *On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. [ISBN: 9780195136166]

Giora’s model opposes Gibbs’s “direct view.” According to Giora’s “graded salience hypothesis,” understanding utterances involves two processes that occur more or less in parallel: one bottom-up, modular and compositional, and another top-down, sensitive to all kinds of contextual factors. Again, Giora’s main interest has been figurative speech.

Katsos, Napoleon. “The Semantics/Pragmatics Interface from an Experimental Perspective: The Case of Scalar Implicature.” *Synthese* 165 (2008): 385–401. [class:journalArticle]

Discusses criteria to classify an aspect of meaning as semantic or pragmatic, proposing a criterion based on the primary versus secondary role of context.

Robbins, Philip. “Minimalism and Modularity.” In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 303–319. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780199213320] [class:bookChapter]

Against Borg, argues that the evidence from Asperger, Williams, and schizophrenic subjects does not support a dissociation between semantic and pragmatic capacities, and that the argument from modularity does not rule out Cappelen and Lepore’s variety of minimalism.

SEMANTIC MINIMALISM AND COMPOSITIONALITY

As explained above, semantic minimalism is committed to an orthodox account of compositionality according to which the meaning of the whole (the sentence) depends only on the stable meaning of its constituent parts (their literal meanings) and on its syntactic structure. On the other hand, semantic minimalism claims that wholes have propositional, or truth-conditional meanings. All together, the position turns out to be extremely controversial despite its orthodoxy. Firstly, it can be attacked for its commitment to literal meanings (see Carston 2002, Chomsky 2000) or for its commitment to syntactic structure as the only structure relevant to determine the minimal meaning of sentential utterances (see Jackendoff 2002). Secondly, it can be rejected on the grounds that the output of the eventual composition process of semantic values cannot be truth-conditional (Carston 2008, Chomsky 2000, Travis 1996). Finally, the assertion that natural language semantics is compositional can be denied (Fodor 2001; see Pagin and Pelletier 2007 and Récanati 2009 for a response). One of the main reasons to reject the compositionality of natural language semantics is the existence of the so-called “unarticulated constituents,” a discussion that deserves its own entry.

Carston, Robyn. *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002. [ISBN: 9780631214885]

In chapter 1, “Pragmatics and Linguistic Underdeterminacy,” argues that neither referential nor predicative terms have literal meanings, as long as these are understood as stable semantic values of these expressions.

Carston, Robyn. "Linguistic Communication and the Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction." *Synthese* 165.3 (2008): 321–345. [class:journalArticle]

Develops the idea that there is a level of linguistic meaning that is compositional. However, it is a meaning that is mostly a reflection of syntactic information, falling very short of being propositional. While in *Thoughts and Utterances* (Carston 2002, cited under *Monographs*) Carston is mostly thinking that there is only one level of linguistic meaning: the conceptual level, which is semantically underdetermined. Here she seems to embrace the idea that there are two levels of meaning, an idea she hints at by the end of Carston 2002.

Chomsky, Noam. *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000. [ISBN: 9780521651479]

Argues against the truth-conditional account of semantics. One argument hinges on the variety of referential meanings a simple term such as a proper noun can have. Thus, Chomsky can be seen as attacking not just truth-conditional semantics, but also the minimalist assumption that each word has just one semantic value, which is (in the case of proper names, at least) its referent. For a similar position, see Paul M. Pietroski's "The Character of Natural Language Semantics," in *Epistemology of Language*, edited by Alex Barber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Fodor, Jerry A. "Language, Thought and Compositionality." *Mind and Language* 16.1 (2001): 1–15. [class:journalArticle]

Surprisingly, Fodor argues here that natural language does not have a compositional semantics. He claims that formal semantics fails to account for what seems to be the propositional content of most sentences. From this, he goes on to defend the idea that natural language cannot be the language of thought, given that the language of thought has to be compositional. This is a ramification of the debate worth considering.

Jackendoff, Ray. *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. [ISBN: 9780198270126]

Explains that the meaning of a sentence does not depend solely on its syntactic structure. The rules of composition are sensitive not only to syntactics, but also to purely semantic information: there are purely semantic rules of composition. For instance, many cases of coercion, as well as of resolutions of polysemy, can be explained in terms of processes of co-composition, that is, processes where the contributions of two or more lexical entries to the propositional meaning constrain each other according to the (rich) semantic information each entry contains.

Pagin, Peter, and Francis Jeffry Pelletier. "Content, Context and Composition." In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 25–62. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780199213320] [class:bookChapter]

Pagin and Pelletier have been arguing for a context-sensitive compositional truth-conditional semantics for some time. This co-authored work presents their views in the context of the minimalism/contextualist debate. The picture they draw is far from the simple one minimalists have in mind.

Récanati, François. "Compositional, Semantic Flexibility, and Context-Dependence[http://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/docs/00/42/91/34/PDF/Compositionality_Flexibility_and_Context-Dependence5REV7.pdf]*."

Argues that flexibility and context-dependence are compatible with compositionality as long as compositionality is not taken to exclude top-down and “lateral” influences (i.e., influences derived from the linguistic context).

Travis, Charles. “Meaning’s Role in Truth.” *Mind* 105 (1996): 451–466.

[class:journalArticle]

Travis is one of the most important defenders of contextualism, and probably no other author has gone as far as he has gone, and has been as persuasive as he has been, in arguing against the systematization of semantics. Here he argues that utterance meaning cannot determine truth-conditions, still less be identified with them. The truth-conditional meaning of an utterance is enormously sensitive to any kind of contextual element. Reprinted in his *Occasion-Sensitivity: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

UNARTICULATED CONSTITUENTS

Semantic minimalism follows the formalist tradition in semantics and there commits itself to being a homomorphism (a structure-preserving function) between syntax and semantics. According to minimalism, there can be nothing in semantics that is not represented in the syntax. Perry 1986, however, noted that the truth-conditional content of many sentential utterances goes beyond what is syntactically represented. Thus, the content of John’s utterance “it’s raining” is not that it’s raining, period, but (perhaps) that it’s raining where he is when he makes the utterance. The location is an *unarticulated constituent* of the content of the utterance. Minimalists deny that there are such unarticulated constituents, which would compromise their view on compositionality (Borg 2004 and Cappelen and Lepore 2005, both cited under *Monographs*). Contextualists assert that unarticulated constituents enter the proposition by way of pragmatic processes, either inferential or associative, and call them “free enrichment” (Récanati 2002). Between these two extremes we find “indexical contextualism,” which claims that the alleged unarticulated constituents are in fact triggered by hidden indexicals in syntactic structure (Stanley 2002, Martí 2006; for a critique, see Neale, 2007).

Borg, Emma. “Saying What You Mean: Unarticulated Constituents and Communication.” In *Ellipsis and Nonsentential Speech*. Edited by Reinaldo Elugardo and Robert J. Stainton, 237–262. Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy 81. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2005. [ISBN: 9781402023019] [class:bookChapter]

Contends that contextualists have confused knowledge of truth-conditions and knowledge that truth conditions are satisfied. Semantics is concerned with the knowledge of truth-conditions. However, one is forced to postulate unarticulated constituents only if one interprets the task of semantics as specification of examples where truth-conditions are satisfied. The point is also developed in Borg 2004(cited under *Monographs*).

Cappelen, Herman, and Ernest Lepore. “The Myth of Unarticulated Constituents.” In *Situating Semantics: Essays on the Philosophy of John Perry*. Edited by Michael O’Rourke and Corey Washington, 199–215. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780262651110] [class:bookChapter]

Argues that an utterance of “it’s raining” is location-neutral. Hearers do want to know about the place where it rains, but this should not be a concern for semanticists. See

also Cappelen and Lepore 2005 (cited under *Monographs*) for a thorough rejection of unarticulated constituents.

Martí, Luisa. "Unarticulated Constituents Revisited." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 29 (2006): 135–166. [class:journalArticle]

Defends the idea that the alleged unarticulated constituents are always triggered by covert or hidden indexical elements. However, Martí claims that such indexicals are optional, such that a sentence like "it's raining" can have two logical forms, one that includes the indexical, and one that does not.

Neale, Stephen. "On Location." In *Situating Semantics: Essays on the Philosophy of John Perry*. Edited by Michael O. Rourke and Corey Washington, 251–394. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780262651110] [class:bookChapter]

Defends the existence of unarticulated constituents against Stanley's indexicalist position. A follow-up is Neale's "Heavy Hands, Magic, and Scene-Reading Traps," *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 3.2 (2007): 77–132.

Perry, John. "Thought without Representation." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp. 60 (1986): 263–283. [class:journalArticle]

Introduces the notion of unarticulated constituents. Unarticulated constituents form part of the content of an utterance, yet they are not syntactically represented. Thus, the homomorphism between syntax and semantics breaks down. Reprinted in Perry's *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: CSLI, 2000).

Récanati, François. "Unarticulated Constituents." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25.3 (2002): 299–345. [class:journalArticle]

This is probably the most thorough, and at the same time complicated defense of the existence of unarticulated constituents. Récanati (see also Récanati 2004, cited under *Monographs*) holds that unarticulated constituents enter the proposition via free enrichment of the encoded content. Free enrichment is an optional pragmatic process.

Stanley, Jason. "Making It Articulated." *Mind and Language* 17.1–2 (2002): 149–168. [class:journalArticle]

By way of his "argument from binding," Stanley argues that putative unarticulated constituents enter propositional contents because they saturate indexical variables that do not appear at the surface structure of the sentence. This treatment of unarticulated constituents has been used to explain all kinds of allegedly covert indexical expressions, from gradable adjectives to predicates of taste. The position is known as "indexicalism" or "indexical contextualism." Reprinted in Stanley's *Language in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

SEMANTIC MINIMALISM AND ITS OTHER OPPONENTS

Semantic minimalism stands in sharp contrast with contextualism. However, contextualism is not its only opponent. As noted above, semantic minimalism opposes *indexical contextualism* as well (Stanley 2002, cited under *Unarticulated Constituents*), the main difference between the two being that minimalism restricts the set of indexical expressions to overt indexicals. The reason for Cappelen and Lepore is that covert indexicals do not pass their tests for semantic context-sensitivity (see Cappelen and Lepore 2005, cited under *Monographs*), while for Borg 2009 it is that the introduction of widespread syntactic or lexical context-sensitivity undermines the fundamental assumption (crucial to indexicalism) that all context-sensitivity must be marked at the

lexico-syntactic level. Bach 2001 has also developed a position that diverges from minimalism in a crucial aspect, for according to Bach the linguistic meaning of a sentential expression does not have a truth-conditional or propositional content. Rather, sentences usually encode propositional radicals, i.e., templates that require extra-linguistic content to become fully propositional. This position is sometimes called “propositional radicalism” or “radical minimalism.” In the last years, another position has emerged: semantic relativism, also called, somewhat misleadingly, “non-indexical contextualism” (MacFarlane 2007, Predelli 2005; also related is situated minimalism as described in Corazza and Dokic 2007). This position, whose initial main concern was to make sense of the relativity of claims about taste or the future, has gained more and more acceptance as a general semantic theory. Basically, it holds that sentential expressions carry a content that is true or false not just with respect to worlds but also many other variables. From this perspective, most contextual parameters do not affect the propositional content of the sentence: they just affect its truth-value. A different position is represented by approaches that endorse the existence of meanings that are directly accessed by the hearer, either as salient meanings (Giora 2003, cited under *Empirical Research*), defaults (Jaszczolt 2005), or presumptions (Levinson 2000). These meanings constitute pretty much the standard interpretation of the utterance and do not require minimal propositions.

Bach, Kent. “You Don’t Say?” *Synthese* 128 (2001): 15–44. [class:journalArticle]
 Develops his “propositional radicalism,” which holds that sentences do have literal meanings. However, such literal meanings fall short of being propositional. See also Bach’s “The Excluded Middle: Minimal Semantics without Minimal Propositions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73.2 (2007): 435–442. His exchange with Cappelen and Lepore, culminating in his “*Minimalism for Dummies[<http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~kbach/replytoC&L.pdf>]*”, is informative as to what is at issue between minimalism and radical minimalism.

Borg, Emma. “Meaning and Context: A Survey of a Contemporary Debate.” In *The Later Wittgenstein on Language*. Edited by Daniel Whiting, 96–113. *Philosophers in Depth*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. [ISBN: 9780230219687]
 [class:bookChapter]
 This surveys minimalism, indexicalism, contextualism, and relativism, and offers an argument that the latter three are all essentially unstable positions.

Corazza, Eros, and Jérôme Dokic. “Sense and Insensibility or Where Minimalism Meets Contextualism.” In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 169–193. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780199213320] [class:bookChapter]
 Criticize Cappelen and Lepore’s minimalism (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, cited under *General Overviews*) as well as the indexicalist and contextualist alternatives. They endorse the idea of truth as relative to a situation while attempting to establish a psychologically stronger role for minimal propositions. The latter are mentally represented yet related to implicit situations that are not represented themselves.

Jaszczolt, [Katarzyna](#) M. *Default Semantics: Foundations of a Compositional Theory of Acts of Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. [ISBN: 9780199261987]

With Giora 2003 (cited under *Empirical Research*), constitutes the most elaborate attempt to put the emphasis on salient meanings. Default interpretations are non-inferentially obtained, and there is no level of minimal proposition that provides a foundation for further inferences. Jaszczolt's entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy[\[http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/defaults-semantics-pragmatics/\]](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/defaults-semantics-pragmatics/)* presents the issues in a more compact way.

Kölbel, Max. "Motivations for Relativism." In *Relative Truth*. Edited by Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 1–40. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [ISBN: 9780199234950] [class:bookChapter]

Explores the motivations for relativism, including use of the relativist framework to address the kinds of context-shifting arguments that contextualists have often used to argue against minimalism.

Levinson, Stephen C. *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. Language, Speech, and Communication. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. [ISBN: 9780585272573]

Although written before the heyday of the minimalism versus contextualism debate, some of its theses have a bearing on it. Particularly important is the notion that generalized conversational implicatures play a role in truth-conditions.

MacFarlane, John. "Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism." In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 240–250. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. [ISBN: 9780199213320] [class:bookChapter]

Together with Predelli 2005, MacFarlane argues that most context-sensitivity is related to evaluation of sentences and does not belong to their content. Semantic content, according to this view, is minimal, but minimalists would prefer that semantic content not be a relativistic proposition.

Predelli, Stefano. *Contexts: Meaning, Truth and the Use of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. [ISBN: 9780199281732]

Here and in other papers, Predelli develops a position on semantics similar to that of MacFarlane 2007.