

Linguistic communication and the semantics/pragmatics distinction

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Abstract Most people working on linguistic meaning or communication assume that semantics and pragmatics are distinct domains, yet there is still little consensus on how the distinction is to be drawn. The position defended in this paper is that the semantics/pragmatics distinction holds between (context-invariant) encoded linguistic meaning and speaker meaning. Two other ‘minimalist’ positions on semantics are explored and found wanting: Kent Bach’s view that there is a narrow semantic notion of context which is responsible for providing semantic values for a small number of indexicals, and Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore’s view that semantics includes the provision of values for all indexicals, even though these depend on the speaker’s communicative intentions. Finally, some implications are considered for the favoured semantics/pragmatics distinction of the fact that there are linguistic elements (lexical and syntactic) which do not contribute to truth-conditional content but rather provide guidance on pragmatic inference.

Keywords Minimal proposition · Indexicals · Narrow context · Broad context · Speaker meaning · Shared content · Explicature/implicature distinction · Truth conditions

1 Introduction: various distinctions

I am prompted by the twofold question: What is the semantics/pragmatics distinction and does it really matter? A variety of answers have been given to the first part of the question and the main aim of this paper is to make the case for a particular answer (largely through arguing against the tenability of the others). That the distinction does matter, and why it does, will emerge, somewhat indirectly, from the assessment of the different attempts to draw it.

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I can think of at least the following five ways the distinction is currently made by different theorists and no doubt there are further finer-grained variants of some of these:

- (1) Context-independent linguistically encoded meaning (LEM) versus speaker meaning (or communicated meaning or utterance meaning).
- (2) LEM plus contextual values for pure indexicals versus speaker meaning.
- (3) LEM plus contextual values for all indexicals versus (the rest of) speaker meaning.
- (4) Minimal proposition expressed versus (the rest of) speaker meaning.
- (5) Intuitive proposition expressed versus (the rest of) speaker meaning.

I shall argue that the right way to draw the distinction is as in (1), that this is a natural distinction (between distinct kinds of information and distinct kinds of mental processes). It is a distinction that matters, although, somewhat ironically, it may in fact turn out to be better viewed as a distinction between syntax and pragmatics, that is, between a semantically relevant level of linguistic representation and pragmatically derived representations. I believe the distinction in (5) is also a valid distinction, but that it is a distinction between kinds of speaker meaning (or communicated propositions) rather than a semantics/pragmatics distinction. As for the others, (2)–(4), they merely blur the semantics/pragmatics distinction, since pragmatics (concerned with recovering the content of a speaker's communicative intention) becomes one of the determinants of semantic content. Not only are these not good ways to draw the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, they are not worthwhile distinctions of any other sort either; that is, they do no useful work, or so I shall argue.

In Sect. 2, I briefly set out my position, which incorporates distinctions (1) and (5), and then go on, at greater length, to consider representatives of positions (2) and (3)/(4), the most minimalist of positions on the nature of semantics after my own, where being 'minimalist' is understood as keeping the semantic contribution made by context to a minimum (no contribution at all, obviously, being the limiting case). Although arguments against the viability of (2) mostly carry over, a fortiori, to (3)/(4), it's worth considering these positions separately, since, while the one allows for nonpropositional semantic contents, the other insists on propositionality and bases an argument for the utility of its conception of semantic content on this property. In Sect. 3, I consider, on the one hand, pragmatics functioning without semantics, that is, in communicative situations not involving language or any other code, and, on the other, semantics without pragmatics, that is, semantics within the domain of thought (its original domain, in my view). The issue of their interaction and so of how a distinction between them is to be drawn only arises for linguistic communication, an activity which, I claim, so alters (perhaps distorts) the way in which semantics has to be construed that it may be as well to avoid the term altogether in this domain and opt instead for a syntax/pragmatics distinction.

2 Good distinctions and spurious distinctions

2.1 Two kinds of speaker meaning and an ultra-minimalist semantics

Let's start with an example of a fairly ordinary communicative exchange, in (6), and consider what, I hope people will agree, is a likely intended (and understood) interpretation, given in (7), of Sue's utterance, as a response to Bob's preceding question.

- (6) Bob: How is Jane feeling after her first year at university?
 Sue: She didn't get enough units and can't continue.
- (7) a. [JANE_i DIDN'T PASS ENOUGH UNIVERSITY COURSE UNITS TO QUALIFY
 FOR ADMISSION TO SECOND YEAR STUDY]_p & AS A RESULT OF P JANE_i
 CANNOT CONTINUE WITH UNIVERSITY STUDY
 b. JANE_i IS NOT FEELING HAPPY

What we get is two distinct communicated (speaker-meant) propositions, neither of which, of course, is the meaning of the sentence that Sue used, although the first one appears to have been built out of that encoded meaning, but with a pretty hefty input from pragmatics. The linguistically encoded meaning of the pronoun 'she' is not Jane, the linguistically encoded meaning of 'units' is not university course units, there is nothing in the sentence indicating a causal relation between the conjuncts, etc. The communicated proposition in (7b) is an uncontroversial case of a (particularized) conversational implicature (an indirect answer to the question asked). The proposition in (7a) is variously named 'what is said' or 'explicature' or 'implicature' or 'intuitive utterance content', or sometimes, simply '(propositional) content', or 'primary' speaker meaning (implicatures being 'secondary').

Although there may be some disagreement with specific details of the way I've divided up speaker meaning for this particular example,¹ it is generally agreed that there is some such division to be made within communicated content. It arises from the inferential pragmatic process of deriving the speaker's intended meaning: she indirectly communicates (7b) and one of the premises on which this conclusion depends is the proposition in (7a), which is derived by pragmatically augmenting the linguistically provided meaning. This, then, is the distinction given in (5) above, between the intuitive proposition expressed² and the rest of the speaker's meaning (i.e. implicatures). It is a distinction that accords well with speaker-hearer intuitions about kinds of communicated content and it has the psychological utility of providing the ingredients required for an inferentially sound account of implicature derivation. This is clearly a valid distinction, a distinction that matters, but there is nothing useful to be gained by dubbing it a (or 'the') semantics/pragmatics distinction, since pragmatic processes, which recruit non-linguistic information and considerations of contextual relevance in order to recover the speaker's communicative intention, play a major role in the composition of what would be the 'semantic' side of the divide. This would be the most extreme of the various existing construals of natural language semantics which, wittingly or not, deny its autonomy from pragmatics.

What does seem clear is that all these various pragmatic contributions can be distinguished from the meaning contributed by the linguistic expression itself used by Sue in (6),

¹ There is (or, anyway, has been) controversy over which elements of pragmatically derived meaning should be taken to contribute to (7a). For instance, the inferred cause-consequence relation was originally assumed by Grice to constitute a (generalized) conversational implicature and some of his current descendants still take this view. However, I think it is fair to say that the consensus nowadays, across otherwise quite different frameworks, has shifted to the view that it is a pragmatic contribution to the level of primary speaker meaning (explicature) (see discussion in Carston 1988, 2002, 2004; Levinson 2000; King and Stanley 2005).

² I am not entirely comfortable with this talk of 'intuitive' propositions or 'intuitive truth-conditional content', though this is quite standard in the literature (see, in particular, Recanati 2001b, 2004c; Stanley and Szabo 2000) and it is sometimes claimed that these ordinary intuitive judgements are the central empirical data which a *semantic* theory should provide an account of (e.g. King and Stanley 2005, p. 141). I would be more cautious—while any broad intuitive consensus on the proposition expressed by an utterance is certainly useful data, there are plenty of cases in the literature where intuitions diverge and/or where it is unclear what the source of the intuitive judgements is (encoded word meaning, strict literal truth or what the speaker meant, etc.); for further discussion, see Carston (2007).

that is, the meaning that the words ‘she’, ‘enough’, ‘units’, ‘and’, ‘continue’, etc. have as elements in a particular linguistic system (the meaning which is logged for them in the mental lexicon), together with the relations between these meanings imposed by the particular syntactic structure of the sentence. This gives us the distinction in (1): it can be seen as a distinction between the information/meaning that comes from (is encoded by) the linguistic form used by the speaker (LEM) and the non-linguistic information/meaning required for a complete understanding of the speaker’s meaning. Alternatively to, or parallel with, this informational construal, it can be seen as a distinction between psychological processes: the decoding processes by which an addressee recovers LEM and the inferential processes by which he extends and adjusts it in order to recover what the speaker meant. This latter distinction is central in the Relevance Theory approach to communication and comprehension (see [Sperber and Wilson 1986/95](#)). However, you don’t have to be a relevance theorist or hold a modular view of the language capacity to accept the reality of context-invariant LEM: it is what ([Perry, 2003](#), p. 378) calls the ‘meaning’ of a linguistic expression, which is the same on every occasion of its use, as distinct from the various kinds of ‘content’ that he recognises, reflexive and referential, which differ across uses of an expression. I believe that LEM is what ([Grice, 1989](#), 359ff) was getting at with his talk of a central kind of signification turning on the notion of ‘formality’ (as opposed to another central kind of meaning, ‘dictiveness’, which is a semantic/pragmatic hybrid), and it is pretty close too to the Kaplanian notion of ‘character’, which is often equated with ‘standing linguistic meaning’ ([Stanley 2005](#)).

This is the only one of the five distinctions given at the beginning where there is no encroachment of pragmatics on the semantics side and is, therefore, the semantics/pragmatics distinction that I favour ([Carston 1999, 2004](#)). However, there are two, possibly related, points (potential worries) to note, for later discussion. First, on this conception, the semantics of a sentence is often, perhaps quite generally, not fully propositional. Looking back at (6), what LEM gives us is something gappy, something calling for completion (‘enough of what?’ ‘can’t continue what?’), with slots to be filled (for referents), perhaps with alternatives to be chosen amongst (in the case of ambiguity). It is a schema or template for building propositions (or at least propositional representations). So semantics as used here is not dealing in truth conditions and if, as many philosophers would claim, truth conditions are at the very heart of semantics, this might indicate a misuse of the term. Second, this way of construing the semantics/pragmatics distinction has the feature that the two halves of the distinction are not carving up a single domain of phenomena but really apply to distinct kinds of domain, albeit domains that inevitably come together in linguistic communication: ‘semantics’ applies to linguistic *types* and ‘pragmatics’ to occasion-specific utterances or *tokenings* of linguistic expressions (in fact, overt acts of communication more generally). I’ll come back to these points at the end when I reconsider the wisdom of using the term ‘semantics’ in this way.

2.2 Two kinds of context: semantic and pragmatic

Kent Bach has argued in favour of a view of the semantic component of an utterance (‘what is said’, as he uses this term) as consisting of that information which it provides *independent of the speaker’s communicative intention* ([Bach 1987](#), pp. 180–181; 2001, p. 22). Now that sounds very much like the first level I’ve been advocating, that is, LEM, or standing linguistic meaning, Kaplan’s semantic character, Grice’s ‘formal’ signification, Perry’s ‘meaning’. But, in fact, it is a bit more than any of these, as he is advocating position (2) above on the semantics/pragmatics distinction. Semantics, on his view, then, includes not only encoded linguistic information, but also any context-given values for indexicals that arise independently of processes (inferences) geared to the recovery of speaker meaning (so employing

pragmatic maxims or principles of some sort). This way of drawing the semantics/pragmatics distinction rests on two other distinctions:

- (8) a. A distinction between pronouns which refer semantically ('pure' indexicals) and those which refer pragmatically (demonstrative indexicals).
- b. A distinction between two kinds of context: narrow (or semantic) and broad (or pragmatic, or cognitive).

With regard to the second of these, Bach says the following:

"There are two sorts of contextual information, one much more restricted in scope than the other. Information that plays the limited role of combining with linguistic information to determine content (in the sense of fixing it) is restricted to a short list of variables, such as the identity of the speaker and the hearer and the time and place of an utterance. Contextual information in the broad sense is anything that the hearer is to take into account to determine (in the sense of ascertain) the speaker's communicative intention."

(Bach 1997, p. 39)

Pronouns that refer semantically are those whose referent is a simple function of narrow (semantic) context. Pronouns that refer pragmatically are those whose referents are a function of broad context (and so are a matter of the speaker's communicative, specifically referential, intention). The following examples, discussed in (Bach, 1987, 176ff), make the distinction very clear. The semantics ('what is said') of (9a) and (9b) is given by (10a) and (10b), respectively:

- (9) a. I am ready to go now.
- b. He was ready to go then.
- (10) a. \underline{a} is ready to go at \underline{t}
- b. A certain male was ready to go at a certain time prior to the time of utterance

The proposition in (10a) is the result of applying a standard Kaplanian semantics for 'I' and 'now' to a narrow context in which \underline{a} is that parameter which corresponds to the speaker and \underline{t} is the time of utterance parameter. Narrow context does not provide any objective parameters as referents for 'he' and 'then', so their referents have to be pragmatically inferred, using broad context and maxims or principles geared to the recovery of speaker meaning. They, then, contribute to a different representational level, a *pragmatic* level, which Bach (1994) calls 'implicature' (very similar to the relevance-theoretic notion of 'explicature', and exemplified by (7a) above). So the semantics of (9b) ('what is said') is rendered by spelling out the likely referential constraints encoded by each of the demonstrative indexicals, as indicated in (10b).³

Evidently, narrow context does not provide a value for the majority of indexicals ('it', 'he', 'she', 'they', 'we', 'then', 'there', 'this', 'that', 'these', 'those'). It often leaves semantic content less than fully propositional in other respects as well, as the examples in (11) illustrate.

³ The equation of this notion of semantics with 'what is said' seems particularly unappealing in the case of demonstrative indexicals, since on virtually all philosophical uses of the term 'what is said', it is intended to encompass what the utterance is about, i.e. its referential content, which this account plainly does not do. I don't know how committed Bach is these days to this 'specific indefinite' rendering of what is said by demonstrative indexicals, since I don't find it reiterated in any of his recent work. However, his commitment to a communicatively-relevant distinction between semantic (pure) and pragmatic (demonstrative) indexicals appears to remain intact and he hasn't suggested any alternative treatment of the latter.

The sentences in (11a)–(11c) are syntactically complete, but a constituent must be supplied, via considerations of broad context, in order for a fully propositional (truth-evaluable) content to be discerned⁴ (e.g. ‘ready [to dance]’, ‘enough [chocolate fondue]’).

- (11) a. He is ready.
- b. She is too tall.
- c. I’ve had enough.
- d. John’s father.

This point applies all the more to utterances of nonsentential linguistic expressions (a bare noun phrase as in (11d), or a prepositional phrase, for instance). So, very often, what is determined by encoded linguistic meaning and narrow context is only a fragment of a proposition, or what Bach calls a ‘propositional radical’ (Bach 1994, p. 269).

As already noted, this view of semantics is very close to the construal which I favour, that of (context-independent) linguistic expression-type meaning. Indeed, it is probably even closer than the discussion so far indicates since, as many authors have noted, identification of the reference of many instances of the so-called ‘pure’ indexicals can, in fact, only be achieved through consideration of speaker intentions, hence is reliant on information from broad context. I’m not going to pursue this point in detail here, but will briefly run through some of the relevant issues. First, there is the question of how far, on any given occasion of use, the bounds of the reference of ‘here’ and ‘now’ extend. The possible referents of a token of ‘here’ include the very section of space occupied by the speaker’s body at the time of utterance (rather unlikely to be the intended referent) through increasingly more inclusive areas (the room in which the utterance occurs, the building, institution, town, country, etc.), up to (and perhaps beyond) our universe as opposed to other universes; the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for ‘now’ (see Recanati 2001a; Carston 2002, p. 218).⁵

Second, narrow context as standardly construed does not give the right result for a whole host of utterances involving pure indexicals. Consider, for example, a post-it note, which says ‘I’ll miss *my* office hour *today*’, written by a departmental secretary sitting in her office one evening, who then attaches it to an absent professor’s office door the next morning; clearly, the correct referent of ‘I’ and ‘my’ is not the writer of the note but the professor, and the correct referent of ‘today’ is not the day on which the note was written but the day on which it appears on the professor’s door. Similarly for recycled signs, notices and sandwich boards (e.g. ‘All *our* leather goods are *now* reduced by 50%’, or the veteran protestor’s banner ‘*You* are a scumbag’ (Perry 2003, p. 378)). Variations and extensions of the same point are provided by answer-machine messages (‘*I* am not *here now*’) and other recorded messages, which also detach spatial and temporal reference from the place/time of production. This set of issues has been discussed extensively in recent semantics literature (Sidelle 1991; Predelli 1998, 2005; Corazza et al. 2002; Perry 2003; Powell 2003), and it seems clear that solutions that propose a simple shift from, say, context of encoding or production to context of decoding or reception, cannot cover the full range of cases. The only workable solutions are those that see the required context in pragmatic terms (as do Predelli, Perry, Powell); that is, the right context is the one the speaker intends (with, of course, the usual constraints on

⁴ Most people would agree with Bach about this, but, as will be discussed in the next section, there are recent forcefully declaimed exceptions (Borg 2004, 2005; Cappelen and Lepore 2005a, 2006).

⁵ Note that there are finer distinctions to be made among indexicals (see Perry 1998, 2003) and that only those that Perry designates as both ‘automatic’ and a function of narrow context (probably only ‘I’ and ‘today’) have any chance of complying with Bach’s requirement on semantically derived values (i.e. no involvement of speaker’s intentions or broad context). And, of course, there is the phenomenon of anaphoric uses of ‘here’ and ‘now’, which I am ignoring here (see Corazza 2004).

what a speaker can reasonably intend in a specific communicative situation). To ascertain the intended context the addressee must go well beyond any conception of narrow context; he has to use his general knowledge about the affordances of the technology involved—written notes, recording machines, etc.—and, in some instances, specific knowledge about the speaker (e.g. ‘she is expecting me to see this note at such-and-such a time’).⁶

Third, in principle, every utterance is ambiguous between descriptive use and metarepresentational use (e.g. when a speaker is attributing the words he utters, or the thoughts they express, to another), so that any given tokening of ‘I’ may not refer to the person uttering it (and similarly for the other ‘pure’ indexicals). This is by no means always explicitly signalled by linguistic structures like “He said/thought ‘I am ...’” but often has to be pragmatically inferred, which again involves considerations of speaker intentions reached via pragmatic or broad context. My overall conclusion, then, is that, with regard to an account of linguistic communication and comprehension, there is no place for a narrow semantic notion of context. It is an artificial construct, invented for the quite distinct theoretical pursuit of formally modelling logically relevant aspects of words, specifically indexicals and demonstratives (see [Kaplan 1977/89](#); [Perry 2003](#); [Predelli 2005](#)), where it will no doubt continue to play a useful and legitimate role.⁷

Bach’s semantic notion of ‘what is said’ has a kind of hybrid nature: it is mostly made up of encoded linguistic meaning but with referential values for some occurrences of some pure indexicals; it seems to be a mix of content and character, as indicated by the use of the specific indefinite descriptions for the majority of the indexicals.⁸ The obvious question now is: what role does this semantic notion play in an account of linguistic communication? Bach’s response is that it is needed “to account for the linguistically determined input to the hearer’s inference to what, if anything, the speaker intends to be conveyed in uttering the sentence” ([Bach 2001](#), p. 15). I think we would all agree that a crucial ingredient in figuring out what the speaker means by a verbal utterance is the linguistically determined input, but I would claim that this is precisely what LEM gives us. Now, it could be objected that LEM alone cannot be an input to this interpretive process because it is not fully propositional and so is not the right kind of entity to serve as a premise in inference; what we need is something which is at least minimally propositional. However, Bach’s semantic ‘what is said’ fares no better in this regard, since, as mentioned earlier, it also often comprises only a propositional radical. Those who make this propositional objection favour a semantics/pragmatics distinction of

⁶ A further issue raised by communication technologies (writing, printing reproduction, telephones, recording machines) which lift the here-and-now restrictions of the ‘primordial face-to-face utterance situation’, as ([Perry 2003](#), p. 385) puts it, is whether or not Kaplan’s semantics for the various pure indexicals can be maintained (for discussion suggesting that it cannot, see [Powell 2003](#), Sect. 4.2).

⁷ [Predelli \(2005\)](#) suggests that it is erroneous and misleading to use the term ‘context’ for the construct in question and replaces it with ‘index’, an n -tuple of components which are taken as givens for the purposes of a certain kind of formal semantic theorising. The question of how these components are determined (or the cognitive processes within an addressee that achieve this) simply does not arise within that formal enterprise. Similarly, this investigation into the logical properties of linguistic entities cannot operate over utterances (concrete physical events extended in time and space), hence Predelli’s insistence that the input to the abstract truth-evaluating system is *clause-index pairs*.

⁸ Another issue (one which is little discussed) arising for Bach and other advocates of a semantic ‘what is said’ is disambiguation (lexical or structural), which also requires consideration of speaker intentions and broad context. For some semanticists, intent on formalising logical aspects of language (or, more likely, propositional thought), ambiguity can be legitimately set aside (see [Predelli 2005](#), pp. 27–34), but not so for those who, like Bach, are interested in the interplay of semantics and pragmatics in linguistic communication. From the point of view of the addressee, then, this semantic ‘what is said’ must in fact comprise a *set* of propositions or proposition radicals, among which he must choose, using the full panoply of pragmatic apparatus at his disposal.

type (4) in the original list. To this objection, Bach and I would respond in (near) unison: the nonpropositional content that constitutes semantics can be embedded in a schema of some sort which renders it an adequate input to (global, propositional) inference: ‘The speaker has said that ...’ or ‘The speaker has presented me with ...’. The point here, though, is that this issue of ‘inferential fitness’ provides no reason to prefer LEM plus pure indexical values, to LEM alone.

I have argued elsewhere that this semantic conception of ‘what is said’ is redundant, being minimally distinct from LEM, and playing no independent role in utterance comprehension (Carston 2002, pp. 177–181).⁹ What I want to add here is that, in the respect in which it is distinct from LEM (in providing a context-specific value for ‘I’ and perhaps a small number of other indexicals, on *some* occasions of their use), it is at odds with the kind of clean, clear, *mutually exclusive distinction between semantics and pragmatics* that both Bach and I (and others, e.g. Recanati 2001b, 2004a) favour. Consider some recent statements of Bach’s about the nature of pragmatics and semantics:

“Pragmatic information is (extralinguistic) information that arises from an actual act of utterance. Whereas semantic information is encoded in what is uttered, **pragmatic information is generated by**, or at least made relevant by, **the act of uttering it.**”

(Bach 2001, p. 22; my highlighting)

“... semantics and pragmatics have distinct subject matters, sentences and utterances, respectively. **Semantics is the part of grammar that pairs forms with meanings.**”

(Bach 2004, p. 28; my highlighting)

“Taken as properties of sentences, **semantic properties are on a par with syntactic and phonological properties**: they are linguistic properties. Pragmatic properties, on the other hand, belong to acts of uttering sentences in the course of communicating. **Sentences have the properties they have independently of anybody’s act of uttering them.**”

(Bach 2004, p. 27; my highlighting)

I’m totally at one with all these statements, which seem to characterise very well the semantics/pragmatics distinction in (1)—between LEM, on the one hand, and what we take to be the speaker’s utterance meaning, on the other. Consider, for instance, that on a specific occasion of use, the value of ‘I’ gets fixed as George W. Bush, and the value of ‘today’ as 31st May 2006. These facts are surely not given by that part of the grammar, a stable body of knowledge of linguistic types, which “pairs forms with meanings”. They are not properties that sentences have “independently of anybody’s act of uttering them” but rather they “arise from an actual act of utterance”, hence they are pragmatic according to Bach’s own characterisation. My point is very simple: there is no context of utterance, narrow or otherwise, without an act of uttering, so facts about speakers, addressees, places, days and times of utterances are pragmatic facts, not semantic ones.

⁹ It’s worth emphasising that the redundancy worry here is not merely the point that a hearer need not identify or recover this semantic ‘what is said’ at any stage in the on-line psychological process of utterance comprehension—this may well be true of LEM as well and, as (Bach 2001, pp. 24–25) says, any assumption that it should be recovered as a whole during interpretation would be an overly strong requirement to place on a purely semantic component of an utterance. The point that concerned me was the more general one that this semantic notion of ‘what is said’, which is so minimally distinct from LEM, appears to play *no role at all* in linguistic communication and understanding. Stanley (2005, p. 3) has recently made a similar point with regard to various minimalist notions of semantic content, including Bach’s, saying that they “threaten to be an idle wheel in an explanation of linguistic practice”.

To conclude this section, Bach's semantic notion of 'what is said' plays no role that isn't played by linguistically encoded meaning alone and, in fact, given his characterisation of the semantics/pragmatics distinction, it seems that his view of the semantic component of linguistic utterances should really be the same as mine: LEM, an ultra-minimalist, non-propositional view.¹⁰

2.3 Two kinds of content: semantic versus speech act

In this section, I consider a view which is, effectively, a combination of the distinctions given in (3) and (4), repeated here:

- (3) Linguistically encoded meaning plus values of all indexicals vs. (the rest of) speaker meaning.
- (4) Minimal proposition expressed vs. (the rest of) speaker meaning.

These two distinctions may be kept distinct or may merge, depending on a number of other considerations, including one's view of linguistic indexicality and willingness to posit covert indexicals or variables in linguistic form. So, for instance, for many people (including Bach), examples like 'That is enough', 'We are ready', 'She has finished', etc. are not propositional even once the intended referent of the overt pronouns has been determined. If this is to be thought of as the semantic content of the utterance, then we not only have pragmatics intervening in semantics (fixing values for 'that', 'she', etc.), but this intervention does not give us a semantics which is fully truth-conditional, an upshot which would be undesirable to many who might otherwise countenance some constrained pragmatic contribution to semantic content. But these examples are good candidates for harbouring some sort of unpronounced constituent (an implicit argument or hidden indexical) in their linguistic logical form (e.g. 'She has finished [*x*]'), which, like an overt indexical, makes obligatory a pragmatic process of contextual saturation, the outcome of which is a propositional content (e.g. '*a* has finished her PhD dissertation at *t*').¹¹

However, the view of semantic content that I want to look at now manages to combine distinctions (3) and (4) without advocating covert indexicality (or any linguistically unarticulated constituents of semantic content either). This is Cappelen and Lepore's 'insensitive semantics', which they describe as follows:

"[This] is the view that for an utterance *u* of a well-formed sentence *S* in a context *C*, if you fix the referents of the obviously indexical/demonstrative components of *S* (the Basic Set of context sensitive expressions with which Kaplan begins 'Demonstratives'

¹⁰ Bach often equates his semantic notion of 'what is said' with the content of Austin's (1955/62) 'locutionary' act (as opposed to 'illocutionary' act) (see, e.g., Bach 1994, 2004). However, it is difficult to see how this advances his case in any way. First, there are notorious problems of interpretation that beset Austin's discussion of the concept of 'locutionary act' (see Iten 2005, pp. 44–51). But, second, one thing that does seem clear is that Austin intended it to include occasion-specific reference as well as sense, so, if anything, it matches up better with the view of semantics entailed by the distinctions given in (3) and (4) at the beginning of this paper. The difference between Austin's and Bach's concepts is sometimes quite evident in Bach's own work (compare Bach 1987, p. 181, n. 9, and Bach 1994, pp. 271–272; see also Carston 2002, p. 218, n. 49).

¹¹ To take this position on these 'semantically incomplete' cases, you don't have to belong to the school of thought, represented by Stanley (2000), according to which *any and all* pragmatic effects on intuitive truth-conditional content must be articulated in logical form. It is quite consistent to support the existence of hidden linguistic constituents in these particular cases, while allowing that there are also cases of optional pragmatic enrichment (i.e. constituents of utterance content which are not articulated anywhere in linguistic form), as do Recanati (2002) and Carston (2002). In this paper, I am not addressing the debate between the advocates of wholesale hidden indexicals and the supporters of free pragmatic enrichment.

(1989)¹², ...) and if you disambiguate the ambiguous expressions, then what you end up with is a proposition. We call this proposition the minimal semantic content of *u*.” (Cappelen and Lepore 2006, p. 2)

They call their approach ‘insensitive semantics’ (meaning ‘context-insensitive’ semantics) because they see themselves as pitted against ‘contextualist’ views, which claim that a great many more (perhaps all) linguistic items are context-sensitive than those given by Kaplan’s basic set of overt indexicals. However, as is evident from the passage just quoted, their notion of semantic content is quite a lot more context-sensitive than Bach’s, since theirs involves the assigning of values to ALL indexicals, pure and demonstrative, and maybe to a few other elements (as listed in footnote 12). The second difference from Bach (and from the LEM position on semantics) is their view that the semantic content of sentences is *always propositional* (has a determinate truth condition), so examples such as those in (12), which repeat some cases discussed earlier, are claimed to all be fully propositional, without any pragmatic process of completion or saturation beyond that mandated by the overt indexicals. Rough indications of possible propositional contents are given in small caps.¹³

- (12) a. She didn’t get enough units.
 JANE_i DIDN’T GET ENOUGH UNITS
 b. He’s ready.
 BILL_k IS READY
 c. It isn’t raining.
 IT IS NOT RAINING

Let’s consider now whether the arguments given in the previous section against Bach’s semantic ‘what is said’ carry over to this more context-sensitive view. There were two main points. First, in order to maintain a sharp mutually exclusive semantics/pragmatics distinction, we need to keep our semantic content clear of speaker’s communicative intentions (that’s the territory of pragmatics). Recall that Bach agrees with this view but posits a notion of semantic content that falls foul of it. Second, there is the ‘idle wheel’ charge; that is, the claim that the favoured notion of semantic content does no work in an account of language and communication that isn’t already covered by the ultra-minimal, context-free, linguistically encoded meaning. As regards the first point, Cappelen and Lepore (hereafter C&L) explicitly reject the kind of absolute semantics/pragmatics distinction that Bach and I (and others, e.g. Recanati 2001b) advocate. They profess to have no problem with the fact that wide context (hence the speaker’s communicative intention) is clearly involved in the fixing of values for most elements in their Basic Set of context-sensitive linguistic elements: “... we might agree that the semantic value of semantically context sensitive expressions might be fixed by the *intentions* of the speaker, ... Recanati (2001b) is probably right that wide

¹² Here is Kaplan’s list of indexicals: the personal pronouns ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’ in their various cases and number, the demonstrative pronouns ‘that’ and ‘this’ in their various cases and number, the adverbs ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘now’, ‘today’, ‘yesterday’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘ago’, ‘henceforth’, and the adjectives ‘actual’ and ‘present’ (Kaplan 1977/89, p. 489). Cappelen and Lepore, (2005a, p.1) add the following: words and aspects of words that indicate tense, and perhaps also ‘contextuals’, which include common nouns like ‘enemy’, ‘outsider’, ‘foreigner’, ‘alien’, ‘immigrant’, ‘friend’, and ‘native’ as well as common adjectives like ‘foreign’, ‘local’, ‘domestic’, ‘national’, ‘imported’ and ‘exported’.

¹³ Cappelen and Lepore (2005a,b) see this as the key element in their disagreement with the contextualist semanticist who claims that you don’t get truth-conditional content except in the context of a speech act. I do not attempt here to assess their arguments for the propositionality of the examples in (12) nor to mount a defence of contextualism, but rather to assess the utility of their particular brand of semantic minimalism and the semantics/pragmatics distinction it implies.

context is involved.” (C&L 2005a, p. 148). They go on to express surprise that anyone might think the word ‘semantic’ should be confined to describing just those features of content that do not depend on speaker’s intentions and distance themselves from any such view (which they find idiosyncratic and unwarranted). In fact, however, there are a number of reasons for drawing the semantics/pragmatics distinction in such a way that the semantic component is independent of a speaker’s communicative intentions.¹⁴ I will shortly focus on one specific problem caused by this apparent nonchalance about pragmatics playing an important role in determining semantic content because, I believe, it undermines what C&L take to be one of the central virtues of their approach.

This particular virtue is elaborated as a response to the second concern mentioned above, the question of what work this conception of semantic content does. According to C&L, it provides us with a component which is absolutely fundamental to any adequate account of linguistic communication, that is, *shared content*. They describe this in the following way: “... the same content can be expressed, claimed, asserted, questioned, investigated, etc. in radically different contexts. It is the semantic content that enables audiences who find themselves in radically different contexts to understand each other, to agree or disagree, to question and debate with each other” (C&L 2005a, p. 152). It is essential that philosophy of language explain how content can be shared across contexts, they say, and that is something that their brand of semantic minimalism, and no other view, can do.

Here is an example of the kind of evidence they call on to support their claim that the proposition semantically expressed, as they delimit it, IS the content shared by all utterances of a given sentence across radically different contexts:

- (13) Context 1: In a conversation about exam preparation, someone raises the question of whether John is well prepared.

Nina utters ‘John is ready’, thereby communicating that John is ready for his exam.

- Context 2: A family is about to go abroad on holiday; they are all packed and ready to go, except for John who is running late.

Finally, Nina utters ‘John is ready’, thereby communicating that John is ready to leave for the airport.

Both of these utterances can be reported *disquotationally*, as in (a)–(c), the report in (c) being of particular interest, since it is a single disquotational report which succeeds in reporting on both of them at once:

- a. In C1, Nina said that John is ready.
- b. In C2, Nina said that John is ready.
- c. In both C1 and C2, Nina said that John is ready.

(C&L 2005a, pp. 91–92)

The intuition is that all of these reports are true. Differences in the context of utterance make no difference to the semantic content of the sentence, neither the contexts of Nina’s original utterances, nor the contexts in which the reports are made. It is the same content, stable across contexts, and so shared by the various speakers and audiences in those contexts.

¹⁴ In a recent assessment of Cappelen & Lepore’s minimalist semantics, which she generally endorses, Borg ([forthcoming](#)) takes issue with their inclusion of elements of content that are dependent on communicative intentions, hence on features of broad context, claiming that it is incompatible with one of the main background motivations of minimalism: that a semantic theory should provide a ‘general, systematic and syntax-driven account of sentential content’. So too Korta and Perry ([forthcoming](#)), which I discovered only after writing this section.

Since the complement clause of the indirect report can express only a single proposition, the truth of (c) indicates that one and the same proposition was expressed by the two distinct utterances of ‘John is ready’.¹⁵

C&L conclude that the semantic content of every utterance of ‘John is ready’ is the *proposition* that John is ready; this is the content shared by all utterances of this sentence in whatever contexts. Thus, they have a strong response to the issue of the utility of their semantic content: it has a *unique cognitive role* since it is the content the speaker can expect the audience to grasp (and expect the audience to expect the speaker to expect them to grasp) even if they have mistaken or incomplete communication-relevant information. As C&L put it: “... the proposition semantically expressed is our minimal defense against confusion, misunderstanding, mistakes and it is that which guarantees communication across contexts of utterance” (C&L 2005a, p. 185). The basic idea is that semantic content provides us with a reliable shared fallback, a default content—when all else fails and we are floundering in a sea of incomprehension, we can at least retreat to the one available solid anchor, the semantic content of the sentence, that much we can be sure of. Well, of course, the same can be said of LEM and could be said of Bach’s ‘what is said’, if there were any such entity. All three positions appear to be offering a stable semantic fallback. Still, on the face of it, there is reason to favour C&L’s semantic content over the other two since theirs is the most fleshed out, and surely the more substantial our shared content is the better, the more there is to shore us up against mistakes, misunderstanding and confusion.

There are two parts to my response to these claims: (a) Cappelen and Lepore’s minimal semantic content is *not* generally shared across occurrences of a sentence in no matter what contexts of utterance, and (b) Even if it were common across all contexts, it would not provide the right kind of shared content for most of the purposes to which they (and indeed all of us) would want to put such a notion.

Starting with the first part, as any half awake reader will already have spotted, a semantic content which is sensitive to speaker’s communicative intentions, hence is partially pragmatic, as C&L’s avowedly is, cannot be shared across contexts. Looking back at Nina’s utterances in (13) and changing ‘John’ to ‘he’ makes this very obvious (so the sentence she utters is ‘he is ready’), since then determining what proposition is expressed clearly depends on recognising who the speaker intends to refer to in using the pronoun, there being an indefinite number of possibilities across contexts.¹⁶ At the beginning of the book, when introducing their minimalist semantics, C&L acknowledge this (though only ever in a bracketed aside as if it didn’t matter much): “The semantic content of a sentence S is the proposition that all utterances of S express (when we adjust for or keep stable the semantic values [*established pragmatically* (RC)] of the obvious context sensitive expressions in S)” (C&L 2005a, pp. 2–3), but later on in the book when the discussion focuses on the main virtue of the account (the provision of a notion of shared content) it isn’t mentioned. We are apparently required to abstract away from (i.e. forget about) what, by their own admission, are aspects

¹⁵ The truth of these ‘inter-textual’ disquotational indirect reports is used by C&L as strong evidence against (contextualist) views according to which the proposition semantically expressed by Nina’s two utterances of ‘John is ready’ are different (JOHN IS READY FOR THE EXAM; JOHN IS READY TO LEAVE FOR THE AIRPORT). According to C&L (2005a, p. 91), if this were the case, it would entail that the report in (c) should be impossible since the complement clause of the report cannot express two distinct propositions simultaneously.

¹⁶ This is, of course, also the case (on a slightly lesser scale) for proper names, though their indexicality is less blatant than that of pronouns, especially in the context of disquotational reports (for discussion of the indexicality of names, see Recanati 1993, chapters 8 and 9). (Szabo, 2006, p. 36) shows that proper names pass all the tests that C&L (2005a) provide for demonstrating that a linguistic element is genuinely context-sensitive and so should be added to the Basic Set of indexicals (which is thereby much expanded).

of semantic content that are unstable across contexts. But what this amounts to, in the context of a discussion of shared content, is pretending that elements of semantic content are shared which are not¹⁷ (or, if, in some particular instance, they are, it is only by dint of a successful exercise of the participants' pragmatic capacities).

Now let's briefly consider the phenomenon of homonymy, lexical or phrasal forms which have two or more quite distinct meanings in the language. C&L's characterisation of semantic content, given above, entails that, for each distinct meaning of a homonymous form, there is a distinct semantic content. This presents no problem if our task is to individuate semantic contents for some formal purpose (e.g. to investigate the logical properties of different contents—see footnote 8). However, it has implications for C&L's claims about the shared nature of their semantic content across different communicative situations and, in particular, its role as a stable fallback content. As with the fixing of values of indexicals in the process of utterance comprehension, disambiguation (or sense selection) is dependent on considerations of the speaker's communicative intentions, hence on wide context, so presents yet another respect in which C&L's semantic contents, construed as playing the role of 'guarantee[ing] communication across contexts of utterance' (C&L 2005a, p. 185), are in fact not stable across contexts. Consider the utterance in (14a), from a notorious case in the history of British criminal (in)justice:

- (14) (a) Derek Bentley: 'Let him have it, Chris.'
- (b) DB told Chris to let the policeman have the gun.
- (c) DB told Chris to shoot the policeman.
- (d) DB told Chris to let him have it.

The ambiguity centres on the phrase 'let X have it', which has the two distinct semantic contents reflected in the reports in (14b) and (14c). Note first that we would probably judge the (disquotational) report in (14d) to be true (that is indeed what Derek Bentley said)¹⁸ although the complement clause remains ambiguous (hence arguably does not express any single proposition)—I return to this concern later. The point I want to make here, though, concerns the debate that continues to surround Derek Bentley's utterance, made in 1952; the debate is not so much about the rights and wrongs of what he said, the justice or injustice of its terrible consequences, but rather about what proposition he in fact expressed, what the semantic content, in C&L's sense, of his utterance was: did he urge his accomplice to kill the policeman (as the prosecution alleged) or to hand over his weapon (as his defence lawyer claimed)? This issue has not been resolved and, if it ever is, it will be through a thorough investigation of the context of his utterance and the state of mind of the man himself (what did he intend?). Quite demonstrably, the only solid shared fallback content here is the disjunction of possible meanings of the phrase; in other words, its linguistically encoded meaning(s).

What this discussion of indexicals and homonymy shows, then, is that those components of C&L's semantic content which make it a more substantial and more definitive entity than

¹⁷ This point is a particular version of Francois Recanati's more general assessment of accounts which include in their semantic content aspects of pragmatic interpretation, reliant on considerations of wide context: 'Formally that is fine, but philosophically it is clear that one is cheating' (Recanati 2001b, p. 86; 2004a, pp. 67–68). While C&L (2005a, pp. 148–149) airily dismiss this charge, it seems to me to be absolutely right—it is cheating, both philosophically and psychologically, to pretend that a semantic content which is dependent on speaker intentions is constant across contexts. In fact, Bar-Hillel (1954) made all this very clear quite some time ago.

¹⁸ Some campaigners seeking a pardon for Bentley claim that he never uttered the phrase at all (as he himself also insisted). Hugely important as this is for his case, it is irrelevant to the semantic issues discussed here.

LEM are just those components that a contextually disoriented addressee (or reporter) cannot turn to for semantic security, precisely because they are *not* shared across distinct contexts.

A further question about C&L's (allegedly shared) semantic content has been raised by Stanley (2005) and that is the issue of how the proposition semantically expressed is to be delineated in given cases and, following from this, why it has to be a proposition at all (even setting aside the matter of the context-variable content of elements of the Basic Set). Note that the concern here is not with examples like those in (11a)–(11c), which seem to many people to be semantically incomplete (non-propositional). C&L (2005a, chapter 11) argue at some length against there being any semantic basis to these intuitions and in support of the position that there is a property encoded by each of the unaugmented phrases 'be ready', 'be too tall' and 'have enough', such that when predicated of a specific referent the result is a proposition. For all I know, this may be true (like C&L, I leave this to the metaphysicians). The question here, rather, concerns what *kind* of entity the common content of all occurrences of a given sentence *S* is supposed to be. Stanley wonders if it is meant to be the content that all *assertions* of *S* express, no matter how different their context of utterance, and concludes that it cannot be that since, in a number of cases, there just isn't any one proposition that is asserted in all contexts of utterance of a particular sentence. Consider the sentences in (15):

- (15) a. Every bottle is in the fridge.
- b. It isn't raining.

Particular assertions of (15a) express distinct propositions since the domain of the quantifier varies across contexts just as much as the value of overt indexicals (EVERY BOTTLE FOR THE PARTY IS IN THE FRIDGE; EVERY BOTTLE MARY BOUGHT YESTERDAY IS IN THE FRIDGE, etc.), and any attempt to extract a common proposition by providing a default general domain results in a proposition that is never asserted (e.g. EVERY BOTTLE IN THE UNIVERSE IS IN THE FRIDGE). In the case of (15b), if there is a semantic proposition (and note that, on this view, it is not the proposition that it is not raining *somewhere*, but rather the proposition that it is not raining *punkt* (whatever that may mean)), it would seem to be inevitably false and would seldom, if ever, fall within the speech act content of an utterance of the sentence. C&L (forthcoming) acknowledge that their semantic proposition is often not endorsed by the speaker, but then, as Stanley (2005, p.6) says:

"If the common content of all utterances of a certain sentence is not the content of any genuine speech act, what is the motivation for thinking that common contents are always genuine propositions, rather than just Recanati's 'semantic schemata'?¹⁹ ... Once one sees that the common minimal contents are not the things claimed, asserted, questioned, or investigated, there is little motivation for believing them always to be propositions."²⁰

Recall the weight given by C&L to disquotational indirect reports, such as those in (13) above, in furnishing evidence for the propositionality of their minimal shared semantic content (see also footnote 15). In a recent paper, Daniel Wedgwood points out that it is not at all clear that this kind of indirect report (specifically *disquotational*) is as distinct from direct

¹⁹ Stanley's reference here is to Recanati (2004a, p.56) and the 'semantic schemata' referred to are none other than instances of what I have been calling LEM. For further discussion, see also Recanati (2004b).

²⁰ Why, then, do C&L continue to insist on the *propositionality* of semantic contents? The only answer I can think of to this question is that their thinking rests on a (widespread) presupposition or prejudice that the semantics of natural language sentences must be truth-conditional.

reports as it needs to be in order to provide the clear interpretive consequences that C&L are looking for. Consider one of [Wedgwood's \(2007\)](#) examples:

- (16) Context 1: Nina utters ‘Sam went to the bank’ thereby semantically expressing (and probably communicating) that Sam went to a particular financial institution.

Context 2: Nina utters ‘Sam went to the bank’ thereby semantically expressing (and probably communicating) that Sam went to a particular river side.

According to C&L's characterisation of semantic contents, Nina's two utterances have distinct (propositional) semantic contents. However, a single inter-contextual disquotational indirect report of these two utterances, along the lines in (16'), seems to be true:

- (16') In both C1 and C2, Nina said that Sam went to the bank.

At this point, it's worth looking more closely at what Cappelen and Lepore say when discussing the multi-contextual report of Nina's two utterances of ‘John is ready’ in (13c), repeated here:

- (13) c. In both C1 and C2, Nina said that John is ready.

They say: “If [13c] is true, then both the imagined utterances of [‘John is ready’] said (or expressed) the proposition expressed by [‘John is ready’] *as it occurs in the complement clause of that report*.” (C&L 2005a, p. 91; my emphasis). The question is how does it manifest itself in the complement clause, and can we tell just by looking at it? The example in (16') (and the one in (14d)) shows that the answer is not obvious at all; it seems that we can carry out the disquotation exercise in the more or less algorithmic fashion C&L advocate (2005a, p. 88), get a clear judgement that the report is true, but be quite certain on other grounds that we are not dealing with a single proposition.

Now let's consider a different kind of example. Suppose Nina utters the quasi-linguistic string in (17a), and someone else reports her utterance as in (17b):

- (17) a. The borogoves were mimsy.
b. Nina said that the borogoves were mimsy.

Although, in contemplating (17a), we don't grasp a proposition (there is presumably none to be grasped) we may well judge the report in (17b) as true (according to my intuitions at least, it is an accurate report).

The upshot of these various considerations is that C&L's test delivers a positive result for three distinct sorts of case: those where the reported utterances do express one and the same proposition, those where they express distinct propositions, and those where no proposition is expressed at all. It seems, then, that all we can say with any certainty about the complement clause following ‘said that’ is that it must be a sentence in the *syntactic sense*, that is, an expression with a certain structure/form; it may, but crucially need not, be a sentence in the semantic sense, that is, a sentence which expresses a proposition (modulo the fixing of indexical values) (see [Stainton \(2000\)](#) on different senses of ‘sentence’). Therefore, the truth of disquotational reports such as (13c) does not, after all, provide C&L with the evidence they seek in support of their proposal that the semantic content of contentious cases such as ‘John is ready’, ‘She's had enough’, etc. is both propositional and shared across contexts.

In the preceding paragraphs, I've been concerned to make two points clear: (a) that a number of elements of C&L's semantic content vary across contexts so it is not content shared by all utterances of a particular sentence, and (b) that there is no obvious basis for their

claim that semantic content is propositional or for any requirement that it should be. Both of these observations point rather directly to the right conception of a cross-contextually stable (non-propositional) semantic content—namely, linguistically encoded meaning (LEM, or semantic character, or formality-based signification). It is LEM and only LEM that has the characteristics we want in a sentence semantics, as specified by C&L themselves: “It is the content that all utterances of a sentence *S* express no matter how different their contexts of utterance are. It is also the content that can be grasped and reported by someone who is ignorant about the relevant characteristics of the context in which an utterance of *S* took place” (C&L 2005a, p. 143).²¹ It seems that, once again then, the semantics/pragmatics distinction as drawn in (1) is vindicated.

I move now to the second (and briefer) part of my response to C&L, which is that, even if their semantic content were shared across all contexts, it would not be the right kind of shared content to serve most of the functions that they explicitly require from a notion of shared content. As a reminder of what some of these are, I paraphrase the earlier quote from C&L (2005a, p. 152): it is content that can be claimed, asserted, questioned, investigated, debated, agreed or disagreed with, etc. by speakers/addressees in radically different contexts. However, as discussed above with regard to the examples in (15), it turns out that many instances of semantic content are not the content of genuine speech acts at all, that is, not the kind of content that is asserted or questioned, not the subject of (dis)agreement or debate. Consider a fragment of a conversation in which it is questioned and debated whether or not John is ready:

- (18) A: We need to leave soon. Is John ready?
 B: No, he isn't ready. He hasn't even finished packing his bags.
 C: That's no reason for believing that he isn't ready. He may not be ready to leave for the airport, but still he is bound to be in a state of readiness (for something), perhaps he's ready to finish his packing, perhaps to start thinking about his holiday, or to have breakfast, I bet he is ready.

A and B are having a real discussion about whether John is ready or not, where the content at issue is the proposition that he is ready to leave for the airport, a shared content achieved partly semantically, partly pragmatically. C changes the terms of the discussion totally, not engaging with the issue at hand (or with any other live issue for that matter), an issue which matters in the situation and whose content can be questioned, asserted and debated. C's contribution is irrelevant, a pointless game which he cannot but win; the proposition (if it is one) that he is playing with is not one which anyone would need or want to dispute or confirm. So, even supposing that the semantic content of the sentence 'John is ready' is a cross-contextually shared content of the sort C&L favour, it isn't the right kind of content to enter into the many human activities which require the participants to all be talking 'about the same thing' or at least to believe that they are. The same applies, of course, to LEM and any other kind of content which isn't speaker meant, isn't the content of a genuine speech act.

The roles or functions of shared content that C&L (2005a) mention seem to split into two distinct kinds, which are, in my view, of quite different orders: (a) the role of providing an

²¹ Coming from a rather different direction and with other priorities, Borg (forthcoming) also argues that C&L's minimalist semantics isn't minimal enough. Her eschewal of individual speaker intentions as having any bearing on semantic content might also seem to point towards LEM, but her commitment to propositionalism indicates otherwise. As she herself recognises, the big challenge for a minimalist, intention-free, propositional semantics is how to deal with demonstratives and other overt indexicals (and, I would add, ambiguity).

invariant core element of meaning to fall back on when speaker intentions are inscrutable (2005a, p. 185); (b) the role of providing the kind of content which people can assert, question, debate, etc. across contexts (2005a, p. 152). This is very confusing to say the least, since the sort of content that can play the first kind of role cannot play the second, and vice versa. In more recent papers by C&L, the emphasis is on functions of the second kind, whose range and reach they extend even further: “[Speakers] share content when they propose (entertain, discuss, etc.) the same hypothesis, theory, and thought ... when they evaluate whether what each says (thinks, claims, suggests, etc.) is true, false, interesting, obscene, original or offensive” (C&L 2007, p. 1). And, they continue, shared content is crucially implicated in many of our non-linguistic practices, including coordinated actions (e.g. voting, paying our taxes), collective deliberation over a period of time about the truth or falsity of a proposition (e.g. the proposition that Derek Bentley was not guilty of incitement to murder a policeman), acquiring beliefs from testimony, holding people responsible for what they state or request, treating what others say as providing reasons for action (C&L 2007, pp. 9–10).²²

Plainly, such semantic contents as, for instance, JOHN IS READY, STEEL IS STRONG ENOUGH, EVERY BOOK IS ON THE SHELF, IT ISN’T RAINING (taken in the minimal way that C&L require), are simply not the right kind of contents for the jobs mentioned (any more than LEM is).²³ The kind of content required is something much more full-bodied, akin to pragmatically imbued primary speaker meaning (or explicature) as discussed in Sect. 2.1 above. Recall example (6), repeated here, with the interpretation in (7):

- (6) Bob: How is Jane feeling after her first year at university?
Sue: She didn’t get enough units and can’t continue.
- (7) a. [JANE_i DIDN’T PASS ENOUGH UNIVERSITY COURSE UNITS TO QUALIFY FOR ADMISSION TO SECOND YEAR STUDY]_P & AS A RESULT OF P JANE_i CANNOT CONTINUE WITH UNIVERSITY STUDY.
b. JANE_i IS NOT FEELING HAPPY

Anyone questioning Sue (e.g. ‘Are you sure she can’t continue?’), agreeing or disagreeing with her (e.g. ‘That’s not right. She did get enough units’), acting on what she said, etc. would be addressing the content of the primary proposition that Sue communicated (meant), that is (7a), not the minimal semantic content of her utterance.²⁴

²² C&L (2007) is a sustained attack on Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95; Carston 2002) as being inherently incapable of accounting for how any of this is possible, indeed unable to provide any account of shared content at all. In a solid defence of RT, Wedgwood (2007) exposes numerous mistakes in C&L’s understanding of the theory, argues that there is a ‘fundamental problem of internal incoherence’ in their own use of the term ‘content’, and points out that they themselves have no account of the kind of shared content at issue here.

²³ In some of C&L’s passages on what I’m calling the second kind of function of shared content it might be possible to read them as simply making the claim that a minimal invariant semantic core plays a crucial enabling role in arriving at the operative kind of shared content. This would be an entirely reasonable claim (though it applies to LEM rather than their context-variable semantics). However, the only way to make a modicum of sense of the attack on Relevance Theory in the 2007 paper is to take it that they are concerned with the much richer kind of shared content since, throughout that paper, they concentrate their fire on the pragmatic aspects of the RT story, which do not always lead to perfect replication of the speaker’s thought in the mind of the hearer, thus, according to C&L, failing to account for how shared content is possible.

²⁴ In fact, it is by no means out of the question that an implicature (secondary speaker meaning) might sometimes be a content that is questioned or (dis)agreed with and so is shared, at least among specific speakers and hearers (see Wedgwood 2007). However, as Grice pointed out, a frequent characteristic of implicatures is a degree of indeterminacy, so it seems likely that sharedness may be less often assumed for implicatures than it is for explicatures.

So there are two quite distinct kinds of shared content, each with its own part to play in our communicative interactions: (a) linguistically encoded meaning (which is “our minimal defense against confusion, misunderstanding, mistakes, etc.”), and (b) that propositional content which we sometimes (quite often in fact) succeed in communicating and which we may concur with, argue about, assess the truth of, the interestingness of, the originality of, etc. Unfortunately for C&L, their conception of semantic content falls between both stools: it’s not minimal enough to serve the first purpose (of an invariant fallback) and it’s too minimal to serve the second set of functions. Sharing of the first kind of content simply follows from having a common language (which is a fairly fixed mapping of bits of sound to bits of meaning). In order to account for how we can share the second, much richer, kind of content (in fact, also how we could share C&L’s speaker-intention-sensitive ‘semantic’ content, if it had any psychological reality), we need a pragmatic theory that explains the psychological processes that enable speakers and hearers often enough to converge on that content. This is what the relevance-theoretic account (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95; Carston 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2004) aims to provide (the extent to which it succeeds is, of course, another matter). C&L, on the other hand, don’t make any attempt to come to grips with the question of how shared content of the second sort is possible (beyond making the obvious point that shared content of the first sort is an important enabling component). In fact, along with quite a few other people, they think it’s not amenable to any sort of “serious, or rigorous theorizing” (C&L 2005a, p. 146), hence that “there can be no *systematic theory* of speech act content” (C&L 2005a, p. 190; their emphasis).

To conclude this section, the arguments here against the utility of C&L’s partially pragmatic conception of semantic content lead to a reassertion of the validity of both distinction (1), the only one that draws a semantics/pragmatics distinction which preserves semantics as stable, autonomous, uninfected by variable speaker intentions, and distinction (5), which distinguishes a speaker’s primary meaning (what she asserted) from her secondary meaning (what she implicated). Both emerge from this discussion as worthwhile distinctions that do their fair share of the work involved in our linguistic interactions, including providing us with the two needed notions of shared content.

Assuming from this point on that the right way to draw the semantics/pragmatics distinction is as in (1), in the next section I look briefly at how what many consider to be the subject matter of semantics—namely, truth conditions—is altered, undermined even, when it is pressed into the service of linguistic communication.

3 Pragmatics, semantics and the medium of language

3.1 Pragmatics without semantics and semantics without pragmatics

Most philosophers of language and linguists interested in semantics and pragmatics start with semantics, establish a position on what that is, then subtract it from the full communicated content of an utterance, and take what is left to be the domain of pragmatics. I’d like to start here by looking at the situation the other way round, by first contemplating pragmatics without semantics. Let’s consider cases of non-verbal communication for a moment, where by ‘communication’ I mean the fully overt sort, in which the communicator intentionally makes his or her informative intention mutually manifest.

Consider the following scenario: two friends, Sue and Bob, are in a bar, Sue is on the other side of the room near the drinks counter, she makes eye contact with Bob, who raises his empty beer glass so it is prominent within Sue’s field of vision, and waves it about a bit;

their eye gaze moves rapidly from each other's eyes to the glass and back again, establishing a situation of joint attention (a key component of ostensive communication—for useful discussion, see [Eilan 2005](#)). The upshot is that Sue takes Bob to have requested her to get him another beer. No words have been spoken, and, although the waving of an empty beer mug may often be used to indicate a desire for a refill, this is not a coded meaning but is derived through a bit of probabilistic reasoning based on general knowledge. So, given the absence of language and of any other code, there is no semantic component involved in the interpretation process. Sue's understanding of Bob's ostensive gestures, her recognition of his communicative intention and of its content, is achieved through pragmatics alone.

Suppose we now add a bit of language into the communicative act, say, a single word or noun phrase: 'Please!', or 'Beer!', or 'Another pint', etc., then we'll have a small element of semantics (a subpropositional concept) constraining the interpretation, but, of course, drastically underdetermining the intended message. Nobody would deny the hugely enabling nature of this kind of communicative tool, but it's also widely agreed that even full sentences seldom, if ever, fully encode a speaker's meaning, so pragmatics remains essential. As Stephen Neale puts it: "What is special about linguistic communication is that a pragmatic theory is *aided* by a semantic theory" ([Neale 2003](#), p. 18; my emphasis). Humans employ other kinds of code-like signs in their communicative acts, for instance, certain so-called 'paralinguistic' phenomena, including intonation, some conventionalised hand and face gestures, and certain 'natural' behaviours, which have a signalling function, like smiles, frowns, cries ([Wharton 2003](#)). These too, presumably, have a semantics of some sort (though there has been little progress so far in analysing it), so when employed in communication they, like linguistic expressions and together with them, provide important clues or evidence which constrain the pragmatic process of deriving the communicator's meaning.

Pragmatics is, in essence, the reasoning involved in interpreting a particular kind of intentional human behaviour, namely ostensive communicative behaviour. As Grice maintained, it is not fundamentally different from other kinds of 'theory-of-mind' reasoning which result in the attribution of an intention to an agent, although it is directed by presumptions or expectations of relevance (or informativeness) that are not prompted by purposive human behaviour generally. One special feature of this kind of communicative behaviour is its capacity to deploy codes of various sorts, including, crucially, linguistic codes, but this is not essential. Interpretation may be entirely a matter of pragmatics and, if Dan Sperber's evolutionary arguments are right, it was only once the species had a functioning pragmatic capacity in place (a capacity to engage in ostensive communicative behaviour) that the social environmental conditions were conducive to the evolution of linguistic systems of the sort we employ today (see [Sperber 2000](#)).

Now, let's think about semantics without pragmatics, the appropriate domain for this being thought. Unlike natural language sentences and phrases, employed in acts of ostensive communication, it seems reasonable to assume that the mental representations that comprise thoughts are (by and large) semantically complete, that is, propositional, hence evaluable as true or false of the states of affairs they represent. It doesn't make any sense to distinguish between a *minimal* and a *pragmatically completed or enriched* proposition with regard to a thought (as opposed to a verbal utterance), since, for any case of differences in propositional form we simply have different thoughts. Jerry Fodor puts this in an especially strong way: "Whereas the content of a sentence may be [and often is] inexplicit with respect to the content of the thought it expresses, a thought can't be inexplicit with respect to its own content; there can't be more—or less—to a thought than there is to its content because a thought just *is* its content" ([Fodor 2001](#), p. 14). Having a thought is a strikingly different kind of mental activity from comprehending an utterance: we do not have to undergo a process of comprehending

occurrences (tokenings) of our own thoughts; we may go on to derive implications (further thoughts) from a thought, but grasping the thought itself does not go beyond the occurrence of it (compare this with deriving the explicature of Sue's utterance in (6) above). To state the obvious: a thought token is not an ostensive stimulus, its occurrence is not a communicative act, thus it comes with no presumption of relevance or informativeness (or cooperativeness) which shapes our grasp of the thought or our subsequent processing of it. In short, there is no 'pragmatics of thought' (see [Butler 1995](#); [Carston 2002](#), pp. 74–83).²⁵

Looked at in this way, semantics IS fundamentally concerned with truth conditions (the meaning of a thought is those worldly conditions which would make it true), while pragmatics is fundamentally concerned with recovering the thoughts communicators intend to convey by their ostensive acts. It is only with the entry of public codes, primarily linguistic codes, into the story that the issue of a semantics/pragmatics distinction arises, the semantics part being an inheritance from the semantics of the mental representation (or concept) that the linguistic form encodes (see [Fodor 1998](#), p. 9). Given the pragmatic capacity as described above, there is no need for linguistic expressions that fully encode thoughts, hence their 'semantics' is often less than fully truth-conditional and virtually always falls short of the content the communicator intended. The point could be pressed further by the claim that it is in the very nature of such *public and shared* representation systems as languages that they *cannot* encode the vast majority of our thoughts, but I won't try to argue that here (see [Carston 2002](#), pp. 28–42). So, while a shift from thoughts to verbal utterances brings a shift in the use of 'semantics', it is one that is entirely motivated by the different natures of the two domains.

The pursuers of ideal languages, sets of eternal sentences (hence with determinate, context-invariant truth conditions), in which to formulate scientific truths and explicate logically valid inferences, were attempting to find a *pragmatics-free* mode of public expression. To the extent that it worked, it had nothing to do with natural human communication, and to the extent that it failed (due to the inevitable ambiguity and indexicality of any public representation system), it reflected a fundamental fact about the relation between human thoughts and human linguistic expressions, which is that the latter virtually always underdetermine the former.

3.2 Some peculiarities of linguistic semantics due to its role in communication

There are some lexical and grammatical forms in natural languages that are often claimed to be intrinsically pragmatic and to belong to a special 'pragmatic component' of the grammar. If this were right, it might be problematic for the conception of linguistic semantics that I've been advocating—that is, LEM—in that semantics would again, as with all the other distinctions discussed in this paper, be partially pragmatic (though for a different reason than the other cases of pragmatic intrusion I've discussed). I'm thinking here of syntactic structures,

²⁵ Two points to note here. First, the issue of mental indexicals (whose existence it seems reasonable to assume) is orthogonal to the point being made here. The indexicality of thought works very differently from the indexicality of a representational system for communication (see [Recanati 1993](#), chapters 6 and 7)—for one thing, when a thinker tokens a mental indexical, she does not then (in most instances at least) have to undertake a search for its referent. Second, the position I am taking here seems to be, in some respects at least, at odds with a view that is currently gathering pace, according to which the truth of representations (in thought as well as language) is relativized to (unrepresented) situations, so that the content of thought representations may be as minimal as that of natural language sentences, hence equally underdetermining of the truth conditions of any particular tokening of the representation (e.g. [Corazza and Dokic forthcoming](#); [MacFarlane 2005, forthcoming](#)). Proper assessment of this view is called for, but is way beyond my scope here.

such as those in (19b)–(19d), which are truth-conditionally equivalent to the canonical declarative structure in (19a), and of lexical items such as those italicised in (20) which, or so it has been argued by many, also do not affect truth-conditional content.

- (19) a. Mary kissed John in the orchard.
- b. It's John that Mary kissed in the orchard.
- c. John was kissed by Mary in the orchard.
- d. In the orchard Mary kissed John.
- (20) a. Mary kissed John.
- b. However, Mary kissed John.
- c. Mary kissed John, after all.
- d. Anyway, Mary kissed John.

Whatever the details of a correct analysis of particular cases, what seems pretty clear about all of these is that they are communication-oriented: the 'cleft structure' in (19b) is appropriate in contexts in which (19a) may not be—for instance, where it's known that Mary kissed someone and the issue is who it was; in (20b), the adverbial 'however' indicates (to the addressee) a particular inferential connection between the proposition expressed by the sentence that follows it and the content of previous utterances or salient contextual assumptions, while (20c) and (20d) indicate different such connections and (20a) is neutral in this regard (for detailed analyses, see [Blakemore 1987, 2002](#)). Given the view of semantics as fundamentally a matter of truth-conditional specification, that is, as concerned with the relation between representations and their referential content, these formal elements might seem to belong with pragmatics rather than semantics (they are concerned with the communicative process rather than with the content of the communicative act). But this, again, would amount to a failure to take account of the consequences of the transfer of semantics from the domain of thought to the domain of linguistic forms and to make the adjustments that are required due to the radically different nature of thoughts and linguistic utterances.

The thinker having her private thoughts is self-directed, able (to some extent at least) to choose what she thinks about, what line of thought to pursue; her thoughts have a certain (truth-conditional) content and she does not (cannot) re-encode her mental representations so as to somehow make that content more comprehensible to herself. The communicator, on the other hand, is other-oriented, intent on getting her addressee to entertain certain thoughts, and reliant for this on an interaction of his pragmatic capacities with whatever elements of code she presents him with. Given the overt request/demand for attention and inferential effort that a speaker imposes on her addressee, she needs to choose appropriately from the range of devices at her disposal, ensuring that the addressee is not put to unnecessary effort or sent down a wrong processing track (see [Wilson and Sperber 2004](#)). Given the enormous potential for misinterpretation, it's hardly surprising that, within all naturally arising linguistic systems, there have developed formal elements whose encoded meaning provides explicit guidance to an addressee on what to do with the conceptual content encoded in uttered sentences, how to contextualise it, what sort of inferences to derive from it. These formal elements are syntactic structures and lexical items which do not contribute directly to representations of the thoughts communicated (their truth-conditional content) but play a comprehension-facilitating role.

Thus the original notion of semantics (as applied to thought, and perhaps certain artificial languages), concerning a relation between representations and states of affairs, is inevitably altered when it is applied to natural languages. Semantics understood as linguistically encoded meaning (LEM, or semantic character, or formal signification) cannot but part company from semantics understood as devoted to truth-conditional content. It's in the nature of a public

representation system, which is subject to communicative, hence coordinative, exigencies, which are absent from thought, to develop meaning conventions concerning communicative use in addition to those concerning conceptual content.

4 Concluding remarks: no semantics/pragmatics distinction?

In the bulk of this paper I have been arguing for the coherence and utility of one particular construal of the semantics/pragmatics distinction. However, in the previous section, I showed how the dominant view of semantics as dealing in truth conditions, while appropriate for thought, is largely eroded when it is applied to natural language representations, which suggests that perhaps we should think again about construing the distinction at issue as a *semantics/pragmatics* distinction. The distinction itself remains intact, of course, and it is a distinction that matters—between different kinds of information involved in linguistic communication, different kinds of mental process, probably different cognitive systems, and calling for different kinds of theorising (the one having an encapsulated/algorithmic/deductive structure, the other unencapsulated, nondeterministic, and probably unformalisable).

The suggestion, which I can't argue for in any detail here, is that maybe 'semantics' should be dropped altogether from the domain of natural language sentences, and confined to the truth-based relation between thoughts and world (a position advocated by Fodor 1989, pp. 418–419). Naturally, the propositional contents of utterances (explicatures and implicatures), the thoughts the speaker communicates by uttering a particular linguistic expression, would fall in the domain of this semantics. According to the view of *linguistic* 'semantics' I've been pushing (LEM) and related views, such as those of Recanati and Bach, sentences encode incomplete gappy meaning structures (semantic schemata or templates, propositional radicals or matrices).²⁶ It seems that these *can* be given a semantic interpretation: Peter Pagin, who has essentially the same view of the semantics/pragmatics distinction as the one I've been advocating in this paper, sets out a systematic denotational semantics for a subset of context-sensitive natural language sentences (Pagin 2005). This is impressive, but what's less clear to me is what the point of the exercise is, how it bears on the practices of linguistic communication and understanding within which the distinction arises.

What LEM must be in order to play its crucial role as input to, constraint on, pragmatic interpretation is some kind of mental representation, conceptual and/or procedural, capable of interacting with those representations of background knowledge (wide context) the addressee brings to bear on the comprehension process. The results of interpretation, representations of the thoughts/the meaning that the speaker intended, have a semantic interpretation (refer to objects in the world, are true or false), but the likelihood or utility of an earlier stage of semantic interpretation of *sentences* is a lot less obvious. Chomsky (1995, 1996) has suggested that there is little basis for a reference-based semantics of linguistic expressions and that natural language probably has only syntax and pragmatics. On this view, LEM is simply the ultimate representational output of the language faculty or grammar, a structured string of

²⁶ One can, of course, always turn these into something which is technically propositional by resorting to Perry's 'reflexive proposition', or utterance-bound truth conditions (see Perry 2003; Korta and Perry forthcoming) but, as everyone acknowledges, this is quite distinct from referential content and, as Recanati (2006) says: '[...] propositionality in this sense is trivial. Even an utterance of a sentence in a language one does not understand determines a reflexive proposition ...'. Furthermore, even if we decided that, for certain purposes, it is useful to propositionalize linguistically encoded meaning in this way, a sizable subset of linguistic expressions would be left out of the account, since, as discussed in Sect. 3.2, there are words and structures which do not encode anything that has an intrinsic role in delivering content, but function more like pragmatic processing prompts.

symbols, which plays an important part in a theory of understanding. Building on Chomsky's conception of linguistic meaning, Pietroski (2005) argues that the relation between meaning and truth is a lot looser than has been standardly assumed and, in support of this contention, he develops the radical position that the meaning encoded by a natural language expression is best thought of as an instruction for creating a concept from available mental resources (thus any relation between encoded meanings and objects in the world is very indirect).

Although, clearly, a great deal more careful thinking about these issues is needed, it may be that the only 'semantics'/pragmatics distinction that works is really a syntax/pragmatics distinction.

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