

Sensitivity Training

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The main thesis of *Insensitive Semantics* is that all context sensitivity can be traced to a handful of expressions. In English, these are the personal and demonstrative pronouns, a few adverbs (e.g. ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘now’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘ago’), and a few adjectives (‘actual’ and ‘present’). The list is essentially Kaplan’s, who calls these expressions *indexicals*.¹ Cappelen and Lepore are not dogmatic about the length of the list: they mention that “words and aspects of words that indicate tense”² also belong on it, and they remain officially non-committal about more than a dozen other words, including the verb ‘say’.³ They hold that an expression is context sensitive just in case it is identical to, or contains as a morpho-syntactic part, one of these items. When this thesis is combined with the claim that the semantic content of a contextually insensitive sentence is a proposition expressed by every utterance of that sentence, we get the doctrine of *semantic minimalism*.

Semantic minimalism is a bold view. Not only do Cappelen and Lepore reject context sensitivity for controversial cases (such as ‘red’ or ‘know’); they are committed to its absence even in textbook cases (such as comparative adjectives and quantifier phrases.) To compensate for the consequences of this radical doctrine, Cappelen and Lepore embrace another they call *speech act pluralism*. According to speech act pluralism, utterances of sentences express infinitely many propositions, most of which are irrelevant in the particular context in which the utterance is reported. Speech act pluralism allows semantic minimalists to admit that I can speak truthfully when uttering ‘Hungary is flat’ while mountain climbing in Switzerland and falsely when uttering the same sentence while biking in Holland.⁴ In the first case, what I have said is that Hungary is flat compared to Switzerland; in the second, that Hungary is flat compared to Holland. These expanded propositions are the ones that underlie our truth-value judgments about the speech acts. But they are not the propositions semantically expressed: the semantic content of both utterances is just the proposition that Hungary is flat.

While I disagree with a great deal in *Insensitive Semantics*, in an important respect I wholeheartedly endorse the outlook of its authors. I share their concern that appeals to context sensitivity have become “cheap” – the twenty-first century version of ordinary language philosophy’s rampant postulations of ambiguity. Not only is this “the lazy man’s approach to philosophy,”⁵ it undermines systematic theorizing about language. The more we believe context can influence semantic content, the more we will find ourselves at a loss when it comes to explaining how ordinary communication (let alone the transmission of knowledge through written texts) is possible.⁶ Radical

¹ Kaplan (1989): 489.

² Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 144.

³ Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 1, 200.

⁴ Whether Cappelen and Lepore *would* in fact say this is unclear; cf. Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 99. I am only pointing out that semantic minimalists *could* say this. (And I think they probably *should*.)

⁵ Saul Kripke has the copyright on this phrase; cf. Kripke (1977).

⁶ See the arguments in chapter 8 of Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

contextualism – the doctrine that all sentences are context sensitive – is a deeply unappealing view.

At the same time, I have reservations about speech act pluralism, and – more importantly – about semantic minimalism. In particular, I disagree with the authors that all context sensitivity can be traced to one of Kaplan’s indexicals. This is not due to some hidden philosophical agenda: I don’t think the problems of skepticism or free will would go away if ‘know’ or ‘can’ turned out to be context sensitive; I don’t think philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. Rather, I am what Cappelen and Lepore so helpfully and generously call a *misguided semanticist*:⁷ someone who is reluctantly pulled towards accepting more than minimal context sensitivity by what he sees as *bona fide* linguistic evidence. I hold, for example, that context selects domains for quantification, which is why

(1) Everyone passed the exam

can semantically express different propositions in different contexts.⁸ For those who doubt this, I would sketch a *context shifting argument*. For example, I might describe two contexts: in the first, Ms. Maple utters this sentence in her class where each of the students passed the exam; in the second, Mr. Oak utters the same sentence in his class where half of the students failed. Then I would try to elicit the intuition that Ms. Maple’s assertion is true and Mr. Oak’s false. From this, I would move straight to the conclusion that (1) is context sensitive.

This argument won’t persuade Cappelen and Lepore. They will begin by pointing out that in the last step, I neglected the fact that, as speech act pluralism implies, speech act content and semantic content *can* come apart. So far, the point is well-taken. But Cappelen and Lepore aren’t just committed to the letter of the doctrine; they are committed to the much stronger claim that “there’s no close and immediate connection between semantic content and speech act content.”⁹ This means that acknowledging that Ms. Maple’s and Mr. Oak’s assertions have different contents gives us no serious *prima facie* evidence that the sentence they uttered is context sensitive. And this I find hard to accept.

Consider an analogy. Usually, we know about the colors of objects by knowing what color they look to be. What color an object looks to be depends on the lighting, on the surroundings of the object, the conditions of the perceiving eye, and so on: looks are sensitive to the context of viewing. Some have concluded from this fact that objects don’t really have colors, or that their true colors are unknown to us; others have argued that the

⁷ Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 7.

⁸ Stanley and Szabó (2000). I believe in the context sensitivity of about half of the expressions discussed in detail by Cappelen and Lepore. For example, I doubt that ‘know’ is context sensitive, but I suspect ‘red’ is (cf. Szabó (2001)). And I think ‘everyone’ is a much clearer case than ‘red’.

⁹ Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 58. Cappelen and Lepore identify the thesis that an adequate semantic theory must account for *most* of the intuitions speakers have about speech act content as a central assumption of semantic theorizing they oppose. They then proceed by attacking a “version” of this assumption, according to which if a context shifting argument triggers the intuition that a certain proposition was said by uttering a certain sentence, then an adequate semantics must assign that proposition as the semantic content for that utterance; cf. Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 54. I subscribe to the general assumption but not to the very strong claim Cappelen and Lepore criticize. I suspect that I am not alone.

colors of objects can only be discovered under laboratory conditions, and that the way an object normally looks provides no evidence regarding its true color. But the sensible attitude is surely to regard the color an object looks to be as solid *prima facie* evidence regarding the color it is. And I don't see why our attitude should be any different when it comes to our assessment of semantic content on the basis of speech act content.

Cappelen and Lepore think that if I regard the difference in speech act content between Ms. Maple's and Mr. Oak's assertions as a *prima facie* evidence for a difference in the semantic contents of the sentences they uttered, then I lose all grounds for resisting radical contextualism. They claim that equally good (or, in their view, equally bad) context shifting arguments can be constructed for the following five "arbitrary sentences":

- (2) John went to the gym
- (3) Jill didn't have fish for dinner
- (4) Justine destroyed those shoes
- (5) That's a dangerous dog
- (6) Justine is a philosopher.

The arguments aim to show respectively that in one context (2) semantically expresses the proposition that John went into the gym, and in another that he went near the gym; that in one context (3) semantically expresses the proposition that Jill didn't eat fish for dinner, and in another that she didn't order fish for dinner; that in one context (4) semantically expresses the proposition that Justine made Marie's shoes unsuitable for some ordinary purpose (such as looking good), and in another that she made them unsuitable for something less usual (such as hiking in the jungle); that in one context (5) semantically expresses the proposition that the demonstrated dog is potentially harmful in the usual manner (through biting), and in another that it is potentially harmful in some way or other (including contagion); and that in one context (6) expresses the proposition that Justine is has a contemplative character, and in another that she is a professional philosopher.

Are these really as convincing as the above argument for the context sensitivity of (1)? I don't think so. Three of the five sentences are plainly ambiguous. The English preposition 'to' can mean either *into* or *near to* and in some other languages only the disambiguated forms exist: cf. 'a tornaterembe' and 'a tornateremhez' in Hungarian. The fact that the English verb 'have' can mean *eat* is not something we can predict from its core meaning – the etymologically related 'avere' in Italian has no such meaning. As far as the word 'philosopher' is concerned, even pocket dictionaries distinguish between the two relevant meanings exploited above. While we certainly don't want to postulate ambiguities left and right, it would be a mistake not to postulate them when they are in fact present. Regarding 'dangerous dog', I simply lack Cappelen and Lepore's intuitions: If the sentence is uttered while demonstrating a toothless dog with bubonic plague, the assertion may be misleading but I don't think it is false. That leaves us with (4) as a potential example of a context-sensitive sentence. To destroy something may well be nothing more or less than making it unsuitable for some contextually salient purpose, so – although I have no settled opinion on the matter – I am not opposed to the suggestion that

(4) is context sensitive. But this hardly constitutes a convincing demonstration of a slippery slope towards radical contextualism.

I have similar worries about some of Cappelen and Lepore's other examples as well. Consider (7), adopted by Cappelen and Lepore from Searle and Travis:¹⁰

(7) Smith weighs 80kg.

Suppose the relevant facts are as follows: Smith has been on a diet; when he stepped on the scale this morning naked the scale registered 80kg; he has since eaten an enormous lunch; and he is now wearing a heavy overcoat. In one context, (7) is uttered by Smith's friend who is boasting about his dieting success; in another (7) is uttered as Smith tries to enter an elevator whose maximal capacity allows for 80 additional kilograms. The ordinary intuition is, I concede, that the first assertion is true, while the second is false. But I don't think we should accept these intuitions as a reason for ascribing context sensitivity to (7). First, some of the variance is the result of vagueness, which Cappelen and Lepore explicitly set aside.¹¹ If as the result of a truly enormous lunch Smith had gained an additional 15kg, both utterances would be false. Second, the sentence is generic and hence makes no direct claim about what Smith's weight is at the time of utterance: 'Smith weighs 80kg but since it's just after lunch, right now he weighs slightly more' is not a contradiction. If we replace the original example with

(8) Smith weighs 80kg right now

my intuitions shift: I think an utterance of this sentence would be false in both contexts. And if we change the contexts slightly by eliminating the lunch and postulating that Smith's naked weight is still 80kg, I judge an utterance of (8) to be true in both contexts. It would be undoubtedly misleading, even reckless, to make such an utterance when Smith is about to enter the elevator. But I don't think this is because of the truth-value of the utterance.

Having expressed my reservations about the alleged slide from moderate to radical contextualism, let me move on to the core of my disagreement with *Insensitive Semantics*. Cappelen and Lepore insist that (neglecting tense) there is some proposition that all utterances of 'Bush is ready' express, and that proposition is the semantic content of this sentence. But it is hard to see why a speech act pluralist would deny that there is also some proposition that all utterances of 'I have a headache' express – perhaps the proposition that someone has a headache. Why does this not count as the semantic content of 'I have a headache'? One answer might be that it is just obvious that 'I' is context-sensitive, while it is far from obvious that 'ready' is.¹² But this reasoning doesn't move me: I find it hard to believe that all disagreements about context-sensitivity are due to deliberate blindness to the plain facts of language.¹³ An alternative answer might be

¹⁰ Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 43.

¹¹ Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 42.

¹² Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 112.

¹³ It is not even true that all items on Kaplan's list are *obviously* context-sensitive: presentists (metaphysicians who believe only the present exists) deny the context-sensitivity of 'now'. If there are no distinct times 'now' could pick out then it always refers to the unique time that exists.

that the only words that pass serious tests of context-sensitivity are the ones on Kaplan's list. This would move me if it were true. But I think it is not.

Cappelen and Lepore propose three tests for selecting the real context sensitive expressions from those that are merely apparently so. According to the first, context sensitive expressions block disquotational indirect reports¹⁴ – e.g. if Cappelen uttered 'Lepore was in a café on 5th Street today' I cannot report this tomorrow by uttering 'Cappelen said that Lepore was in a café on 5th Street today'. According to the second, when the same context sensitive expression occurs in different sentences, those sentences cannot in general be conjoined in a way that does not involve repeating the expression¹⁵ – e.g. although in some contexts 'It is awfully cold here' is true and in some contexts 'It is awfully hot here' is true, it does not follow that there is a true utterance of 'It is awfully cold and hot here'. According to the third, if an expression is context sensitive then it occurs in some sentence *S* such that there is (or could be) a false utterance of '*S*' even though *S* – e.g. there is a false utterance of 'I was born in Budapest' even though I was born in Budapest.

Consider the word 'Ernie.' It is not on Kaplan's list – but it passes all three of these tests. If Herman utters 'Ernie lives in New Jersey' in a context where we are discussing the residence habits of the Rutgers philosophy faculty, then I cannot truly report to my son in the context of our conversation about Sesame Street characters: 'Herman said that Ernie lives in New Jersey'. Although 'Ernie lives in New Jersey' is true in the first context and 'Ernie lives on Sesame Street' is true in the second, 'Ernie lives in New Jersey and on Sesame Street' is silly and false in both. And – since I am now in a Leporesque context, I can safely say – there are false utterances of 'Ernie lives in New Jersey' even though Ernie lives in New Jersey. So, contra semantic minimalism, 'Ernie' (and with it tens of thousands of other proper names¹⁶) are context sensitive. (I am afraid many will react to this by claiming that proper names are ambiguous – that there are as many 'Ernie's as there are Ernies. But I think this is mistaken for at least three familiar reasons: that dictionaries contain at most one entry for 'Ernie'¹⁷, that there is an

¹⁴ More precisely, they block such reports when the original utterance and the report are in sufficiently different contexts and when we adjust the semantic values of genuinely context sensitive components of the sentence originally uttered.

¹⁵ The requirement of non-repetition is important because we need to avoid herd to detect context-shifts. For example, "It is awfully cold here, but not here" is fine if the speaker moved from one room to another mid-sentence. Cappelen and Lepore give no general formulation for this test. They say that "if a verb phrase *v* is context sensitive [...] then on the basis of merely knowing that there are two contexts of utterance in which 'A *v*-s' and 'B *v*-s' are true respectively, we *cannot* automatically infer that there is a context in which '*v*' can be used to describe what A and B have done." Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 99. Then they generalize the test for singular terms in the obvious way.

¹⁶ Hank and Hodges's *Dictionary of First Names* contains approximately 7000 entries and their *Dictionary of Surnames* approximately 70,000 – 'Lepore' is in, 'Cappelen' is not (the closest you find is 'Cappelle').

¹⁷ Most likely you will only find 'Ernest', an English name derived from the Old High German *eornost*, meaning seriousness and battle (to the death). Don't try the *Oxford English Dictionary* – they subscribe to the view that proper names are not lexical items. Be that as it may, they are linguistic expressions, so questions whether they are ambiguous, whether they are context sensitive, whether they are vague, etc. make perfect sense.

open-ended and potentially infinite list of Ernies¹⁸, and that the ambiguity view has no credible account of the semantics of sentences like ‘Some Ernies are philosophers.’)

I think many other expressions deemed contextually insensitive by Cappelen and Lepore pass their own second and third tests for context sensitivity. For example, from the fact that there are true utterances of ‘Everyone passed the exam’ and true utterances of ‘Everyone failed the exam’ it does not follow that ‘Everyone passed and failed the exam’ has true utterances. I also think there are true utterances of ‘Everyone passed the exam’ even though Aristotle certainly did not, and hence obviously, not *everyone* passed the exam. I acknowledge that Cappelen and Lepore have different intuitions, and I have no choice but to let the reader make up her own mind. (I should say that I think the way the tests are set up sometimes has a distorting effect.¹⁹) However, I concede that ‘everyone’ fails the first test: my utterance of ‘Everyone passed the exam’ typically (perhaps always) can be reported as ‘Zoltán said that everyone passed the exam’. In fact, besides proper names and the words of Kaplan’s list (plus or minus a bit) I cannot think of a single word or morpheme that clearly passes this test. What might be the reason for this?

Here is how Cappelen and Lepore justify the inter-contextual disquotational indirect report test:²⁰

By definition, for *e* to be context sensitive is for *e* to shift its semantic value from one context of utterance to another. So, if *e* is context sensitive and Rupert uses *e* in context C, and Lepore uses it in context C', and the relevant contextual features change, then it will be just an *accident* if their uses of *e* end up with the same semantic value. In particular, if Lepore finds himself in a context other than Rupert’s and wants to utter a sentence that matches the semantic content of Rupert’s utterance of a sentence with *e*, he can’t use *e*, i.e. he can’t report Rupert’s utterance disquotationally.

This is correct, assuming that the semantic value of *e* depends *exclusively* on the context of utterance, and not on any larger expression in which *e* occurs as a constituent. This is true for all of Kaplan’s indexicals – their semantic values stay fixed under embedding. Wherever ‘here’ occurs within a sentence it refers to the spatial location of the speaker, which is why this expression is both temporally and modally rigid, and why it cannot be bound by a quantifier. But not all context sensitive expressions are like that. The past

¹⁸ ‘Ernest’ is the 86th most popular name in the US; one in every 465 males bears this name. Besides, ‘Ernie’ is the former name of *Piranha Club*, a comic strip by Bud Grace, and an acronym for Electronic Random Number Indicator Equipment.

¹⁹ For example, here is a beefed up version of the third test applied to ‘red’: “In order to be red, an apple has to have red skin. That’s a necessary condition for being a red apple. It is irrelevant, for instance, whether an apple is red on its inside. Here’s an apple, call it Rupert; Rupert is red. On the inside, Rupert is white. Nonetheless, there are utterances of ‘Rupert is red’ that are false, not because Rupert’s color changes, but because the speaker cares about what’s inside Rupert rather than whether it is red or not. This affects the truth value of the utterance even though the color of the inside of the apple is completely irrelevant to whether Rupert is red” Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 111. It is surely true that this story does not provide a clear and convincing intuitive support for the context-sensitivity of ‘red’. But I suspect this is because it starts with dogmatic claims that distort the reader’s subsequent intuitions. Compare: “In order to be present, an event has to occur on July 5, 2005. That’s a necessary condition for being present.” What should a poor reader do who reads a story that begins this way on August 5, 2005? How should he interpret subsequent occurrences of ‘present’ within the story?

²⁰ Cappelen and Lepore (2005): 89.

tense morpheme, for example, behaves quite differently. Consider the sentence ‘Cappelen said that Lepore was in a café on 5th Street.’ This sentence is true at t only if Cappelen said at a time t' before t that Ernie was at t'' at or before t' in a café on 5th Street. So the interpretation of the embedded past tense morpheme is not independent of the interpretation of the embedding past tense morpheme.

As Cappelen and Lepore are well aware, a number of moderate contextualists believe that at least some context-sensitivity is due to a bindable variable in logical form.²¹ Expressions containing such variables obviously don't have their semantic values fixed under every embedding. Consequently, there is no compelling reason to believe that their semantic values don't change when they occur within a clausal complement of ‘said’, and they may well fail the inter-contextual disquotational indirect report despite being context-sensitive.²²

To sum up: I think Cappelen and Lepore present strong arguments against radical contextualism, but only a weak case against moderate contextualism. They don't show that the latter collapses in the former; their second and third tests for context-sensitivity are adequate, but their intuitions that only the expressions on Kaplan's list pass them are questionable; and their first test is inadequate because it only tests for a special kind of context-sensitivity.

The context wars have surely reached a new level of intensity. But truce, let alone peace, is not in sight.*

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²¹ Cf. Bartsch (1986), Ludlow (1989), Stanley and Szabó (2000), Stanley (2000), and Stanley (2002).

²² Note that the suggestion is *not* that thinking about what someone said miraculously shifts the context one is in to the context in which the saying occurred. (This idea is criticized by Cappelen and Lepore in Appendix 1 to Chapter 7.) Nor is the suggestion that ‘said’ is a monster and so its complement is evaluated relative to a shifted context. (This idea is criticized by Cappelen and Lepore in Appendix 2 to Chapter 7.) As in standard variable binding, the semantic value of e within the complement of ‘said’ is supposed to change, *even though the context remains the same*.

* Thanks to Tamar Szabó Gendler, Jason Stanley, and Brian Weatherson for comments.