

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

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0. Introduction

When we disagree, we want our disagreements to be substantive. Substantive disagreements require agreement on what the disagreement is about, which in turn requires mutual understanding. Lack of mutual understanding comes from two kinds of defects: hidden differences in how the parties understand some expression, or hidden differences in what they take to be the context in which their views are presented. The former defects are eliminable in principle and manageable in practice; the latter are something between troublesome and hopeless. So it is important to see how to tell them apart. One thing seems clear – these defects fall on opposite sides of the divide between semantics and pragmatics. This is one reason that the divide matters.

Let me elaborate. Suppose you say that the Evening Star is a star and I say it is not. Ideally, we know well enough what the world would have to be like for our respective views to be correct: if the shiniest celestial object visible in the sky just after sunset (discounting the Moon) is a sphere of hot gases radiating energy derived from thermonuclear reactions you are right; otherwise I am. If we agree about this much, our debate is certainly substantive. But things could be less than ideal and still good enough for mutual understanding. Perhaps we don't both know which one of the shiny objects in the sky is the Evening Star, or what exactly makes one of those objects a star. Nonetheless, there is a clear sense in which we know what the world would have to be like for our views to be correct: if the Evening Star is a star you are right, if it isn't I am. Putting it this way is somewhat perplexing, for the statement does not move beyond the

words you or I would use to present our respective views. But there is nothing wrong with that – mutual understanding does not require agreement about paraphrase.

But do we *really* agree that if the Evening Star is a star you are right and if it isn't I am? Suppose you take it that the English word 'star' applies to any celestial object visible at night from Earth by the naked eye (excepting the Moon and the occasional comets) and I take it that it applies to just those things that fit the astronomical definition. Furthermore, suppose that we are unaware of this difference. Then we may be prepared to *say* that we agree that your view would be correct if the Evening Star is a star, mine if it isn't. Still, once we realize what is going on, we would stop putting things this way. We would still agree that you assent to 'The Evening Star is a star' and I do not, but given the fact that we attach different meanings to this sentence we would no longer use it without quotation in contrasting our views. We would conclude that we have a *verbal* disagreement about what the Evening Star is, which prevents us from seeing whether we also have a substantive disagreement about this matter. To achieve mutual understanding, we need to make sure that we interpret the linguistic expressions involved in stating our views in the same way.

Despite their bad reputation, verbal disagreements needn't be frivolous or trivial – it is just that they are usually unwanted. For example, I think that if you attach to the English word 'star' a meaning that allows you to truly say that the Evening Star – i.e. the planet Venus – is a star, you are mistaken about what this word means. (The mistake is common and a number of dictionaries are willing to comply.) But if we are concerned about what sort of thing the Evening Star might be we need not settle *this* disagreement, we can simply bypass it. To ensure mutual understanding, we may agree to distinguish between your word and mine by an index: we agree that for the purposes of our discussion we will mean by 'star₁' what you mean by 'star' and we will mean by 'star₂' what I do. Once we did that, we can see whether you are willing to assent to 'The Evening Star is a star₂' and whether I am willing to assent to 'The Evening Star is a star₁'. If either of these is the case, we might have a substantive disagreement; if neither is we have none.

This is a general method for filtering out verbal disagreements: locate the contentious linguistic expression (it needn't be a lexical item – we could disagree about

the meanings of morphemes or phrases as well), clarify the different meanings the parties attach to it, introduce new expressions with the clarified meanings, and finally restate the disagreement using the new expressions. The process is arduous and often impractical. Still, when applied with care and caution it eliminates verbal disagreements. If all non-substantive disagreements were verbal, we would be in good shape: not only would we know what mutual understanding is (agreement about the meanings of linguistic expressions employed in stating our views), we would also have a sense of how to bring it about (eliminate verbal disagreements by replacing contentious expressions with new ones introduced by more or less explicit stipulation).

Unfortunately, things are not this tidy: there are disagreements that are neither substantive nor verbal. If I say 'The table looks good here' and you say 'The table looks terrible here' I may refer to a place next to the window and you to a place in the opposite corner from it, I may talk about the coffee table and you about the dining table, I may invoke low standards for looks and you high, I may attribute good looks to the table from my own perspective and you terrible looks from yours, I may speak in jest and you in all sincerity, and so on. In these cases, if we take ourselves to disagree our disagreement lacks substance, even if we are in full agreement about what these sentences mean. These misunderstandings are neither factual nor linguistic; to have a label, we might call them *contextual*.

There is no general recipe for bypassing contextual disagreements. Some of them are tied to specific linguistic expressions, such as the indexical 'here' in the above example. These may be replaced by appropriate descriptions: instead of saying 'The table looks good here' I may agree to present my view as 'The table looks good next to the window.' But then again, I may not. I might be reluctant to state my view in this way because I fear that it would then be misunderstood as suggesting that the table looks good *because* of its proximity to the window. Even if we make it clear that such a causal-explanatory link is not intended, I might remain reluctant. After all, the two claims are not necessarily equivalent and even if I believe both, I may want to be careful about which of my modal commitments I want to make explicit. But suppose I accept this new claim as an adequate way to state my view. It still looks like all I did was to replace one context-sensitive expression ('here') with another ('next to'). It is by no means clear

whether there is a sentence containing no context-sensitive expressions I could use to state my view. And even if we carefully eliminate all context-sensitive expressions, we are still stuck with the possibility of contextual disagreements that are not tied to particular linguistic expressions. As any good censor knows, paraphrase cannot eliminate irony. Of course, we may agree, for the sake of our discussion, to cut out all forms of non-literal speech – assuming we have the same understanding of exactly what constitutes such speech. But we have no reason to assume that by adhering to this maxim, we maintain the ability to express ourselves fully. In sum: we don't know, even *in principle*, how we could bypass our contextual disagreements because we have no inventory of all the different ways in which context might influence interpretation.

Semantics is the study of meaning, or more precisely, the study of the relation between linguistic expressions and their meanings. Whenever we have a verbal disagreement, we disagree about the semantics of some expression we employed in stating our views. Pragmatics is the study of context, or more precisely, a study of the way context can influence our understanding of linguistic utterances. Whenever we have a contextual disagreement, we take ourselves to be in different contexts and the difference effects what we take ourselves to have done through our respective acts of stating our views. Settling on a shared meaning for the expressions we used may be hard, but settling on a shared take on the context is often harder. Philosophy is full of recalcitrant debates where the impression that the parties are somehow speaking past each other is strong. Those of us who want to maintain that the debates (about skepticism, about ontology, about free will, and so on) are substantive must show not only that they involve no equivocation, but also that they are free of contextual confusion. This will be hard, unless we have some way to show that – at least in the relevant cases – the role of context is tightly constrained. The question about how to draw the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is philosophically important because to a large extent it determines how hard it will be to defend the legitimacy of philosophical debates.

The distinction between semantics and pragmatics I gave is nothing but a sketch; it is the intent of the rest of this paper to make it more precise. I will start in section 1 by considering three alternative characterizations and explain what I find problematic about each of them. This leads to the discussion of utterance interpretation in section 2, which

will situate semantics and pragmatics, as I see them, in a larger enterprise. But the characterization of their contrast remains sketchy until the final section, where I discuss how truth-conditions and the notion of *what is said* fit into the picture.

1. How not to draw the line: some examples from the literature

The sketch of a characterization of the semantic/pragmatics distinction I gave (semantics is the study of meaning; pragmatics of the context) seems fairly innocent. Still, it differs significantly from a number of standard conceptions.¹ In this section, I will survey three alternatives – occasionally pausing to set the historical record straight. I will also point out features of these alternatives that make them, in my view, less desirable than the view I advocate.

1.1. The semiotic conception

The now-familiar distinction between syntax, semantics and pragmatics can be traced to Charles Morris' short but influential 1938 book, in which he outlines the conceptual foundations for a general study of signs. Morris' starting point is the process in which something functions as a sign, a process he calls *semiosis*:²

A dog responds by the type of behavior (*I*) involved in the hunting of chipmunks (*D*) to a certain sound (*S*); a traveler prepares himself to deal appropriately (*I*) with the geographical region (*D*) in virtue of the letter (*S*) received from a friend. In such cases *S* is the sign vehicle (and a sign in virtue of its functioning), *D* the designatum, and *I* the interpretant of the interpreter. The most effective characterization of a sign is the following: *S* is a sign of *D* for *I* to the degree that *I*

¹ My characterization of pragmatics is identical to that of Stalnaker (1970): "Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed." (30) However, as I will elaborate in section 3, I do not agree with Stalnaker's claim that semantics is primarily concerned with what is said by declarative sentences, that it is "the study of propositions" (32). Still, the way I suggest the semantics/pragmatics distinction should be drawn is probably closest to Stalnaker's view.

² Morris (1938): 3 – 4. The term 'semiosis,' along with the idea that the process in which something is used as a sign is a process involving mediation, goes back to Charles Peirce.

takes account of *D* in virtue of the presence of *S*. Thus in semiosis something takes account of something else mediately, i.e., by means of a third something. Semiosis is accordingly a mediated-taking-account-of. The mediators are *sign vehicles*; the takings-account-of are *interpretants*; the agents of the process are *interpreters*; what is taken account of are *designata*.

For Morris, semiosis is a triadic relation among interpreters, signs and designata. We can abstract three dyadic relations from it – the three “dimensions of semiosis.”³

Corresponding to these, Morris distinguishes three branches of the general study of signs: *syntactics* (the study of relations between signs and signs), *semantics* (the study of relations between signs and their designata), and *pragmatics* (the study of relations between signs and their interpreters).

Morris assigns a rather narrow scope to semantics. If semantics is the study of the sign-designatum relation, it must remain silent about the linguistic meanings of those expressions whose function is not to stand for something. According to Morris, these include prepositions, affixes, quantifiers and logical connectives, all of which indicate (but not designate) syntactic relations to other signs in the language, as well as adverbs, such as ‘fortunately’ or ‘certainly’, which indicate (but again, do not designate) pragmatic relations involving the users of the sign.⁴ Indexicals are also not dealt with in semantics, although Morris’s exact views are a bit hard to pin down. At one point Morris claims that within the sentence ‘That white horse runs slowly,’ spoken in an actual situation with indexical gestures “‘that’ in combination with the indexical gesture serves as an indexical sign.”⁵ This seems to suggest that the demonstrative pronoun by itself is not a sign at all. In a later work, however, he is willing to say that “terms such as ‘it’, ‘this’, ‘I’, ‘now’ are [...] singular signs like “proper names” but differing from proper names in that what they denote varies with the circumstances of production of the individual sign-vehicles of the sign-families to which they belong.”⁶ Here indexical expressions themselves have denotata, and the role of possible indexical gestures is simply to help to identify them. Either way, indexicals fall outside the purview of semantics: to spell out what a particular

³ Morris (1938): 11.

⁴ Morris (1938): 27 – 28.

⁵ Morris (1938): 19.

⁶ Morris (1946): 77.

indexical sign stands for, we must bring in facts about the circumstances under which it is used, and this is a task for pragmatics.

Complementing his narrow conception of semantics, Morris's picture of pragmatics is broad and amorphous. Pragmatics, he writes, concerns itself with "the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs."⁷ Given how much in our lives is bound up with the use of signs, this is tantamount to a comprehensive theory of human interactions. Morris suggests that the concept of sign may prove as fundamental for the biological sciences as the concept of atom is for the physical ones.⁸ The problem with this is not so much that it is false; it is rather that it comes at the wrong level of generality. Genes may well be the atoms of life and it may well be a good idea to think of them primarily as information carriers, or signs. But given how few useful generalizations apply equally well to genes, traffic signs and words, it is good news that the biological sciences are *not* in the business of looking for them.

There is another problem with Morris' way of drawing the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. His idea is that just as semantics abstracts away from the relation signs bear to their interpreters, pragmatics is supposed to neglect the relation signs bear to their designata. It is more or less clear what the former amounts to: we can say, for example, that the English noun 'dog' refers to dogs and in saying this we do not commit ourselves to anything specific about how particular speakers of English will on particular occasions interpret particular occurrences of this word. It is doubtless true that if 'dog' refers to dogs, then many speakers of English will on many occasions refer to dogs by uttering 'dog,' and it is also clear that if all of them on all occasions used the word 'dog' to refer to cats, then it couldn't be the case that 'dog' refers to dogs. Still, there is no need to burden semantics with such facts: it is one thing to say what a word refers to and another to say *why* it refers to what it does. By contrast, it is not altogether clear how we could abstract away from designation in discussing the relation between signs and their interpreters. The fact that particular speakers of English use 'dog' on many particular occasions to refer to dogs is clearly an important fact about their relation

⁷ Morris (1938): 30.

⁸ Morris (1938): 42.

to this word; without being able to state this fact much else will have to remain unexplained about this relation. There seems to be a fundamental *asymmetry* between semantics and pragmatics, in the sense that the former can operate in relative ignorance of the latter, but not the other way around.⁹ This asymmetry is not captured by the semiotic conception, which is the main reason I believe we should not follow Morris in drawing the line between semantics and pragmatics.

1.2. The indexical conception

Perhaps the most influential conception of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics is presented in two papers by Richard Montague.¹⁰ Montague does not regard his conception as new:¹¹

The study of language (or *semiosis* or *semiotic*) was partitioned in Morris (1938) into three branches – syntax, semantics, and pragmatics – that may be characterized roughly as follows. Syntax is concerned solely with relations between linguistic expressions; semantics with relations between expressions and the objects to which they refer; and pragmatics with relations among expressions, the objects to which they refer, and the users or contexts of use of the expressions.

Despite the credit, this characterization is quite different from Morris'. First of all, it is drawn not within the general theory of signs but rather within the study of language, a much narrower domain. But within this narrower domain, pragmatics is supposed to deal with the entirety of the relation underlying semiosis.¹² In Montague's characterization, pragmatics does not abstract away from designata, and so it becomes an *extension* of semantics, not a distinct field. Here is how he puts it:

⁹ There is a similar asymmetry between syntax and semantics, which comes to the fore when we consider complex expressions. The semantics of a complex expression depends on its syntactic structure, but not the other way around.

¹⁰ Montague (1968) and Montague (1970a).

¹¹ Montague (1968): 95.

¹² There are smaller differences as well. 'Semiosis' is a term Morris uses for the process when something functions as a sign, not as a synonym for 'semiotics'. Morris does not use the term 'reference'; he speaks of 'designation' instead. (This matters: empty names lack reference, but for Morris it is analytic that every sign has a designatum. He used 'denotatum' in roughly the way a Fregean might use 'reference'.)

Though Bar-Hillel (1954) suggested that pragmatics concern itself with indexical expressions, he was not wholly explicit as to the form this concern should take. It seemed to me desirable that pragmatics should at least initially follow the lead of semantics – or its modern version, model theory – which is primarily concerned with the notions of truth and satisfaction (in a model, or under an interpretation). Pragmatics, then, should employ similar notions, though we should speak about truth and satisfaction with respect not only to an interpretation but also to a context of use.

Bar-Hillel indeed said that the investigation of indexical languages belongs to pragmatics, but he never said that this is all there is to pragmatics.¹³ By contrast, for Montague – at least “initially” (whatever that qualification may amount to) – pragmatics is nothing more or less than the systematic assignment of reference to expressions of an indexical language and the ensuing definition of truth relative to an interpretation and also to a context of use.¹⁴

This way of distinguishing semantics and pragmatics has its advantages. We know how to do semantics, at least for simple formal languages, and if pragmatics is just the extension of these techniques to slightly more complicated languages, we know how to do that too. By making pragmatics deal with generalizations of the semantic notions of truth and reference, Montague’s distinction also captures the asymmetry in the relation between semantics and pragmatics, which escaped Morris. And, although by swallowing up semantics Montaguean pragmatics acquires considerable dimensions, its scope certainly does not include all the “biotic aspects of semiosis.” All these are good things.

Despite the advantages, there is a sense in which the indexical conception of the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is simply incomplete. Morris’s definition tells us that semantics and pragmatics are parts of the general theory of signs and specifies their subject-matters: semantics is about relations between one thing and another in virtue of which the former is a sign *of* the latter, pragmatics about relations between one thing and another in virtue of which the former is a sign *for* the latter. By contrast, the indexical conception leaves the subject-matter of semantics entirely open

¹³ Bar-Hillel (1954): 369.

¹⁴ The Montaguean view of the relation between semantics and pragmatics is echoed in Donald Kalish (1967). He writes: “Pragmatics, so conceived, is simply the extension of the semantical truth-definition to formal languages containing indexical terms.” (p. 356) The misrepresentations of Morris’ view and the claim that Bar-Hillel “identified” pragmatics with the study of indexical languages can also be found here.

and defines pragmatics in relation to it. Semantics studies something about non-indexical languages and pragmatics studies the same thing about indexical ones.

Montague, of course, did have quite a specific view about what semantics is, so perhaps the charitable thing to do is to interpret his distinction together with those additional views. Suppose we go along with Montague and assume that the task of semantics is to systematically assign what Carnap called extensions to all expressions of a non-indexical language – then the task of pragmatics is to do the same for an indexical language. Now we have a substantive conception of the difference between semantics and pragmatics, but there is a new concern: once we consider natural languages (as opposed to tiny fragments of them Montague discussed), the idea that we could simply view pragmatics as an extension of ordinary semantics becomes illusory. Let me explain.

The theory of indexicals is typically pursued within the scope of what has come to be called *index-theory*. Indices are supposed to be abstract representations – usually n -tuples – of those features of the context of utterance that are relevant for the assignment of extensions to the expressions of the indexical language under consideration. If the language contains the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’, the indices will contain the speaker and the addressee of the utterance; if the language contains temporal indexicals, such as ‘now’ or ‘next Thursday’, the indices will contain the time of utterance, if the language contains spatial indexicals, such as ‘here’ or ‘five miles to the North’, the indices will contain the place of utterance, and so on. In order to apply Montague’s techniques to natural languages, we would need to specify *all* these features of contexts of utterance that play a role in determining extensions. At one point, David Lewis used as indices 8-tuples of (i) a possible world, (ii) a moment of time, (iii) a place, (iv) a person (speaker), (v) a set of persons (audience), (vi) a set of objects (available for demonstration), (vii) a segment of discourse, and (viii) an assignment function (a function assigning appropriate values to all variables used in the Tarskian semantics for quantification).¹⁵ But he was well aware that even this was inadequate: our language may contain expressions whose interpretation apparently depends on orientation (‘to the left’), or standards of precision (‘hexagonal’), or salient relations (‘Bill’s book’), or salient domains (‘every bottle’), or epistemic alternatives (‘knows’), and so on. In each of these cases, we will need additional

¹⁵ Lewis (1970): 195.

coordinates in our indices. The chances of listing all the features of the context upon which extensions in natural languages depend seem bleak.¹⁶ Because of these difficulties, Lewis and many others gave up on the idea of representing contexts by indices.

Could Montague's view that pragmatics is just the extension of semantics survive the abandonment of the index-theory? Lewis proposed that we could represent contexts simply as a triplet of a world, a time and a speaker (or, if our metaphysics allows it, as a world-bound time-slice of a possible speaker) and leave the other coordinates implicit.¹⁷ Those who follow him no longer have a theory that looks anything like ordinary model-theoretic semantics. Instead of clauses such as (1), they have clauses like (2):

- (1) The extension of 'here' in a model M relative to the index $\langle s, t, w, p \rangle$ is p .
- (2) The extension of 'here' in a model M relative to the index $\langle s, t, w \rangle$ is the place where s is at t in w .

At first sight, the difference between (1) and (2) may appear inconsequential, especially if we add the informal gloss that the fourth coordinate of the index in (1) is supposed to be the place where s is at t in w . But it does matter. A model-theoretic semantics is supposed to define a function that assigns extensions to all expressions in the language under consideration from some formal structure. Given (1) alone, it is guaranteed that 'here' has a unique extension relative to an arbitrary index $\langle s, t, w, p \rangle$. Given (2) alone, we do not have a guarantee that 'here' has an extension relative to an arbitrary index $\langle s, t, w \rangle$ – if there is some speaker, time and world such that the speaker is at no place or at more than one place at that time in that world, (2) fails to determine the extension of 'here' relative to an arbitrary index. Leaving contextual coordinates implicit compromises the formal adequacy of the assignment of extensions.¹⁸

¹⁶ Unless the intuition that the extensions of all these expressions depend on context is mistaken; for an argument to this effect see Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

¹⁷ Cf. Lewis (1981) and Lewis (1983).

¹⁸ One way to react to this difficulty is to give up entirely the project of assigning extensions to indexical expressions relative to context. Instead, one might replace each and every clause of a semantic theory with a conditionalized schema whose antecedent specifies an arbitrary assignment to all the indexicals in the lexicon. Instead of the usual T-sentence for 'She is lazy', Higginbotham (1988) recommends that we include in our semantics the clause 'If x is referred to by 'she' in the course of an utterance of 'She is lazy' and x is female, then that utterance is true iff x is lazy.' In this way, he hopes to stay clear of the "morass of communicative context." (Higginbotham (1988): 40.)

So pragmatics, as Montague conceives of it, may not be a completely straightforward extension of model-theoretic semantics. But this is not the real problem with the indexical conception. The main reason for its unpopularity is that it leaves out too much from the domain of pragmatics. Take for example the case where a waiter uses the sentence ‘The ham sandwich is getting restless’ to inform the cook that the person who ordered a ham sandwich ten minutes ago is eagerly awaiting his lunch. How is this fact to be accounted for on a Montagovean picture? Perhaps we can say that ‘the ham sandwich’ relative to the context of the utterance is interpreted as denoting a person, and thereby treat the phenomenon as a new sort of indexicality. But this is a dangerous strategy: after all, almost any definite description could be used in a similarly off way in some context, and if we allow that all of them are indexicals, we risk losing our intuitive grip on the very notion of indexicality. Or consider the sentence ‘I will not forget this’, which could be uttered as a simple prediction, as a threat, as a promise, and in many other ways. Identifying which of these is the case is part of interpreting the sentence relative to the context of utterance. If this is to be treated as a kind of indexicality, we need to represent the illocutionary force of the sentence in our model, which seems to be a bad idea. (Models are supposed to represent what linguistic expressions are about, not how they are employed to various conversational effects.)

The examples could be multiplied. Many phenomena discussed in pragmatics textbooks – presupposition, conversational implicature, rhetorical tropes, etc. – simply do not yield easily to indexical treatment. The problem is not primarily technical – it is not just that we would end up with a lot of odd indices to which to relativize interpretation. It is rather that, intuitively, many of the traditional problems of pragmatics are problems of utterance interpretation, not problems of the interpretation of linguistic expressions in context. The case of irony illustrates the point nicely. Suppose I utter the sentence ‘He is a fine friend’ contemptuously. The interpretation of my utterance must be sensitive to my contempt; otherwise the addressee will misunderstand me in the worst possible way. But intuitively, the sentence itself means what it does quite independently of my manifest attitude in uttering it. Utterance interpretation often goes beyond literal meaning, even literal meaning relativized to context. This is not captured by the indexical conception – which is, I think, the main reason why we should not adopt it.

1.3. The cognitivist conception

It is a fairly natural idea to try to distinguish semantics and pragmatics on psychological grounds: perhaps different kinds of psychological mechanisms underlie different parts of the interpretation process, and these are subject to different kinds of inquiry. In their influential 1986 book *Relevance*, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson proposed just such a distinction.¹⁹ On their view, semantics studies coding mechanisms whereby linguistic expressions are paired with their meanings;²⁰ pragmatics concerns itself with inferential mechanisms whereby one can integrate this meaning with other information available from the context to arrive at the interpretation of an utterance. These mechanisms are fundamentally different.²¹

An inferential process starts from a set of premises and results in a set of conclusions which follow logically from, or are at least warranted by, the premises. *A decoding process* starts from a signal and results in the recovery of a message which is associated to the signal by an underlying code. In general, conclusions are not associated to their premises by a code, and signals do not warrant the messages they convey.

Unfortunately, the distinction is not as clear as it first seems. Since natural languages contain infinitely many expressions, pairing them with their meanings must proceed via a recursive function. Assuming that speakers do in fact compute the values of such a function when they determine the meaning of a particular expression, the cognitive mechanism they employ is, in a perfectly natural sense of the word, inferential. If inferential mechanisms employed in interpretation belong to pragmatics, all that remains within the scope of semantics is the study of lexical meaning.²²

This is clearly not Sperber and Wilson's intent. Although they don't dispute simple and empirically well-founded generalizations like that one must know what

¹⁹ See also R. Carston and G. Powell, 'Relevance Theory', in this volume.

²⁰ For Sperber and Wilson, the study of all the psychological mechanisms whereby certain acoustic signals are connected with meanings is grammar. Semantics is a part of grammar.

²¹ Sperber and Wilson (1988): 12 – 13.

²² For further discussion of this and related problems with the inferential conception of pragmatics, see Recanati (2002).

‘snow’ and ‘white’ mean (as well as how predication works) in order to know the meaning of ‘Snow is white’, they believe the process involved in moving from understanding words to understanding sentences those words compose differs fundamentally from ordinary inferential processes:²³

A variety of species, from bees to humans, have codes which are to a greater or lesser extent genetically determined. These differ from inferential systems in two main respects: first, the representations they relate need not be conceptual, and second, the rules relating these representations need not be inferential. Human natural languages are case in point. If we are right, then linguistic knowledge does not contribute to the comprehension process in the way described above: by providing premises for inference.

Is it legitimate to seek to distinguish semantics and pragmatics on psychological grounds? A familiar objection to this very idea starts with Montague’s contention that “there is no important theoretical difference between natural languages and the artificial languages of logicians.”²⁴ Despite occasional overstatements to the contrary, this does not quite mean that linguistics is a branch of mathematics: what linguists are really interested in is which of the possible abstract formal structures are English, Swahili, or Bulgarian – and these are surely empirical questions.²⁵ Still, these are not questions of psychology; which populations speak which mathematically characterized language is a question about conventions, and as such, is a concern for sociology. There clearly are problems about what it is for an individual to have the capacity to speak and comprehend a language, and anti-psychologists about linguistics usually do not deny this. What they maintain instead is that the main business of linguistics – formally characterizing a range of possible languages and empirically determining which of these is used by which groups of people – can proceed independently of the psychological details. Presumably we all agree that Martians could learn English, even if they employed completely

²³ Sperber and Wilson (1988): 27. I take it that one aspect of the difference alluded to here has something to do with doubts whether our understanding of complex expressions can legitimately be called a kind of knowledge. The doubts are linked to the observation that our beliefs about what linguistic expressions mean do not appear to have justification – at least if we assume that justification requires reasons we could articulate.

²⁴ Montague (1970b): 222.

²⁵ For one of the clearest ways of outlining this conception of the subject-matter of linguistics, see Lewis (1968).

different psychological mechanisms to produce and interpret English utterances. In fact, later on, all the people could die out and the Martians could keep using English in their conversations. So, we could have English without any of the current psychological mechanisms connected with its use.

Cognitivists, like Sperber and Wilson, will not dispute the cogency of this argument but instead of concluding that psychology is irrelevant to linguistics, they conclude that linguistics is not primarily about public language.²⁶ For certain purposes the idiolects spoken by Martians would count as sufficiently similar to be called idiolects of the same language, and for other purposes they may not be, just as for certain purposes we would say that Chaucer and Poe spoke the same language and for others that they did not. And although the idiolect of a person does typically manifest itself in linguistic behavior – *performance*, as Chomsky calls it – the full range of such behavior provides us with a confusing set of data, most of which in its entirety does not yield itself to systematic theorizing. Nonetheless, underlying the cacophony, we have good reason to postulate a uniform, largely genetically encoded linguistic capacity of individual human beings – their *competence* – which is for linguistics to reveal. Perhaps semantics deals with certain aspects of utterance interpretation that are manifestations of linguistic competence (decoding process), while pragmatics is part of the study of certain aspects of performance (inferential process).²⁷ The human language faculty, the psychological system underlying linguistic competence, is a paradigm example of a *module*: it works fast, its principles are domain-specific, and it works in a way that remains largely inaccessible to consciousness and to other modules. The gist of Sperber and Wilson’s view is that semantics and pragmatics study different processes involved in utterance

²⁶ Chomsky (1986) introduced the distinction between *I-language* and *E-language*. The former is a natural object internal to the brain of an individual whose working is representable as a function-in-intension generating structural descriptions of (as opposed to mere strings of) expressions. The latter is something external to individuals, either a social object constituted by norms and conventions, or some abstract object, say, a set of sentences. The former is the subject of linguists, the latter is not.

²⁷ “Pragmatic theories [...] explicate the reasoning of speakers and addressees in working out the correlation in a context of a sentence token with a proposition. In this respect, a pragmatic theory is part of performance.” Katz (1977): 19.

interpretation, and that the subject matter of the former but not the latter are the workings of the linguistic module.²⁸

Many cognitivists – famously including Chomsky himself – are reluctant to say that linguistic competence includes semantic competence. The reluctance is entirely natural: it is hard to see how the study of the relation between language and world could be part of individual psychology. The world, after all, could be quite different from the way it is – for example, it could be that rivers and lakes contain a curious substance XYZ superficially indistinguishable from our H₂O – without any relevant change in what is in our head. If semantics is really concerned with the question of what the English word ‘water’ represents, it must be sensitive to the difference between XYZ and H₂O, and hence, it must be outside the scope of cognitive linguistics. Here is a familiar argument to this effect.²⁹ Suppose our semantics of Oscar’s idiolect contains (3):

(3) ‘Water’ refers to water

Assuming – as it seems plausible – that not being H₂O, XYZ is not a kind of water, (3) is false on Twin-Earth (a planet just like ours, except that the substance in rivers and lakes is XYZ), and consequently cannot be part of an adequate semantics of the idiolect of Twin-Oscar. Oscar’s and Twin-Oscar’s idiolects have different semantics, even though (given that they are molecule-by-molecule duplicates) their individual psychology must be the same. So, semantics is not part of cognitive linguistics.³⁰

There are ways to resist this conclusion but each carries considerable difficulties.³¹ The particular path Sperber and Wilson chose involves rejecting the idea

²⁸ Initially Sperber and Wilson defended the idea that pragmatic processes do not belong to any module. See Wilson and Sperber (1986). Lately their views have changed; cf. Sperber and Wilson (2002). What is crucial to our discussion here is that they do not belong to the *linguistic* module.

²⁹ See also K. Farkas’s article ‘Semantic Internalism and Externalism’ in this volume.

³⁰ Chomsky thinks the reference of ‘water’ is interest-relative. He points out that if we fill a glass from the tap and then dip a tea bag into it, we would be reluctant to call the content ‘water’. By contrast, if we fill another glass from another tap that is connected to a reservoir into which tea has been dumped, we would probably not hesitate to call the content of this glass ‘water’. Chomsky thinks this remains the case even if it turns out that the contents of the two cups are indistinguishable even for a chemist. (Chomsky (1995): 22) I disagree: I think many of us would be reluctant to stand by both judgments upon learning the chemist’s verdict; we might not know which one to give up, but that does not mean that they must have the same standing.

³¹ The main options are: (i) argue that despite majority intuition XYZ *is* a kind of water, (ii) argue that false clauses can underlie semantic competence, (iii) say that ‘water’ contains a hidden indexical, (iv) say that

that semantics should tell us about how language related to the world: the job of a semantic theory of (idiolects of) English is merely to assign mental representations to linguistic expressions. Those representations, of course, must stand in an appropriate relation to the world, and we may theorize about that relation as well. That theory, however, has nothing to do with language or communication – in particular, it is not a theory that articulates something that is supposed to be already tacitly known. Using capital letters to talk about the relevant mental representations, (4) is a common clause of the semantics of (idiolects of) English and Twin-English; (5) tells us what a particular mental representation refers to on Earth and (6) tells us what it refers to on Twin-Earth. Neither (5) nor (6) is part of semantics of idiolects on either planet.

- (4) 'Water' expresses WATER
- (5) 'WATER' refers to H₂O
- (6) 'WATER' refers to XYZ

Philosophers often doubt whether a theory that assigns one representation to another deserves the name 'semantics.' The idea bothers me too, but not as much as the suggestion that a theory that does establish links between representations and the world does *not* deserve that name.³² But perhaps the complaint is merely verbal. Sperber and Wilson may fundamentally agree with Chomsky that there is one important line to be drawn: between speakers' linguistic competence and whatever else is involved in utterance interpretation. Sperber and Wilson think semantic processes belong to the former and Chomsky does not – but this is only because Chomsky understands 'semantics' as 'referential semantics' and Sperber and Wilson understand it as 'translational semantics.' They agree that translational semantics is part of linguistic competence and referential semantics isn't.³³

This maneuver has a price. Cognitivists may have successfully drawn distinctions between translational semantics and pragmatics and between referential and translational semantics. Still, in order for these to make up a successful semantics/pragmatics

semantics proper does not include lexical semantics, or (v) accept internalism about semantics, as Sperber and Wilson do.

³² Fodor, a major proponent of the view that instead of (3), we need (4) and (5), takes his view to mean that while English has no semantics, Mentalese, of course, does. Cf. Fodor (1998): 9.

³³ This is the sort of view taken in the Introduction of Carston (2002).

distinction, they need to convince us that referential semantics and pragmatics do not overlap. That is, *none* of the pragmatic processes involved in utterance interpretation requires at any point information about what a certain word refers to or what the truth-conditions of a certain sentence might be. This is a strong claim, one that I am not much inclined to believe. But even if my inclination is wrong, it seems unwise to burden a simple distinction with such a theoretical baggage. I think the basic idea of the Sperber and Wilson distinction can be preserved without assuming the truth of cognitivism from the outset.

2. Interpreting utterances

I said that semantics is the study of meaning and pragmatics the study of context. This makes it seem as if they are about entirely different things. In a way, this is so: *primarily* expression types have meaning and expression tokens occur in contexts. Courtesies are extended in both directions, but tokens can only be said to have a certain meaning by extension, in virtue of being tokens of a type with that meaning, and types can only be said to occur in a context by extension, in virtue of being types to which a token that occurs in that context belongs.

Despite their differences there is a way to pull meaning and context together: they are the two sources of information used in *interpreting utterances*. An utterance is an action involving the articulation of a linguistic expression by an intentional agent, the *speaker*, directed at an intentional agent, the *addressee*. The interpretation of the utterance is a certain cognitive process whereby the addressee ascertains what the speaker meant in making the utterance.³⁴ In paradigm cases, interpretation begins with the recognition of a certain acoustic event³⁵ and ends with knowledge about what the speaker

³⁴ I follow Levinson (1983): 72 in distinguishing between *addressee* (someone at whom an utterance is directed) and *hearer* (someone who heard the utterance, perhaps accidentally). The way I understand utterance interpretation, it is always a cognitive process of someone at whom the utterance is directed.

³⁵ I focus here on spoken language because the interpretation of written texts poses extra difficulties. Written language involves a code whereby certain marks are associated with linguistic expressions – a code that is unknown to illiterate but otherwise linguistically-competent people. More importantly, this code enables us to make “canned” utterances that can be directed at an indeterminate number of addressees,

meant in bringing that event about. In between the beginning and the end, the addressee relies on her ability to understand linguistic expressions (her knowledge of their meanings) and on her ability to track what is manifest in the situation (her knowledge of the context). When she does the former, she is engaged in semantic interpretation; when she does the latter, she is engaged in pragmatic interpretation.

What is speaker meaning, knowledge of which by the addressee is the postulated end point of interpretation? According to Grice's famous analysis, it is a certain effect the speaker intends to bring about in the addressee by means of the recognition of that intention.³⁶ That meaning something involves intentions to bring about recognition of intentions is an important insight that has been preserved in much of our current thinking. Nonetheless, we know that Grice's analysis is not exactly correct. The speaker may utter something; have the first-order intention to bring about a certain effect in the addressee, and the second-order intention that this response come about by means of the recognition of the first-order intention – still, he may also have a third-order intention that his second-order intention should remain unrecognized.³⁷ Fixing up Grice's characterization so that it can deal with such cases is hard and I will not attempt it here. All that is needed for our purposes is the acknowledgment that it requires the speaker having a certain intention to bring about a certain effect, and that beyond that it requires nothing but presence of some further intentions and possibly the absence of others.³⁸

If meaning something by an utterance primarily requires having an intention to bring about some effect in the addressee, it seems natural to say that *what* is meant by an utterance is just that effect. This is indeed Grice's view:

... to ask for a specification of what *A* meant [by making an utterance] is to ask for a specification of the intended effect (though, of course, it may not always be possible to get a straight answer involving a "that" clause, for example, "a belief that...").³⁹

rendering the process of identifying the context (or contexts) against which the interpretation must take place particularly difficult.

³⁶ Grice (1957): 220.

³⁷ Examples of this sort were first raised in Strawson (1964).

³⁸ For discussion how Grice's analysis might be improved, see Searle (1965), Grice (1967), Schiffer (1972), Bach and Harnish (1979), and Sperber and Wilson (1986).

³⁹ Grice (1957): 220.

The parenthetical remark is a bit surprising, for “straight answers” to the question what someone meant by making an utterance do not typically involve anything like a clause:

- (7) a. By uttering ‘Watch out!’ I meant to bring you to a halt.
- b. By uttering ‘Well done.’ I meant to make you proud.
- c. By uttering ‘Who is that?’ I meant to get you to tell me who you were talking to.
- d. By uttering ‘Your wallet!’ I meant to obtain your wallet.
- e. By uttering ‘It is on the left’ I meant to persuade you to turn left.

By contrast, if we focus not on what effects the speaker intends to accomplish *by* making the utterance, but rather on what the speaker intends to do *in* making it, we can easily get the impression that a straight answer must indeed involve a clause – not necessarily one headed by the complementizer ‘that’, but a clause nonetheless:

- (8) a. In uttering ‘Watch out!’ I meant to warn you that the train is coming.
- b. In uttering ‘Well done.’ I meant to praise you for having succeeded.
- c. In uttering ‘Who is that?’ I meant to ask you who you were talking to.
- d. In uttering ‘Your wallet!’ I meant to command you to hand me your wallet.
- e. In uttering ‘It is on the left.’ I meant to inform you that the exit is on your left.

It is hard to resist the idea that Grice did not pay sufficient attention to Austin’s distinction between *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts.⁴⁰ There are two sorts of speaker meaning. Someone who understands my utterances will *typically* know the things stated under (7), but all he *must* know are the things stated under (8). I suggest that we should modify Grice’s view and bring it in harmony with ordinary usage and take the latter, rather than the former, to be the endpoint of utterance interpretation.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Austin (1962), esp. Lecture VII. Illocutionary acts are what later came to be called speech acts – acts that have content, often but not always specifiable by a clause. Such acts include asserting, describing, warning, commanding, requesting, referring, etc. Perlocutionary acts are *effects* of illocutionary acts on the audience. The third of Austin’s tripartite distinction, the *locutionary act* is the mere utterance of a meaningful linguistic expression. For example, according to Austin in performing the locutionary act of articulating a sequence of premises and a conclusion I often perform the illocutionary act of arguing, and if things work out fine I may also perform the perlocutionary act of convincing my audience. Grice’s lapse has been stressed by Strawson (1964), Searle (1969), and Bach and Harnish (1979).

⁴¹ Note that this does not necessarily call into question Grice’s claim that one can only mean something if one has an intention to bring about a certain effect in the addressee. But the relevant effects must be immediate – the understanding of the utterance by the addressee. What we usually call the effects of an utterance are more remote – such as getting the addressee to believe something or to act in some way. Searle (1969): 46 notes, Grice’s claim that speaker meanings are intended perlocutionary effects is

I am not sure whether all specifications of what the speaker meant in uttering certain words can be brought into canonical form, like the ones under (8), but I am fairly confident that most can. In the canonical formulations we can distinguish between two components: one is given by the main verb within the infinitival clause in the complement of ‘mean’ and the other by the clause in the complement of that verb. I call the first component the *illocutionary act* meant by the utterance, the second the *content* of that act. For example, in (8a) the illocutionary act meant by the utterance is *warning*, and the content of the warning is *that the train is coming*, in (8b) the illocutionary act is *praising* and the content of the praising is *you having succeeded*.

So, a general theory of utterance interpretation is the study of how we normally get from our perceptions of certain sounds to our knowledge what the person making those sounds meant in making them. It is important that this theory studies *normal* processes – it does not investigate, for example, the arduous path followed by Champollion in deciphering the Rosetta stone. That process relies on information beyond meaning and context.⁴² Although it is not as complex as hermeneutics, the theory of utterance interpretation is still an ambitious enterprise, one we have no clear idea how to pursue (hence philosophers’ persisting interest in it). Conventional wisdom locates semantics in the middle of this picture: its inputs are linguistic expressions (something which must somehow be identified through parsing the noises that are the input of utterance interpretation) and its outputs are linguistic meanings (something which must somehow yield through further processing knowledge of what was meant in making the noises by the one who was making them). Since semantic knowledge is something speakers have independently of the particular situations in which they interpret utterances, this pairing is strictly context-independent. Context enters utterance interpretation *before* semantics does (in helping disambiguation, filling in elliptical

problematic anyway: when I greet someone I undoubtedly mean something even though my utterance is typically without intended perlocutionary effects.

⁴² We should certainly avoid the temptation to say that context includes absolutely everything an addressee might employ to ascertain what a speaker meant. If context is understood so widely, then it is trivial that interpretation requires nothing beyond knowledge of context, and so, knowledge of meaning is deemed not to be an independent source of information for interpreting utterances. I return to this issue at the end of Section 3.

expressions, etc.) or *after* semantics does (in helping to derive conversational implicatures, to determine the force of indirect speech acts, etc.).

The temporal language must be taken with a grain of salt here. There is no reason to assume that in interpreting a certain utterance we first determine (without any recourse to semantic knowledge) which linguistic expression was used, then determine (without any recourse to pragmatic knowledge) what that expression means, and then determine (again, without recourse to semantic knowledge) what the speaker meant in making the utterance. It is psychologically much more plausible to think the employment of our semantic and pragmatic knowledge is intertwined, e.g. that in order to disambiguate a sound we need to consider the meanings of the alternative expressions it may encode, or even what sort of implicatures the utterance of the alternative expressions may carry. But this does not alter the conceptual point that we can assign a linguistic meaning to an expression only after we know what the expression is, or the conceptual point that if the assignment of linguistic meaning to the expression occurs at all, it must occur before the entire process of utterance interpretation reaches its goal.

Does interpretation always have to involve a semantic component? Do we have to know what words, phrases, and clauses were uttered and what they meant if we are to ascertain what the speaker meant in uttering them? The answer is no – otherwise people with patchy knowledge of a language wouldn't be able get along so well. It is an everyday experience of people interacting in a foreign-language environment that they may be perfectly clear about what an utterance meant despite hearty ignorance concerning some of the expressions that compose it. Indeed, it is a common experience to learn all but the first few hundred words of a new language *in situ* by understanding utterances in which they occur and then reasoning back to what their linguistic meaning must be. Furthermore, it seems to me that in certain exceptional cases we could *in principle* bypass all semantics: we could ascertain what the speaker meant in uttering a certain expression without knowing the meaning of *any* component of that expression.⁴³

⁴³ This is Grice's view as well. Searle criticized Grice's definition of speaker meaning on the grounds that it allows for this possibility. The intuition Searle relies on is exemplified in the following case. An American soldier in the Second World War wishes to convince the Italians who have captured him that he is a German officer by uttering the only German sentence he knows: 'Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?' Intuitively, in making this utterance he does not mean to tell them that he is a German soldier.

What about interpretation without a pragmatic component? Can there be a situation where an addressee can interpret an utterance completely independently of context, exclusively on the basis of his linguistic knowledge? I think this is doubtful. Take a case of a math teacher announcing at the end of a calculation: “Four thousand eight hundred fifty three plus six hundred ninety four is five thousand five hundred forty seven.” Clearly, the students know that the teacher meant to inform them that $4853 + 694 = 5547$. But the fact that she meant just that (and not something more, or something altogether different) is something they know because they know that they are listening to their teacher in a class and not, for example, to an enraged customer in a restaurant (who is complaining about the faulty addition on his bill) or an actor on stage (who plays an insane serial killer making plans). Perhaps there is such a thing as zero context, but the addressee still must know that he is in such a context, and *that* knowledge is not linguistic.

Let me summarize the picture advocated here. I suggest that we understand semantics and pragmatics as subfields within the general study of utterance interpretation, the process whereby the addressee determines what the speaker meant in uttering a linguistic expression. Typically but not always, such a process will include a component when the speaker associates linguistic expressions with their meanings: this is the subject-matter of semantics. This association is independent of the context in which the utterance takes place; the study of the various ways in which context influences utterance interpretation is the business of pragmatics.

Like the cognitivist conception, this picture avoids the problems that render the semiotic and the indexical conceptions implausible: unlike Morris’ definitions, it accounts for the fact that semantics can be pursued in relative ignorance of pragmatics, but not the other way around, and unlike Montague’s definitions, it does not neglect the fact that pragmatics is concerned with the interpretation of utterances, not merely the interpretation of linguistic expressions in context. It departs from the cognitivist

The conclusion Searle draws is that in order for a speaker to mean something, he must intend that his primary intention to convey something be recognized *in virtue of the addressee’s semantic knowledge*; cf. Searle (1965): 49 – 50. I think the suggested revision of Grice’s definition is much too radical. As Grice (1967): 101 – 102 points out, Searle’s definition is much too restrictive. If a Port Said merchant standing in the doorway of his shop sees a British visitor and in a sweet tone with an alluring smile utters the Arabic translation of ‘You pig of an Englishman’, he *does* mean to suggest that the visitor should come into his store, and the visitor may well correctly interpret his utterance this way.

conception in being neutral on the questions of whether semantic and pragmatic processes are fundamentally different and whether either is fully describable at the level of individual psychology.

3. Truth-conditions and what is said

Saying that semantics is concerned with meaning may simultaneously bore and annoy philosophers. It's a bit like "You should buy low and sell high" – true but unhelpful. Semanticists tend to talk more about truth-conditions than about meaning. I need to stick out my neck and say something about how truth-conditions fit into the picture I outlined; otherwise the main frontlines in the semantics/pragmatics wars remain hidden.

It is sometimes said that the meaning of an expression simply *is* what it contributes to the truth-conditions of declarative sentence where it occurs (in an extensional context). As it stands, this isn't quite right: there are meaningful subsentential expressions which contribute nothing to truth-conditions (such as 'by the way'⁴⁴) and differences in meaning (say, between 'a(n)' and 'at least one'⁴⁵) which do not affect truth-conditions. Semanticists who conduct their business in terms of truth-conditions are well aware of this, but they are sufficiently well-occupied by their central task not to worry much about peripheral cases. Still, if one wants to speak accurately, one has to be a bit more careful. We can say at most that the linguistic meaning of an expression simply *determines* what (if anything) it contributes to the truth-conditions of declarative sentence where it occurs (in an extensional context). Here is how David Lewis puts such a proposal:⁴⁶

A meaning for a sentence determines the conditions under which the sentence is true or false. It determines the truth-value of the sentence in various possible states of affairs, at various times, at various places, for various speakers, and so

⁴⁴ 'By the way' is hardly exceptional: Bach (1999) lists over a hundred such examples.

⁴⁵ That these expressions don't mean the same is plausible because unlike 'a(n)', 'at least one' cannot occur as the subject of a generic sentence ('At least one elephant never forgets' vs. 'An elephant never forgets') and can be part of a complex quantifier ('at least one but no more than five' vs. *'an but no more than five'). It is hard to believe that these syntactic contrasts have nothing to do with meaning.

⁴⁶ Lewis (1970): 193.

on. [...] Similarly, a meaning for a name is something that determines what thing, if any, the name names in various possible states of affairs, at various times, and so on. [...] Similarly, a meaning for a common noun is something that determines which (actual or possible) things, if any, that common noun applies to in various possible states of affairs, at various times, and so on. We call the truth-value of a sentence the *extension* of that sentence; we call the thing named by a name the *extension* of that name; we call the set of things to which a common noun applies the *extension* of that common noun. The extension of something in one of these three categories depends on its meaning and, in general, on other things as well: on facts about the world, on the time of utterance, on the place of the utterance, on the speaker, on the surrounding discourse, etc. It is the meaning that which determines how the extension depends on the combination of other relevant factors.

It is important that Lewis uses the term ‘truth-condition’ in a slightly non-standard way. He takes truth-conditions to be *all* the conditions other than meaning upon which the truth-value of a (declarative)⁴⁷ sentence depends. Call these *absolute truth-conditions*. Lewis would represent the absolute truth-conditions of ‘I am now hungry’ by a function that maps possible worlds, times, and individuals onto the truth just in case the individual is the speaker at that time in that world and (s)he is hungry. Truth-conditions are typically construed more restrictively: they specify the conditions involving the *subject-matter* of the sentence upon which its truth-value depends. Call these *relative truth-conditions*. The relative truth-conditions of ‘I am now hungry’ vary according to speaker and time of utterance: if the speaker is Socrates and the time of utterance is 5pm GMT January 6, 2006, they could be representable by the function that maps possible worlds onto the truth just in case Socrates is hungry at 5pm GMT January 6, 2006 in that world; if the speaker is Cromwell and the time of utterance is 1pm GMT March 11, 1256, they could be representable by the function that maps possible worlds onto the truth just in case Cromwell is hungry at 1pm GMT March 11, 1256 in that world, and so on for any possible individual and any possible time.⁴⁸ Lewis claims that linguistic meaning determines absolute truth-conditions, and consequently, that linguistic meaning *together with the context* determines relative truth-conditions. Relative truth-conditions are typically called ‘truth-conditions’ or ‘truth-conditional content’ and I will also follow this

⁴⁷ Lewis (1970): 220 – 226 sketches some proposals about how to extend this story to non-declaratives.

⁴⁸ Those who abhor non-actual possibilia can represent universal truth-conditions by a relativized T-sentence and factual truth-conditions by unrelativized ones. For current purposes, nothing hangs on this.

practice. The view Lewis advocates in the quote above can be rephrased then as follows: linguistic meaning plus context determine truth-conditional content. Call this the *standard view*.⁴⁹

There are two widespread misconceptions about standard view. The first is that it says that semantic theory *aims* at the assignment of truth-conditional content relative to context. But this does not follow from the standard view. Semantics is supposed to tell us what linguistic expressions mean and truth-conditional content relative to context is *not* meaning. (The two obviously come apart in cases of meaningful expressions contributing nothing to truth-conditions of sentences in which they occur, such as ‘by the way’. I suspect the divergence is much more widespread.⁵⁰) Nonetheless, in many cases the best we can do in characterizing linguistic meaning is to show how it determines, together with context, the truth-conditional content of an expression. Semantics is about meaning; semantic interest in context and truth-conditions is instrumental.

But even if this is not its aim, does semantic theory *in fact* assign truth-conditional content relative to context? This is the second misconception about the standard view. Semantic theories assign semantic values to linguistic expressions. Semantic values do some of the things within the theory what meanings do in fact – e.g. they determine, together with context, truth-conditional content. Lewis actually presented an argument *against* the view that compositional semantic theories assign to declarative sentences their truth-conditional contents.⁵¹ There are ways to resist Lewis’s conclusion and the debate is quite intricate.⁵² What is important for present purposes here is that Lewis’s own view is well within the bounds of the standard view: what a semantic theory assigns

⁴⁹ Some philosophers prefer to conduct the business of semantics in terms of propositions rather than truth-conditions. They don’t deny that one can assign truth-conditions to declarative sentences, but they prefer to break this assignment into two parts: the assignment of propositions to sentences, and the assignment of truth-conditions to propositions. The first part (e.g. that ‘Snow is white’ expresses in English the proposition that snow is white) is an empirical matter which belongs to semantics; the second part (e.g. that the proposition that snow is white is true just in case snow is white) is a conceptual truth. Whether these philosophers are right is orthogonal to the issue whether the standard view is correct: meaning plus context may well determine truth-conditional content even if such a determination is not a purely semantic matter.

⁵⁰ I have argued in Szabó (2000) that the indefinite and definite articles have the same truth-conditional content, namely, that of the quantificational determiner ‘some’. I did not say that the articles are synonymous – they most certainly are not.

⁵¹ Lewis (1981).

⁵² For a detailed reply to Lewis, see King (2003).

to a complete declarative sentence in a context must *determine* its truth-conditional content but it needn't be *identical* to that.

The standard view has fallen into disrepute in many circles lately. The reason is that there are a host of putative counterexamples to it. These are all simple, meaningful, well-formed declarative sentences, each of which seems to lack truth-conditional content, even within a context of utterance. Here are some examples:

- (9) a. Igor is tall. (compared to what?)
- b. Louise is taller. (than whom?)
- c. Kati is ready. (for what?)
- d. Hendryk arrived. (where?)

Intuitively, the parenthetical questions must be answered before we can assign truth-conditional content to these sentences and, it is claimed, the answers are not provided by the context of utterance. From this, it is concluded that what the semantic theory assigns to these sentences (and many others) in a context *underdetermines* their truth-conditional content.^{53,54}

One can object to these putative counterexamples in two ways. The first is to deny that without answering the parenthetical questions we cannot assign truth-conditional content to these sentences. This might be the most plausible in the case of (9a): perhaps 'Igor is tall' is true in *any* context just in case Igor is tall. If so, 'Igor is tall' does not follow from 'Igor is tall for a soccer player', no matter what the context might be. People may, of course, convey the thought that Igor is tall for a soccer player by sincerely uttering 'Igor is tall' in the right context, but this has nothing to do with the truth-conditional content of the sentence. Defenders of this line will be forced to acknowledge

⁵³ Sperber and Wilson (1986): 188 suggest that we assign to such sentences subpropositional logical forms; Bach (1994): 269 says that they express propositional radicals.

⁵⁴ In addition to these sorts of cases many theorists (among them Sperber and Wilson, and Bach as well) claim that semantics underdetermines scope assignment. More generally, Levinson (2000) argues that all indexing at the level of logical form is underdetermined by semantics. These views require not merely the revision of our standard picture of the role of semantics in utterance interpretation, but also that of syntax. (Chapter 4 of Levinson (2000) is an attempt to replace Binding Theory by generalized conversational implicatures.) I set this issue aside, for even if it were true (contrary to the majority view among linguists) a defender of the standard view could simply retreat and claim that semantics assigns a *finite set* of (relative) truth-conditions to declarative sentences. This would be a concession, but not a fundamental one. (Note, for example, that one of the standard approaches that aims to capture the truth-conditional effects of focus already requires that we assign *two* semantic values to declarative sentences; cf. Rooth (1992).)

that tallness is somewhat hard to detect: we may know that Igor is tall for an accountant, not tall for a basketball player – we may even be told that he is exactly 6'1". *In principle* one could know all these facts and still be ignorant whether Igor is tall. This is not particularly intuitive but it is not a fatal objection against those who deny the context-dependence of (9a). After all, they may claim that verificationism is dead: semantics is one thing, epistemology another.⁵⁵

The second option is to claim that context does yield an answer to these questions in one way or another. But how does context do that? Perhaps these sentences are elliptical: context must provide a linguistic expression of some sort to fill in a lacuna. This strategy is most plausible in the case of (9b): the sentence when it occurs in the context of an utterance must be something like 'Louise is taller *than Rita*' or 'Louise is taller *than her*' – it's just that the words in italics remain unpronounced. Why think this? One might point at the fact that, just as paradigm cases of ellipsis, (9b) supports a strict/sloppy ambiguity:

- (10) Vera visited her mother. Louise did too.
- (11) Vera is shorter than her mother. Louise is taller.

(10) can mean either that Louise also visited Vera's mother, or that she also visited her own mother, and (11) either that she is taller than Vera's mother, or that she is taller than her own mother. If the right account of this involves the postulation of ellipsis in (10), the situation is likely to be the same in (11).

In other cases the ellipsis strategy is less plausible. We might then postulate a hidden variable in logical form. A reasonable case can be made for this regarding (9c): perhaps at the level of logical form 'ready' is really 'ready for *x*' and in (9c) it is context that must provide an appropriate value for the variable. One reason to think so could be the observation that this variable is apparently available for binding from outside the clause; the most natural reading of (12) appears to be (13):

⁵⁵ For this sort of line see Cappelen and Lepore (2003) and (2005). They also provide detailed arguments against the positive case made in Searle (1978), Travis (1985), and others that the sort of underdetermination they see in (9a) is present in virtually every declarative sentence.

- (12) Whatever comes her way, Kati is ready.
(13) For every x , if x comes her way, Kati is ready for x .

If we believe, as many syntacticians do, that binding phenomena must be captured at the level of logical form, it seems natural to demand the presence of an appropriate variable in (9c). Once we come this far, it is hard to resist the hidden variable proposal.⁵⁶

Needless to say, these defenses of the standard view are controversial. And there are other examples for which they would be even more controversial, (9d) being one of them. But it is important to see that just because it is hard to see *how* context may yield answers to certain questions, we cannot immediately conclude that it does not.⁵⁷ Perhaps there is an answer implicit in the context even if the speaker and hearer could not articulate it. This would arguably lead to the conclusion that the content of this sentence relative to the context of utterance – what someone who accepted it as true in that context would believe – is not truth-conditional. Nonetheless, there would be such a thing as the truth-conditional content of the sentence relative to that context and it would be jointly determined by the meaning of the sentence and by the context.⁵⁸ The standard view would still stand.

I don't think any of the standard examples from the literature provide robust enough evidence that the standard view is false. In fact, it seems that there is an *argument* that there won't be counterexamples to the standard view. It goes as follows. Everyone agrees that declarative sentences are the sort of linguistic expressions for which the question of truth or falsity arises, that it *makes sense* to ask whether they would be true if uttered in a certain situation. Now, it might be (for all I know) that although the question makes sense, it cannot be answered because there is simply no fact of the matter about what the correct answer is. If there are such cases, let's set them aside: the challenge the sentences under (9) pose to the orthodox view is not *indeterminacy* but *underdetermination*.⁵⁹ But if there is a fact of the matter whether a declarative sentence is

⁵⁶ For a similar argument for postulating domain variables in the logical form of nouns to capture domain restriction phenomena, see Stanley and Szabó (2000). For a detailed defense of the binding argument, see Stanley (2000).

⁵⁷ Compare: just because it is hard to see *how* one may know things about numbers and other abstracta, it does not follow that one does not know things about them.

⁵⁸ For this sort of views, see Perry (1986).

⁵⁹ This point is very clearly made in Carston (2002): 20-21.

true or false, its truth-value depends on its meaning, the context, and the facts it is about – nothing else. By telling what a declarative sentence means we specify something that determines relative to context what the facts would have to be for the sentence to be true.

As far as I can tell, there is only one way to resist this argument: by claiming that it presupposes an unreasonably broad conception of context. This is the charge formulated by Kent Bach in many places, among them in the following passage:⁶⁰

Now if context were defined so broadly as to include anything other than linguistic meaning that is relevant to determining what a speaker means, then of course the speaker's intention would be part of the context. However, if the context is to play the explanatory role claimed for it, it must be something that is the same for the speaker as it is for his audience, and obviously the role of the speaker's intention is not the same for both.

It is certainly true that we should not construe context as including absolutely everything other than linguistic meaning that might play a role in determining what the speaker meant in making an utterance. In particular, we should not say that *what the speaker meant* is itself part of the context – doing so would rob context of its explanatory role. (Interpretation would be portrayed as a process whereby the addressee figures out what the speaker meant on the basis of information that includes, among other things, what the speaker meant.) But this restriction does not entail that context shouldn't include *any* information about the speaker's intentions.⁶¹ It is, I think, perfectly legitimate to include in the context what the speaker meant *in uttering certain words that occur in the sentence he uttered*. So, for example, while it is illegitimate to assume that when the speaker utters the sentence 'She is hungry', it is part of the context of utterance that in uttering 'She is hungry' he meant to inform the addressee that Adele is hungry, it is *not* illegitimate to assume that in uttering 'she' he meant to refer to Adele. (Interpretation then is portrayed as a process whereby the addressee figures out what the speaker meant in making an utterance of a sentence on the basis of information that may include, among other things, what the speaker meant in uttering some of the constituents of that sentence.) The charge

⁶⁰ Bach (2001a): 30.

⁶¹ I note here that Gauker (1998) explicitly argues for a conception of context that is thoroughly unintentional. Nonetheless, Gauker is no champion of underdetermination – although he advocates a rather stringent conception of context, but he thinks this is sufficient for determining truth-conditional content.

that such information has a different role for the speaker and the addressee seems beside the point: as long as the speaker made his intention to mean this or that in uttering a word manifest, it can be accessible to the addressee, and that is all that is required.⁶²

This leads the debate to the question of whether the sort of incompleteness many claim to detect in, say, (9c) can be tied to some constituent of the sentence. If so, my response can stand: context may include the speaker's intention to mean 'ready for a fight' in uttering 'ready' within 'Kati is ready'. But those who view (9c) as a counterexample to the project of truth-conditional semantics will insist that 'ready' (and all other constituents of the sentence) are used *literally* to mean nothing more or less than what they always mean in every context.⁶³ If they are right then the relevant information needed in order to assign truth-conditions to (9c) will be nothing less than what the speaker meant in uttering the entire sentence, and this – I already conceded – cannot be part of the context of utterance.

Resolving this debate is not something I will attempt here. What is relevant for our purposes is something that both sides should readily concede: that the fate of the underdetermination challenge against truth-conditional semantics depends on subtle empirical questions, and neither the piling of putative counterexamples, nor some abstract argument, is likely to lead to a quick resolution. What I can offer here are a few remarks which may put this debate in clearer focus by distancing it from another equally tangled but quite independent disagreement concerning the notion of *what is said*.

The distinction between what someone said and meant in making a certain utterance is one of the cornerstones of our ordinary thinking about communication. The simplest cases when these come apart are mistakes: the speaker picks the wrong word

⁶² To capture the plausible idea that context is shared by the speaker and the addressee, we can identify it with some part of common ground. Following Stalnaker (2002), we can say that p is part of the common ground in a conversation iff the speaker and the addressee accept p , they both believe that they accept p , they both believe that they both believe that they accept p , ... and so on. Unlike Stalnaker, I think context should not be thought of as *all* of the common ground, since then context would include the linguistic meanings as well. Those who resist identifying context with part of the common ground sometimes object that the reference of indexicals is determined independently of everything the speaker and addressee may believe. Now, it is certainly true that the referent of 'I' is *not* Napoleon in an utterance of 'I order you to withdraw the troops' uttered in a psychiatric hospital by one patient to another, even if it is common ground between the speaker and the addressee that the utterer *is* Napoleon. But I take it that this phenomenon can be taken care of if we assume that among all the propositions in the common ground the one that actually fixes the reference of 'I' in the context of an utterance u is one that would have been expressed by the speaker's utterance of 'I am the speaker of this' (where the reference of the demonstrative is u).

⁶³ See Bach (2001b).

(because her understanding of it is defective or because she is speaking carelessly), and she ends up saying something she does not mean. More complex but equally uncontroversial are cases discussed by Grice in great detail, where someone says something and thereby implicates something else, which she also means. And there are probably other sorts of cases as well.⁶⁴

Somehow or other the standard view about semantics came to acquire the additional commitment that the truth-conditional content of a declarative sentence in a context (what semantic theory must specify) is identical to, or at least determined by, what a speaker in that context would say in uttering that sentence. If so, the debates over whether sentences such as (9a-d) have truth-conditional content are properly conducted by eliciting intuitions about what someone uttering these would say under various circumstances. This is, in fact, how most of the debate has been conducted, which is unfortunate, since both the pedigree and the standing of the additional commitment are dubious.

Grice, who was the first to offer a systematic contrast between what is said and what is meant, offered little by way of written illumination concerning his views about the former notion. It is often assumed that he held what is said to be a proposition or truth-conditional content, but I cannot find solid evidence for this in Grice's writings. What Grice claims is that his intended notion of what is said is "closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) he has uttered" and it corresponds to "the elements of [the sentence], their order, and their syntactical character."⁶⁵ In addition, he also insists that what we say is always part of what we mean.⁶⁶ (According to Grice, in uttering the words 'He is a nice friend' ironically one does not say that he is a nice friend, one "makes as if to say" that he is.⁶⁷) Whether he thought that the proper subject of semantics is what is said is rather hard to tell, especially because he does not use the term

⁶⁴ Bach (2001b), for example, claims that there are cases when one says one thing and means something else instead (e.g. when one speaks metaphorically) and cases when one says something but means nothing at all (e.g. when one rehearses the words of others). Describing metaphor and rehearsal in these terms is more controversial than the examples in the main text.

⁶⁵ Grice (1967): 25 and 87.

⁶⁶ Grice (1967): 88 and 120.

⁶⁷ Grice (1967): 34 and 53. Neale (1992) has argued, quite persuasively, that the reason why Grice insisted on this has to do with his large program of reducing linguistic meaning to speaker meaning.

‘semantics’ at all. In any case, the purported Gricean pedigree of the thesis that truth-conditional content is determined by what is said is questionable at best.

And things are little better in the case of Kaplan, who played a central role in popularizing the term ‘what is said.’ Kaplan was certainly committed to the view that ‘what is said’ designates a proposition semantic theory is supposed to assign to declarative sentences relative to contexts. But his is not the ordinary notion of what is said *by a speaker* – it is rather the semi-technical notion of what is said *by a sentence*. Soames, who follows Kaplan in this regard makes this fully explicit when he writes “the fundamental task of a semantic theory is to tell us what sentences say in various contexts of utterance.”⁶⁸ The terminology certainly suggests that what a sentence says in a context bears some intimate relation to what a speaker would say in that context in uttering the sentence, but the claim that this relation is always or even usually *identity* is not part of this conception.⁶⁹

Whether or not it is traceable to a misattribution of lineage, the claim that what a speaker says in uttering a declarative sentence determines the truth-conditional content of the sentence in the context of utterance is assumed tacitly all the time in semantic theorizing. Is this assumption true? Following Austin, we should distinguish between a *locutionary* act of uttering a declarative sentence with a certain meaning and the *illocutiouary* act of performing a speech act (typically an assertion) in uttering that sentence. Both of these can be described as saying something but they are certainly distinct acts; let us call them saying_{loc} and saying_{illoc}.

What a speaker says_{loc} in uttering a declarative sentence in a context is obviously what the semantic theory should assign to that sentence in the context – whether it is truth-conditional is not immediately clear. If you think ‘Hendryk arrived’ is semantically incomplete, you should say that what someone uttering this sentence said_{loc} is *not* truth-conditional.⁷⁰ What a speaker says_{illoc} in uttering a declarative sentence in a context is obviously truth-conditional – whether it is the content of the sentence uttered in the context is controversial. If you think ‘Hendryk arrived’ is semantically incomplete, you

⁶⁸ Soames (1989): 394.

⁶⁹ Nonetheless, it is true that this is often presupposed without argument in semantic theorizing. Soames (2002): 57 makes it explicit, but Soames (2005) goes on rejecting this picture.

⁷⁰ This is what Bach (2001) advocates along with the claim that what is said must be what is said_{loc}.

should say that what someone uttering this sentence said_{illoc} is a truth-conditional content determined by pragmatic means.⁷¹

Given the inherent ambiguity of the notion of what is said by a speaker and the proximity of these to the semi-technical notion of what is said by a sentence, intuitions about what is said are of dubious value.⁷² I think it is better to avoid such a slippery term when we debate whether declarative sentences have truth-conditional content in context. It would perhaps be better to settle whether truth-conditional semantics can be defended against the underdetermination examples before we sort out how the various notions of what is said relate to utterance interpretation.

4. Conclusion

The distinction between semantics and pragmatics, I argued, is the distinction between the study of meaning and the study of context. These are components of a general theory about how addressees normally determine what speakers mean in uttering linguistic expressions. Semantic knowledge is context-independent, but semantics does meddle with context to the extent that part of its task is to settle what the truth-conditional content of various expressions is relative to context. Context does not include absolutely everything other than meaning that might be relevant to the interpretation of an utterance, but it does include at least some information about speaker intentions.⁷³

⁷¹ This is what Recanati (2001) advocates along with the claim that what is said must be what is said_{illoc}.

⁷² Our ordinary practice of indirect quotation certainly does not require that in reporting someone's utterance we use a clause that has the same truth-conditional content; see Capellen and Lepore (1997) and (2005) for detailed arguments.

⁷³ I thank Kent Bach, Kati Farkas, Tamar Szabó Gendler, Ernie Lepore, Allyson Mount, and Barry Smith for their comments and objections.

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