

Luca Baptista and Erich Rast, eds.

Meaning and Context.

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‘Is meaning context dependent?’ has been a recurring debate since Frege in the philosophy of language. When we talk about ‘language’, this necessarily subsumes three components: structure, semantics, and organization. Structure has to do with syntax, which expresses the mechanism of production of language; semantics conveys assigning meaning to the expression; organization or grammar delineates a rule-governed structure. These three elements do facilitate communication. The primary question, however, is this: are these components both necessary and sufficient for explaining all possible expressions in the usage of language?

This book tries to answer this question from different perspectives and at different levels by incorporating thirteen papers, including a short introduction by the editors. The contributors elaborate on the theme through psychological, logical, and philosophical avenues among others, and the collection thus covers a wide range of issues. The subject index testifies to this breadth, covering as it does terms such as the semantic-pragmatic distinction, presupposition, indexicality, minimalism, occasionalism, contextualism, negation, and game theory.

The collection commences with an introductory essay that contextualizes the other contributions. It traces the trajectory of the debate on context and meaning from Frege to Kaplan, Recanati, and Perry, to name but a few. It points to the importance of ‘indexical expressions’ and illustrates how they are naturally context-dependent. Kaplan’s approach to ‘indexicality’ is further illustrated by considering his work ‘Logic Demonstratives (1989)’. As the editors write, ‘In Kaplan’s approach, the linguistic meaning (character) of a sentence in a context yields an intension (context), which in turn, depending on the circumstances of evaluation, has an extension’ (1–2). Such an evaluation proceeds in two steps. First, ‘the mixing ingredients are provided by the context parameter, and in the second, tenses and modal expressions operate on the resulting intension and evaluate it with respect to different circumstances of evaluation’ (2). The editors further discuss Kaplan’s arguments, highlighting the debate between Recanati and Kaplan on the issue of linguistic context-dependence. Recanati holds the view that we should stick to truth-conditional pragmatics instead of a truth-conditional semantic approach for deriving the meanings from all varieties of propositions in ordinary language. The editors also illustrate Perry’s views on Recanati’s approach to meaning derivation from a speaker’s utterances. By considering the works of Recanati, Kaplan, and Perry, the authors outline a determinate number of different philosophical positions about linguistic context-dependence. These are semantic minimalism, radical semantic contextualism, and moderate semantic contextualism.

Semantic minimalists hold that the actual understanding of a sentence relies on its literal meaning, which is expressed by its pragmatic component. Accordingly, it will be wrong to conclude ‘from examples of the contextual variability of speech act content that the semantic content of the corresponding sentence is contextually variable’ (6). Contextualists by contrast

claim that ‘it must be possible to trace back a genuine semantic context-dependence to the logical form of the sentence which is being analyzed’ (6). Bach (2005), who seconds the contextualists’ views, moderately puts it that obtaining meaning from a sentence is not necessarily truth-evaluable, but is not devoid the task of pragmatics. Recanati as a radical contextualist refutes the moderate contextualists’ views by posing a query: can we derive the actual meanings of propositions like ‘I have had breakfast’? Recanati suggests that meaning derivation is an ‘idle wheel’ for linguistic theorization backed by a hearer’s intuition regarding the speaker’s utterances.

Towards the end of their paper, Baptista and Rast canvas the extension and evaluation of Kaplan’s work by Lasnik (2005, 2008) and MacFarlane (2005, 2007, 2008). Since the evaluators are proclaimed relativists, they depart from Kaplan’s work insofar as they hold that actual meaning derivation from a sentence does not depend solely on the context parameter but also on the variability of contextual circumstances. For example, two people might disagree when it comes to the semantic content of ‘John’s nephew is tall’, and both may be right. This is so because they may evaluate the content of ‘tall’ from two different perspectives.

Manuel Garcia-Carpintero as the author of the second paper examines the notion of presupposition and its role for understanding a speaker’s utterances. He suggests that both speaker and hearer must share some common ground (common knowledge) in order to acquire the actual meanings of propositions. Following this paper, Borg, while participating in the debate between minimalists and contextualists regarding the evaluation of the lexical meanings of sentences, endorses the minimalist view. Borg takes word-meaning to be an atomic concept and criticizes the internalist approaches to lexical meaning. Her notion of lexical meaning is encapsulated in the theory of ‘Organisational Lexical Semantics’ (OLS). The theory posits that word meaning is atomic and referential and, further, that it is lexical organization which guides the minimalist in explaining intralinguistic semantic phenomena. Emphasizing the mentalist account of meaning, the authors of the fifth paper, Vicente and Martínez-Manrique, counteract the conceptual atomism suggested by Borg and advocate decompositionalism. Vicente and Martínez-Manrique take an intermediate position between the two extremes of minimalism and radical contextualism; in their view, ‘atomism as a concept has no structure’ (144).

Bezuidenhout in her contribution tries to defend contextualism by supplying empirical evidence from psycholinguistics and attempts to prove that contextualism can offer a scientific explanation of pragmatic modulation for deriving the actual meanings of propositions. In the subsequent paper, Stojanovic argues on ‘meaning and reference of proper names’ from the pragmatic standpoint. Names enable speakers to identify the referent of the expression. Here, ‘referent’ must be understood as the primary act of referring. Explaining further, she clarifies that what is referred to by an expression is not part of the semantics although it is related to its truth-value. This is so because the semantic content of an expression lies in its lexically encoded content. Thus, a direct referent-identification gives clear information about the names used in a sentence to convey a particular meaning. Furthermore, she iterates the interplay between reference, meaning, and content in the context of indexicality.

Korta and Perry discuss acts of referring while attempting to develop a new pragmatic theory of singular reference that would rely solely on referential intentions. They develop their

theory by using two theoretical tools: roles and cognitive fixes. While elaborating on these tools, they submit that ‘referential acts exploit a speaker’s cognitive fix on an object and aim to induce a hearer to have a cognitive fix on that object appropriate to the speaker’s communicative goals’ (162). To establish this theory and to have ceaseless communication, they propose ‘GDTPA (grammar, directing, target, path and auxiliary intentions)’ (162) structure of referential plans.

In the succeeding paper, Ball develops a taxonomy to answer the central question ‘what is semantic content?’ Ball’s taxonomy is composed of five principal elements, nihilism, minimalism, propositional radicalism, indexical contextualism, and relativism. Berkovski in his work critically examines Josef Stern’s theory of metaphor, which is developed by considering the works of Stalnaker’s account of context and Kaplan’s semantic theory of indexicals. Berkovski posits that Stern’s position is not valid from a pragmatic standpoint.

The semantic ambiguity of negation delineated by Marques in her paper takes up the tenth slot in this book. She highlights the crucial distinction between negation in its external and internal senses. Supporting her claims both by empirical evidence and by philosophical theorization, Marques argues that negation is in fact not lexically ambiguous. In addition, she addresses Kripke’s and Larry Horn’s works in her paper. Falcato, coming on the heels of Marques, defends occasionalism and repudiates the minimalists’ proposal regarding actual meaning derivation from sentences. In her view, minimalism cannot embrace those wider contextual contributions expected to achieve truth-evaluability.

Pistoia-Reda develops a theoretical framework in line with Grice’s account of communication and game theory. In the process, he analyzes ‘the notion of complexity in Horn scales, opting for structural complexity, whose principles function as filters, operating before the (rational) conversational process’. The paper concludes with a note that ‘every time a communicative game is going on, speaker and hearer coordinate because rationality dictates so’ (280). Moldovan pens the last paper of the book. He addresses the uses of language in thought in reference to Jeff Speaks’ arguments. Further, he and highlights the relevance of the notion of ‘thinking out loud’ for understanding a speaker’s utterances. The paper argues that every utterance involves intentions and intentions must be formed before the utterances. As a result, the hearer who ‘thinks out loud’ may be able to entertain the thoughts of the speaker.

Philosophers of language among others would certainly appreciate this book. It has substantial materials to acquaint any professional philosopher with recent research developments in the field.

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