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BOOK REVIEW

Peter Ludlow. *Living Words: Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon.* Oxford University Press 2014.

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Peter Ludlow. *Living Words: Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon*. Oxford University Press 2014. 208 pp. \$45.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198712053); \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780788505126).

This book is concerned with the repercussions of the pervasive underdetermination of meaning, and with the resulting dynamism displayed by natural language. The meaning associated with ‘book’, for example, is not sufficient to determine a precise extension for the term, as it does not tell us whether marginal cases such as audiobooks, ebooks, or drafts are to count in the extension. This is the aforementioned meaning underdetermination. Whether such cases do count in the range of ‘book’ will depend upon how we as speakers flesh out (or modulate) the meaning of the term, and the way we do this can vary from context to context. This is the aforementioned dynamism. We as speakers do not just employ expressions, but actually construct their meanings ‘on the fly’, and accordingly we speak in ‘microlanguages’ that can change across or within contexts.

The book is separated into six chapters. While each chapter serves to develop Ludlow’s ‘dynamic’ view a little further, it is fair to say that the first three chapters are primarily concerned with outlining the key components of the view, while the last three chapters are more concerned with the philosophical and linguistic insight that the view provides. After introducing and motivating the two key claims of underdetermination and dynamism, the introduction is used to examine the way speakers can often be engaged in disagreements about how certain expressions should be modulated – which Ludlow labels ‘lexical warfare’. The second chapter examines this argumentative aspect of meaning dynamism further, and it is claimed that although we as speakers have control over how a given expression is to be modulated, there are right and wrong ways to modulate an expression, complete with certain ‘norms of word meaning litigation’. The third chapter seeks to characterize the key claims of Ludlow’s dynamic view, and then subsequently outline how such a view is continuous with the post-Gricean pragmatic literature (particularly relevance theory). In the most intriguing part, Chapter Four attempts to establish how a truth-conditional semantic theory can still be given despite the ubiquity of underdetermination. Further, it is shown how the dynamic view must adjust its definition of validity, and that once this is done a resolution to the Sorites paradox (similar to the ‘shifting sands’ approach outlined by (Delia Graff, ‘Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness’, *Philosophical Topics* 28, 2000)) can be given. Chapter Five focuses on further philosophical issues that the dynamic view can shed new light on. It is argued first that the dynamic view can provide a ‘cheap’ form of epistemic contextualism, secondly that a partial explanation of Kripke’s puzzle of belief can be given, and finally that an account of the retention of indexical thoughts can be given. Finally, the last chapter contains a brief discussion of metaphor as a particularly wide form of modulation – a claim that Ludlow thinks serves to collapse the literal/figurative distinction.

The achievement of this book is in its breadth – both in the philosophical, linguistic, and social topics that it covers in such a short space, and in the vast range of research that it draws from. Naturally, a review of this brevity cannot do justice to every aspect of the book that warrants further discussion or comment, and so here I will discuss only three points.

First, the book appears to be more concerned with investigating the repercussions of meaning underdetermination than with demonstrating its truth. The ‘book’ example outlined above is used to motivate the claim, and such a case can be seen as a form of context-shifting experiment. Such thought experiments have been used previously to argue for meaning underdetermination. But

following the work of semantic minimalists such as Cappelen & Lepore (*Insensitive Semantics*, Blackwell 2005), further work has to be done to establish that the expressions in question are in fact underdetermined and that this context-sensitivity is not actually a variation in pragmatic content. It may be, for example, that ‘book’ has a stable extension across all contexts but that the way the expression is used by speakers can vary. Further, as minimalists usually suppose, this variation in use may even extend to what a speaker is taken to have said in saying a sentence, even though the meaning of that sentence remains invariant and determinate. Ludlow does not seek to address this possibility, and so the book is perhaps best read as assuming the truth of meaning underdetermination against such concerns.

Chapter Four provides (among other things) the fascinating argument for the claim that it is admissible for the truth conditions provided by a semantic theory to be underdetermined. This provides a way of constructing a formal semantic theory even given the pervasive underdetermination of natural language. More specifically, a semantic theory will only account for the meanings of sentence tokens within a microlanguage. In this way, Ludlow takes semantic theory to be a ‘passing’ theory of the kind that Davidson envisaged in his paper ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’. But such a proposal will attract the worry that we have already given up the semantic game. If a semantic theory is supposed to assign a meaning to each construction in a language, then a theory that produces truth-conditions for each construction *that themselves do not have a determinate meaning* will not complete the task it has set out to do. A related point can be made. The output for a Davidsonian semantic theory of the kind that Ludlow hopes to construct will be truth conditions for each sentence-token, such as the following:

1. A token of “Snow is white” is true in microlanguage L iff snow is white.

But what if the modulations used in the metalanguage are distinct from the modulations used in microlanguage L? It appears that we would actually have no guarantee of the truth of (1). Instead, the right truth conditions to assign to a sentence-token on any given occasion is going to depend on how the expressions in question are modulated in both microlanguages. This semantic theory would provide no clue as to what those are. The meanings of every expression are provided by the non-semantic modulation process, while the semantic theory can only provide stable compositional rules that play a role in interpreting sentence-tokens. Perhaps this is seen by Ludlow as an appropriate demotion of semantic theory, but we should not see this as a way of saving the original truth-conditional project.

Before continuing, one further point. Ludlow argues that in order to lift the underdetermination into the metalanguage, precise formal machinery such as sets and functions must be avoided (108), and yet elsewhere he is clear that mathematical and logical language is just as prone to underdetermination as natural language (7). If he does take set-theoretical and functional language to be an exception, this would reveal something quite important about the nature of meaning underdetermination i.e. that it is in fact avoidable. Ludlow admits to finding the idea that sets and functions are underdetermined ‘hard to work through’ (103 ft.4), but clearly further discussion would be beneficial with regard to understanding the extent of meaning underdetermination.

In Chapter Five, it is argued that the ‘cheap’ epistemic contextualism provided by the dynamic view avoids an argument against epistemic contextualism outlined by John Hawthorne

(*Knowledge and Lotteries* Oxford University Press 2004). Suppose that A is currently in a sceptical context and that earlier, in a non-sceptical context, A heard B say that B knows she has hands. Hawthorne argues that A would now be able to deduce via a number of plausible principles that B knows that she has hands. Yet A is in a sceptical context, so such a deduction would be contrary to epistemic contextualism. Ludlow responds that such an argument does not touch his cheap contextualism because on his view speakers in a conversation must agree upon a modulation (in this case regarding ‘know’) (139-140). But this misses the force of the objection. The point is that A can make this deduction about a previous utterance from within a skeptical context. So the fact that the two speakers will have to agree on a modulation when in the same conversation does not help, as A could now be using the term differently in a distinct context. Furthermore, most epistemic contextualists hold that the meaning of ‘know’ remains invariant between speakers *within* a conversational context and so if this were an appropriate response, it would be one available to standard epistemic contextualists anyway.

Overall, the discussion in *Living Words* can often be too rushed or too brief, and this is probably the symptom of a text with too much ambition in too short a space. But even as a mere sketch of a research project (much of which Ludlow has developed elsewhere), *Living Words* is an insightful and challenging read that aims to provide value both inside and outside of academia. As such, the book is enjoyable and also provides original insight into current philosophical issues.

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