

Reply to Predelli

François Recanati

► **To cite this version:**

François Recanati. Reply to Predelli. Maria-José Frapolli. Saying, Meaning, and Referring: Essays on François Recanati's Philosophy of Language, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004. ijn_00000641

HAL Id: ijn_00000641

https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000641

Submitted on 20 Oct 2005

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Reply to Predelli

Stefano Predelli objects to my admittedly polemical remarks on 'traditional semantic approaches' and their ways of handling (or ignoring) context-sensitivity. Those approaches, he argues, can easily accommodate the phenomena I adduce against them.

First, Predelli points out that there is an important distinction between presemantic processes such as disambiguation or the determination of the relevant contextual index, and the semantic mechanism which, given a disambiguated sentence and a contextual index, determines the truth-conditions of the sentence with respect to that index. The latter, but not the former, may be fully pragmatic and involve the hearer's holistic appraisal of the speaker's meaning. Once such a distinction is made, the existence of semantically underdeterminate expressions whose semantic value depends upon what the speaker means can no longer be considered as raising a problem for traditional approaches. What is automatic and independent of speaker's meaning, for those theories, is only the *semantic* determination of truth-conditional content. The presemantic share of the work can be as pragmatic and messy as you please. So Predelli rejects my claim that the form of saturation triggered by semantically underdeterminate expressions is problematic from the traditional point of view.

With free enrichment, things are more subtle. Here Predelli admits that there is a prima facie problem for traditional accounts : the truth-value of an utterance of, say, 'this is red' depends on contextual factors that are not traceable to the semantic contribution of any of the uttered expressions. But, he suggests, nothing prevents a traditional theorist from attempting to account for free enrichment, by adding to the theory a new layer of analysis : the 'post-compositional' layer. In this way progress can be made *within* the traditional framework, just as progress was made when the distinction between extension and intension, or that between content and character, was originally introduced.

In response, let me say, first, that I do not think there is any substantial disagreement between Predelli and me, as far as I can understand. With respect to free enrichment, his account is not detailed enough for me to say whether I can accept it or not, but I have no doubt that some story can be told, by adding a new layer of analysis. The only clear point of disagreement concerns the history of ideas.

Am I fair, or I am unfair, to the semantic tradition — the tradition that began with Frege and took a new start with Montague — when I criticize it the way I do? Predelli says I am unfair, and I want to defend myself.

I take the semantic tradition to be deeply committed to a (tacit) philosophical view which I call 'Literalism'; it is that view which I criticize. To say that the tradition is committed (by default, as it were) to a mistaken view is not to say that it is worthless, however; on the contrary, I think the semantic tradition has been tremendously (and unexpectedly) successful in dealing with natural language in the last thirty years. But to the extent that it has been successful, it has had to give up some of the basic literalist assumptions which it started by presupposing. This evolution away from Literalism and towards Contextualism was gradual and is still unfinished (I claim).

According to me, four stages can be discerned in the historical development of the semantic tradition. The first two or three stages undoubtedly belong to the past, and Predelli does not want to defend the views that were then held. The first of these views is Proto-Literalism, according to which context-sensitivity is a defect of a natural language, to be ignored in theorizing about language. (This view was held at a time when logicians and formally minded philosophers were not, or only marginally, interested in natural language.) Then came Eternalism, which holds that indexicality is a practical convenience rather than an essential feature of natural language. According to Eternalism, indexicality is not a defect — we could hardly communicate if natural language did not have that feature — but it is 'in principle' eliminable so that we can ignore it in theorizing about language.

Next came Conventionalism. This view acknowledges the extent (and ineliminability) of context-sensitivity, but it draws a sharp contrast between the content of a sentence (with respect to context) and the content of the speech act performed by uttering that sentence. The content of the speech act depends upon the multicoloured context in all its richness and it can only be determined on a pragmatic basis, by appealing to factors such as mutual beliefs, speaker's intentions, etc. Things are different with regard to the content of the sentence. It is the linguistic conventions, not the speaker's intentions (or the hearer's beliefs regarding the speaker's intentions), which fix the content of the sentence with respect to context. Thus what determines the content of an indexical expression is not what is in the head of the language users, but a linguistic rule — the rule which constitutes the conventional meaning of that expression.

Predelli argues that the determination of the index with respect to which an indexical sentence is interpreted is presemantic, hence it may involve pragmatic factors such as the speaker's intentions without threatening the claim that the meaning of the sentence automatically fixes its content (with respect to an appropriate index). But this liberal stance is not acceptable from a Conventionalist point of view. Conventionalism rests on the idea that the truth-conditions of a disambiguated sentence are fixed by its linguistic meaning independent of speaker's meaning. This determination is relative to some index, whose determination is indeed presemantic, but *the determination of the index cannot itself depend upon what the speaker means on pains of falsifying the central conventionalist assumption*. So when Predelli says that the traditional framework is compatible with the facts of semantic underdetermination, what he really means is that the traditional framework is not committed to Conventionalism (understood as I do).

In a sense, I agree : Like Proto-Literalism and Eternalism, Conventionalism was but one step in the development of the semantic tradition. Conventionalism replaced Eternalism when the Eternalization Principle was abandoned. Contrary to Eternalism, Conventionalism still has advocates today ; but it is no longer the dominant position. It is widely acknowledged that the speaker's meaning has a role to play in fixing the truth-conditions of indexical sentences. On this, Predelli and I agree. We agree that semantics must take input from pragmatics, not only as far as disambiguation is concerned, but also when it comes to determining the relevant 'index'. The index cannot be read off the context : it must be pragmatically determined.

So there has been a misunderstanding. I never said that what Perry calls 'intentional indexicals' (as opposed to 'automatic indexicals') raise a problem for *current views* , such as Predelli's. The traditional framework constantly evolves, and it seems to me that most reasonable semanticists nowadays give up Conventionalism and accept that semantics needs an input from pragmatics even if we set disambiguation aside. But Conventionalism has been replaced by a new way of drawing the distinction between the content of the sentence and the content of the speech act. That new view, which dominates the scene today, is Minimalism. In the minimalist framework, the semantic content of the utterance departs only minimally from the linguistic meaning of the sentence type (hence the name 'Minimalism'); it departs from it only when the meaning of the sentence itself requires that some

contextual value be assigned to a context-sensitive word or morpheme, or to a free variable in logical form. Now I think Minimalism must be given up in order to account for free enrichment, just as Conventionalism had to be given up to account for semantic under-determination.

My claim, then, is this : the semantic tradition has its roots in the study of artificial languages, and it is historically committed to Literalism. Literalism, in general, minimizes context-sensitivity, which is a characteristic feature of natural language. Still, the semantic tradition has managed to deal with natural language, and has achieved considerable success in that endeavour. Inevitably, in the process, the literalist prejudice had to be given up. But the departure from Literalism has been slow and progressive. It is only recently that Conventionalism has been given up (some theorist still hold that sort of view) and I hold that some work has still to be done in this area — the *aggiornamento* is not completed yet : we still have to account for free enrichment and similar matters. Predelli seems to agree ; he himself attempts to show what such an account might look like.

So what is the difference between Predelli and me ? I do not deny that the semantic tradition can evolve and adapt itself to the facts of natural language. It has done so in the past, and it continues to do so today. So I am optimistic. On the other hand, as a philosopher I point out that this tradition has consistently tried to minimize context-sensitivity by adhering to whichever version of Literalism seemed defensible at the time, given the evidence then available. What the historical development of Literalism reveals is a gradual weakening of Literalism : from Proto-Literalism to Eternalism to Conventionalism to Minimalism. The question that naturally arises is: How far can we go in this direction? Where will this tendency ultimately lead us? And the obvious answer (for me) is: to Contextualism. I find nothing in Predelli's argument that challenges this conclusion.