Crazy Minimalism

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Review of H. Cappelen and E. Lepore

Insensitive Semantics (Blackwell 2004)

I

In the beginning was literalism : the view that (give or take a bit) the conventional meaning of a sentence is its truth-conditional content. As the ordinary language philosophers rightly argued, literalism can't be right, because sentences are context-sensitive : in vacuo, they do not carry content, but do so only 'in context'. Still, the history of the philosophy of language in the twentieth century can be described as a succession of attempts to defend literalism against the obvious counter-examples by softening it and making it weaker and weaker.[1] The currently fashionable version I dubbed 'minimalism' (Recanati 1989, 1993). According to minimalism, the truth-conditional content of a sentence is not identical to its conventional meaning, but it departs from it *only when* the sentence itself, in virtue of its conventional meaning, makes an appeal to context mandatory in order to provide a value for some indexical expression or free variable in need of saturation.

Like most philosophers of language, Cappelen and Lepore are minimalists, but they defend a fairly radical version of minimalism, close to the literalist ideal. Instead of multiplying indexical variables, as other minimalists do, they maintain that there is only a very short list of indexical expressions and that sentences not including any of them are such that their meaning *is* their truth-conditional content. Thus they hold that, if we put tense aside, sentences like 'John is ready' or 'Steel is strong enough', which most theorists consider context-sensitive, actually express complete propositions independent of context. To be sure, such sentences invite the question : 'for what ?' ('ready for what?' 'strong enough for what?'), and it is the context that enables us to answer such questions ; but Cappelen and Lepore hold that the sentences nevertheless express complete propositions independent of

[1] See section 1 of my 'Literalism and Contextualism : Some Varieties'.

context. Which propositions ? They don't tell us. They say it's an issue for the metaphysician, not the semanticist. The semanticist ought to be content with biconditionals such as : *'Steel is strong enough' is true if and only if steel is strong enough*, and *'John is ready' is true if and only if John is ready*.

It is, of course, very hard to take this position seriously. Still, it is worth looking at the argument which led two able philosophers to risk their reputation in the service of that position. Inspired by the abusing (and amusing) tone adopted by Cappelen and Lepore in their entertaining manifesto, I will call the position in question *Crazy Minimalism*.

II

The standard criterion for context-sensitivity has two sides. First, a context-sensitive expression carries different values in different contexts. C&L refer to this as the *context-shifting* condition. Thus 'you' refers to Jim when the speaker addresses Jim, and it refers to Paul when the speaker addresses Paul. This, however, is not sufficient. Many expressions carry different values in different contexts because the context adds something to their constant meaning ; but that additional component may often be considered as external to semantic content proper. Thus conversational implicatures are standardly treated as contextual components of meaning that do *not* impinge upon semantic content. For there to be context-sensitivity in the strict sense, it must be the case that, without a contribution from context, the expression would not carry a complete content. This is the *incompleteness* condition. When the two conditions are met (context-shifting, and incompleteness) we can conclude that the expression at issue is context-sensitive. By this criterion, 'Steel is strong enough' is context-sensitive. First, it carries different values in different contexts C1 and C2 whenever C1 and C2 provide different answers to the 'for what ?' question ; second, without a contribution from context, the sentence is intuitively felt to be 'incomplete' : we are unable to evaluate it as true or false, just as we cannot evaluate 'he is bald' unless we are told who, in context, the pronoun 'he' refers to.

The argument for Crazy Minimalism proceeds in two steps. First, C&L argue against the standard criterion ; that is the destructive part of their proposal. The constructive part consists in offering an alternative, more demanding criterion, according to which only a very restricted set of expressions are context-sensitive.

III

To undermine the standard criterion, C&L borrow an argument from the most radical opponents of literalism : those I dubbed 'contextualists' (Recanati 1993 : 267, 2004a : 90). According to these philosophers, sentences can never express complete propositions independent of context, however explicit speakers try to be. In other words, content is always under-determined by the linguistic material. Thus suppose we start from the sentence 'Steel is strong enough'. We feel that, in order to evaluate the sentence, we must first answer the question : strong enough for what ? Let us make that explicit so as to get rid of context dependence : 'Steel is strong enough *to hold the roof*'. But this, the contextualist argues, is not enough. If we want to evaluate 'Steel is strong enough to hold the roof', we need to be told *for how long* the roof needs to be supported, or *which quantity of steel* is needed to do the supporting. Again, the context is supposed to provide answers to these questions, and in order to get rid of context-sensitivity we must make the answers explicit in the sentences themselves. At this point, the contextualist argues, we are led into an infinite regress ; each time we explicitly answer one such question, the answer itself raises further questions which the context has to implicitly answer.

The contextualist concludes that context-sensitivity ought to be generalized : no natural language sentence wears its truth-conditional content on its sleeves. C&L accept the contextualist *argument*, but, being conservative literalists, they reject the *conclusion*. They argue for a different conclusion : since the standard criterion for context-sensitivity (viz. context-shifting plus incompleteness) leads to the generalization of context-sensitivity, we should reject the criterion. And so they do — they offer a new criterion for telling when an expression is context sensitive and when it isn't. Using the new criterion, they are in a position to argue that very few expressions are actually context-sensitive.

IV

Before considering C&L's new criterion, let us scrutinize their argument so far. That argument is, in several respects, gappy.

First, the argument has force only for someone who antecedently rejects the contextualist conclusion. Cappelen and Lepore's book is addressed to their fellow minimalists, whom they urge to reject the standard criterion for context-sensitivity because it is too liberal. That criterion, they argue, pushes us down a slippery slope since (via the contextualist argument) it leads to the generalization of context-sensitivity. For a literalist, of whatever stripe, this is indeed unacceptable. But nothing has been done to convince an

unbiased philosopher that it is a *mistake* to generalize context-sensitivity. C&L merely presuppose that contextualism is wrong.

On behalf of Cappelen and Lepore, one may try to fill the gap by providing an argument against the contextualist conclusion. The following seems to be close to what they have in mind :

> *(Distinctiveness)*
> The generalization of context-sensitivity is unacceptable because there is something *distinctive* — hence not generalizable — about indexicals and the other context-sensitive expressions that have been listed in the early literature on the topic (the expressions in the 'Basic Set').

Even so, C&L's argument remains gappy. One ought to reject the standard criterion for context-sensitivity, they say, because it leads to the (unacceptable) generalization of context-sensitivity. But does it ? It has been argued that the form of incompleteness which the contextualist argument generalizes — 'top-down incompleteness', as we might call it — is different in kind from the 'bottom-up' incompleteness which the standard criterion invokes (see Recanati 2004a : 93-95 and 139-140). It follows that there are two forms of context-sensitivity, corresponding to the pragmatic processes I call 'saturation' and 'modulation' respectively. If this is right, then one can deny that the standard criterion leads to the generalization of context-sensitivity, since the form of context-sensitivity which the contextualist argument generalizes is not that which the standard criterion captures. By the same token, one can deny that the generalization of context-sensitivity to which the contextualist argument leads conflicts in any way with Distinctiveness. What is distinctive of indexicals etc. is the fact that they are context-sensitive in the 'bottom-up' sense, that is, they are in need of saturation. This is compatible with the fact that, in the top-down sense, every expression — or, perhaps, every complex expression — is context-sensitive since it requires contextual modulation in order to express a definite content (or at least, in order to express the content it does).

To be sure, one may be skeptical of the distinction between the two kinds of incompleteness. A radical contextualist will typically be skeptical. But if one wants to use the contextualist argument, plus Distinctiveness, to argue against the standard criterion, one needs to discuss that crucial issue. C&L don't do so, and that is a gap in their argument.

V

Let us now turn to C&L's new criterion for context-sensitivity. The basic idea is that context-sensitive expressions 'block inter-contextual disquotation', that is, they *make homophonic reports impossible across contexts*. Thus if Bush said on June 3, 2003 'I wasn't ready yesterday', Lepore cannot report his utterance homophonically by saying, on June 5, 'Bush said that I wasn't ready yesterday'. Adjustment of indexicals has to take place to capture what Bush actually said. But, Cappelen and Lepore argue, no such adjustment is required when the expression at issue does not belong to the Basic Set. This provides Cappelen and Lepore with the following test for context-sensitivity :

> Suppose you suspect, or at least want to ascertain whether, *e* is context-sensitive. Take an utterance *u* of a sentence S containing *e* in context C. Let C' be a context relevantly different from C (i.e., different according to the standards significant according to contextualists about *e*). If there's a true disquotational indirect report of *u* in C', then that's evidence S is context insensitive. (p. 89)

Run-of-the-mill context-sensitive expressions such as 'I' or 'yesterday' do block inter-contextual disquotation, so they pass the test, as we have just seen. But consider 'ready', whose context-sensitive nature C&L deny. Does it block inter-contextual disquotation ? According to C&L, the answer is a resounding 'no' :

> We're imagining the following two contexts of utterance of (1) :

> (1)   John is ready

> *Context of utterance C1*. In a conversation about exam preparation, someone raises the question of whether John is well prepared. Nina utters (1).
> *Context of utterance C2*. Three people are about to leave an apartment ; they are getting dressed for heavy rain. Nina utters (1).

> Here's a pretty obvious fact : whichever of these contexts of utterance we consider, no matter how dissimilar you think they are from each other, *each of [Nina's] utterances can still be reported disquotationally*. To ensure this is utterly obvious, we'll right

now engage in actual speech acts… In (1.1) we report on her utterance in (C1), in (1.2) her utterance in C2 :

(1.1)   Nina said that John is ready.

(1.2)   Nina said that John is ready.

(1.3)   In both C1 and C2, Nina said that John is ready.

<div align="right">(p. 90-91)</div>

(1.1) – (1.3) are supposed to be uttered in a context C3 (the 'storytelling context') distinct both from C1 and C2. And the fact that, despite the differences between C1, C2 and C3, the same expression 'ready' may be *used in C3* to report what the speaker said *in either C1 or C2* (or, perhaps, as in (1.3), what the speaker said in *both* C1 and C2) shows that the expression in question is not really context-sensitive — its semantic value stays constant from context to context, despite the illusory intuition that what (1) says differs when we move from C1 to C2.

<div align="center">VI</div>

Cappelen and Lepore's new criterion (inter-contextual disquotation) yields results that apparently conflict with those we get by using the standard criterion. So what is going on ? Cappelen and Lepore argue that the standard criterion uses the wrong kind of 'context shifting argument' (CSA), i.e. the wrong kind of scenario intended to elicit intuitions about context-sensitivity.

C&L draw a distinction between two types of CSA. The standard criterion draws upon what they call an *Impoverished* CSA (ICSA). An ICSA is a description of two target contexts C1 and C2 such that a given expression *e* allegedly carries different values with respect to C1 and C2. This (together with incompleteness intuitions) is supposed to show that *e* is context-sensitive. C&L reject that conclusion : they hold that ICSAs systematically elicit illusory intuitions. Instead, they suggest that one should use a more complex type of scenario which they call a *Real* CSA (RCSA). RCSAs are distinguished from ICSAs by the fact that *the expression* e *is not merely mentioned, but actually used in the storytelling context*, i.e. in the context C3 in which the use of *e* in C1 and/or C2 is being described and reported. Whereas ICSAs involve two 'target contexts' C1 and C2, and an alleged shift in semantic value from C1 to C2, RCSAs additionally involve the 'storytelling context' C3. In C3 the alleged context-sensitive expression whose semantic value is supposed to shift from C1 to C2 is used to report what was said in C1 and/or C2 ; and the fact that the expression *e* can be used in the

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storytelling context to report what was said in the target context C1/C2 shows that the expression carries the same content in C1, C2 and C3, hence that it is not really context-sensitive, superficial intuitions notwithstanding. Were it context-sensitive, inter-contextual disquotation would be blocked as we move from C1/C2 to C3.

<div align="center">VII</div>

I have just expounded Cappelen and Lepore's Master Argument in favour of Crazy Minimalism. What are we to think of it ? If I were Cappelen and Lepore, I would say that it *fails miserably* (one of their favorite expressions). And it does ! Since they first put forward their idea, so many people came up with so many counterexamples that I will not try to be original ; I will simply borrow one here to make my point. The following example — actually an elaboration on Cappelen and Lepore's own example —is due to Sarah Jane Leslie :

> John is on the job market, and about to be interviewed for his dream job. Unfortunately, he is very lazy and hasn't bothered to prepare for the interview at all. He can barely even remember what his thesis is about, and is unbelievably nervous. Looking at him, his thesis advisor says: "Well, at least John's ready." The department chair appropriately responds: "Are you out of your mind? He's clearly not ready!" (…)
>
> The night before John's APA nightmare, he was very hungry. People were going out for dinner, and inquired if John was in a position to eat dinner right then. He was indeed ready to eat dinner, and appropriately responded, "Yes, I'm ready'. John's thesis advisor overheard this, and the next day, as John awaited his interview in terror, the advisor adduces this comment as support for his claim that John is ready. He says: "Hey, last night he said himself that he was ready."

The advisor's homophonic report, 'Last night he said himself that he was ready', is clearly inappropriate in this context. In this context 'ready' means *ready for the interview*, but when John said 'I am ready' the day before he meant that he was *ready to eat dinner*. This example shows that *homophonic reports are not always possible with expressions such as 'ready'*. There are contexts in which homophonic reports *are* blocked when the sentence at issue contains an expression like 'ready'.

This is not to deny that, in other contexts, homophonic reports may be possible. Whether or not an homophonic report is possible depends upon a number of factors, and, in

particular, it depends upon the storytelling context (the context in which the report is made). Some storytelling contexts are *altruistic* : they track, and 'absorb', the settings of the parameters in force in the target context. Other storytelling contexts are *selfish* (as in Leslie's story): they impose their own settings and override those in force in the target context. It is very easy to manipulate the storytelling context so as to make it selfish or not, and when we do so we see that the possibility or impossibility of homophonic reports straightforwardly follows. Indeed, as I pointed out, Leslie's example is only a variant of Cappelen and Lepore's own example. To block inter-contextual disquotation, Leslie only had to do two things : (i) make a certain setting for the relevant parameter salient in the storytelling context and (ii) ensure that the original setting of the parameter in the target context was not mutually manifest to the conversational protagonists in the storytelling context.

The trivial observation that the possibility or impossibility of homophonic reports depends upon the context in which the report is made is sufficient to dispose of Cappelen and Lepore's theory. Cappelen and Lepore offer an explanation for the fact that homophonic reports are — at least sometimes — possible across contexts, with expressions such as 'ready'. Their explanation goes as follows : homophonic reports are possible *because the expression at issue is context insensitive*. Were that explanation correct, however, homophonic reports would *always* be possible ; but they are not, as the Leslie example shows. So this explanation is out. Another explanation goes like this : homophonic reports are possible when there is a certain relation between the storytelling context and the target context, a relation in virtue of which the storytelling context inherits the values of the target context. Evidently, this is the correct explanation, at least for a wide range of cases.[2]

VIII

As Cappelen and Lepore notice, the cases of inter-contextual disquotation they bring to our attention are counterexamples to claims about context-sensitivity *only if* the storytelling context (the context in which the homophonic report is made) is 'relevantly different' from the target context in which the expression at issue was originally used. If the storytelling context is altruistic, there will be no relevant difference : the storytelling context will 'match the contextual features relevant in the original utterance' (p. 91). This matching process

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[2] There are also cases of homophonic report that ought to be accounted for in terms of covert quotation. Covert quotation is quite common when speech act verbs are used.

characteristic of altruistic contexts is a form of accommodation whose possibility C&L themselves consider, and which they call 'Contextual Salience Absorption'.

C&L think they have a knock-down objection to the explanation in terms of Contextual Salience Absorption, however. They think a contextualist (as they call whoever rejects literalism) cannot accept this explanation without commiting theoretical suicide. Why is that so ? Because what is at stake in the literalism/contextualism controversy is the status of the following schema :

Literalist schema :
(Whatever the context) the sentence'S' expresses the proposition that S.

According to C&L, every instance of the schema is true when the sentence that substitutes for 'S' in the schema does not contain an expression from the Basic Set. In particular

(2)
(Whatever the context) the sentence 'John is ready' expresses the proposition that John is ready.

The contextualist denies this. According to the contextualist, (2) is false, just as (3) is false :

(3)
(Whatever the context) the sentence 'I am hungry' expresses the proposition that I am hungry.

(3) is false, because the sentence 'I am hungry', uttered by Cappelen, expresses the proposition that *Cappelen* is hungry and *not* the proposition that I am hungry. Similarly, (2) is false, when uttered in a context in which 'ready' means *ready for the interview*, since there are contexts in which the sentence 'John is ready' does *not* express the proposition that John is ready for the interview.

It is essential for the contextualist to come up with such counterexamples to (2), and to the literalist schema more generally. 'But', Cappelen and Lepore point out, 'to endorse Contextual Salience Absorption is in effect to grant that no such intuitive counterexample is forthcoming' (p. 115). They argue that Contextual Salience Absorption *guarantees* the validity of the literalist schema, hence makes it impossible for the contextualist to win her case by providing the right kind of counterexample. 'Appeal to Contextual Salience

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Absorption is not a defense of contextualism', they conclude ; 'rather, it's a concession of defeat' (p. 115).

Once again, the argument fails miserably. Appeal to Contextual Salience Absorption would be self-defeating in this manner only if Contextual Salience Absorption was automatic, in such a way that there *cannot* be any divergence between the target context and the storytelling context as far as the contextual value of 'ready' is concerned. But such divergences are possible, as the Leslie example shows. This is sufficient for the contextualist to make her point and win her case. It is true that Cappelen and Lepore define Contextual Salience Absorption as a process that is 'automatically triggered' as soon as, in a storytelling context, we imaginatively place ourselves in a target context (p. 114). But the claim that Contextual Salience Absorption is automatic and takes place come what may, independently of the features of the storytelling context, is obviously not a claim which the contextualist will accept. From a contextualist point of view, Contextual Salience Absorption takes place only in some of the cases, typically those in which the value of the relevant parameter in the target context is salient, mutually manifest and relevant to the protagonists in the storytelling context. Cappelen and Lepore's argument fails because, once the automaticity of Contextual Salience Absorption is rejected, the validity of the literalist schema is no longer guaranteed. As a result, the contextualist can have her cake and eat it : she can invoke Contextual Salience Absorption to account for the homophonic cases, and she can simultaneously invoke the other cases (the Leslie cases) to argue against the literalist schema.

<center>IX</center>

I have said enough to establish that C&L's position is untenable. This does not mean that I disagree with everything they say, however. In particular, I do not want to deny that there are differences between expressions in the Basic Set and other (alleged) context-sensitive expressions, such as 'ready' ; nor that some of those differences may have to do with the availability of homophonic reports, collective descriptions, etc. But the conclusion should not be that expressions like 'ready' are not really context-sensitive. Rather, one should be prepared to acknowledge differences within the class of context-sensitive expressions : they don't all behave similarly.

Even if we concentrate upon the Basic Set, one finds considerable differences within the set — not only between demonstratives and pure indexicals (Kaplan 1989), but also, as has often been noticed, within the class of pure indexicals. Thus 'here' and 'now' behave very differently from 'today' and 'tomorrow', and the tenses behave very differently from both.

Even the twins 'here' and 'now' greatly differ from each other : 'now' is more 'shiftable' than 'here' (Recanati 2004b). That is not without consequences for C&L's discussion : with 'now', contrary to what they claim, inter-contextual disquotation is (sometimes) possible. Thus I can report John's utterance of 'Now I am hungry' by uttering, much later, 'He said that now he was hungry'. One should look at all this in much more detail than C&L themselves are willing to do. The more we extend the list of context-sensitive expressions, the more we should be disposed to register, and explore, fine differences within the class.

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