

Predelli and Carpintero on Literal Meaning

François Recanati

► **To cite this version:**

| François Recanati. Predelli and Carpintero on Literal Meaning. *Critica*, 2006. ijn_00000675

HAL Id: ijn_00000675

https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000675

Submitted on 26 Feb 2006

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.

Predelli and Carpintero on *Literal Meaning*

François Recanati

Institut Jean-Nicod, Paris

1. What *Literal Meaning* is about

Literal Meaning is devoted to a foundational debate in the philosophy of language : the debate between Literalism and Contextualism. According to Literalism, sentences represent the world as being thus and so and are true or false depending on how the world actually is. The task of semantics is to assign truth-conditions to sentences in a compositional fashion. According to Contextualism, this project rests on a category mistake. Natural language sentences per se don't have truth-conditions, they only have conventional meanings in virtue of which they can be *used* to say things that are true or false. What has content primarily is the speech act (or the thought act) and only derivatively the sentence used in performing the speech act.

Early contextualists were undoubtedly right to emphasize the gap between the linguistic meaning of the sentence type and the truth-conditional content of a particular utterance of the sentence, and they were right to criticize the early literalists for overlooking that gap. Everybody now agrees that context-sensitivity is a distinctive and central feature of natural language. Still, full recognition of the pervasiveness and importance of context-sensitivity is not sufficient to settle the issue in favour of Contextualism ; for Literalism has evolved new forms in order precisely to accommodate the distinction between the meaning of the sentence type and the proposition expressed by an utterance of the sentence, while still denying the contextualist's claim that truth-conditional content is primarily a speech-act notion. In *Literal Meaning* I argue for Contextualism, against these new versions of Literalism which I will collectively refer to as 'neo-Literalism'.

Neo-Literalism posits a principled distinction between *the content of the speech act* and *the content of the sentence with respect to context*. So it is able to acknowledge the fact that sentences only carry content in context, while maintaining that the content of a sentence (a semantic notion) is distinct from the content of the speech act performed by uttering the sentence (a pragmatic notion).

Before proceeding, let me rule out a potential misunderstanding regarding the notion of speech act. In Austin's theory a distinction is drawn between the locutionary act (the act of

‘saying’ something by e.g. referring to something and predicating something of it) and the illocutionary act (e.g. the act of making an assertion). It is possible to say something (e.g. that Sam is a fine friend) without seriously asserting the proposition which one thereby expresses. The contextualist’s claim that the content of a sentence is nothing but the content of the speech act performed by uttering the sentence would be trivially false if by ‘speech act’ one meant the illocutionary act ; so the thesis must be interpreted by giving ‘speech act’ the locutionary sense. What the contextualist claims is that the truth-conditional content of a sentence with respect to context is nothing but the content of the locutionary act performed by uttering that sentence (if the sentence is uttered in isolation) or (if it is not) its contribution to the content of the locutionary act performed by uttering the sentence of which it is a part.

There are two main variants of neo-Literalism. The first variant, already outdated, is built around the idea that the content of the sentence (with respect to context) is fixed by the rules of the language in an ‘automatic’ manner and independently of pragmatic considerations having to do with the speaker’s intentions, the common ground, and so on and so forth. In contrast, the content of the speech act heavily depends upon such pragmatic considerations. So there is a distinction between the semantic content (which is a matter of rules) and the pragmatic content (which is a matter of intentions). Both depend upon the context, but the semantic content is said to depend upon the ‘narrow’ context while pragmatic content depends upon the ‘wide’ context. Against this variant, which I dubbed ‘Conventionalism’ (Recanati 2005 :173), I argue that we already need to appeal to speaker’s intentions and the wide context to assign values to indexicals, or at least to most of them. So the intended contrast between the content of the sentence (with respect to context) and the content of the speech act cannot be based upon that idea.

The other variant is currently the dominant position in the philosophy of language. I call it ‘Minimalism’. It acknowledges the need to appeal to the wide context in assigning values to context-sensitive elements, and builds the distinction between speech act content and sentence content around the following idea : sentence content incorporates contextual ingredients *only when the meaning of the sentence demands it*. (The content of the speech act is not so constrained.) It is this dominant position which is my main target in *Literal Meaning*. I argue that, besides ‘saturation’ — the assignment of contextual values to indexicals and free variables in logical form — there is another form of contextual influence on content, viz. ‘modulation’, which is not controlled by the conventional meaning of the linguistic expressions whose meaning is modulated. Modulation covers optional processes such as free enrichment, loosening, metonymic transfer, etc. : processes which (arguably) affect the intuitive truth-

conditions but which take place for pragmatic reasons, without being triggered by the linguistic material in an obligatory manner. The only form of contextuality which Minimalism accepts as far as the determination of semantic content is concerned is what Predelli aptly calls ‘meaning-controlled contextuality’, viz. saturation. My claim in *Literal Meaning* is that we should make room for modulation as well.

For a minimalist, modulation does not affect the semantic content of the sentence (with respect to context) : assuming there is such a thing as modulation, it only affects the content of the speech act performed by uttering the sentence. Now I concede to the minimalist that it is possible to *define* the (minimal) semantic content of the sentence as that which results from saturation alone ; but I claim that this notion of content is an idle wheel in the overall theory of language and communication. On the view I argue for in the book, the composition rules determine the value of a complex expression on the basis of the *pragmatically modulated* values of the parts, according to formula (F):

$$(F) \quad I(a^b) = f(g_1(I(a)), g_2(I(b)))$$

In that formula ‘ I ’ stands for the interpretation function, ‘ a^b ’ stands for a complex expression formed from the parts ‘ a ’ and ‘ b ’, and the ‘ g ’s are free higher-order variables ranging over available pragmatic functions (including identity, which gives us the ‘literal’ case). The formula says that the semantic value of a complex phrase a^b is a function of the pragmatic values of the parts, where the ‘pragmatic values’ in question are what we get when we subject the literal semantic values of the parts to pragmatic modulation. On this view the un-modulated contents of individual expressions do not (necessarily) undergo semantic composition, hence the alleged ‘minimal proposition’ obtained by composing those un-modulated contents need not play any role in the actual derivation of the content of the speech act from the meanings of the parts and the way they are put together. This is my main line of criticism against Minimalism, which gives pride of place to the minimal proposition.

2. Automaticity and completeness : a red herring

Predelli finds my position unclear because in characterizing the position I attack I “marry” three distinct ideas that need not go together: meaning-controlled contextuality (viz. the idea that semantic content only incorporates contextual ingredients when the sentence itself demands it), semantic completeness (the idea that semantic content must be truth-evaluable –

it cannot be schematic or semantically incomplete, as linguistic meaning arguably is) and automaticity (the idea that semantic content is determined by linguistic rules, independent of pragmatic considerations). He writes:

The problem with minimalism/literalism may be expressed in terms of the uncomfortable conjunction of three aspects: meaning-controlled contextuality, propositional completeness, and automatic saturation. For Recanati, meaning-controlled contextuality may arguably achieve the desired results, and yield the desired complete and intuitive propositional contents, but it may do so only by appealing to wide context. On the other hand, complete propositionality may perhaps be achieved on the basis of automatic meaning-controlled processes, but the resulting outcomes would be intuitively inadequate.

But this is a misrepresentation of my views. What defines Minimalism, for me, is the idea of meaning-controlled contextuality. Automaticity has nothing to do with Minimalism. Automaticity is an idea which *another* version of neo-Literalism, viz. Conventionalism, puts forward in order to ground the distinction between the content of the sentence (with respect to context) and the content of the speech act. That idea, however, is rejected by most researchers for the reason which Predelli himself gives: “the idea of a role for wide context at a level prior to implicatures and pragmatic impartations is not only compatible with customary semantic approaches, but is in fact typically presupposed by it”. Predelli’s confusion may be due to the fact that he puts Literalism and Minimalism together under a single heading ‘Literalism/Minimalism’ as if there was no interesting difference between the numerous trends which I take pains to distinguish within the literalist camp. The unclarity Predelli finds in my position stems from his own conflation of views which I carefully distinguish, so I do not feel responsible for it.

Before turning to the second idea which I am said to marry with that of meaning-controlled contextuality, namely completeness, let me point out that I deny the premiss which, in the passage I have just quoted, Predelli says I accept, viz that “meaning-controlled contextuality may arguably achieve the desired results, and yield the desired complete and intuitive propositional contents, but it may do so only by appealing to wide context”. Even if we appeal to the wide context (as we undoubtedly do when assigning contextual values to indexicals), meaning-controlled contextuality does not, according to me, achieve the desired results and yield the intuitive propositional contents. To get to the intuitive truth-conditional content of an utterance, according to me, saturation is not sufficient: one needs modulation as

well. Without modulation, one cannot get the right content whenever there is loose talk, metonymy, free enrichment, sense extension or whatever. *That* is the gist of my critique of Minimalism. Again, the fact that we need to appeal to the wide context is not an aspect of that critique, since most minimalists accept that fact (as Predelli himself notes).

What about (in)completeness? Predelli criticizes “the presumed marriage between meaning-controlled contextuality and propositional completeness”. Here the situation is a bit more complex. There are two notions of incompleteness at stake, which, in my review of Cappelen’s and Lepore’s *Insensitive Semantics*, I dubbed ‘bottom-up incompleteness’ and ‘top-down incompleteness’ (Recanati 2006: 24). Bottom-up incompleteness amounts to this: given the rules of the language, a sentence does not express a determinate content unless the context in which it is uttered assigns a value to some expression whose linguistic meaning constrains, but does not constitute, that semantic value. Whether or not an expression is incomplete in that sense — whether or not it must be assigned a contextual value — is an aspect of its conventional meaning. So bottom-up incompleteness is but another name for meaning-controlled contextuality. There is no ‘marriage’ between two ideas here — there is a single idea. As Predelli himself puts it, “Completeness, in this sense, [is] the result of whatever regularity happens to be encoded within the meaning of this or that English expression.” Since incompleteness, in the bottom-up sense, *is* an aspect of meaning-controlled contextuality (rather than something additional), the two ideas which Predelli says I ‘marry’ cannot be separated, and I cannot make sense of his objection that sometimes “what meaning requires by far exceeds the minimal requirement for minimal completeness”. If meaning requires something, that something is *eo ipso* a requirement for completeness: *there is no completeness unless everything meaning requires has been provided*. So meaning cannot require something that is not a requirement for completeness (in the sense of completeness which is relevant to my discussion in the passages which Predelli comments on).

Why does Predelli think that the issue of incompleteness is distinct from that of meaning-controlled contextuality? I can discern two sources for his position. First, Predelli misreads my discussion of two examples (‘it’s raining’ and ‘I’ve had breakfast’) in the first pages of *Literal Meaning*. There, I mention a certain minimalist analysis of these examples, to illustrate a general point about Minimalism. Predelli criticizes me for holding that a minimalist is committed to that particular analysis, and speculates that my reason for taking the minimalist to be so committed is “the red-herring of completeness” (understood as non-reducible to meaning-controlled contextuality). But this is a mistake. I do *not* take the minimalist to be committed to any particular analysis of ‘it’s raining’ and ‘I’ve had breakfast’

(and in the very passage which Predelli quotes, I mention an alternative minimalist analysis of ‘I’ve had breakfast’ in a footnote).

Second possible source for Predelli’s position regarding the marriage of meaning-controlled contextuality and completeness: the *other* notion of incompleteness (viz. ‘top-down’ incompleteness). Just as, for Predelli, meaning may require something that exceeds the minimal requirement for completeness, “what meaning happens to demand [may also] result in less than full fledged, complete propositions”, he says. Now this is correct if we take ‘incompleteness’ in the top-down sense — a sense which I introduce at the end of the book. There is top-down incompleteness whenever a sentence does not express a truth-evaluable content even after all the indexicals and free variables have been assigned contextual values. This possibility is explicitly considered in chapter 9, devoted to Radical Contextualism. It may be that, without some form of modulation, we cannot make sense of a complex phrase such as ‘disarm the fricassee’. Now it is a presupposition of Minimalism that, to get a proposition (i.e. a function from worlds to truth-values), it is *sufficient* to disambiguate the sentence and to assign values to all the indexicals and context-sensitive morphemes (whether overt or covert) it contains. That this is *not* sufficient is one of the tenets of Radical Contextualism. Whoever concedes this, as it seems to me Predelli (hesitantly) does in his own writings, is a (covert) contextualist.¹

Because of the role played by top-down incompleteness in the later parts of the book, I bite the bullet: Minimalism — the view which is currently dominant and which I attack — is indeed constituted by the marriage of two ideas. One idea is that, besides disambiguation, saturation is the only contextual process allowed to influence semantic content. The second idea is that the semantic content of a sentence with respect to context is a complete proposition, something that determines a function from possible worlds to truth-values. I maintain that Minimalism is indeed constituted by these two ideas. But the second idea comes into the picture only in my discussion of Radical Contextualism at the end of the book. So the ‘red herring of completeness’ which is supposed to play a role in my discussion of Minimalism in the early chapters of the book (those which Predelli focusses on in his discussion) is really that: a red herring.

¹ For a gentle hint to that effect, see McFarlane 2005.

3. Contextualism and character-semantics

The facts of context-sensitivity make it impossible to maintain the literalist fiction that semantics is indistinguishably the study of the conventional meaning of sentence types and the study of truth-conditional content. There are actually two distinct objects of study: the conventional meaning of linguistic expressions (including sentences) on the one hand, and the relations which hold, in virtue of meaning, between linguistic expressions and the world, on the other hand. Like reference and truth, the notion of content pertains to the second type of study. There is of course a fairly intimate connection between the two objects. Thus the meaning of a sentence is that in virtue of which, in a given context, it carries the truth-conditional content it does. In Kaplan's framework, this intimate relationship is captured by modeling the conventional meaning of a sentence as a function from contexts to contents (a 'character', in Kaplanian terminology).

Contextualism is a view regarding content. It says that sentences as such do not carry contents – they do so only in the context of a speech act. That means that the truth-conditional content of an utterance is jointly determined by semantics and by pragmatics. But this is not to say that semantics has no proper object of study. Semantics studies linguistic meaning or character (a property of expression types), and of course linguistic meaning constrains truth-conditional content.

Carpintero objects, and attempts to defend Literalism. He seems to concede, or at least abstains from denying, that content is indeed infected by pragmatics to a considerable extent.² But, he insists, that does not mean that there is *no* level of truth-conditional content that one may associate with the sentence purely in virtue of the conventions of language. Carpintero takes the contextualist to deny that there is such a level, and since he himself insists that there is one (namely character, which Carpintero construes as itself a level of truth-conditions — see below), he considers himself a literalist.

I think Carpintero's move here rests on a confusion. He is not a literalist, by my lights, since he accepts (or seems to accept) that content is not the proper object of study for semantics. Nor has he any reason to resist the contextualist's assault. Contrary to what Carpintero repeatedly suggests, the contextualist does not deny that character is a proper object of study for semantics. So there is no conflict or tension whatsoever between the contextualist's scepticism toward content-semantics and Carpintero's advocacy of character-

² Thus he writes : « Semantic theory is in no position to give us all the information that we convey when we speak literally ; it can only give us the systematic constraints on that ».

semantics. The contextualist's scepticism only concerns content: it is truth-conditional content that is not 'purely semantic', according to the contextualist. That's why I say that the notion of 'the content of a sentence' is illusory (since content is primarily a speech act notion). If we broaden the notion of 'content' so as to include *character* (as Carpintero does when he uses the notion of 'ch-content') then of course a sentence has a content. But that's not what is at issue. When contextualists like myself deny that sentences have contents, they take 'content' to mean *content*, not *character*.

To be sure, Carpintero regrets the usual focus on content; he thinks one should focus on character instead. He criticizes me for sharing the view that semantics ought to be concerned with content rather than character. But I do not hold such a view. I hold that there are two objects of study: one is character and it is an object of study for semantics; the other is content and that is a hybrid, for which both the resources of semantics and of pragmatics are necessary. I criticize Literalism for not realizing how much pragmatics goes into the determination of truth-conditional content. But I have nothing against a semantics of character of the type that Carpintero advocates.

It is true that for me character is not 'semantically complete', while Carpintero holds that character is just as much propositional/truth-conditional as content is. But this issue is terminological. Character is semantically incomplete in the sense of bottom-up incompleteness I have just spelled out in my reply to Predelli: the word 'I' forces an interpreter to identify the speaker on pains of not grasping the content of the sentence in which the word occurs; that's a conventional difference between 'I' and the definite description 'the present speaker' which has (roughly) the same descriptive meaning but does not conventionally require an assignment of contextual value. In this sense content is privileged: character is ancillary to content — its role is to constrain content and to help determine it in context. (This Carpintero explicitly accepts.) So I maintain that character is semantically incomplete, in the relevant sense. But if we put bottom-up incompleteness aside, I have no objection to considering character itself as somehow propositional. Indeed, as I acknowledge explicitly in the book, the character of an utterance determines a complete proposition: what Perry calls the 'reflexive proposition'. But propositionality in this sense is trivial. Even an utterance of a sentence in a language one does not understand determines a reflexive proposition for us (namely the proposition that there is some proposition p such that the utterance is true iff p).

So far I have not found any substance in the tensions Carpintero thinks he detects between his views and mine. The tensions are illusory or terminological. In one area, however, it seems that there is genuine disagreement.

Carpintero wants to deprive content of its privileges and to promote character instead. We have seen that content is indeed privileged in being that which character itself aims at. It is because the role of character is to give us content that character is incomplete in the bottom-up sense. Be that as it may, there is another way in which content is privileged, according to me, but not according to Carpintero. I hold that we have intuitions concerning content, and that those intuitions are the raw materials we use in semantics when we build hypotheses about meaning. We do not directly have intuitions about meanings, characters, and the like, which are merely part of the sub-personal machinery we use in determining content in context. Now Carpintero denies that content is privileged in this phenomenological sense. He holds that we do have intuitions about character, and more generally he denies my claim that only content and post-propositional ingredients of meaning are 'available' to language users (while pre-propositional ingredients, such as characters, are not).

But I maintain what I say in the book. Consider, as an example, the word 'but'. It has a certain linguistic meaning, and speakers of the language 'know' that meaning in the sense that they have tacit mastery of the semantic rules that govern the use of 'but'. They are able to use the word and to understand its use by others. But the abstract meaning of 'but' which, like character in general, can be put in propositional form, is not something that is available to the language users. It takes a lot of work to expert linguists to come up with the proper analysis of the meaning of 'but' (and what most linguists say about it is blatantly inadequate). Ordinary users of the language do no better than most linguists, and it is pretty clear that they do not have direct intuitive access to the abstract meaning of 'but'. Their intuitions only concern the meaning conveyed by particular utterances of sentences containing 'but'. Of course they can reflect upon those intuitions and try to abstract from them something that, if they are theoretically minded, they might assign to 'but' as its abstract meaning; but those reflective abilities come in addition to, rather than being an aspect of, their tacit mastery of semantic rules. Thus we can easily imagine a competent language user without the relevant reflective abilities: someone who is able to use the word 'but' and to understand utterances in which it occurs, but unable to devise hypotheses regarding the abstract meaning of 'but'. This is what I mean when I say that the reflective abilities thanks to which one can become aware of the linguistic meaning (character) of some expression is not constitutive of our competence with that expression. In contrast, I hold that we do have direct intuitive access to the content of the

utterances that are addressed to us and to the (genuine) conversational implicatures generated by making those utterance in their respective contexts. Our ability to become aware of what is said by an utterance and of what the speaker implies by saying what he says *is* constitutive of our communicative competence. No one can be said to understand what is said or what is implied in the absence of such an ability.

Carpintero puts forward an alleged counter-example. In response to the question, whether he was categorically denying that he ever had an affair with Gennifer Flowers, Clinton replied: ‘I’ve said that before, and so has she’. This clearly conveyed the implicature that Clinton was indeed categorically denying that he had an affair with her. I hold that in such a case, a competent language user has intuitive access to what is said (viz. that Clinton has said that before) and to what is implied (viz. that he still denies having had an affair); it may take some reflection on the part of the language user to disentangle what is said from what is implied — that is why I use the dispositional term ‘ability’ — but the relevant ability is constitutive of the competence in such a case: someone deprived of the relevant dispositions, that is, someone who is unable to disentangle what is said from what is implied in such a case, lacks the type of competence required for understanding conversational implicatures. The asymmetry between this type of case and the other (the abstract meaning of ‘but’) is striking, and I am surprised by Carpintero’s refusal to acknowledge it.³

References

- McFarlane, John (2005) ‘Semantic Minimalism and Non-Indexical Contextualism’. Ms.
- Recanati, François (2005) ‘Literalism and Contextualism: Some Varieties’. In Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (eds.) *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, 171-96.
- Recanati, François (2006) ‘Crazy Minimalism’. *Mind and Language* 21: 21-30.

³ I am indebted to the European Science Foundation EUROCORES programme ‘The Origin of Man, Language and Languages’ for supporting the research reported in this paper.