

## Contextualism: Some Varieties.

François Recanati

► **To cite this version:**

François Recanati. Contextualism: Some Varieties.. K. Allen

K. Jaszolt. Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics, Cambridge University Press, pp.135-149, 2012.  
<ijn\_00760415>

**HAL Id: ijn\_00760415**

**[https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn\\_00760415](https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00760415)**

Submitted on 3 Dec 2012

**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.

# Chapter 7

## Contextualism: Some Varieties

**François Recanati**

A number of distinct (though related) issues are raised in the debate over Contextualism. My aim in this chapter is to disentangle them, so as to get a clearer view of the positions available (where a ‘position’ consists of a particular take on each of the relevant issues simultaneously). The position I defend will be apparent at the end of the chapter.

### 1. The modularity issue

According to a view which used to be standard, and which, for reasons that will soon emerge, I call the modular view, knowledge of a language, and especially semantic knowledge or *semantic competence*, enables language users to ascribe truth-conditions to arbitrary sentences of that language. To be sure, when a sentence is context-sensitive (as most sentences are), it only carries truth-conditions ‘with respect to context’; so knowledge of the context is required in addition to knowledge of the language. But (according to the view in question) the context at issue involves only limited aspects of the situation of utterance: who speaks, when, where, to whom, and so forth. Given a context thus understood, the rules of the language — e.g. the rule that ‘I’ refers to the speaker — suffice to determine the truth-conditional contribution of context-sensitive expressions. There is no need to appeal, in addition, to *pragmatic competence*. That is the gist of the modular view.

By ‘pragmatic competence’, I mean the ability to understand *what the speaker means* by his or her utterance. As Grice emphasized, speaker’s meaning is a matter of intentions: what someone means is what he or she overtly intends — or, as Grice says, ‘M-intends’ — to get across through his or her utterance. Communication succeeds when the M-intentions of the speaker are recognized by the hearer. Pragmatic competence is needed to determine *what the speaker means* on the basis of *what she says*; but what the speaker says is supposed to be autonomously determined by the semantics (with respect to context), irrespective of the speaker’s beliefs and intentions. So the modular story goes.

On this conception, semantics and pragmatics are insulated from each other. Pragmatics takes as input the output of semantics, but they do not mix, and in particular, pragmatic processes do not interfere with the process of semantic composition which outputs the truth-conditions.<sup>1</sup> This makes sense if one construes semantic competence and pragmatic competence as belonging to two distinct ‘modules’ (Borg 2004, chapter 2) — hence my name for the view.<sup>2</sup> Semantic competence belongs to the language faculty, Borg says; it is an

---

<sup>1</sup> Pragmatics, of course, is needed for disambiguation; but, on the traditional picture, disambiguation is ‘pre-semantic’, so it is not a counterexample to the claim that semantics and pragmatics do not mix.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Borg herself does not fully endorse the modular view, since she takes semantics and pragmatics to mix in determining ‘what is said’ (Borg 2004: 128).

aspect of our ‘knowledge of language’. Pragmatic competence has more to do with the so-called ‘Theory of Mind’, that faculty in virtue of which human subjects are able to explain other people’s behaviour by ascribing intentions to them and reading their mind.

The modular picture I have just described has started to lose grip in recent years. Nearly everybody nowadays acknowledge the fact that the reference of indexicals and, more generally, the semantic value of context-sensitive expressions cannot be determined without appealing to full-fledged pragmatic factors (e.g. speaker’s intentions). The semantic value of a context-sensitive expression varies from occurrence to occurrence, yet it often varies not as a function of some objective feature of the context but as a function of *what the speaker means*. Pragmatic competence, therefore, is required not only to determine what the speaker means on the basis of what she says, but also to determine what is said in the first place. That means that we have to give up the modular view, and accept that pragmatics and semantics *do* mix in fixing truth-conditional content.

Of course, if one wants to maintain a semantics pure of pragmatic intrusion, one can, but then one has to construe the goal of semantics differently than it is on the standard conception. Pure semantics will no longer deliver truth-conditions, but it will deliver, say, conditional truth-conditions, or schemata, or characters, or propositional radicals, or whatever. To get full-blown truth-conditional content, pragmatics will be needed. This non-modular approach to truth-conditional content is one of the key ingredients of contemporary Contextualism.

## 2. The ‘extent of context-sensitivity’ issue

According to most contemporary theorists, context-sensitivity is pervasive in natural language. In addition to the obvious indexicals, many expressions turn out to be context-sensitive in one way or another. This covers two types of case. There are expressions which display hidden indexicality in that, when properly analysed, they turn out to behave very much like standard indexicals, or to contain hidden constituents which do ; and there are expressions which display other forms of context-sensitivity. In any case, we don’t know in advance whether a given expression is, or is not, context-sensitive: it is an empirical question, to be resolved through linguistic analysis. So we must reject a certain presumption which was still prevalent twenty years ago and which we may call the ‘Literalist presumption’.

To introduce the Literalist presumption, let us start from the following (uncontroversial) premiss:

- There is a ‘basic set’ of expressions whose content is known to depend upon the context in a systematic manner: the indexicals.

The presumption which the pervasiveness of context-sensitivity leads us to reject can now be stated as follows:

- **Literalist presumption:** expressions *not* in the basic set are (by default) assumed to be context-*insensitive*.

The Literalist presumption is implicitly at work in a number of fallacious arguments using Grice’s ‘Modified Occam’s Razor’, or an equivalent principle of parsimony, to demonstrate that a semantic analysis in terms of conversational implicature is preferable to an account in terms of truth-conditional content proper (Recanati 1994, 2004 : 155-58). Classic examples involve the use of Modified Occam’s Razor against Strawson’s view of the contextually varying truth-conditional contributions of ‘and’ (in *Introduction to Logical Theory*), or against Donnellan’s view of the contextually varying truth-conditional contributions of definite

descriptions. In each case, the possibility that the relevant expression (which seems to carry different contents in different contexts) might be context-sensitive even though it does not belong to the basic set is ignored, in virtue of the Literalist presumption, and the argument proceeds as if the only options available to account for the data were lexical ambiguity on the one hand and conversational implicature on the other hand (with Modified Occam's Razor being used to rule out the former option).

Rejection of the Literalist presumption is another key ingredient in contemporary Contextualism. It corresponds to a stance I dubbed 'Methodological Contextualism' (Recanati 1994). According to Methodological Contextualism, we don't know in advance which expressions are context-sensitive and which aren't. For all we know, *every expression might be context-sensitive*. Here the universal quantifier takes scope over the epistemic modal, so what generalizes is the *possibility* of context-sensitivity. For every expression *e* — including 'and' or definite descriptions — it may be that *e* is context-sensitive and contributes different contents in different contexts (even though *e* is not ambiguous). As a result, we need to draw a *general* distinction between the linguistic meaning of an expression and its contribution to propositional content, while allowing for special cases in which they will be identical, instead of doing the opposite (i.e. equating conventional meaning and propositional contribution, while allowing for exceptions — the expressions in the 'basic set').

Methodological Contextualism goes together with the view that context-sensitivity is a pervasive phenomenon in natural language. Not everybody accepts this view, however. The so-called 'semantic minimalists' (e.g. Cappelen and Lepore 2005) believe that context-sensitivity is a *very limited phenomenon*, corresponding roughly to expressions in the basic set, so they don't feel compelled to reject the Literalist presumption.

### 3. Does context-sensitivity generalize?

The two contextualist ingredients I have described so far correspond to views that are widely shared among contemporary theorists. Those who still believe in modularity and are faithful to the Literalist presumption are a rather small minority (see Chapter 25 for more on their view). But there is another minority, at the other end of the spectrum: the *radical* contextualists. What characterizes their view is the *generalization* of context-sensitivity.

There are several possible arguments for the generalization of context-sensitivity. First, one should distinguish the claim that context-sensitivity generalizes at the sentential level, from the much stronger claim that it generalizes at the constituent or the lexical level. One generalizes context-sensitivity at the sentential level if one holds that *the truth-conditions of a sentence* always depend upon the context (so that there are no 'eternal sentences'). Here is an example of an argument for that conclusion:

- (a) A successful sentence (i.e. a sentence that succeeds in expressing a proposition) expresses either a singular proposition or a general proposition.
- (b) If a sentence expresses a singular proposition, it does so in a context-sensitive manner because (i) a sentence expresses a singular proposition only if it contains a successful referring expression (i.e., an expression which succeeds in referring), and (ii) reference is inherently context-sensitive. (That is so because an expression-token only

refers to some object in virtue of *contextual relations* between the token and the object.)<sup>3</sup>

- (c) If a sentence expresses a general proposition, it does so in a context-sensitive manner because (i) a sentence expresses a general proposition only if it contains a (successful) quantificational expression, and (ii) quantification is inherently context-sensitive. (That is so because the domain of quantification depends upon the context. An expression succeeds in quantifying only if the context supplies an appropriate domain of quantification.)
- (d) Conclusion: Whenever a sentence expresses a proposition, it does so in a context-sensitive manner.

The argument I have just presented relies on many controversial assumptions regarding, *inter alia*, the nature of reference, the semantics/meta-semantics distinction, the semantic analysis of plurals, proper names and definite descriptions, quantifier domain restriction, and so on and so forth. It is not my intention to go into these thorny issues here, in order to evaluate the argument. Rather, I will focus on arguments for the generalization of context-sensitivity at the level of sentential constituents, or at the lexical level, rather than at the sentential level. As I already suggested, the claim that context-sensitivity generalizes at the constituent or lexical level is much stronger than the claim that it generalizes at the sentential level. What we are now considering is the possibility that *every expression* (not just every sentence) might be context-sensitive. This is a very radical form of Contextualism indeed.

We have already encountered the claim that ‘every expression might be context-sensitive’ in the context of Methodological Contextualism, but then the universal quantifier ‘every expression’ took scope over the epistemic modal. What Methodological Contextualism meant to generalize to every expression was only the *possibility* of its being context-sensitive. In the context of Radical Contextualism, the claim that ‘every expression might be context-sensitive’ is understood differently: the modal now scopes over the universal quantifier. The possibility that is being considered is the possibility that, for every expression *e*, *e* is context-sensitive. Here what tentatively generalizes is (actual) context-sensitivity, not the possibility of context-sensitivity.

In what follows I will present two types of argument for the generalization of context-sensitivity at the lexical or constituent level. One such argument involves the phenomenon of pragmatic modulation. It is of special importance and will be discussed in sections 5 and 6. Other arguments, to which I now turn, are based on considerations from lexical semantics.

#### 4. Arguments from lexical semantics

What is the meaning of a word? Let us assume that utterances express ‘propositions’ or ‘thoughts’, and that these propositions/thoughts are made out of, or can be analysed into, certain building blocks or constituents, to be called *senses*. The standard assumption regarding word meaning is that *the conventions of the language associate expressions with senses*. What an expression contributes, when it is used (together with other expressions) in making a complete utterance, is supposed to be the sense which it independently possesses in virtue of the conventions of the language. Indexicals (and context-sensitive expressions more generally) are considered an exception: *their* sense is not to be equated with their linguistic

---

<sup>3</sup> On this view, contextual relations may be *long distance* relations, as emphasized in historical-chain accounts of the reference of proper names.

meaning, but depends upon the context. Now Radical Contextualism rejects the very idea that the conventions of the language associate expressions with full-fledged senses. It generalizes the distinction between the lexical meaning of an expression and its sense (or ‘content’ or ‘propositional contribution’), which is said to depend upon the context.

Putnam’s ideas about the lexical semantics of nouns can be seen as a forerunner of Radical Contextualism. Putnam criticizes the Fregean idea that the meaning of a noun is a (context-independent) sense which determines the noun’s reference (i.e. its extension). In many cases, Putnam points out, we start with the reference : the noun is associated with contextually given exemplars known to fall into the extension of the noun, or, on a more refined picture, with a *stereotype* used to identify the exemplars to be found in one’s local environment. What determines the extension of the noun is not the lexically given stereotype, however, but a certain relation *R* of similarity to the local exemplars. So the extension-determining sense of an expression is context-dependent on two counts: it depends upon the contextually given exemplars (e.g. whether the transparent, thirst-quenching liquid around us is H<sub>2</sub>O or XYZ), and it depends upon the relation *R*, which itself may vary according to the interests of the conversational participants (Putnam 1975: 238-39). The sense thus determined in context is utterly different from the lexical meaning of the noun, which Putnam describes as a ‘vector’ comprised of, inter alia, a ‘semantic marker’ (e.g. *liquid*) and the exemplar-fixing stereotype.

Putnam’s story is meant to apply to the nouns that are used to talk about things in the environment, and which we learn by getting acquainted with the things they are used to talk about. Not merely natural kind terms like ‘water’, but also, he says, nouns for artefacts like ‘pencil’. It could presumably be extended to other categories of lexical items, such as verbs and adjectives. On a Putnamian semantics, context-sensitivity generalizes to all the words which have a ‘referential’ dimension and directly connect up with aspects of the world around us. That is arguably the core of the language.

Another class of expressions which might claim to be ‘the core of the language’, though for totally different reasons, are the *most frequently used* expressions — light verbs (e.g. ‘get’, ‘have’, ‘take’), prepositions, and the like. Such expressions exhibit a high degree of polysemy, and this raises a problem for lexical semantics. What do such words mean? A number of scholars believe their meaning is schematic and has to be fleshed out on any particular use. This suggests that, perhaps, their conventional meaning is not a fully-fledged sense. Can one argue that they are *ambiguous* between a number of distinct senses? That is not obvious because it does not seem that there is a *discrete* list of such senses available but, rather, a continuum of possible senses to which one can creatively add in an open-ended manner. That is not to say that the meaning of such an expression reduces to an abstract schema: the expression is undoubtedly *also* associated in memory with conventional ways of using it in collocations with (more or less) determinate senses. All this — the abstract schema or schemata, the collocations, the senses — arguably goes into the linguistic meaning of the expression, which starts looking rather messy. On such a view, the meaning of an expression does not have the right ‘format’ to be what the expression contributes to propositional content.<sup>4</sup> In other words, linguistic meanings are not senses (though they may involve senses, inter alia).

The two views of lexical semantics I have just mentioned may well be wrong, of course. When it comes to lexical semantics, nearly everything is up for grabs. That, however, is

---

<sup>4</sup> This is an instance of the ‘wrong format view’, described in Recanati 2004: 140. Putnam’s theory is another instance of that view.

precisely the point. As theorists, we have an idea what senses are, i.e. what words contribute when we speak. We know, more or less, how to model that. But we know very little about what words themselves mean and what relation there is between word meaning and contributed sense. In view of the limits of our knowledge, it is reasonable to give up the simplifying assumption that linguistic meanings *are* senses, in order at least to start making serious enquiries in that area.

If we give up that simplifying assumption, we are left with the idea that lexical meaning plays some role in determining the sense which is an expression's contribution to the thought expressed. This idea can be expressed by saying that the sense of an expression is a function of the lexical meaning of that expression and some factor  $x$ , where ' $x$ ' is whatever, in addition to lexical meaning, is needed to determine sense. If, as seems very likely, ' $x$ ' includes the *context* in which the expression is tokened (and in particular the most important among contextual factors: what one is talking about), then we get a radical form of Contextualism that 'generalizes indexicality'.

## 5. Pragmatic modulation

The arguments from lexical semantics I have just mentioned support Radical Contextualism because they cast doubt on the idea that an expression's contribution to truth-conditional content (its sense) is fixed by the rules of the language independent of context. Most expressions are treated as indexical-like in that their semantic content depends upon the context somehow. But this does not (yet) mean that the semantic contribution of *every* expression is context-dependent. The next argument for Radical Contextualism leads to that stronger conclusion, however. I call it the argument from pragmatic modulation.

The argument from pragmatic modulation is independent of the arguments from lexical semantics, and it can be put forward even if we *grant* the assumption which the arguments from lexical semantics lead us to doubt: that the conventions of the language directly associate expressions with fully-fledged senses.<sup>5</sup> Let us, indeed, grant that assumption. One can still deny that the senses which — on this view — are the meanings of expressions are also what these expressions contribute when they are used (together with other expressions) in a making a complete utterance. Because of pragmatic modulation, an expression may, but *need not*, contribute its sense — i.e. the sense it independently possesses in virtue of the conventions of the language (assuming for the sake of argument that it possesses such a sense); it may also contribute an indefinite number of *other* senses resulting from modulation operations (e.g. free enrichment, predicate transfer, sense-extension, etc.) applied to the proprietary sense. For example, a sentence like (1) has several readings.

(1) There is a lion in the middle of the piazza

On one reading 'lion' is given a non-literal interpretation and means something like 'statue of a lion'. On that reading (1) may be true even if, literally, there is no lion in the middle of the piazza (but only a statue of a lion). Or consider (2).

(2) The ATM swallowed my credit card

This can be given a literal reading, if we imagine a context à la Putnam in which ATMs turn out to be living organisms. But the sentence can also and typically will be interpreted non-literally. In an ordinary context, 'swallow' will be given an *extended sense*, corresponding to

---

<sup>5</sup> It is actually easier to state the argument if one grants the assumption that conventional meanings are senses.

what ATMs sometimes do with credit cards (something which, indeed, resembles swallowing). The sentence may be true, on such a reading, even though no real swallowing takes place. In a less ordinary context in which there is a person disguised as an ATM, the predicate ‘ATM’ in the description will be given a non-literal reading: through ‘predicate transfer’ (Nunberg 1995), it will acquire the meaning ‘*person disguised as an ATM*’ (just as ‘lion’ acquires the meaning ‘*statue of a lion*’ in the previous example). The sentence may well be true, on that interpretation, even though no real ATM swallows anything, provided the person disguised as an ATM does swallow the credit card.<sup>6</sup>

Accepting pragmatic modulation (here, the process mapping the literal meaning of ‘lion’ or ‘ATM’ to the relevant representational reading, or the meaning of ‘swallow’ to its extended reading) as a possible determinant of truth-conditional content leads to a radical form of Contextualism, because modulation itself is context-sensitive: *whether or not* modulation comes into play, and if it does, *which* modulation operation takes place, is a matter of context. It follows that what an expression actually contributes to the thought expressed by the utterance in which it occurs is *always* a matter of context.

Of course, not everybody accepts that pragmatic modulation affects the truth-conditional content of an utterance. On the currently dominant picture, pragmatics comes into play in the determination of truth-conditional content but does so *only when* the semantic rules of the language prescribe it (as when an indexical demands a contextual value). On this view the only truth-conditional role of pragmatics corresponds to what I have called ‘saturation’ (in contrast to ‘modulation’). Saturation is a pragmatic process of contextual value-assignment that is triggered (and made obligatory) by something in the sentence itself, namely the linguistic expression to which a value is contextually assigned. For example, if the speaker uses a demonstrative pronoun and says ‘She is cute’, the hearer must determine who the speaker means by ‘she’ in order to fix the utterance’s truth-conditional content. The expression itself acts as a variable in need of contextual instantiation. So pragmatic competence comes into play, but it does so under the guidance of the linguistic material: the pragmatic process of saturation is a ‘bottom-up’ process in the sense that it is signal-driven, not context-driven. In contrast, pragmatic modulation is a ‘top-down’ or context-driven process, i.e. a pragmatic process which is not triggered by an expression in the sentence but takes place for purely pragmatic reasons — in order to make sense of what the speaker is saying. In other words, it is a ‘free’ pragmatic process — free because it is not mandated by the linguistic material but responds to wholly pragmatic considerations. That is clearly the case for the pragmatic processes through which an expression is given a nonliteral interpretation: we interpret an expression nonliterally in order to make sense of the speech act, not because this is dictated by the linguistic materials in virtue of the rules of the language.

The dominant view is that the only pragmatic process that can affect truth-conditional content is saturation. No ‘top-down’ or free pragmatic process can affect truth-conditions — such a process can only affect what the speaker means (but not what she says). As Stanley puts it, ‘all truth-conditional context-dependence results from fixing the values of contextually sensitive elements in the real structure of natural language sentences’ (Stanley 2000: 392). Or, as King and Stanley put it, there can only be ‘weak’ pragmatic effects on truth-conditional content. They define a weak pragmatic effect as follows:

---

<sup>6</sup> We can also imagine mixed readings in which the person disguised as an ATM does not really swallow the card, but does something that resembles swallowing, just as an ATM does.



A weak pragmatic effect on what is communicated by an utterance is a case in which context (including speaker intentions) determines interpretation of a lexical item *in accord with the standing meaning of that lexical item*. A strong pragmatic effect on what is communicated is a contextual effect on what is communicated that is not merely pragmatic in the weak sense. (King and Stanley 2005: 118-19; emphasis mine)

Radical Contextualism rejects the view that only weak pragmatic effects can affect what is said. It holds that truth-conditional content may be affected not only by saturation (as when an indexical is assigned a contextual value) but also by *free* pragmatic processes of modulation. In (1) the non-literal reading of ‘lion’ arguably results from a pragmatic operation that is not dictated by the lexical item ‘lion’ in virtue of its standing meaning. There is no slot to be filled, no free variable or context-sensitive element whose value is to be fixed, or anything of the sort. Moreover, nothing (except the desire to make sense of the speaker, in a context in which the literal reading is unlikely) prevents the sentence from being interpreted literally. The pragmatic effect here looks like a strong pragmatic effect, yet it affects truth-conditional content. Since the semantic content of any expression can be pragmatically modulated in this way, what an expression actually contributes depends upon the context.

## 6. Why resist Radical Contextualism?

I have presented five distinct issues relevant to the overall debate between Contextualism and Literalism. On each issue there are two sides: the contextualist side and the literalist side.

*Modularity*. Is pragmatic competence involved in the determination of truth-conditional content? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

*Extent of context-sensitivity*. Is context-sensitivity pervasive in natural language? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

*Generalization of context-sensitivity (1)*. Is it true that there are no eternal sentences, i.e. no sentence which expresses a proposition independent of context? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

*Generalization of context-sensitivity (2)*. Are all/most expressions like indexicals in that their lexical meaning does not add up to a full-fledged sense? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

*Generalization of context-sensitivity (3)*. Does pragmatic modulation affect truth-conditional content? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

On the first two issues (the modularity issue, and the extent of context-sensitivity issue) Contextualism wins in the sense that it is the dominant position. The role of speaker’s intentions and pragmatic competence in fixing contextual values for indexicals etc. is widely acknowledged, as is the pervasiveness of context-sensitivity in natural language. With respect to the ‘generalization of context-sensitivity’ issues, however, it is the other way round: Literalism wins, sociologically speaking. There is widespread resistance to the most radical forms of Contextualism — those which generalize context-sensitivity. Why?

In this section, I will discuss some of the reasons one might have for resisting the generalization of context-sensitivity.<sup>7</sup> I will argue that they do not carry much weight. This

---

<sup>7</sup> I will only discuss the generalization of context-sensitivity at the constituent or lexical level. The issue regarding eternal sentences etc. I take to be only of anecdotal interest. (Who cares what the proper analysis of ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ exactly is?)

will bring a *sixth* issue to the fore — the systematicity issue, to which the final section will be devoted.

Let us start with the arguments from lexical semantics. Why not simply accept them? I submit that the main source of resistance to the idea that a word's lexical meaning does not add up to a full-fledged sense is the following. Most semanticists worry more about compositional semantics than about lexical semantics, so they make their lives simpler by uncritically accepting the simplifying assumption (inherited from our elders) that lexical meanings are senses. In this way we don't have to care about how senses are generated — we take them simply as *given*. Admittedly, this is an acceptable idealization at a certain stage in the development of semantics; but as soon as one gets interested in the foundations of lexical semantics, one should start by lifting the simplifying assumption in order at least to consider the issue with an open mind.

The resistance to pragmatic modulation is a more serious matter. Here it seems that there are substantive reasons to be suspicious of Radical Contextualism. The first reason is this. If free pragmatic processes are allowed to affect semantic content, semantic content leaps out of control — it is no longer determined by the rules of the language but varies freely, à la Humpty Dumpty. But then, how can we account for the success of communication? Communication (content sharing) becomes a miracle since there is nothing to ensure that communicators and their addressees will converge on the same content. Now communication *is* possible (it takes place all the time), and there is no miracle. It follows that we should give up the view that free pragmatic processes play a role in the determination of semantic content (Cappelen and Lepore 2005: chapter 8).

This argument fails, I believe, because the problem it raises is a problem for everybody, as soon as one gives up the modular view. *Whenever* the semantic value of a linguistic expression must be pragmatically inferred, the question arises, what guarantees that the hearer will be able to latch on to the exact same semantic value as the speaker? Whether the pragmatic process at stake is saturation or modulation is irrelevant as far as this issue is concerned, so the argument fails as an argument specifically intended to cast doubt on pragmatic modulation.<sup>8</sup>

Another argument against pragmatic modulation as a possible determinant of semantic content can be put as follows. 'What is said', the truth-conditional content of an utterance, is what is *literally* said, and that — by definition — has to be determined by the conventions of the language. Pragmatics can enter the picture, provided its role is to assign a contextual value

---

<sup>8</sup> Note that one of Stanley's early arguments against radical forms of Contextualism fails for the same reason. In 'Context and Logical Form', Stanley objects that such views make truth-conditional interpretation similar to "the kind [of interpretation] involved in interpreting kicks under the table and taps on the shoulder" (Stanley 2000: 396). However, Stanley acknowledges that "each [context-sensitive] element brings with it rules governing what context can and cannot assign to it, *of varying degrees of laxity*" (Stanley 2000: 396; emphasis mine). Presumably, when the degree of laxity of the linguistically encoded constraint is high (as it is for a great deal of context-sensitive expressions), the content of the expression, hence the truth-conditions of the utterance containing it, can be determined only by appealing to pragmatic competence and figuring out what the intentions of the speaker might be. This, in itself, is sufficient to make the interpretation of utterances similar to that of kicks under the table (to some extent), even if we leave free pragmatic processes aside. (I say: 'to some extent', because truth-conditional interpretation is grammar-driven, even if it needs to rely on pragmatic competence. This difference — between truth-conditional interpretation and the interpretation of kicks under the table — may be what Stanley has in mind when he objects to pragmatic modulation. See below, §7.)

to a lexical item in a bottom-up manner, i.e. in accord with (and under the guidance of) the conventional meaning of that context-sensitive item. In contrast, strong pragmatic effects achieved in order to make sense of the speech act without being linguistically mandated take us into the realm of speaker's meaning, away from literal meaning.

Insofar as this argument is based upon a certain understanding of the phrase 'what is said' (or 'what is literally said'), it is *not* substantive, but verbal. There is no doubt that one can *define* 'what is said' in such a way that only weak pragmatic effects can affect what is said. But what the advocate of pragmatic modulation means by 'what is said' corresponds to the *intuitive truth-conditional content* of the utterance.<sup>9</sup> According to the contextualist side in the debate, the intuitive truth-conditions of an utterance of (1) or (2) *are* affected by free pragmatic processes. Assuming this is true, this does not prevent us from defining another notion of what is said, conforming to literalist standards. Let 'what is said<sub>min</sub>' be the proposition expressed by an utterance when strong pragmatic effects have been discounted (the so-called 'minimal proposition'), and let 'what is said<sub>int</sub>' correspond to the intuitive truth-conditions of the utterance. According to the contextualist view under discussion, what is said<sub>int</sub> may be affected by top-down pragmatic processes. This is compatible with the claim that only weak pragmatic effects can affect what is said<sub>min</sub>. So that claim in no way counters the idea that pragmatic modulation affects the (intuitive) truth-conditional content of utterances.

According to yet another argument, if we accept the view that pragmatic modulation affects semantic content, we blur the semantics/pragmatics distinction to the point where there no longer is any difference between what is said and what is meant; so — assuming this distinction is essential — we should reject the view that pragmatic modulation affects truth-conditional content. I find this argument unconvincing, because acknowledging the effects of pragmatic modulation on truth-conditional content (what is said<sub>int</sub>) in no way prevents one from distinguishing what is said<sub>int</sub> from other things that are conveyed by an utterance without belonging to its intuitive truth-conditional content, e.g. the particularized conversational implicatures (Grice 1989) or the effects achieved through 'staging' (Clark 1996). In other words, we can distinguish between 'primary' pragmatic processes such as modulation, from 'secondary' pragmatic processes which do not contribute to what is said<sub>int</sub> (Recanati 1989, 2004). So we do not lose the distinction between what is said and what is meant.

Conclusion: the three arguments against pragmatic modulation I have extracted from the literature and presented in this section are no good and should not be taken seriously. However, the most important argument against pragmatic modulation is, by far, the systematicity argument, which I have not yet introduced. That argument, which I take to be the main source of resistance to Radical Contextualism, deserves separate discussion since it raises a new issue relevant to the overall debate.

## 7. The systematicity issue

Many theorists argue as follows. If Radical Contextualism is true, the project of constructing a systematic, truth-conditional semantics for natural language is doomed to failure. We should therefore reject Radical Contextualism, since it leads to skepticism. Or rather, we should reject that ingredient which is incompatible with the project of constructing a systematic, truth-conditional semantics. That is not the generalization of indexicality prompted by the

---

<sup>9</sup> See my 'availability principle' (Recanati 1989, 1993, 2004).

lexical semantics considerations ; for, if indexicality is compatible with formal semantics, generalized indexicality should be compatible with it, too.<sup>10</sup> The problem, rather, comes from the acceptance of pragmatic modulation as a determinant of semantic content. That is what we should reject.

Of course, one has to say *why* the acceptance of pragmatic modulation as a determinant of semantic content is incompatible with the project of building a systematic semantics. Here is a first sketch of an argument for that conclusion.

In contrast to the contextual assignment of values to indexicals, modulation is not driven by the linguistic meaning of words. Nothing in the linguistic meaning of the words whose sense is modulated tells us that modulation ought to take place. Modulation takes place purely as a matter of context, of ‘pragmatics’; what drives it is the urge to make sense of what the speaker is saying. So modulation *is* unsystematic. If we allow it as a determinant of semantic content, we make it impossible to construct a systematic theory of semantic content.

I grant the objector that modulation is unsystematic. Still, I think it is easy to make room for it within a systematic semantics.<sup>11</sup> In general, nothing prevents unsystematic factors from being handled systematically, by being assigned their proper place in the theory. In the case at hand, we can define a function *mod* taking as argument an expression *e* and the context *c* in which it occurs: the value of *mod* is the particular modulation function that is contextually salient/relevant/appropriate for the interpretation of that expression in that context. If no modulation is contextually appropriate and the expression receives its literal interpretation, the value of *mod* will be the identity function. In this framework, we can distinguish between the *literal* sense of a simple expression *e*, namely its semantic interpretation *I(e)*, and the *modulated* sense *M(e)<sub>c</sub>* carried by an occurrence of *e* in context *c*. The modulated sense of an expression *e* (in context *c*) results from applying the contextually appropriate modulation function *mod* (*e*, *c*) to its semantic interpretation *I(e)*:

$$M(e)_c = \text{mod}(e, c)(I(e))$$

So far, this is very standard: in distinguishing *I(e)* from *M(e)<sub>c</sub>* we are just appealing to the traditional semantics/pragmatics distinction. What is *not* standard is the claim that **the semantic interpretation of a complex expression (e.g. a sentence) is a function of the modulated senses of its parts and the way they are put together**. (Recanati 2010: chapter 1). This is what examples like (1) and (2) suggest if we take at face value the effects of modulation on truth-conditional content which they seem to display. On the resulting view the semantic process of composition and the pragmatic process of sense modulation are intertwined. For simple expressions, their semantic interpretation is their literal sense, but *for complex expressions pragmatic modulation is allowed to enter into the determination of semantic content*. This is nonstandard, for sure, but there is nothing unsystematic about this view.

---

<sup>10</sup> Thus it is worth noting that, in her lecture notes on indexicality (Heim 2004), Irene Heim tentatively buys Putnam’s story about the semantics of referential nouns.

<sup>11</sup> “Acknowledging modulations as primary pragmatic processes isn’t in conflict with accepting a central role for compositional semantics”, Pagin and Pelletier rightly say (2007: 50). Like Pagin and Pelletier, Westerstahl (forthcoming) sketches a compositional treatment of modulation.

The systematicity objection can be understood differently, however. What is not systematic enough, according to the objection, is not so much the radical contextualist's *theory* of utterance interpretation, than utterance interpretation itself (what the theory is about) as construed by the radical contextualist. We have seen that, in the contextualist framework with its 'free' pragmatic processes, interpretation (content recovery) is no longer driven by the linguistic material. In introducing modulation (in contrast to saturation), I said that in saturation 'pragmatic competence comes into play, but does so under the guidance of the linguistic material', whereas modulation 'is not triggered by an expression in the sentence but takes place for purely pragmatic reasons — in order to make sense of what the speaker is saying'. This suggests that, for a radical contextualist, utterance interpretation is pragmatic through and through and does not significantly differ from "the kind [of interpretation] involved in interpreting kicks under the table and taps on the shoulder" (Stanley 2000: 396): it is not the systematic affair which formal semanticists have claimed it to be. In this way, we reach the conclusion that Radical Contextualism is incompatible with the programme of formal semantics.

Thus understood, I think the objection is confused. Even though free pragmatic processes, i.e. pragmatic processes that are not mandated by the standing meaning of any expression in the sentence, are allowed to enter into the determination of truth-conditional content, still, in the framework I have sketched, *they come into the picture as part of the compositional machinery*. Semantic interpretation remains *grammar-driven* even if, in the course of semantic interpretation, pragmatics is appealed to not only to assign contextual values to indexicals and free variables but also to freely modulate the senses of the constituents in a top-down manner. Semantic interpretation is *still* a matter of determining the sense of the whole as a function of the (possibly modulated) senses of the parts and the way they are put together.

If what I have just said is right, the systematicity issue is orthogonal to the other issues I discussed as relevant to the Contextualism/Literalism debate. The systematicity issue can be formulated thus:

*Systematicity*. Is semantic interpretation a matter of holistic guesswork (like the interpretation of kicks under the table), rather than an algorithmic, grammar-driven process as formal semanticists have claimed? Contextualism: Yes. Literalism: No.

On that issue I am happy to part company with the most radical contextualists — the 'skeptics' who would go for the holistic guesswork answer (assuming they exist, which I doubt). Like Stanley and the formal semanticists, I maintain that semantic interpretation is grammar-driven. But this issue is orthogonal to the others! So, without contradicting what I have just said, I can still hold that a good deal of holistic guesswork comes into play in semantic interpretation, e.g. in order to fix the values of context-sensitive elements or to pick the right modulation functions. Both in the case of saturation and in the case of modulation — the two types of contextual process that play a part in the determination of truth-conditional content — one has to rely heavily on pragmatic competence. Accepting this point means that one endorses a quite radical form of Contextualism; but this is compatible with maintaining that semantic interpretation is grammar-driven and proceeds recursively. I conclude that there is no reason to take one's adherence to the project of building a systematic semantics to prevent one from being a contextualist with respect to any of the issues talked about earlier.

Of course, a radical contextualist will be prone to set *limits* to systematicity in semantics; but that is not the same thing as getting rid of systematicity altogether. As I said, when it comes to fixing the values of context-sensitive elements or to picking the right modulation

functions, pragmatic competence takes over: formal semantics has nothing to say regarding the pragmatic mechanisms in play, and the hand-waving word ‘salience’ which semanticists like to use is only a place-holder. But these limitations put on semantics are nothing but the price to pay for giving up the modular view. We have to admit, once for all, that (intuitive) truth-conditional content or ‘what is said’ is not something purely semantic — something that can be retrieved simply by exercising one’s semantic competence. Pragmatic competence massively comes into the picture. To reach that conclusion, however, there is no need to consider anything fancier than deictic pronouns. In particular, there is no need to go into the ‘generalization of context-sensitivity’ issues which have loomed large in our discussion of Radical Contextualism.

What I have just said shows that there is a continuum of positions with respect to systematicity. The more literalist one is, the stronger the form of systematicity one will be in a position to claim for semantics. This means that even a moderate contextualist — someone who (merely) gives up the modular view and accepts the pervasiveness of context-sensitivity — will have to set limits to systematic semantics. These limitations I think most language theorists currently accept. Radical contextualists who generalize context-sensitivity simply go a bit farther in the same direction, but, I insist, there is only a difference of degree between them and the moderate contextualists. (In this respect I agree with Cappelen and Lepore 2005.) Radical Contextualism, therefore, is not a revolutionary position which threatens the programme of formal semantics, as many theorists have claimed. If Revolution there is, it antedates Radical Contextualism and coincides with the advent of the moderate form of Contextualism which almost everybody embraces.

## References

- Borg, E. (2004) *Minimal Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cappelen, H. and E. Lepore (2005) *Insensitive Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Clark, H. (1996) *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Donnellan, K. (1966) Reference and Definite Descriptions. *Phil. Review* 75: 281-304.
- Grice, H.P. (1989) *Studies in the way of Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Heim, I. (2004) Lecture Notes on Indexicality. *Ms*, MIT.
- King, J. and J. Stanley (2005) Semantics, Pragmatics, and the Role of Semantic Content. In Szabo, Zoltan (ed.) *Semantics versus Pragmatics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 111-64.
- Nunberg, G. (1995) Transfers of Meaning. *Journal of Semantics* 12: 109-32.
- Pagin, P. and J. Pelletier (2007) Context, Content and Communication. In G. Preyer and G. Peter (eds.) *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 25-62.
- Putnam, H. (1975) The Meaning of Meaning. In his *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 215-71.
- Recanati, F. (1989) The Pragmatics of What is Said. *Mind and Language* 4: 295-329; reprinted in Davis, S. (ed.) *Pragmatics: A Reader*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 97-120.
- Recanati, F. (1993) *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Recanati, F. (1994) Contextualism and Anti-Contextualism in the Philosophy of Language. In S. Tsohatzidis (ed.) *Foundations of Speech Act Theory*. Routledge, 156-66.

- Recanati, F. (2004) *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Recanati, F. (2010) *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stanley, J. (2000) Context and Logical Form. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23: 391-434.
- Strawson, P. (1952) *Introduction to Logical Theory*. Methuen.
- Westerståhl, D. (forthcoming) Compositionality in Kaplan Style Semantics. In Hinzen, W., Machery, E. and M. Werning (eds) *The Handbook of Compositionality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.