Précis of *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics

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In the middle of the twentieth-century so-called 'ordinary language philosophers' (Austin, Strawson, Wittgenstein, and dozens of others) launched a sustained attack on the views of so-called 'ideal-language' philosophers — the founding fathers of analytic philosophy: Frege, Russell, the first Wittgenstein, and the logical positivists. The assault lasted for about twenty years — from the early forties to the late sixties. In his inaugural lecture as the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in Oxford, Strawson described the debate as a 'battle of the giants'. Eventually, ordinary language philosophers lost, and it was their opponents' disciples — Davidson, Montague, Lewis etc. — who managed to build semantics for natural language on the foundations laid down by the founding fathers, and who thereby contributed to the development of what is now a thriving discipline in linguistics.

Ordinary language philosophers were not totally defeated, however. Many of their insights were actually taken on board — in particular the following two claims, which have become common ground among students of language:

- The unit of speech is the *illocutionary act*. Assertion is only one illocutionary act among others.

- There is pervasive *context-sensitivity* in natural language: the content carried by a linguistic expression depends upon the context of utterance and is liable to vary if the context changes.

From the standpoint of ordinary language philosophy, the two claims go together. The content carried by an expression is the contribution it makes to the content of the sentence in which the expression occurs; and for ordinary language philosophers the content of a sentence is nothing but the content of the speech act performed by uttering the sentence in context (see the 'Contextualist Principle' below). The sentence type, in abstraction from the context of use, does not have determinate representational content but ab-

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stract grammatical properties which, by themselves, fall short of determining a graspable content.[1] So, instead of focussing on the so-called 'semantic' relation between the sentence (type) and the state of affairs it allegedly represents (its truth-conditions), they advocated a perspective shift. They argued that one should take a broader look and consider the 'total speech act' [Austin (1975)] because it is only in the context of a speech act that a sentence acquires a determinate content. In other words, the semantics of natural language cannot be dissociated from its pragmatics.

That the semantics of natural language cannot be dissociated from its pragmatics is something that, *in a sense*, has become common ground since Bar-Hillel first advocated a synthesis between the insights of the two camps [Bar-Hillel (1954)]. What has been widely acknowledged among semanticists since Bar-Hillel is that the compositional assignment of content to natural language expressions must appeal to a context parameter; that is enough to bring some 'pragmatics' into the semantics, in *one* sense of 'pragmatics'. (For Montague, following Morris and Carnap, as soon as you bring the context of use into the picture, you're in the field of pragmatics.) But there is a stronger sense, closer to the views of ordinary language philosophers, in which it may be said that the semantics of natural language cannot be dissociated from its pragmatics.

What ordinary language philosophers thought was that content is (primarily) a property of speech acts (or thought acts). Sentences only have content in a derivative manner. They endorsed a pragmaticized version of Frege's context principle:

> *Contextualist Principle*
>
> Only in the context of a speech act does a sentence acquire a determinate content.[2]

The successors of Bar-Hillel and Montague reject the Contextualist Principle as incompatible with the project of building a systematic semantics for natural language. *Their* pragmaticization of semantics is much more limited and manageable: because of context-sensitivity, they appeal to a context parameter and only assign contents to sentences in context, but they do so *without* bringing the illocutionary act into the picture, that is, without venturing into 'pragmatics' in the more substantial sense — real pragmatics, as we might call it. They maintain a sharp demarcation between semantics and (real) pragmatics.

Among the reasons why ordinary language philosophers lost is a popular argument which was successfully used against ordinary language philosophers by Paul Grice. It is actually a counter-argument. Ordinary language philosophers held that sentences do not carry content independently of the speech act they are used to perform. It follows that context-sensitivity is not

merely the mark of a particular category of expressions (e.g. indexicals) but should affect *all* expressions, in virtue of the constitutive tie between speech acts and contents. Speech acts are context-bound, so contents, being constitutively tied to speech acts, must be context-bound too. In support of this view, ordinary language philosophers pointed out that, as a matter of fact, sentences do not carry stable truth-conditions across contexts. Thus, in *Introduction to Logical Theory*, Strawson famously pointed out that a simple conjunctive sentence of the form 'P and Q' does not have fixed truth-conditions. Its truth-conditions depend upon the context in a sense which has nothing to do with indexicality. In some contexts a temporal relation between the events described by the conjuncts will be truth-conditionally relevant, but in other contexts not. That is so because truth-conditional content is not a property of the sentence, but a property of the speech act, sensitive to fine features of the context of use. Grice responded by appealing to the intuitive distinction between what a sentence means and what the speaker means — a distinction which can be maintained even if we hold (as Grice did) that sentence meaning itself can ultimately be analysed in terms of speaker's meaning (at the so-called 'metasemantic' level). Sentence meaning is a conventional, *stable* property of the sentence. That is a property which speaker's meaning does not have: there is no limit to what the speaker can mean, in a suitable context, by the utterance of a given sentence, so speaker's meaning is maximally unstable. In between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning we find 'what is said'. What is said, Grice tells us, departs from the (disambiguated) meaning of the sentence but does so only minimally. Grice and his followers accept the following principle:

> *Minimality Principle*
>
> The only unstable elements of what is said — the only elements which depend upon the context and can vary — are elements resulting from 'saturation', i.e. from contextual assigning values to expressions whose conventional meaning carries a free variable to be contextually instantiated or a slot to be contextually filled (e.g. an indexical)

All the *other* aspects of utterance meaning that are context-dependent and unstable result from pragmatic processes that take place for purely pragmatic reasons. These extra ingredients of meaning are considered external to what is said: they are implicatures.

In the ordinary language argument from the unstability of truth-conditional content, it is *assumed* that the unstable ingredients (e.g. the temporal relation between the events in the conjunction cases) belong to truth-conditional content; but if we follow Grice and use a notion of truth-conditional content, or 'what is said', which *minimizes* the distance between truth-conditional content and conventional sentence meaning in the manner suggested, then we will treat

the unstable ingredients as implicatures external to what is said (unless they can be shown to result from saturation). This allows truth-conditional content to stabilize instead of varying indefinitely. Grice's suggestion, then, is that sentences do carry contents (in context), but that these contents are, or may be, distinct from the content of the speech acts the speaker performs. Speech acts contents are richer and more varied because they don't obey the Minimality Principle. They include implicatures in addition to semantic content in the strict and narrow sense. Thanks to the Gricean distinction between what is said (sentence content) and what is meant (speech act content), the ordinary language philosophers's attack on the traditional view that sentences have content can be resisted, and the Contextualist Principle rejected.

In the eighties, however, a new debate about the extent of context-sensitivity started and developed until, recently, it reached center stage in the philosophy of language.[3] The key issue in the debate is the Minimality Principle. Following Grice, 'minimalists' and their allies accept the Minimality Principle, while 'contextualists' reject it. *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics* is a contribution to that debate (on the contextualist side).

In the new debate, contextualists like myself put forward an *alternative* notion of what is said, one that does not satisfy the Minimality Principle. As a result of that move, truth-conditional content becomes unstable again. Many things which the minimalists take to be implicatures are reintegrated into truth-conditional content with the status of 'modulations' [Recanati (2004)]. Modulations are (the effects of) pragmatic processes of sense-adjustment which are not linguistically mandated (in contrast to the contextual assignment of values to indexicals) yet affect the intuitive truth-conditions of utterances (in contrast to conversational implicatures, which remain external to truth-conditional content). Modulation processes come in several varieties [Recanati (1993), (2004), Carston (1997)]: free enrichment, whereby, words are contextually understood in a more specific sense than the sense they possess in virtue of the conventions of the language; loosening, whereby words are contextually given a less specific sense than the conventional sense; and predicate transfer [Nunberg (1995)], whereby a general term comes to contribute a property distinct from, though characterizable in terms of, the property conventionally associated with the term (thus, in 'I am parked out back', the words 'parked out back' contribute the property λx *x's car is parked out back* rather than the literally encoded property λx *x is parked out back*).

To be sure, there remain genuine implicatures which the contextualists themselves treat as external to truth-conditional content. However context-dependent what is said is (on the contextualist conception), it is always possible for the speaker to mean something over and above what he or she says. But this is not enough to secure the stability of truth-conditional content. To systematically reject the unstable ingredients out of truth-conditional content, as the minimalists are willing to do, it is not sufficient to invoke the

said/meant distinction: one needs, in addition, the Minimality Principe as a specific constraint on 'what is said'. But the contextualists reject that constraint, so it cannot be invoked against them without begging the question. They reject that constraint because they take the *speech act* to be the source, or one of the sources, of truth-conditional content. From the contextualist standpoint, there is no reason why the speech act should not be allowed to contribute aspects of truth-conditional content that are not derivable from the linguistic properties of the sentence.

Are there actually 'modulations', with the properties I ascribe to them (optional yet truth-conditionally relevant)? In *Direct Reference* and again in *Literal Meaning*, I argued that there are. In *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*, I provide a collection of case studies in support of that conclusion. In the more theoretical chapters of the book, and especially in chapter 1, I make a case for integrating pragmatics — real pragmatics, i.e. pragmatics having to do with speech acts and speaker's meaning — into the compositional machinery which computes truth-conditional content. Modulated meanings, I claim, are the building blocks out of which truth-conditional content is made.

The view that there are modulations (and that we should therefore reject the Minimality Principe) is what I call Truth-Conditional Pragmatics (TCP). But this view is more modest than another one, directly inspired by the Contextualist Principle. The other view is what I called 'Contextualism' in *Direct Reference*, and 'Radical Contextualism' in *Literal Meaning* and *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*. Let me say a word about the difference between the two views.

TCP says that the speech act contributes aspects of truth-conditional content that are not derivable from the linguistic properties of the sentence (even if we take on board the mandatory assignment of contextual values to indexicals and free variables). But this is compatible with the idea that the linguistic properties of the uttered sentence (plus saturation) do determine a minimal, truth-evaluable content, which may or may not coincide with the content of the locutionary act. Radical Contextualism rejects that idea. It takes content to be primarily a speech act notion: sentences possess contents only insofar as they inherit the content of the speech acts they are used to perform. It follows that sentences by themselves do not carry (even minimal) truth-evaluable contents. They carry schematic meanings which only determine truth-evaluable contents in the context of a speech act. Radical Contextualism entails TCP, but not the other way round.

I discuss Radical Contextualism extensively in *Literal Meaning* (chapters 6 and 9), and plan to defend it in the future more or less along the lines of an earlier paper of mine [Recanati (1994)]; but in *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics* my aim is to show that the weaker position, TCP, is compatible with the project of building a systematic semantics. It is true that truth-conditional content is susceptible to indefinite variation in the TCP framework, but this variation is traceable to a process of modulation which, like saturation, can be

integrated into the compositional process which maps the syntactic string to the content it contextually expresses. The key idea is that *the content of a complex expression is a function of the modulated contents of its parts* (chapter 1). In chapter 4 I discuss various ways of construing modulation processes from a cognitive point of view.

The linguistic phenomena I discuss in the book are: verb-object combinations in chapter 1; adjective-noun combinations (with special attention to non-intersective adjectives, including privatives, and to gradable adjectives) in chapter 2; meteorological verbs and their valency in chapter 3; embedded implicatures in chapter 5; indexicality and semantic under-determination in chapter 6; reported speech, irony and quotation in chapters 6-8. In each case I show the benefits one can draw from allowing 'free' (though potentially systematic) pragmatic processes of modulation. The processes in question come in several varieties, as I said: free enrichment, predicate transfer, loosening. Other pragmatic processes, such as relativisation to situations (a process at work in contextual domain restriction) and context-shift (the process in terms of which I analyse irony, hybrid quotation and certain cases of indexical shift), are also brought to bear on the analysis of the linguistic phenomena.

Context-shifts are a particularly important topic, which occupies the last three chapters of the book. This may give a slight feeling of disunity. But there are good reasons why these chapters are included in *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*. First, context-shifts illustrate the role of pragmatics at the pre-semantic level. In the TCP framework, pragmatics is involved at three levels in utterance interpretation: the pre-semantic level (disambiguation and context-shift), the semantic level (saturation and modulation) and the post-semantic level (conversational implicature and irony). Second, context-shifts give rise to free enrichment in phenomena such as mixed quotation (chapters 7 and 8). Third, context-shifts, when they occur locally, map the character of the operand (the expression whose context of interpretation is shifted) to the character of the resulting 'hybrid' (chapter 8). This is a form of modulation at the level of character, similar to that which occurs in predicate transfer.

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NOTES

[1] Linguists can describe the semantic properties of sentences like all other grammatical properties, but the innocent language users know these properties only implicitly. The innocent language user cannot grasp the conventional meaning of a

sentence (a subset of its grammatical properties) in the sense in which he or she grasps the content expressed by a sentence in the context of a speech act, real or imaginary.

[2] The Contextualist Principle can be found in Wittgenstein, who wrote: 'It is only in use that the proposition has its sense' [*On Certainty*, §10]. According to Conant, Wittgenstein 'seeks to generalize Frege's context principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but also to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use or — as Wittgenstein prefers to call them — language games. The possibility of such a generalization already played an important (if somewhat subterranean) role in the work of Frege and the early Wittgenstein' [Conant (1998), p. 233].

[3] The following books published within a very short period of time give an idea of the intensity of the minimalism/contextualism debate in early twenty-first century philosophy of language: Borg (2004), Recanati (2004), Cappelen and Lepore (2005), Predelli (2005), Stanley (2005), Preyer and Peter (eds.) (2005) and (2007).

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