

Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism

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Abstract: According to Semantic Minimalism, every use of "Chiara is tall" (fixing the girl and the time) semantically expresses the same proposition, the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall. Given standard assumptions, this proposition ought to have an intension (a function from possible worlds to truth values). However, speakers tend to reject questions that presuppose that it does. I suggest that semantic minimalists might address this problem by adopting a form of "nonindexical contextualism," according to which the proposition invariantly expressed by "Chiara is tall" does not have a context-invariant intension. Nonindexical contextualism provides an elegant explanation of what is wrong with "context-shifting arguments" and can be seen as a synthesis of the (partial) insights of semantic minimalists and radical contextualists.

1. Introduction

My niece is four and a half feet tall—significantly taller than the average seven-year old. With this in mind, I might say "Chiara is tall," and, it seems, I would be speaking truly. Yet it also seems that if her basketball coach were to say "Chiara is tall" while discussing who should play which position on the team, he would not be speaking truly. What can we conclude about the *meaning* of "tall"?

Moderate Contextualists conclude that the sentence must be context-sensitive, in a way that goes beyond the context sensitivity of "Chiara" and "is" (which we may presume are being used in reference to the same girl and time). They reason as follows: If I am speaking truly and the coach is speaking falsely, we must be saying different things. Since we are using the same sentence, and using it "literally," this sentence must be context-sensitive. Used at my context, it expresses the proposition that Chiara has significantly greater height than the average seven-year old; used at the coach's context, it expresses the proposition that she has significantly greater height than the average member of team he coaches.

Cappelen and Lepore (2005) reject this reasoning, but only at the last step. They agree that different things are said in the two contexts I have

described, but they deny that anything interesting follows from this about the *meaning* of "Chiara is tall." They can do this because they are *Speech Act Pluralists*: they hold that indefinitely many different things can be said in a single utterance. So, although I have said that Chiara is tall for a seven-year old, and the coach has said that she is tall for a member of the basketball team, that is consistent with there *also* being something that we have *both* said—namely, that she is (just plain) tall. It is this that Cappelen and Lepore take to be the invariant semantic content of the sentence we have used. Thus they can concede to the Moderate Contextualist that different things have been said in the two contexts, while resisting the conclusion that the sentence used is context-sensitive.

This deployment of Speech Act Pluralism helps deflect one argument against the view that there is a single proposition that is semantically expressed by *every* use of "Chiara is tall" (fixing the girl and the time). But it does nothing to make it plausible that there *is* such a proposition. Indeed, most contextualists, including some who accept Speech Act Pluralism, take it to be obvious that there *cannot* be any such proposition, on the grounds that there is no such thing as being just plain tall (as opposed to tall for a seven-year old, or tall for a team member, or tall compared to a skyscraper, or ...). That there is in fact such a proposition—a bona fide, truth-evaluable proposition, not a "proposition radical" or anything schematic—is the central tenet of what Cappelen and Lepore call *Semantic Minimalism*. It is this, chiefly, that distinguishes them from the philosophers they call *Radical Contextualists*. If it should turn out that there is no such "minimal" or (borrowing a phrase from Ken Taylor) "modificationally neutral" proposition, then Cappelen and Lepore will have no choice but to embrace the Radical Contextualists' conclusion that there is no hope for systematic theorizing about the propositions expressed by sentences in contexts.¹ After all, they accept all of the Radicals' arguments against the Moderates.

Our first order of business, then, should be asking what might be thought

¹ Note that this is not at all the same as the claim that systematic semantics is impossible. What Radical Contextualists reject is only a certain conception of what semantics must accomplish.

to be problematic about such propositions—since Moderate and Radical Contextualists are united in rejecting them—and considering whether Cappelen and Lepore have said enough to dispel these worries. I am going to argue that although Cappelen and Lepore misidentify the real source of resistance to minimal propositions, and so do not address it, this worry *can* be addressed. However, the strategy I will describe for making sense of Semantic Minimalism is not one that Cappelen and Lepore can take on board without cost. For my way of "making sense" of Cappelen and Lepore's view can, with a slight shift of perspective, be regarded as a way of making sense of Radical Contextualism, a position they regard as incompatible with their own (and indeed as hopeless).²

2. The intension problem

Let's call the proposition putatively expressed in every context of use by the sentence "Chiara is tall" (fixing girl and time) *the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall* (at time *t*—I will henceforth omit this qualification). According to Cappelen and Lepore, "[t]his proposition is not a 'skeleton'; it is not fragmentary; it's a full-blooded proposition with truth conditions and a truth value" (181). What they mean, presumably, is that it has a truth value at every circumstance of evaluation (since propositions may, in general, have different truth values at different circumstances of evaluation).

I believe that most philosophers' worries about minimal propositions are rooted in puzzlement over the question this claim naturally provokes: At *which* circumstances of evaluation is the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall true? Here I'm using the technical term "circumstance of evaluation" the way David Kaplan taught us to use it in *Demonstratives* (1989). A circumstance of evaluation includes all the parameters to which propositional truth must be relativized for semantic purposes. Though Kaplan himself included times in his circumstances of evaluation (and contemplated other parameters as well), the current orthodoxy is that

² Because my concern here is with the coherence of Semantic Minimalism, I will not address the arguments Cappelen and Lepore muster in favor of that doctrine (most of them arguments *against* the contextualist alternative).

circumstances of evaluation are just possible worlds.³ In this setting, our question becomes: At which possible worlds is the minimal proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall true? I'll call this the *intension problem* for minimal propositions (using the term "intension" for a function from possible worlds to truth values for propositions, or to extensions for properties and relations).

It's easy to feel pressure to make this intension very, very weak. After all, being tall for a seven year old does seem to be a way of being tall. So it is natural to think that the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall must be true at every world at which the proposition that Chiara is tall for a seven year old is true. Similar reasoning will move us inexorably towards the conclusion that, no matter what reference class F we pick, the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall is weaker than the proposition that she is tall for an F . After all, even being tall compared to an ant is a way of being tall. We are left with the surprising conclusion that the minimal proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall is true at every world at which Chiara has any degree of height at all.

That's odd enough. It gets even odder when we run the same argument with "short" and conclude that the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) short is true at every possible world in which she is not absolutely gigantic. It follows that at all but a few very odd worlds, Chiara has both the property of being (just plain) tall *and* the property of being (just plain) short. And that does not sit well with our feeling that *being tall* and *being short* are incompatible properties.

Cappelen and Lepore do not themselves embrace this view about the

³ Kaplan included times because he thought the tenses were best understood as propositional operators, which need a parameter to shift (1989: 502-3). This view of tenses is now rejected by most semanticists, so there is no longer a compelling reason to include a time parameter in circumstances of evaluation (see King 2003). But everything I say in this paper about the orthodox framework could be said (with minimal modifications) about a Kaplan-style framework as well.

intension of *tall*. They do not reject it either. They present it as one of several possible views one might adopt about the metaphysics of tallness (171):

- A thing is tall if there is some comparison class with respect to which it is tall.
- A thing is tall if it is tall with respect to its *privileged* comparison class.
- A thing is tall (at time *t*) if it is tall with respect to the comparison class that is appropriate to its situation (at *t*).
- A thing is tall if it is taller than the average of all objects with height.

All of these views are problematic; indeed, Cappelen and Lepore point out many of the problems themselves. But they don't think that solving these problems, or deciding between these options, is part of their job as semanticists. Their charge is language, not the metaphysics of properties. Having argued to their satisfaction that "tall" is not context sensitive, they are content to leave it to the metaphysicians to sort out just what an object has to be like in order to have the property that "tall" invariantly expresses.

This response is fine, as far as it goes. Semanticists should not be required to be metaphysicians (or physicists or biologists or ethicists). They need not give informative answers to questions about the intensions of properties.⁴ However, in taking resistance to minimal propositions to be grounded in a misguided demand for an informative *specification* of their intensions, Cappelen and Lepore have missed what is most troubling about their doctrine. Semantic Minimalism is problematic not because it does not *provide* an answer to questions about the intensions of its minimal properties and propositions, but because it requires that there *be* answers to such questions.

⁴ It is not difficult for the Semantic Minimalist to give *uninformative* answers: for example, "a thing has the property of being tall (in some world *w*) just in case it is tall in *w*."

Suppose that you are examining some ants on the sidewalk. Most of the ants are tiny, but one is significantly bigger than the rest. "That's a big one," you say. After a while, the ants begin to disappear though a barely perceptible crack in the concrete. When the last ant, the bigger one, squeezes through, you say, "Boy, that ant is small." At this point a Semantic Minimalist appears and begins to question you in a most annoying way:

"Wait a second. You just said that that ant was big. Now you say it's small. I didn't notice it changing size. So which is it, big or small?"

"Well, it's big for an ant, but small compared to most of the other things we can see."

"Fine, but I'm not asking about these properties; I'm asking about plain old bigness and smallness. You said (among many other things) that the ant was (just plain) big, and then that it was (just plain) small. Do you suppose it could have had both properties, bigness and smallness?"

"No..."

"So which is it, then? Or don't you know?"

The question seems completely inappropriate. But why should it, if the Semantic Minimalist is right that there is a property of being (just plain) big which is always expressed by "big", and a property of being (just plain) small which is always expressed by "small"? Why shouldn't we be able to entertain questions about which things have these properties? It is not enough to point out that semanticists need not answer metaphysical questions. For even the answer "I have no idea" seems out of place here.⁵

⁵ It should be clear that the problem does not stem from the *vagueness* of "big" and "small". It would not help the Semantic Minimalist here if we allowed the intensions of bigness and smallness to be functions from possible worlds to fuzzy extensions (mappings of objects to degrees of truth) or partial functions from possible worlds to extensions.

It might be suggested that we reject such questions because we aren't *aware* of the minimal propositions that are semantically expressed by our sentences, but only of the more determinate contents of our speech acts. But such a line would be incompatible with what Cappelen and Lepore say about the cognitive role of the minimal content. They say that "the proposition semantically expressed is that content the audience can expect the speaker to grasp (and expect the speaker to expect the audience to grasp, etc.) even if she has such mistaken or incomplete information" about the context (184-5). Explaining how a speaker could use the (presumably quite weak) proposition that A is red in order to make a much more determinate claim about A's color, they say: "The audience can assume that the speaker knew that this [the proposition semantically expressed] was trivial and was not interested in conveying such trivialities with his utterance and can, therefore, infer that there's work to be done in order to figure out exactly what the speaker was trying to communicate" (185-6). All of this assumes that both speaker and audience are aware of the proposition semantically expressed. (Indeed, the second claim assumes some mutual knowledge about the *intension* of this proposition.) If Cappelen and Lepore were to abandon this assumption, they would open themselves up to the objection that their minimal propositions play no real cognitive role in communication.

Alternatively, the Minimalist might say that the reason speakers find the question in our dialogue inappropriate is that they have mistaken views about the semantics of terms like "big" and "small." They implicitly take these words to be context sensitive, when in fact they invariantly express the properties of being (just plain) big and (just plain) small.

It should be obvious, however, that this response would completely undermine the positive case for Semantic Minimalism. For the contextualist can use exactly the same trick—attributing confusion or error about the semantics of these terms to ordinary speakers—to dismiss the evidence Cappelen and Lepore have mustered that terms like "red," "tall," and "know" do not behave like context-sensitive expressions. For example, Cappelen and Lepore make much of the fact that we report others who utter the sentence "Chiara is tall" as having said that Chiara is tall, without much regard to differences in our contexts. The practice of making such "intercontextual disquotational indirect reports" only makes sense, they

say, if "tall" semantically expresses the same property in every context. But the contextualist can accept this conditional and conclude that the practice *doesn't* make sense—that it embodies a fundamental mistake people implicitly make about the semantics of their own terms, a mistake that the contextualist hopes to correct. (This is, in fact, a common line for contextualists to take, although they sometimes also question the uniformity or the relevance of the data about intercontextual indirect reports: see DeRose, forthcoming.) Cappelen and Lepore need to say something to block this kind of move. Whatever they say, it will presumably also block *them* from appealing to massive speaker error or confusion in explaining our rejection of the question in the dialogue above as somehow absurd or inappropriate.

To recap: The intension problem is the problem of saying just what a world must be like if the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall is to be true at that world. Cappelen and Lepore rightly put this aside as a metaphysical question, not a semantic one. But they fail to see that there is a semantic problem lurking in the immediate vicinity. If Semantic Minimalism is true, then the intension problem should have a solution (even if the solution is not known to us). But we do not treat it as having a solution at all. We reject as inappropriate questions that ought to have perfectly definite answers if there is such a property as being (just plain) tall and that property has an intension.

3. Minimal propositions without intensions?

In view of this problem, it is worth asking whether a Semantic Minimalist can coherently deny that minimal propositions, like the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall, have intensions.

In orthodox frameworks of the kind favored by most Moderate Contextualists, this option is not open. For propositions have truth values relative to circumstances of evaluation. If circumstances of evaluation are just possible worlds, then propositions have truth values relative to worlds: in other words, they have intensions. So if there is a proposition that is semantically expressed by "Chiara is tall" at every context of use, it must have an intension. At this point, contextualists conclude *modo tollente* that there is no such proposition, while Cappelen and Lepore conclude *modo ponente* that, since there *is* such a proposition, it must have an intension.

We can go beyond these two alternatives by thinking a bit differently about circumstances of evaluation. Possible worlds will presumably be one component of our circumstances of evaluation (otherwise, what will our modal operators shift?), but nothing stops us from introducing other components as well. (Indeed, semanticists have for various reasons suggested adding times, "standards of precision," and other parameters.) So let's think of a circumstance of evaluation as an ordered pair consisting of a world and a "counts-as" parameter, which we can model as a function from properties to intensions (functions from worlds to extensions). The "counts-as" parameter is so called because it fixes what things have to be like in order to *count as* having the property of tallness (or any other property) at a circumstance of evaluation.⁶

As before, we say that propositions have truth values at circumstances of evaluation. But now our circumstances are not just worlds, so it no longer follows that propositions have truth values at worlds. This is why it is not appropriate to ask about the truth value of the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall at a possible world (including the actual world). For there will in general be *many* circumstances of evaluation that have a given world as their world parameter but differ in their "counts-as" parameter. Our proposition will be true at some of these circumstances and false at others. So it does not have an intension (a function from possible worlds to truth values).⁷ This should be a welcome result for the Semantic Minimalist, who no longer has to say that there is a (context-invariant) answer to the question: Does Chiara have the property of being (just plain) tall, in the actual world, or not?

Following Kaplan, we say that an occurrence of a sentence is true just in

⁶ Note that the function assigns an intension to *every* property, not just "minimal" properties. This is important because, as Cappelen and Lepore point out (172-5), the same kinds of arguments that may lead one to doubt that the property of *being tall* has an intension can also be run for the property of *being tall for a giraffe*.

⁷ Of course it has an "intension" in a broader sense: a function from *circumstances of evaluation* to truth values.

case the proposition expressed is true at the circumstance of the context.⁸ Which circumstance of evaluation is the "circumstance of the context," in this framework? The world parameter of the circumstance of the context is, of course, just the world of the context. But the counts-as parameter will be determined in complex ways by other features of the context, including the topic of conversation and the speaker's intentions. In a context C1 where I'm talking about seven-year olds, the counts-as function might assign to the property of being (just plain) tall the same intension it assigns to the property of being tall-for-a-seven-year-old. In a context C2 where I'm talking about members of the basketball team, the counts-as function might assign to the property of being tall the same intension it assigns to the property of being tall-for-team-member. Thus the circumstance of C1 can differ from the circumstance of C2 even if the two contexts are situated in the same world (say, the actual world). And as a result, an occurrence of "Chiara is tall" in C1 can differ in truth value from an occurrence of "Chiara is tall" in C2, even if the same proposition is expressed by both.

We can now say precisely what goes wrong in the story about the ants (above). The problem is *not* that there is no such proposition as the proposition that the ant is (just plain) big. The present view concedes that there is such a proposition, and that this proposition is perfectly suitable, in general, for use in questions and answers. In general, we look to contextual factors to determine a counts-as parameter that (together with the world of utterance) can settle a truth value for the proposition in

⁸ "If c is a context, then an occurrence of ϕ in c is true iff the content expressed by ϕ in this context is true when evaluated with respect to the circumstance of the context" (Kaplan 1989: 522). Semanticists sometimes ascribe truth to *utterances* rather than to occurrences of sentences in contexts, but as Kaplan notes, the notion of an utterance is proper to pragmatics, not semantics. It is especially odd to find Speech Act Pluralists like Cappelen and Lepore ascribing truth and falsity to utterances (e.g. in their "intercontextual disquotational test," 105), since on their view an utterance can express indefinitely many propositions, which (one assumes) need not all have the same truth value at the circumstance of the context.

context. In the ant story, however, the context fails to determine a single counts-as parameter, because the questioner has deliberately made salient two incompatible counts-as parameters: the one that was in play when the ant was first described as big and the one that was in play when it was later described as small. The question "which is it, big or small?" presupposes that the context determines sufficiently what counts as having the properties of bigness and smallness. But the questioner in this case has ensured that this presupposition cannot be met. That is why we (rightly) reject the question and find every answer (even "I don't know") to be inappropriate.

As far as I can see, the view I have just described is consistent with Semantic Minimalism, as Cappelen and Lepore describe it. It allows that "Chiara is tall" expresses the same proposition at every context of use (fixing girl and time). This proposition is not a "schema," but "a full-blooded proposition with truth conditions and a truth value," that is, a truth value at each circumstance of evaluation. Granted, the proposition does not have a truth value at each *possible world*, but that is just what we should expect in a framework where there is more to circumstances of evaluation than just worlds.⁹

On this picture, the sentence "Chiara is tall" is not context-sensitive in the sense that it expresses different propositions at different contexts. But it *is* context-sensitive in the sense that the truth of an occurrence of it depends on features of the context—not just the world of the context, but the speaker's intentions, the conversational common ground, and other such things.¹⁰ Accordingly, this brand of Semantic Minimalism might also be

⁹ "Temporalists" who take circumstances of evaluation to be world/time pairs do not think that propositions have truth values relative to worlds, either.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Cappelen and Lepore give two distinct definitions of "context-sensitive," corresponding roughly to these two senses (146). According to the first, "To say that *e* is context sensitive is to say that its contribution to the proposition expressed by utterances of sentences containing *e* varies from context to context." According to the second, "To say that *e* is context sensitive is to say that its contribution to the

described as a kind of contextualism: what I have elsewhere called *Nonindexical Contextualism*.¹¹ This way of describing it brings out how close it is to Radical Contextualism. *Too* close, Cappelen and Lepore may feel! However, it is immune to their best arguments against Radical Contextualism, so if they are going to reject it, they need fresh reasons.

truth conditions of utterances u of a sentence S containing e (in some way or other) references various aspects of the context of u ." In the framework I have described, these two definitions are not equivalent.

¹¹ See my "Nonindexical Contextualism" (in preparation). See also MacFarlane 2005a and 2005b, where I describe nonindexical contextualist views in order to distinguish them from views I regard as genuinely "relativist." I take it that the account developed by Predelli 2005, to which I am much indebted, is also a form of nonindexical contextualism. Instead of countenancing an extra parameter of circumstances of evaluation, as I do here, Predelli conceives of points of evaluation as something like state descriptions (which fix the extension of every property and relation expressible in the language). There are state descriptions according to which Chiara falls into the extension of both "four and a half feet tall" and "tall", and others according to which she falls into the extension of the former but not the latter. Which state description is "the circumstance of the context" will depend not just on the world of the context, but on other features of context as well. I think that the differences between these two versions of nonindexical contextualism are largely notational. I prefer to "factor out" my circumstances of evaluation into a world component and a catch-all counts-as parameter, because it is convenient to have a separate "world" parameter of circumstances for modal operators to shift. If we let them shift state descriptions wholesale, then "That could have been red" could come out true just because what counts as red might have been different, even if the color of the object demonstrated could not have been different—surely an undesirable result. But this is not a fatal objection to Predelli's approach: as Kenny Easwaran has pointed out to me, Predelli could allow his modal operators to shift state descriptions "retail," the way quantifiers shift assignments.

4. Context Shifting Arguments reconsidered

An advantage of the framework I have just sketched is that it offers a different (and perhaps deeper) diagnosis than Cappelen and Lepore's of what goes wrong in Moderate Contextualists' uses of Context Shifting Arguments (CSAs). Unlike Cappelen and Lepore's diagnosis, this one does not require Speech Act Pluralism, though it is consistent with it.

Let's consider again the general form of a Context Shifting Argument. We describe two occurrences of the same sentence, *S*, one in context *C*₁, the other in context *C*₂. We then observe that intuitively the former is true, while the latter is false. Assuming these intuitions are accurate, we can conclude the following:

- (1) At *C*₁, *S* expresses a proposition that is true at the circumstance of *C*₁.
- (2) At *C*₂, *S* expresses a proposition that is false at the circumstance of *C*₂.

We *cannot* conclude, however, that the proposition *S* expresses at *C*₁ is different from the proposition *S* expresses at *C*₂. For if the circumstance of *C*₁ is different from the circumstance of *C*₂, our two occurrences of *S* can diverge in truth value even while expressing the same proposition.

Nothing about the general point I am making here depends on circumstances of evaluations being anything other than just worlds. Suppose *S* is the sentence "Bush won the US Presidential election in 2000," and suppose that the world of *C*₁ is different from the world of *C*₂. Then an occurrence of *S* in *C*₁ could diverge in truth value from an occurrence of *S* in *C*₂, not because different propositions are expressed, but simply because the circumstances of the two contexts are different. (Say, Bush won in the world of *C*₁, but lost in the world of *C*₂.)

Thus, a CSA establishes that the propositions expressed are different only given an additional premise:

- (3) The circumstance of *C*₁ = the circumstance of *C*₂.

Normally users of CSAs do not even mention (or perhaps see the need for)

this premise, because in orthodox frameworks it is relatively easy to secure. In these frameworks, a circumstance of evaluation is just a possible world, so (3) amounts to

(4) The world of C1 = the world of C2.

So the user of a CSA has only to describe contexts that take place at the same world and differ only in other ways—in the topic of conversation, for example—and the CSA *will* establish that what is said at C1 is different from what is said at C2.

Cappelen and Lepore seem to accept all of this reasoning. They accept that the CSAs used by contextualists show that something different is said at the two contexts described. Their point is that this does not show that the proposition *semantically expressed* is different, because (given Speech Act Pluralism) the proposition semantically expressed is only one of many things said.

If we adopt the framework described in the last section, however, we can reject the contextualists' reasoning in a more fundamental way. For in this framework it is no longer true that a circumstance of evaluation is just a world. This makes it much more difficult to construct a CSA for which (3) holds. It is no longer sufficient to ensure that C1 and C2 are situated at the same world; we must also make sure that these contexts determine the same counts-as function. This is relatively easy to do when we are making up CSAs to demonstrate the indexicality of "I", "here", or "now", but difficult or impossible when we are making up CSAs to demonstrate the indexicality of "knows", "tall", and other such terms. That is why CSAs work in the former cases but not in the latter.

5. Conclusion

I have offered up this version of Nonindexical Contextualism as a way of making sense of Semantic Minimalism. If Cappelen and Lepore accept my exegesis, then they can block Context Shifting Arguments in a different way than they do in *Insensitive Semantics*, and without invoking Speech Act Pluralism. If they do not accept it, then they must find another way to explain why speakers reject questions that should admit of answers (if only "I don't know") if minimal propositions have determinate intensions.

In closing, a Hegelian thought. In a recent paper, Stefano Predelli (2005) has offered up his own version of Nonindexical Contextualism as a way of making sense of Radical Contextualism. It is striking, I think, that a plausible interpretation of Semantic Minimalism and a plausible interpretation of Radical Contextualism should come out looking very similar! This suggests that, far from being fundamentally opposed, the two positions are just the two one-sided ways of grasping the truth about context sensitivity that are available when one supposes that propositions have truth values at possible worlds. *Thesis*: Semantic Minimalism. *Antithesis*: Radical Contextualism. *Synthesis*: Nonindexical Contextualism.

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