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REVIEW ARTICLE

Folk psychology and literal meaning

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François Recanati, *Literal Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, viii+179 pages. ISBN 0-521-53736-3

Recanati argues against what he calls “literalism” and for what he calls “contextualism”. He considers a wide spectrum of positions and arguments from relevance theory to hidden variables theory. In the end, however, he seems to hold that semantic and pragmatic theorizing must answer to broadly introspective or folk psychological constraints — they don’t exist in “heaven”. After surveying Recanati’s wide-ranging and provocative discussion of these issues, we wonder why parity of reasoning does not condemn syntax and phonology, as customarily practiced.

This slender, elegant book integrates much of Recanati’s influential writings over the last fifteen years on a cluster of issues surrounding the relation of traditionally semantic information to traditionally pragmatic information. Recanati has been one of the leaders in the recent movement to “pragmatize” semantics beyond what is taken to be the traditional Gricean role of reference fixing and contextual disambiguation. Recanati tries to get beyond the territorial and mostly vacuous recent terminological squabbles concerning what is ‘semantics’ vs ‘pragmatics’ to what the status of disputed information is in processing terms, as well as the consequences for semantics and pragmatics of taking one option rather than another.¹ You may not agree with the choices he has made, but you will have to consider the arguments he has made for them. In what follows I would like to give the reader, who is unlikely to have already read the book, some sense of the flow of ideas and argument, unbroken by questions and criticisms. I have, therefore, separated off exposition of the chapters from specific commentary on them, as well as from some general reflections at the end.

The Introduction presents the idea that “Literalism”, the view that we may legitimately assign truth-conditional content to sentences independent of what speakers mean in uttering them, descends from the Ideal Language tradition (e.g., Frege, Russell, Carnap, Montague and contemporary formal semantics), whereas “Contextualism”, the view that speech acts are the primary bearers of truth-conditional content, descends from the Ordinary Language tradition (e.g., Wittgenstein, Austin, Grice, Searle, etc.). The rest of the book constitutes a case against Literalism, nicely summarized here, and for Contextualism.

Note that the relation between Literalism and Minimalism is not entirely clear because Literalism is not explicitly presented as a theory of sentence meaning, as it is in, say, truth-conditional semantics (either as an explication or replacement).² Thus, there is an official gap between meaning and truth-conditions that a Literalist might (and should) exploit to deflect some criticisms.

Chapter 1 outlines two contrasting views on the relation between the three central Gricean categories: what a sentence means vs. what is said, and what is implicated, in the utterance of it. “Minimalism”, which is allied with Literalism above, construes what is said as making the minimum supplementation to linguistic meaning necessary for a full truth-conditional (“propositional”) content. What we might call “Availabilism”, allied with Contextualism above, construes what is said as involving whatever constitutes the truth-conditional content that is available to introspection. These two conceptions can pull apart in the way they describe the interpretation of utterances in context of sentences such as:

- (1) I’ve had breakfast [M: sometime, A: today]
- (2) You’re not going to die [M: ever, A: now, from that]
- (3) It’s raining [M: somewhere, A: here]

The Minimalist takes the M-proposition as what is said and the A-proposition as conversationally implicated. The availabilist takes the A-proposition as what is said, in accordance with the thesis that what is said must be intuitively accessible to the communicants (p. 20). Underlying this taxonomic point is a processing point. Let’s call a process ‘mandatory’ if the content semantically encoded in a sentence is less than propositional and that process is required to make it propositional. Filling a slot, or assigning a contextual element to a free variable, are typical examples of the bottom-up ‘saturation’ of an incomplete content to render it truth-conditionally evaluable and ‘what is said’. The minimalist limits mandatory processes to saturation. The availabilist adds optional top-down processes such as “free enrichment” to contribute to ‘what is

said'. Together, these (both mandatory and optional) are called 'Primary Pragmatic Processes' (PPP), and they contrast with 'Secondary Pragmatic Processes' (SPP) — which take the output of PPPs and produce, by familiar Gricean mechanisms of conversational implicature, another proposition, "external" to the first. In sum, Minimalism sees the minimal proposition as what is said, and it is usually unavailable to introspection (as to what is being said), and the full conscious truth-conditional content is the result of supplementing that proposition with semantically, though not pragmatically, optional processes such as free enrichment.

Availabilism sees the available proposition as what is said, even if it is built using semantically optional processes such as free enrichment. Tying the two conceptions of what is said to processing saves the dispute from being merely terminological, but Recanati is reluctant to endorse existing attempts by some psychologists to test for 'what was said' simply by taking a fancy survey. More sophisticated testing is required.

We should note that Minimalism³ is a specific view concerning the nature of that truth-conditional content (or proposition). So one could in principle be a Literalist without being a Minimalist by denying that the Minimalist conception of that content is in fact the content of such sentences. Literalism and Minimalism need not go together because Minimalism is only one stop among possible stops on the way to a content becoming propositional.⁴ Recanati does not say why someone should be a Minimalist, given that they are a Literalist. Nor is it clear what the relation between Minimalism as characterized above and the "processes" of saturation is. If saturation is simply an interpretation function defined over contexts and sentences, then it is a "process" in an attenuated sense. However Recanati suggests that saturation is a process in a richer, psychological sense. But why should a Minimalist agree to that — why shouldn't a Minimalist stick to semantics?

Chapter 2 elaborates on the "pre-propositional" PPPs, as opposed to the "post-propositional" SPPs. PPPs are not limited to mandatory, bottom-up saturation, and include at least two other optional, top-down processes. First, there is "free enrichment", illustrated in (4), where Mary is understood as opening the door with the key.

(4) Mary took out her key and opened the door [with the key]

Here the enriched proposition is a more specific version of the original, the interpretation has undergone "specificization" by a restriction on the predicate 'open' to 'opened with the key'. Are all cases of enrichment cases of specificization?

Recanati does not venture an answer, nor does he answer the question whether all cases of enrichment involve “strengthening” or “logical enrichment”, i.e., cases where the enriched proposition asymmetrically entails the unenriched proposition. Second, there is the opposite of enrichment, “loosening”, where the condition of application associated with a concept is broadened, not restricted:

- (5) The ATM swallowed my credit card

Note: this is a metaphor, requiring a reinterpretation of ‘swallow’, not the weakening of the proposition by adding more material, as in:

- (6) That is a FAKE Ming vase

Third, there is “semantic” (formerly “metonymic”) transfer:

- (7) The ham sandwich has left without paying [person who ordered it]
(8) I’m parked out back [my car is]

These four processes (saturation, enrichment, loosening, transfer) yield a “derived” meaning from the “literal” meaning of the sentence, but this process need not be carried out at the level of the whole sentence or proposition. Constituents of the sentence can activate “associatively” (vs. “inferentially”) derived concepts, which are then parallel candidates for incorporation into the proposition expressed, which is settled by “fitting” the context of utterance better than the other, suppressed, candidates. On this model, the anomalous, lexically encoded, propositions expressed by (7) and (8) are not computed then rejected by the hearer. Rather, they are never computed in the first place, and what is computed is:

- (7’) The person who ordered the ham sandwich has left without paying
(8’) My car is parked out back

This is because the process of computing derived meanings (from literal ones) is sensitive to those elements that are the most “activated”, “accessible” or “salient”, and accessibility status can change in the course of interpreting an utterance:

- (9) John was arrested by a policeman yesterday: he had just stolen a wallet

Suppose when the hearer reaches ‘he’, this is assigned a policeman by some principle of closeness (resolve to the closest previous NP). By the time we get

to the predicate 'stolen', general knowledge dictates the 'he' be reassigned John. This allows Recanati to account for the interpretability of (7) as well as (10):

- (10) The ham sandwich is getting eaten

In fact, there are now multiple ways of handling the same resulting interpretation. For instance in:

- (11) The city [inhabitants of (transfer)] is asleep [showing little activity (loosening)]

What drives the interpretation process is a tendency to prefer "coherent", or the most "coherent" interpretation — the one with the highest degree of fit between semantic values — the one that instantiates a "schema". Schemata seem to be associated at least with verbs. Thus 'sleep' calls the sleep-schema, and 'steal'/'arrest' call the stealing and being arrested schema. These schemata serve as a kind of conceptual framework within which to fit the developing parts of the interpretation of the sentence. The activation of appropriate schemata is raised by processing related words, and the activation of certain interpretations of words is raised by the activated schema. Schemata drive the interpretation process because such "coherent" interpretations tend to be preferred.

Notice that some utterances are ambiguous in context and all alternatives are not suppressed. This means the notion of "fit" is doing all the work here. And Recanati does not say much about what he takes a schema to be. He refers the reader to various sources which suggest that such things as "frames" and "scripts" are also to be included.

Chapter 3 compares the foregoing conception of PPPs and SPPs with Relevance Theory (RT), which posits a single system mapping the sentence into the propositions communicated via inferences, which are normally spontaneous, unconscious, and automatic, but which can become effortful and conscious when something goes wrong. Appealing to Reid's distinction between "intuitive" and "discursive" judgments, and the availability of the discursive judgment, its grounds, and the fact that it is grounded (but not the inference mechanism), Recanati claims that inferences RT takes to be unconscious are in fact conscious, but inexplicit. RT has conflated consciousness with explicitness. Having argued against Griceans that enriched saying is not serially computed after minimal saying, Recanati now argues against Relevance Theorists (RTs) who deny that PPPs come before SPPs. RTs claim that a variety of examples, including the phenomena of "bridging" and "implicated premises" show that there is a relation of "mutual adjustment between PPPs and SPPs, and so there

is no necessary ordering between them. Recanati challenges the RT description of the data, arguing that in some cases the alleged implicature is just a presupposition, in other cases that the implicature is actually a part of what is said_{prag}. He also challenges the notion that there is a single conscious-tacit distinction between these processes. In fact there are both subpersonal and personal “tacit inferences”.

We should note that it is not always clear what features are being attributed to inferences by the combatants. For instance, Figure 3.1 represents RT as postulating conscious inferences as “explicit” and “effortful” while unconscious inferences have no features — are they “implicit” and “effortless”? Figure 3.2 represents Recanati’s view that conscious inferences divide between “explicit reasoning” and “spontaneous inference”. Is there a difference here between reasoning and inference? And what is the contrast between “spontaneous” and “explicit” — couldn’t one make a spontaneous explicit inference? Why not? Finally, what is the “explicit-implicit” distinction for inferences? Are implicit inferences enthymematic? Are they “tacit” — and what does that mean? More needs to be said here. Also, Recanati wants to handle some of the troublesome cases that RT says show that what is implicated (SPPs) can precede what is said (PPPs) by either making it a presupposition, or enriching what is said to include that information. But he gives no reason to prefer his redescriptions over the original.

Chapter 4 raises the possibility that minimalism and availability can be reconciled in a “syncretic” view. Recanati outlines his version and compares it with the views of Salmon, Soames and Bach. On the syncretic view there are at least four levels of information in play and there is no tension between the minimal and pragmatic notions of what is said: sentence meaning → (Bach: proposition radical) + saturation (Bach: completion) → what is said_{min} → other PPPs (Bach: expansion) → what is said_{prag} (Bach: asserted) + SPPs → what is communicated. Note that Bach adds a level of “proposition-radicals”, i.e., incomplete propositions, after sentence meaning (and has different terms for the processes of saturation and the SPPs). Recanati’s main complaint against the syncretic view is that it postulates a minimal notion of what is said. According to Recanati, said_{min} cannot be abstracted from the enriched, pragmatic, notion, said_{prag}, by finding a common minimal core, because this procedure does not yield a plausible candidate in the case of loosening and transfer. Nor can it be characterized in terms of sentence meaning plus non-intentional context and saturation, because speaker meaning dependent primary pragmatic processes sometimes must be recruited at the said_{min} stage as well. In fact, there is no

obvious need for such a hybrid concept as the minimal proposition built from sentence meaning and reference: 'I am French' (uttered by Recanati) <Recanati, being French>. These considerations do not impugn Perry's "reflexive" propositions, which may have a role in specifying sentential content: <The speaker (of this sentence), being French>.

However, it is not clear if Recanati thinks of saying_{prag} as having illocutionary force or not. He attributes a view like that to Salmon, and occasionally to Bach, but rarely to himself. That raises the question of where and how illocutionary force is represented in the theory, and when it is recovered during processing. Also, Recanati is arguing against the (ill-named) "Literalist" who identifies the meaning of (assertoric) sentences generally with truth-evaluable conditions (truth-conditions). But a "minimalist" need not claim that. So Recanati has not refuted "minimalism", but rather "Literalism".

Chapter 5 introduces three notions (curiously, Recanati does not discuss Bach's notion of "sentence-nonliterality") of literality and nonliterality: (i) the 't-literal' meaning, i.e., the meaning of the expression type in the language, and by contrast 't-non-literal', (ii) the 'm-literal' meaning, i.e., the minimal departure in meaning from t-literality, a departure that is still covered by the conventions of the language and by contrast 'm-non-literal', (iii) and finally the 'p-literal' (primary) meaning, i.e., the meaning not derived via some inferential process such as implicature and indirection and by contrast 'p-non-literal'. Recanati holds that utterances recruiting PPPs involve primary meanings that are non-minimal. None of the above are the ordinary notion of literality ('o-literal' and by contrast 'o-non-literal'), which, according to Recanati, involves the "transparency condition", i.e., users are aware that the conveyed meaning exceeds the conventional meaning. Metaphor, irony and related uses exemplify o-literality. Semantics tends to treat cases of p-literal but m-nonliteral as o-nonliteral, but this is a mistake. (Note that the ordinary notion of nonliterality is more like this: there is a certain inconsistency or incompatibility between the meaning of the sentence and what the speaker means in uttering it.)

Chapter 6 sets out five basic positions, three developed so far (Literalism, the Syncretic View, and Contextualism) and two new ones (Indexicalism and Quasi-Contextualism). The dispute is about whether or not truth-conditional content can be ascribed basically to sentences, or must be assigned basically to speech acts. The spectrum of views ranges from Literalism at the sentence end, to Contextualism at the context end. The literalist thinks context can be abstracted away from, and subscribes to (L):

- (L) For every statement that can be made using a context-sensitive sentence in a given context, there is an eternal sentence that can be used to make the same statement in any context (by replacing indexical constituents with non-indexical constituents with the same semantic value).

Then there is a Fallback-Literalist, who takes sentences as expressing a proposition relative to a context in virtue of linguistic rules. This category includes, most importantly, the Indexicalist, who denies that what is said in the “intuitive sense” can be affected by top-down, optional, pragmatic processes. All that is allowed is mandatory, bottom-up saturation. To make this case the indexicalist must show that each clear case of optional expansion is actually a case of mandatory completion, and, according to Recanati, this position can be refuted by one case. The Syncretic View offers a compromise by allowing both what is said_{min} and what is said_{prag}, i.e., what is said “in the intuitive sense”. On the contextualist end of the spectrum, the Quasi-contextualist considers the minimal proposition to be theoretically useless: it may exist in “semantic heaven”, as Recanati puts it, but plays no role in communication. The Contextualist denies the very existence and possibility of the minimal proposition, denies that the notion of a minimal proposition even makes sense. Finally, Recanati claims that contextualism and literalism might be seen to begin to approach one another in the following way: by proliferating hidden indexicals the indexicalist approaches contextualism, and by generalizing indexicality to include enrichment etc. the distinction between mandatory and optional processes becomes “blurred”.

Recanati’s main arguments here are in defense of the contextualist end of the spectrum. He argues against “disquotational” (Borg) construals of literalism that they offer too weak and/or abstract a notion of a truth condition to do the job of helping account for language understanding. Against indexicalists (e.g., Stanley) Recanati argues that semantic underdetermination shows that assigning contextual values to indexicals can rarely proceed without appealing to the speaker’s communicative or referential intentions. And against both, he argues with Searle that implicit background assumptions are required to get from conventional meaning to truth conditions.

Note that Literalism as characterized by (L) is not the same as characterized in the Introduction. Also, Recanati regularly appeals to the notion of what is said in “the intuitive sense”. But is this a pre-theoretic notion about which we (can) have intuitions? Remember, Recanati wants to detach “what is said” from the normal meaning of the word ‘say’ — what is left? Moreover, in what sense does the distinction between mandatory and optional processes become “blurred”? Maybe Recanati has in mind the following: relative to the minimal

proposition (which may not exist, or only in semantic heaven) saturation is mandatory and the rest are optional in the sense of building a proposition. But relative to the “intuitive” notion of what is said, all PPPs are mandatory to give that proposition. But if this is correct it is not a “blurring”, but an equivocation on which proposition the completion is “mandatory” or “optional” with respect to. Finally, in the case of the disquotational analysis: “‘Harry cut the sun’ is true iff Harry cut the sun”, Recanati says we need to know what it is to cut the sun, just like we need to know who Harry is. But what is “knowing who Harry is”? Does this require some descriptive information? If so, is it compatible with non-descriptive analyses of proper names? If we do not demand more than ‘the person named ‘Harry’ of ‘Harry’, why do we demand more of ‘cut the sun’?

Chapter 7 considers at length the virtues and vices of indexicalism, the main challenger to contextualism. After characterizing “optional” and “mandatory” contextual ingredients of a proposition he illustrates these with cases of indefinite (‘eat’) and definite (‘hear’) null instantiation respectively. With this contrast in hand Recanati states two ‘criteria’ for deciding whether or not a constituent of a proposition is optional or mandatory. The Optionality Criterion (OC) says, roughly, that it is optional if circumstances can be imagined where a proposition is expressed but no contextual item is provided, and the Binding Criterion (BC) says, roughly, that the contextual item is assigned via saturation if something in the sentence to which it might be assigned can be bound by an operator. It is Stanley’s contention that there are no “optional” contextual ingredients to truth-conditional content, and it is Recanati’s contention that there are. Recanati notes that the two criteria can agree in some cases:

(12) John is small [for a basketball player]

(13) John noticed [the mistake]

But there are cases where they conflict:

(14) It is raining [at I]

(15) I’ve had breakfast [today]

Although there are cases in which it is not clear how to apply the OC, Recanati thinks it is superior to the BC, which, he argues, both proves too much, and contains a fallacy. It proves too much because it predicts variables where there do not intuitively seem to be any:

(16) The policeman stopped the car [in some manner]

(17) However he did it, the policeman stopped the car

The argument for the (BC) also contains a fallacious step; in particular it assumes that because one can say:

(18) Everywhere I go it rains [at \downarrow where I go],

it follows that in:

(19) It rains

there is a location variable:

(20) It rains at \downarrow

But this is a mistake, says Recanati, because it fails to block the option that the variable ' \downarrow ' is introduced by the quantifier phrase that binds a variable ' \downarrow ' outside the subformula 'it rains':

(21) [For every place \downarrow such that I go to \downarrow] (in \downarrow (it rains))

The same complaint can be raised against the Stanley and Szabo treatment of quantifier domains in terms of hidden contextual parameters.

Chapter 8 investigates the role of context in the "circumstance of evaluation" in contributing to content. Recanati discusses three kinds of case: modality, time and situations (as he conceives them). In the case of modality and time, there are two main approaches: the operator approach and the variable approach:

- (22) a. I am French
 b. Operator: 'Possibly, I am French'
 c. Variable: ' $(\exists w)$ I am French at w '

In (a) and (b) the world is not represented by a constituent of the sentence, though it is evaluated with respect to that world, whereas in (c) it is. Analogously for time and tense. Recanati prefers the operator approach in both cases. Only certain sentences change when modals and tenses are introduced as operators, an extension of the language, whereas when variables are introduced, the whole language changes. In addition, Recanati thinks that although the world comes into the picture for evaluation, the sentence is not about the world, and ordinary users of the language need not have the ability to entertain such thoughts as are involved in quantifying over worlds. His conclusion is that possible worlds and times are external to the content of modal and tense sentences, and in general every utterance "articulates" a certain content and expresses a richer type of content (what Recanati calls an "Austinian proposition") consisting of the articulated content and situation with respect to which

it is evaluated. Articulated content need not be a classical, complete proposition, and there is no reason, thinks Recanati, why these contents cannot be affected by optional primary pragmatic processes.

Chapter 9 argues that in context, the meaning of words is adjusted or “modulated” so as to fit what is being talked about and be appropriate to the situation at hand. The meaning of the whole is not constructed in a purely bottom-up manner from the meaning of the parts. The meaning of the whole is influenced by top-down, pragmatic factors, and through the meaning of the whole the meanings of the parts are also affected. So Recanati thinks we need a more ‘interactionist’ approach to compositionality. Modulation is truth-conditionally relevant, it is not post-semantic shading of meaning, nor is it pre-semantic disambiguation either (this would require that a pre-established list of discrete senses be given). Nor is modulation like indexicality, it is “a pragmatic process in the fullest sense” (p. 136). Recanati surveys four approaches to modulation. First, (i) the Strong Optionality (SO) View takes the PPPs that are involved in modulation to be optional in a strong and straightforward sense. They take place for contingent reasons, but they might as well not take place. Such implications are always cancelable. Second, (ii) the Pragmatic Composition (PC) View says that with respect to the word whose sense is modulated, it is optional, but with respect to the complex expression in which it occurs, modulation is “essential” because the process of semantic composition cannot proceed unless appropriate adjustments take place so as to make the parts fit together within an appropriate whole; the composition process forces modulation to take place, or at least invites it. Third, (iii) the Wrong Format (WF) View holds that modulation is ineliminable for deeper reasons. It is not just semantic composition which requires adjustment and modulation of word meaning. Individual word meanings themselves are such that they could not go directly into the interpretation. They don’t have the proper format for that. They are either too abstract and schematic or too rich and must undergo some screening process. According to WF modulation is mandatory. Fourth, (iv) the Meaning Eliminativism (ME) View denies that words (qua linguistic types) have ‘meanings’ in anything like the traditional sense — not even abstract or knowledge-rich meanings. Meanings for types undergo wholesale elimination, in favor of the senses contextually expressed by particular tokens. Recanati thinks ME is probably too extreme (though viable), and he would seem to think SO is too weak. But which of PC and WF he favors and why is not completely clear.

Chapter 10 presents a defense of Contextualism (“the view according to which it is speech acts, not sentences, which have determinate content and

are truth-evaluable: sentences themselves express a determinate content only in the context of a speech act”, p. 154) in the face of two arguments that “have been taken to constitute a complete and final refutation of Contextualism”, though Recanati does not mention anybody who holds that (extreme) position. First there is “Frege’s Point” that a sentence can express the same proposition (Gedank) when it occurs as e.g the antecedent of a conditional, as it does when standing alone. According to Recanati, Geach sees this as conflicting with Contextualism. Second, there is the “Gricean Point” combining the Parallelism Principle (PP), to the effect that if a complete sentence “says” different things in different contexts it is ambiguous, with Modified Occam’s Razor (MOR), to the effect that meanings should not be proliferated without necessity, to yield the result that Contextualism should be rejected. According to Recanati, this was Grice’s conclusion in arguing against Strawson’s analysis of ‘and’. However, Contextualism rejects PP, and MOR itself does not decide between Contextualism and implicature analyses. So Recanati countenances “Methodological Contextualism” (MC), the view that there is in principle a difference between the meaning of a sentence (or its constituents) and what is said (and its constituents). Finally, Recanati returns to the earlier issue of the ‘availability’ of what is said. Following Carpintero, there are Wittgensteinians for whom what is said must be available at the personal level, in the strong sense, of being conscious, explicit and occurrent (CEO). For Chomskyans what is said can be subpersonal and tacit, while for Griceans such as Bach and Carpintero, what is said need only be weakly available, i.e, dispositionally available to personal level introspection — it can be information that takes some reflection and maybe even some training or examples to bring out. The rub is that in response to Relevance Theory, Recanati adopted this “Gricean” position himself. So what is the argument against minimalism? Recanati’s response seems to be that such judgments are second-order, metalinguistic, and not “constitutive of our conversational practice” (p. 164). He seems to concede that some “semantic” phenomena can be subpersonal, such as binding conditions, but concludes that which facts belong to which category is an empirical matter, and the moral of all this is that we should stop presupposing literalism, and argue for it. We should embrace “Methodological Contextualism”.

However, it is not clear that Grice was arguing against Contextualism, but only against the postulation of ambiguity — the “easy way out” of philosophical problems. Grice’s argument was more like this:

- i. MOR is just a special case of the general methodological principle OR,

- ii. I can give you another account of the semantic data besides ambiguity, i.e., implicature.
- iii. So, other things being equal, you should prefer the implicature analysis to the ambiguity analysis.

Furthermore, the discussion regarding the psychological status of what is said is blurred in part by going back and forth between “semantic” and “what is said”. One could hold, with the Chomskyans, that some semantics is subpersonal, just as, much that is syntactic or phonological is subpersonal, without holding that what is said can have that status.

The Semantics-First Movement. In the 70’s there was a movement in some circles away from the Chomskyan paradigm of “abstract” syntax. In linguistics it was, to some extent “generative semantics”, and in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and certain strains of cognitive psychology it was “procedural (or “no”) syntax”. The idea in AI was that systems of natural language processing (natural language “understanding”, as it was wistfully called) did not need “grammars” of the sort linguists, especially Chomskyan linguists, were proposing. For instance, speaking for a segment of the Artificial Intelligence community, Schank (1972: 555) wrote:⁵

Whereas no one would claim today that syntactic analysis of a sentence is sufficient for programs which use natural language, it may not even be necessary ... its [syntax] function is as a pointer to semantic information rather than as a first step to semantic analysis as had been traditionally assumed.
... there is a need for an understanding model that recognizes that syntax is not a relevant object of study in its own right, but should be studied only as a tool for understanding of meaning.

In cognitive psychology there were a number of researchers pursuing the idea that large data structures (general knowledge organized by schemata) played a central role in guiding understanding and a concomitant effort to downplay the role of traditional linguistic information. For instance, Bransford and McCarrell (1974: 215) wrote:⁶

We have proposed that knowledge of language might fruitfully be conceptualized as knowledge of abstract cues or instructions that guide the comprehender ... an important future problem is the characterization of the abstract information specified by lexical items (plus certain rules of syntax) ...

What was needed, on this picture, was a lexicon, a huge database of general knowledge, and a few heuristics (“certain rules of syntax”) for the funny bits. Natural language understanding can get by on “plausibility” based mainly on

general knowledge, with linguistic information serving mostly as “cues” to meaning. According to this view (with a very familiar ring):

... linguistic inputs might be viewed as cues or instructions to create meanings implies that semantic descriptions created by S's may not always correspond to the information a sentence ‘expresses directly’. The semantic descriptions created by S's may often include more information than was expressed in a sentence, and the same inputs may result in different semantic descriptions depending on the cognitive contributions that the comprehender makes (Bransford and McCarrell 1974: 201).

In short, “grammaticality” is an expensive luxury that does not seem to be needed. What do we need a “grammar” for — accounting for linguistic intuitions? Who cares? We use language to communicate, not for grammaticality judgments, and if lexical semantics, general knowledge, and a few bookkeeping rules is all we need for that, then e.g. “generative grammars” are just a linguist's artifact, and the complex syntactic objects postulated by linguists are only to be found in syntactic heaven.

The development of the subject since the 70's has not worked out as predicted; syntax is flourishing, generative semantics died (and was reborn in variant guises such as cognitive grammar), more and more grammar found its way into natural language processing programs, and more sophisticated experimental techniques (cross-modal priming, ERP etc.) are revealing evidence for “abstract” syntactic entities and processes not revealed in introspection.

The Pragmatics-First Movement. History is threatening to repeat itself in semantics-pragmatics. Semantics (or misleadingly “formal” semantics), as a branch of linguistic theory, treats sentences relative to a context as objects of semantic-pragmatic “interpretation” or “assignment”.⁷ But the result of such interpretation, the so-called “minimal proposition” (or proposition-fragment), is a semantic object which is sometimes (usually?) only marginally related to what is understood as being communicated (even literally and directly).

The new “Contextualist” view seems to be that rather than postulate principles of compositional, context-sensitive semantics yielding sometimes “minimal” propositions, it is better to use heuristics such as “modulated senses”, “ad hoc concepts”, top-down schematic enrichments, loosening, transfers and so forth, to get the full communicated content, what is “said”, on the first and single pass through the sentence:⁸

I reject the claim that the process of semantic composition begins by paying attention only to literal semantic values ... literal meaning and derived meaning are on an equal footing as far as semantic composition are concerned ...

the literal meaning of an expression is accessed first and triggers the activation of associatively related representations ... All candidates, whether literal or derived, are processed in parallel and compete. When an interpretation which fits the broader context of discourse is found, it is selected (that is, it undergoes semantic composition) and the other candidates are suppressed (p. 28).

Interpretational success — what brings a ‘candidate’ or potential semantic value into the actual interpretation of the utterance — to a large extent depends on the candidate’s accessibility or degree of activation ... a schema is activated by ... an expression whose semantic value corresponds to an aspect of the schema ... Coherent, schema-instantiating interpretations therefore tend to be selected and preferred over non-integrated or ‘loose’ interpretations. As a result, schemata drive the interpretational process (p. 37).

This is what introspection of language understanding reveals, and this is what theory should reflect. The rest is “semantic heaven”:

... the minimal proposition exists in semantic heaven, but plays no role in communication (p. 96).

So Recanati seems to be not only promoting a kind of “folk semantics-pragmatics”, but also denying the legitimacy (and potential psychological value) of traditional (“scientific”) linguistic semantics. He seems to be betting that semantics-pragmatics will not go the way of syntax (and phonology). That is, that introspective, folk psychology will trump semantic intuitions plus the traditional methodology of theory construction in semantics. As Schank (1972: 555)wrote:

Whereas no one would claim today that FORMAL SEMANTIC ANALYSIS of a sentence is sufficient for A THEORY OF COMMUNICATION, it may not even be necessary ... its function is as a pointer to semantic information rather than as a first step to COMMUNICATIVE analysis as had been traditionally assumed.

... there is a need for an understanding model that recognizes that THE MINIMAL PROPOSITION is not a relevant object of study in its own right, but should be studied only as a tool for understanding of COMMUNICATION.

Shank does not give any arguments for this and neither does Recanati. We are repeatedly told that the typical products of semantic evaluation, the “minimal” proposition (or proposition-radical), is rarely introspected and plays no (or only a marginal) role in communication. But we are not told why this counts against semantics-pragmatics as traditionally practiced, but not against syntax and phonology as traditionally practiced. Of course, when the issue is raised,

he might just Modus Ponens where I have Modus Tollens, and conclude that current syntax and phonology are illegitimate as well. That, for many people, would constitute a *reductio* of the argument. Furthermore, we are not told why sophisticated experimental techniques might not reveal such entities and processes in spite of their opacity to introspection. So there is a lot of a priori, speculative psychology here in the guise of semantics and pragmatics, and history in related fields has given reason to be cautious of theorists bearing such gifts. Recanati was the first out of the gate with the present book, but the topic is hot, and ‘Literalists’ and ‘Minimalists’ are already nipping at his heels, trying to carve out a space for traditional semantics, and relate it to a more modest pragmatics.⁹ Who said you can’t look a gift horse in the mouth?

Notes

1. If terms such as ‘what was said’, ‘semantic’, ‘pragmatic’ and the rest played roles in substantive generalizations, then categorizing phenomena one way rather than another would have some informational value. So far they do not. All of these terms have a variety of proprietary uses, and implicit stipulations often masquerade as empirical discoveries. Attempts to pin down “experimentally” how ordinary speakers use such terms lead to the conclusion that naive subjects make few systematic distinctions between ‘what words mean’, ‘what speakers say’ and ‘what is communicated’. See Gibbs and Moise (1997), Nicolle and Clark (1999) and Bezuidenhout and Cutting (2004) for a sample.
2. “According to the dominant position which I call ‘Literalism’, we may legitimately ascribe truth-conditional content to natural language sentences, quite independently of what the speaker who utters this sentence means” (p. 3).
3. “‘What is said’, in the minimalist framework, departs from the conventional meaning of the sentence (and incorporated contextual elements) only when this is necessary to ‘complete’ the meaning of the sentence and make it propositional. In other words, the distance between sentence meaning and what is said is kept to a minimum ...” (p. 7).
4. For instance, Perry’s “reflexive” propositions discussed briefly in Chapter 4.7.
5. See Dresher and Hornstein (1976) for a contrary view.
6. See also Franks (1974).
7. It is an open, empirical question what the scope of such “assignment” is, i.e., whether all sentences can be given such a treatment or whether there are examples that require something more, something else i.e. that (bottom-up) indexicality runs just so deep, and after that (top-down) free enrichment takes over.

8. Sometimes, of course, we are led astray, down a garden path, to an unintended and unwanted interpretation, in which case we have to back out and try again.

9. See e.g. Borg (2004) and Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

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