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Robert Stainton
*Words and Thoughts:
Subsentences, Ellipsis and the Philosophy
of Language.*
Toronto and New York:
Oxford University Press 2006.
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This book is only marginally about words and thoughts; it is principally about subsentences and ellipsis, and they are all connected by the central argument (schema):

Premise 1 (P1): Speakers genuinely can utter ordinary words and phrases in isolation, and thereby perform full-fledged speech acts (e.g., 'On the floor').

Premise 2 (P2): If P1 is true, then such-and-such implications follow. (For example: not all thoughts require sentential vehicles, thoughts can have logical form, some forms of the 'context principle' can't be right, some conceptions of assertion can't be right).

Conclusion: Such-and-such implications follow.

Part I (Chapters 1, 2) is devoted to a preliminary survey of what P1 and P2 amount to, some examples, and some background notions from contemporary linguistic theory. Part II (Chapters 3-8) takes up the task of 'defending the appearances' summarized in P1. For philosophers of language this is the heart of the book. As Stainton notes, P1 can be challenged in two general ways: (i) deny the acts are genuine, or (ii) deny that what is uttered are just words or phrases. It is Part II that takes these up in turn. Part III (Chapters 9-11) is devoted to defending P2 and the Conclusion.

There is too much data and (good) argumentation to discuss in detail, and furthermore I think anyone without an agenda will have to agree thatonus is on the skeptic to refute this argument. Rather, I would like to focus not on the arguments against alternatives, but on the positive theory of subsentences that must replace the 'sententialist' program if the argument is ultimately to succeed.

According to Stainton (Chapters 1-3) the expressions he is interested in are words and phrases, not sentences, and they have the same syntax and semantics standing alone as they have embedded in a matrix sentence. As such, e.g., 'on the floor' is a prepositional phrase — not an elliptical sentence, argued convincingly in Chapters 5 and 6 — expressing a relation to the floor, but not exhibiting any illocutionary force. However, in the right circumstances it can be used to perform a 'full fledged speech act', by which he means an illocutionary act with propositional content. Words and phrases have no mood, unlike sentences, and so carry no illocutionary information. It is not clear why it is important that subsentences have no mood. For him, an expression has the force of K-ing if it has the 'job', as a matter or 'convention' (18) of being used to perform acts of kind K (even though the utterance of that expression is neither necessary nor sufficient for that performance). He does not say what being governed by such a 'convention' might amount to, but clearly there are not enough moods to go around to all the forces. So we are still left with a huge underdetermination of force by sentences. He does not mention the most popular connector of form and force — performatives. Such speech acts are not only illocutionary and propositional, they are what he calls 'literal': they are not used metaphorically, ironically, or indirectly to 'implicate' their content. The main evidence for this is the intuitive difference between an utterance being a lie and being misleading. If Jones sees Smith looking for the hammer and says to him 'on the floor', knowing that it is on the table, we judge him to have lied. If Paul says of a candidate's writing sample just 'Nice typing' — implying incompetence at philosophy but in fact believing her to be excellent — we judge him not to be lying (as the typing *was* nice), but to have been misleading. In sum, we can use subsentences to perform literal illocutionary acts with propositional content. How so?

Stainton's proposal (Chapter 8) is a 'representational-pragmatic' position. He first formulates a general statement of it, then a specific version of it. The 'guiding idea' behind his position is that fragment interpretation involves (a) grasping a content from language, (b) grasping a content from somewhere else but language, and (c) combining the two by function-argument application (156). What drives functional application is (d) the recognition by the hearer that the speaker wants to communicate something, which requires something propositional to be meant, even though nothing propositional has been uttered (158). We can agree with (a), (b) and (d), but for a 'general' position (c) is rather parochial. Why assume that the format for content, linguistic or otherwise, is function-argument? Why not standard quantification theory? And what happened to force; is that also gotten by function application? And

how? The 'specific' version spells out these 'general' ideas: (a) grasping contents means having faculties provide Central systems with representations of them, but (b) finding them is up to pragmatics (160). That's it, for a 'representational-pragmatic' theory, that's a bit skimpy on the pragmatics. And (c) the various representations of content are combined in Central systems. Stainton returns to the issue of how to decide if a content is asserted or merely conveyed, which is pressing in the case of fragments because of the need to flesh them out to be propositional. His idea is to extend Sperber and Wilson's analysis of assertion to fragments, by adding the thought that the proposition communicated is the minimal one obtained by 'developing' the linguistic content (163). This means straight off that one can't assert anything nonhierarchically or indirectly. Indeed, it looks like Stainton has in mind 'saying' not 'asserting'. Additionally, Stainton does not tell us much about what a proposition has to be to qualify as 'minimal' with respect to a fragment (and a context?). So on some speech act intuitions, this proposal does not draw the assertion-conveying line correctly. It is a striking feature of this 'representational-pragmatic' theory that there is no pragmatics, as normally understood.

Finally (Chapter 11), Stainton turns to the analysis of assertion and the semantics-pragmatics boundary. The relevance of fragments to assertion is via the claim of Dummett et al. that assertion be characterized in terms of uttering a declarative sentence in conventionally specified conditions. Clearly, if P1 is true, non-sentences can be used to assert. The relevance of fragments to the semantics-pragmatics boundary is that if P1 is true, then so is 'contextualism' — the view that pragmatic enrichment, beyond disambiguation and reference fixing, can help determine asserted content (225). The first seems clearly right, the second is still controversial given the unknown limits of 'hidden' variables in natural language sentences. In the course of these arguments Stainton touches on an number of other issues. One is the question of whether one can assert using a non-declarative (e.g., imperative or interrogative) sentence. Davidson thinks one can, Dummett not, and Stainton seems to come down on Dummett's side, but for no convincing reason. The fact that one can distinguish between 'what someone says' and 'the point of saying it' (213) does nothing to support Dummett's claim if the point is perlocutionary, such as 'inducing the belief that p ' (217). But if the point is illocutionary, such as commitment to truth (with evidence) or to doing A (in the hearer's interest), then according to many speech act theories (Searle, Vanderveken, Alston) one cannot achieve the point without performing the act. In short, Stainton just begs the question against Davidson. Another question turns on the nature of 'determining' the content of an utterance. Bach has frequently complained that authors conflate an epistemic construal (how to find out) with a metaphysical construal (what constitutes the nature of) the content. Stainton's take is that these are not really separate questions, because the intentions that contribute metaphysically to fixing the content, must pass an epistemic test of being 'reasonable expectations about what the hearer can figure out' (224). Thus the two are 'inextricably linked' (224). But besides requiring assertions to be audience directed, it fails to ask to what a 'reasonable

expectation' is relative. It would seem to be relative to the speaker's beliefs about the hearer. But if the speaker has strange enough beliefs (that sofas are religious artifacts) one can imagine systematic communicative reference failure that does not affect asserted content.

It takes perseverance to single-handedly force a field to pay attention to something it should not be ignoring, and it is to Stainton's credit that he has done this for subsentential expressions — and not by concocting clever short-lived arguments for outrageous positions (no names, thank you) but by following solid philosophical intuitions with good arguments against alternate positions. Of course, in the end, it is 'an empirical question', but he has put the burden of proof on the other side. This is a closely argued and still wide-ranging survey of a subject many philosophers, even of language, think they know their way around. They will be surprised.

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