

Emma Borg, *Minimal Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. x, 288.

This book is an effective antidote to the epidemic of contextualism that has spread through philosophy lately. Epistemology and metaethics have been hit particularly hard, but contextualism in semantics is the epicenter. That is Emma Borg's target. Taking such forms as "truth-conditional pragmatics" and "relevance theory," the main strain of semantic contextualism is that most if not all sentences fail to express propositions independently of the uses to which they are put. Contextualism echoes but generalizes Strawson's basis for claiming (in "On Referring") that although sentences can of course be used to assert things that are true or false, sentences themselves are neither true nor false. Unlike Strawson, contextualists are not worried specifically about sentences containing obviously context-sensitive elements, such as indexicals and tensed verbs. They think that all sorts of expressions are context-sensitive and, indeed, that the context sensitivity of most sentences goes beyond the effects of particular expressions. Contextualism is inspired by a pervasive phenomenon, long neglected by philosophers of language, that the meanings of sentences we use are generally impoverished relative to the various things we mean in using them, even when using all their constituents literally.

Though motivated differently, semantic contextualism is a throwback to the meaning-as-use program of ordinary language philosophy, as inspired by Wittgenstein and championed by Austin. Contextualism radically clashes with the tradition from Frege to Davidson to the present that to give the meaning of a (declarative) sentence is to give its truth-condition. While granting that a given sentence can be used in various ways to convey various things, even with all of its constituents being used literally, Borg forcefully argues that this hardly shows that the sentence does not itself have a truth-condition. She rebuts various contextualist arguments, not as thoroughly or polemically as Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore do in their similarly motivated *Insensitive Semantics* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), but her defense of semantic minimalism is based more on positive considerations (both philosophical and empirical) than on problems with contextualism.

Borg characterizes the various versions of contextualism as "dual pragmatic" theories, in that pragmatic factors bear not only on what speakers mean in uttering

sentences but even on the sentences' own propositional or truth-conditional contents. Her "formal" approach to semantics rejects "contextual intrusions." She suggests that there are good "reasons to think that semantic understanding is modular, while ... our use of language to communicate should be seen as a non-modular or global process" (12).

Semantic competence is modular in the same way that syntactic competence is evidently modular, in Fodor's sense of being a fast, unconscious, special-purpose computational mechanism that is domain specific, informationally encapsulated, and automatic in its workings. Borg makes a strong case for why the processes whereby hearers recognize speakers' communicative intentions engage only the output of this semantic module.

Accordingly, elements of the propositional content of an *utterance* that are attributable to the speaker's intention fall outside the scope of minimalist semantics, whose target is the meanings and contents of sentences, not utterances.

Borg proceeds to argue that the existence of obviously context-sensitive expressions in natural language does not present an obstacle to the formal theorist, at least one who takes a minimalist approach to what is required of semantics. Something like Kaplan's approach in "Demonstratives" seems capable of handling such expressions. However, semantic contextual sensitivity must be limited to parameters associated with specific expressions. It cannot include clearly pragmatic factors like speakers' communicative intentions and shared background information. As for other sources of context sensitivity, Borg argues compellingly that "covert appeals to context" do not threaten the formal approach, provided they are understood to pertain not to the semantic contents of sentences but only to the what speakers mean in uttering them.

What is "minimal" about minimal semantics? Borg identifies six goals that have been assigned to semantics and argues that it should be properly limited to but two of them. It need not explain our communicative abilities (that is the job of pragmatics), characterize our epistemic relations to things in the world, reveal our metaphysical commitments, or even explicate the concept of meaning. It should be confined to giving a systematic account of the compositional contents of sentences and their inferential relations. In particular, the job of a semantic theory of a language is, in Borg's view (following Tarski via Davidson), to give a recursive specification of the truth-conditions of the sentences. This assumes, of course, that all (declarative) sentences have truth-conditions, at least

(when obvious context-sensitive elements like indexicals are present) relative to contexts of use.

Borg is thus committed to attributing propositional contents to sentences that seem to fall short of having them, sentences like ‘Jack is glad’ and ‘Jill has finished’. Whereas Cappelen and Lepore suppose that these sentences express the “minimal” propositions that Jack is just plain glad and that Jill has just plain finished, which seem too minimal to be capable of being true or false, Borg proposes that they express weak existential, or what she calls “liberal,” propositions, that Jack is glad about something and that Jill has finished doing something. If so, these sentences are capable of being true or false, but obviously they are not informative enough to be what speakers would likely mean in using them. Borg does not see this as a problem, so long as there is a pragmatic explanation for what the speaker does mean and a role for the weak, existential proposition to play in conveying that.

But there is another problem: where in the sentence does the additional element come from? There is nothing in the syntax, corresponding to ‘about something’ or ‘doing something’, to complete the propositional content. Borg recognizes that “a liberal truth-condition posits ‘extra’ syntactic material,” rightly deeming this acceptable “only when it is intuitively compelling to do so, or when there is good empirical evidence to support the move” (230). With this in mind let us compare, for example, ‘Jack is glad’ with ‘Jack is pleased’ and ‘Jack is happy’. ‘Jack is happy’ can be true even if Jack is not happy about anything – he can be just plain happy. So that sentence does not express one of Borg’s liberal propositions. In contrast, ‘Jack is pleased’ apparently does. Intuitively, that sentence is true just in case Jack is pleased about something. Now ‘Jack is glad’ is subtly different. Even though being glad is relevantly similar to being pleased, in that one cannot be just plain glad or just plain pleased, ‘Jack is glad’ does not seem to have a liberal truth-condition like that of ‘Jack is pleased’. It seems that in uttering ‘Jack is glad’ the speaker must have something specific in mind. Whereas one could, looking at Jack, unproblematically say, “Jack is pleased, but I have no idea what he is pleased about,” it is incoherent to say, “Jack is glad, but I have no idea what he is glad about.” This suggests that ‘Jack is glad’ does not have a weak, existential truth-condition. Arguably, it has no truth-condition at all but is semantically incomplete, in the sense that it falls short of

expressing a proposition. Of course, there must be something the speaker means that Jack is glad about – she must intend to convey a proposition – but it can't be the weak, existential proposition that Jack is glad about something (or other).

There are numerous similar examples, such as 'Abe left', 'Bill is ready', and 'Chad lives nearby'. Like 'Jack is glad', they do not express liberal propositions. Indeed, they do not seem fully to express propositions, even relative to contexts. Semantic contextualists recognize the variety of such examples, but they mistakenly suppose that since such sentences fail to express a proposition independently of context, they must express propositions relative to contexts. Semantic minimalists like Borg (and Cappelen and Lepore) make the opposite mistake: they suppose that if a sentence contains no context-sensitive elements, it must express a proposition independently of context. They do not seriously consider the possibility that some sentences (in my view a great many) are semantically incomplete.

The idea of semantic incompleteness is straightforward if you think in terms of (structured) propositions rather than truth-conditions. Since these are made up of building blocks assembled in a particular way, it makes sense to suppose that in some cases such an assemblage, put together compositionally from the sentence's constituents according to its syntactic structure, might fail to comprise a proposition. What is thus built up might be called a "propositional radical," to indicate that, although it comprises the entire semantic content of the sentence, it lacks at least one constituent needed for it to be true or false (and to be the content of a thought or a statement).

Once we see that being semantically incomplete is not the same thing as being context-sensitive, we can pursue the goals of minimal semantics without burdening it with the assumption that every sentence expresses a proposition (whether relative to or independently of context). The output of the semantic module (if there is one) can sometimes fall short of being truth-conditional. As good a case as Borg makes for keeping pragmatics out of semantics, her minimal semantics is not minimal enough.

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