

From the strange to the bizarre: Another reply to Cappelen and Lepore

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ABSTRACT

If you think that semantic minimalism is the only alternative to contextualism but you'd rather do without Cappelen and Lepore's mysteriously minimal "propositions," you can. You just have to recognize that being semantically incomplete does not make a sentence context-sensitive. You don't have to go through the ritual of repeatedly incanting things like this: "John is ready" expresses the proposition that John is ready. Instead, you can opt for Radical Minimalism and suppose that "John is ready" and its ilk fall short of semantically expressing propositions – their semantic contents are propositional "radicals." Now C&L think they've addressed Radical Minimalism and offered objections to it. So they find it strange and bizarre that I think they haven't. In fact, they persist in confusing semantic incompleteness with context sensitivity. If they appreciated the difference, they might even welcome the opportunity to adopt a form of semantic minimalism that does without the minimal propositions that everyone but them find incredible (pun intended).

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They still don't get it.¹ Cappelen and Lepore still don't see the difference between semantic incompleteness and context sensitivity. So they persist in thinking that the only alternative to semantic contextualism is their version of semantic minimalism, the one that is stuck with the minimal "propositions" whose capacity for being true or false defies everyone's credulity but theirs. Instead of seizing the opportunity to take up a version of semantic minimalism that does without these elusive if not illusive entities, they continue to complain that I've stuck them with an implicit assumption that they're unaware of making (perhaps that's why it's implicit). This is the assumption (Propositionalism) that every indexical-free declarative sentence expresses a proposition.² If they didn't implicitly make it, they wouldn't be so keen on positing minimal propositions as the things that are semantically expressed by sentences that seem to most people to be semantically incomplete. And, as we'll see, even if they don't think they make it, to be valid their main argument for semantic minimalism needs this assumption.

Now, instead of opening their eyes and taking a look at Radical Minimalism, the version of semantic minimalism unencumbered by minimal propositions, C&L pretend that they have already examined it. Indeed, they suggest that my "claim that we have overlooked Bach's version of Semantic Minimalism might be the strangest claim made about *Insensitive Semantics* so far." They add that this claim is "made particularly bizarre by the fact that Bach goes on to discuss our objections to his version of minimalism." No wonder they are puzzled by "how Bach can both think that we overlook his view and think that our objections to his view are wrong." This is strange, since not only do they not address Radical Minimalism in their book,³ they don't take it on in their reply to my commentary either. So it's bizarre that although they offer no objections to Radical Minimalism, they think I responded to such objections. (Perhaps it isn't so bizarre from the standpoint of C&L's Speech Act Anarchism, I mean Pluralism, which seems to allow that communication can succeed even if a speaker means one thing and his audience thinks he means something quite different.)

In this round I will first explain precisely why the main argument behind their version of semantic minimalism requires the assumption I claim they implicitly make. They can deny that

¹ This is a reply to Cappelen and Lepore's response to my reply to their response to my forthcoming *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* commentary on *Insensitive Semantics*. Here are links to all the items in the thread.

KB, "The Excluded Middle: Semantic Minimalism without Minimal Propositions"

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/Cappelen&Lepore.pdf>

C&L, "Reply to Bach"

<http://folk.uio.no/hermanc/docs/BachPPR.pdf>

KB, "'Minimalism for Dummies: A Reply to Cappelen and Lepore'"

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/replytoC&L.pdf>

C&L, "Kent Bach on Minimalism for Dummies"

<http://folk.uio.no/hermanc/docs/KBM..pdf>

² They first make this assumption, although they may not be aware of making it, near the beginning of their book, where they write, "the semantic content of a sentence S is the proposition that all utterances of S express (when we adjust for or keep stable the semantic values of the obvious context sensitive expressions in S (IS: 2-3). It appears that they question this assumption when they introduce (IS: 33-38) and later challenge incompleteness arguments (ch. 5), but they fail to distinguish arguments that some sentences are semantically incomplete from arguments that semantically incomplete sentences are context-sensitive.

³ In their book they repeatedly call me a contextualist, not a minimalist (IS: 32, 34, 36, 61).

they make it but, as I will show, without it their argument is invalid. Then I will enumerate the points made in my original commentary and in my reply to their response to it. It will be clear that with one possible exception none of them concerns the objections they think they have made against Radical Minimalism. Finally, I will try to clarify what's really at stake here.

1. C&L's main argument

As I explained in my commentary, C&L take their version of semantic minimalism to be the only alternative to contextualism, the view that many, most, or perhaps even all sentences that do not contain obvious indexicals (members of C&L's "Basic Set") contain unobvious indexicals and are therefore context-sensitive, semantically expressing propositions but only relative to contexts (in accordance with the context-sensitive meanings of the unobvious indexicals they contain). Here's a reconstruction of C&L's argument from the falsity of contextualism (moderate or radical) to the truth of their version of semantic minimalism:

1. Only sentences containing indexicals are context-sensitive, i.e., express different propositions in different contexts.⁴
2. The only indexicals are the obvious ones (the members of the Basic Set).
3. Only sentences containing obvious indexicals are context-sensitive.
4. Therefore, sentences that do not contain obvious indexicals express propositions independently of context.

Clearly this argument is invalid. Even if, as per 1, only sentences containing indexicals are context-sensitive, in the sense of expressing different propositions in different contexts,⁵ and, as per 3, the only such sentences are those containing *obvious* indexicals, it doesn't follow that any sentence that does not contain an (obvious) indexical *does* express a proposition. The conclusion follows only on the assumption that if a sentence is not context-sensitive it expresses a proposition. But that is precisely the assumption I claim C&L implicitly make. So, even if they are "unaware of endorsing" this assumption, clearly their argument needs it (perhaps they would do without it if, like one of my former colleagues, their idea of a valid argument is one whose conclusion follows its premises).

2. Critical points

C&L find it "particularly bizarre" that I can claim that they ignore Radical Minimalism and then go on to criticize their objections to it. Well, let's look the main critical points made in my commentary and in my reply to C&L's response to it, and see if any of them concern objections to Radical Minimalism. Here they are:

1. Semantic incompleteness is not context sensitivity or indexicality (being semantically incomplete is not a matter of containing any "surprise indexicals," "hidden indexicals," or "unarticulated constituents"). One bit of evidence that C&L don't see the difference is that in their book they repeatedly misclassify me as a contextualist.
2. C&L mistakenly assume that if a sentence doesn't express a proposition independently of context, it must be context-sensitive, expressing a proposition relative to a context. Although they claim (correctly) that only sentences containing indexicals are context-sensitive, and argue vigorously that the only indexicals are the obvious ones, since other alleged indexicals flunk the

⁴ As I noted in my commentary, this ignores the version of radical contextualism that claims that sentences are generally context-sensitive even if they don't contain specific expressions (indexicals) that are context-sensitive. In construing radical contextualism as an extreme version of moderate contextualism, which does suppose that there are many indexicals beyond the obvious ones (those in the Basic Set), C&L overlook this other version of radical contextualism.

⁵ In fact, sentences like 'I am ready' and 'I've had enough' both contain an obvious indexical *and* are still semantically incomplete, even with the reference of the indexical fixed.

tests for context sensitivity (IS: ch. 7), it hardly follows that if a sentence doesn't have context-sensitive truth conditions, it has context-independent truth conditions.

3. They mistakenly assume that if a T-sentence can be given for a sentence that is putatively semantically incomplete, then that sentence isn't semantically incomplete after all. For the T-sentence could itself be semantically incomplete, e.g. "'John is ready' is true iff John is ready." Similarly, they mistakenly assume that if an allegedly semantically incomplete sentence 'S' can be put into the frame 'the proposition that ___', then the description 'the proposition that S' automatically succeeds in designating something, i.e., a proposition.

4. According to C&L, "that there is a proposition semantically expressed is presupposed by any coherent account of linguistic communication" (IS: 144). They are right to insist that "only semantic minimalism can account for how the same content can be expressed ... in radically different contexts." However, this content need not add up to a proposition. Yes, "it is the semantic content that enables audiences who find themselves in radically different contexts to understand each other. ... It can serve this function simply because it is the sort of content that is largely immune to contextual variation" (IS: 152). But it doesn't have to amount to a proposition.

5. C&L implausibly suppose that predicates like 'being ready' and 'having had enough' express properties and, in passing the buck to the metaphysicians to tell us which properties these are (and which propositions are expressed by sentences containing such predicates), C&L capriciously assume that their metaphysical consultants will agree with them that such predicates do express properties (and that sentences containing them do express propositions).

6. Assuming that those who believe that some sentences are semantically incomplete rely solely on "brute intuitions" to the effect that these sentences leave certain questions unanswered, C&L argue that similar questions can be asked about any sentence, hence that there is no way to distinguish semantically incomplete sentences from semantically complete ones. C&L present this as an argument against moderate contextualism, to the effect that it leads inevitably to radical contextualism. It is not presented as an argument against Radical Minimalism. In any case, as I argued, leaving questions unanswered is not sufficient for being semantically incomplete. There is a relevant difference between 'John went to the gym' and 'John is ready', even though in both cases a speaker is likely to mean something more specific than what is semantically expressed by the sentence.

None of these points, most of which C&L do not reply to, are directed at C&L's alleged objections to Radical Minimalism. Point 6 is indirectly relevant, since it concerns their slippery-slope argument against the claim that some sentences are semantically incomplete, a claim that is presupposed by Radical Minimalism, though they attribute it to moderate contextualism. In any case, slippery-slope arguments are notoriously weak, and in particular theirs is. More importantly, C&L don't need this argument to defend semantic minimalism. Semantic minimalism can enjoy the virtues they credit it with without being burdened by the claim that indexical-free declarative sentences invariably express propositions.

3. Clarifying the issue: C&L on Incompleteness Arguments

Here is how C&L lay out what they take to be the structure of typical incompleteness arguments:

Stage 1. A solicitation of an intuition to the effect that the proposition *semantically* expressed by an utterance of a sentence S (according to Semantic Minimalism) is incomplete, i.e., it is *not* the kind of thing that can take a truth value.

Stage 2. A solicitation of an intuition to the effect that utterances of S have a truth value, i.e., that they can express propositions, and hence, do have truth conditions, and so, can take a truth value.

Conclusion. Something unaccounted for by Semantic Minimalism must be added in the context of the utterance in order for a complete proposition to be *semantically* expressed. (IS: 59; my italics)

The bulk of C&L's complaint with incompleteness arguments is with Stage 1. They are unsatisfied with this appeal to intuition and demand "criteria for In/completeness" (IS: 61). As I keep having to point out, the absence of a general criterion does not show that either all sentences are semantically complete or that all are semantically incomplete. So I won't dwell on this point here. But it should be noticed that C&L's formulation of Stage 1 should not include the words 'an utterance of', since it is the sentence itself that is said not to express the kind of thing that can take a truth value, whereas the conclusion of the argument is that the utterance of the sentence does semantically express a (complete) proposition.⁶ So including those words in Stage 1 renders the argument self-contradictory.

Stage 2 is not in dispute.

As C&L characterize the conclusion of an incompleteness argument, it claims that something, unaccounted for by semantic minimalism, must be added in the context of the utterance for a complete proposition (i.e. something capable of being true or false) to be semantically expressed. But Radical Minimalism denies that in the relevant cases any such thing is *semantically* expressed. Of course, the speaker must *intend* to convey a complete proposition, but that's a pragmatic matter, not a semantic one.

C&L's failure to appreciate the difference is clear when they go on state what they take to be the contextualist import of incompleteness arguments:

There's no proposition expressed if you don't add something; there clearly is a proposition there, and moreover, a different one in different contexts of utterance. This is a reason for thinking the sentences in question are context sensitive. (IS: 60)

Not from the standpoint of Radical Minimalism. It's merely a reason for thinking that the sentences in questions are semantically incomplete. Unfortunately, C&L don't see the difference between being semantically incomplete and being context-sensitive.⁷ Unfortunately, contextualists don't see it either.⁸

In my commentary and in my reply to their response to it, I acknowledged that it's sometimes difficult to tell whether a sentence is semantically complete or incomplete. Cappelen and Lepore are well within their rights to ask what makes a sentence incomplete beyond the fact that it doesn't fully express a proposition. But the important point here is that defending semantic minimalism doesn't require a definitive answer to this question. It concedes nothing to contextualism to leave open the possibility that some syntactically well-formed sentences are semantically incomplete, since semantic incompleteness is not a form of context sensitivity. C&L themselves acknowledge that they "don't claim to have shown that that there couldn't be grammatical sentences the semantic contents of which are not propositional." So they should welcome the proposed deletion of the claim that all indexical-free sentences express propositions as a friendly amendment to their formulation of semantic minimalism.

I'll conclude by pointing out that from the standpoint of communication it really doesn't matter all that much whether a given sentence expresses a "minimal" proposition or no

⁶ Since if this is not the kind of thing that can take a truth value, it's strange that C&L call it, or think their opponents call it, a proposition.

⁷ As I pointed out in my reply, not only C&L endorse the claim that "if a sentence's semantic content is non-propositional, then an appeal to context is required to determine a complete proposition," they claim that I endorse it too. But if the sentence is not context-sensitive, then this proposition can only be what the speaker means in uttering the sentence. That's irrelevant. The question is whether a sentence that is not context-sensitive must express a proposition, not whether what a speaker means in uttering a semantically incomplete sentence must be a proposition.

⁸ Contextualists imagine that if something must be added *in* the context of utterance, it must be added *by* the context, i.e., that the context somehow supplies or determines this missing ingredient. For a critique of this and other contextualist ideas, see my "Context ex Machina," in Zoltán Szabó (ed.), *Semantic versus Pragmatics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005), pp. 15-44.

proposition at all. Either way, what the speaker means is obviously some sort of enrichment of the semantic content of the sentence he's uttering, and the processes involved in figuring out which proposition that is are essentially the same.⁹ In both cases, the speaker leaves part of what he means implicit, and in both cases the audience has to figure out what the speaker means partly on the basis of the uttered sentence's semantic content, which is too impoverished to comprise all of what the speaker means.

⁹ This is why, in "Conversational Implicature" (*Mind & Language* 9 (1994): 124-162) and subsequent papers, I have regarded both expansion (of a minimal proposition) and completion (of a propositional radical) as cases of implicature. Both commonly occur with the relatively short sentences that we use in everyday conversation. Contextualists tend not to take into account the longer and more cumbersome sentences that would make what we mean fully explicit, sentences generally avoided in colloquial speech. In everyday life we generally speak loosely, omitting the qualifications and disclaimers that would be necessary to give more explicit expression to our thoughts.