

# Notes on Cappelen & Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*

Ephraim Glick  
August 6, 2008

## Chapter 1: Sketch of positive views, of strategies and views of opponents

- ✓ *Semantic Minimalism*: (1) There are only a few linguistic items whose semantic contents are affected by their context of use: 'I', 'you', 'here', 'now', 'yesterday', 'actual'...(2) From (1), all context-sensitivity is syntactically/morphologically triggered. (What does this mean, and why does it follow from (1)?) (3) Apart from determining semantic values of CS items, context has no effect on the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence.
  - How do we continue the list of CS terms? We'll get some tests later, but for now, go with "pure and uncontaminated" intuition: CS terms obviously (?) contrast with 'red', 'know', 'good'...
  - Separating semantics from pragmatics is going to be the goal throughout the book. So what do C&L mean by "semantic content" (SEM) of S or "proposition semantically expressed" by S? That which is expressed by all utterances of S (pg. 2). (= ...all *literal* utterances of S?). Contrast with speech act content (SAC).
  - What could possibly be the non-CS SEM of 'Steel is strong enough'? Strategy for answer: Disquotation. 'S' expresses the proposition that S!
- ✓ *Speech Act Pluralism*: SEM  $\neq$  SAC. An utterance of a sentence S with SEM p may be an assertion / saying / claiming / stating of other (possibly logically independent) propositions q, r, etc.
  - SAC is highly CS. May depend on indefinitely many features of context.
  - SAC of an utterance may depend on the context of assessor / reporter! (pg. 5)
  - Does SAC always include SEM? Note that SEM is expressed by *all* utterances of S, as claimed on pg. 2.
- ✗ *Radical Contextualism*: It is impossible to systematically assign truth conditions / propositions to sentences, no matter how much we try to expand the context-sensitivity in our semantics. At best, sentences express propositional radicals / fragments. Context contributes to determining asserted propositions in a pervasive way that cannot be

represented as part of meaning. (Wittgenstein, Sperber & Wilson, Carston, Recanati, Travis, Searle.)

- ✕ *Moderate Contextualism*: Many more expressions are context-sensitive than are claimed by Semantic Minimalism. Many sentences that Minimalism says express propositions actually do not — only their utterances express propositions.
- Why do C&L focus on utterances rather than sentences in contexts? Presumably people like Stanley are happy to work with the latter notion.
  - Some MCists use *Surprise Indexical* strategy: Like ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘knows’ takes different semantic values in different contexts. (Lewis, DeRose)
  - Some MCists use *Hidden Indexical* strategy: There are unpronounced indexical syntactic elements that combine with terms like ‘short’, though ‘short’ is not itself CS. (Stanley, most linguists?)
  - Some MCists use *Unarticulated Constituent* strategy: Context directly supplies some propositional constituents without any syntactic element denoting them, e.g. location in ‘It is raining’. (Perry, Crimmins)
- According to C&L, contextualists have only two argumentative strategies.
    - *Context-shifting arguments*: Take utterances  $u_1$ - $u_n$  of a sentence in various distinct contexts  $c_1$ - $c_n$ , where you are not in any of  $c_1$ - $c_n$ . Elicit intuitions that  $u_1$ - $u_n$  differ in truth-conditions or say / state / assert different things, and that they do so in a way that systematically depends on the context.
    - *Incompleteness arguments*: Take a sentence like ‘It’s raining’ or ‘John is ready’. Assert that these express no proposition independent of context. E.g.: “Obviously, there’s no such thing as it’s being 5pm *simpliciter* or our sun’s being small *simpliciter*.”

**Chapter 2:** Contextualists appeal to context-shifting and incompleteness arguments. C&L give us tons of examples, but they differ in various ways.

- Some authors simply assert that in a range of scenarios, the truth-conditions of the relevant sentence vary. In others, they assert that what is said, what is asserted, or what is stated varies.
- But sometimes it's not obvious how authors appeal to context-shifts, e.g. Stanley and Williamson on pg. 18.

Since there are clearly true utterances of ['Every bottle is empty'] in ordinary contexts, it follows that utterances of sentences containing quantified expressions are evaluated with respect to contextually restricted domains.

They seem to intend to argue as follows:

1. Some utterances of 'Every bottle is empty' are true.
2. It is always true that not every bottle in the universe is empty.
3. Suppose that each utterance *u* of 'Every bottle is empty' is true iff every bottle in the universe is empty.
4. If (2) and (3), then no utterance of 'Every bottle is empty' is true.
5. Therefore, the supposition in (3) is false.
6. Therefore some utterances containing quantified expressions are evaluated with respect to contextually restricted domains.

According to C&L, then, we must need context-shifting data to get from (5) to (6). But we don't need that to get (6\*):

- 6\* Some utterances containing quantified expressions are evaluated with respect to restricted domains.

This just leaves out that the domain is *contextually* restricted. So unless C&L want to deny (1), they must think the restriction is built into the semantics of 'everyone', and hence the restriction is always the same. I can't imagine any adequate proposal for such a restriction.

- When it comes to incompleteness arguments, C&L just do not find it obvious that there's a missing argument in sentences like: 'John is finished' or 'Steel is strong enough'. The quotations they give us don't reveal much positive argumentation by their opponents, so they don't do much here except deny the claims they don't like.
- The examples seem to me to differ in some respects. 'Steel is strong enough' is supposed to lack an argument, and the intuition there is obvious enough, correct or not. But what about 'John's book is gray'?

- Is the following an incompleteness argument? How would C&L respond to it?

John owns a book x, he chose a different book y for the book club, and he wrote a third book z. Now consider the sentence 'John's book is gray'. If the sentence has a SEM that is not CS, then the facts given so far determine which of the following scenarios it is true in.

1. Book x is gray, y is red, and z is red.
2. Book x is red, y is gray, and z is red.
3. Book x is red, y is red, and z is gray.

However, it is so far indeterminate which scenario, if any, is the one in which 'John's book is gray' is true. So the sentence's SEM is CS.

Simply denying the indeterminacy would require C&L to choose an answer. But whichever they chose, it would follow that the sentence would be false most of the time it is sincerely used, and that ordinary speakers don't notice this. Doesn't defending the view that 'John's book is gray' has context-independent truth-conditions require more than a little disquotation? Don't you need to be able to tell of certain scenarios whether they verify the sentence?