STUDIES IN THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

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in Zusammenarbeit mit

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Semantic Pluralism

Contents

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1

Introduction

How do speakers use language to communicate thoughts? Theorists in semantics, the subject area of this investigation, have given two quite different answers to this question. On a first answer, speakers usually communicate thoughts by putting them into sentences. If a speaker wants to communicate a thought, she utters a sentence that has the content of the thought, a *proposition*, as its meaning (i.e. as its *semantic value*). Communication is successful if her audience understands the sentence and as a result comes to entertain the proposition that is its semantic value. For example, if Anne and Bert are on a walk near Oxford, and if Anne wants to communicate to Bert that the silhouette of Oxford is beautiful, then she can do so by uttering (1) while gesturing towards Oxford's silhouette:

> (1)   That is beautiful.

According to the current answer, the semantic value of (1) is the proposition that the silhouette of Oxford is beautiful. Communication is successful if Bert comes to entertain this proposition by figuring out the semantic value of (1). This might be called the *correspondence view* of linguistic communication: the thought communicated typically corresponds to the semantic value of the sentence uttered.

On a second answer, speakers use sentences to communicate propositions, but the semantic value of a sentence is merely a guide to the proposition the speaker intends to communicate. The semantic values of most sentences are not propositions, and are thus distinct from what speakers communicate by uttering them. Speakers and audiences, however, know which propositions a speaker *could* communicate by uttering a given sentence. In our example, (1) does not express the proposition that the silhouette of Oxford is beautiful,

but something less specific (roughly: that a certain thing is beautiful). Bert uses this semantic value as a guide to what Anne intends to communicate, but he also uses other, non-linguistic clues, such as the fact that Anne is gesturing towards Oxford's silhouette. This might be called the *guide view* of linguistic communication.

The correspondence view of linguistic communication fits naturally with the semantic theory of *Contextualism*. Contextualists hold that semantics is *propositional*: that the semantic value of every sentence, as uttered on a certain occasion, is a proposition. And they hold that semantics is *sensitive*: that many sentences express different propositions on different utterances, and that which proposition a sentence expresses on a given utterance typically depends on features of the conversational setting, such as the speaker's intentions. Contextualism and the correspondence view of communication fit together well because most sentences allow speakers to communicate different propositions. This is illustrated by (1), which cannot only be used to communicate the proposition that the silhouette of Oxford is beautiful, but also the proposition that Beethoven's violin concerto is beautiful, the proposition that the view of Earth from space is beautiful and countless other propositions. If speakers typically use (1) to communicate the proposition it expresses, then it cannot express the same proposition on every utterance.

If semanticists adopt the guide view of linguistic communication, they are likely to opt for a semantic theory that strongly differs from Contextualism. They will hold that semantics is *non-propositional* and *insensitive*: that the semantic value of most sentences is not a proposition, and that most sentences have the same semantic value on every utterance. Such views on semantic values fit with the guide view of communication because the latter does not require the proposition communicated to be the semantic value of the sentence uttered. Speakers can use a sentence such as (1) to communicate different propositions on different occasions, although (1) has the same semantic value in every conversational setting. Compared to Contextualism, theories of non-propositional and insensitive semantics permit a simpler account of the semantic values of sentences: they take many sentences to have the same semantic value on every utterance, and thus can avoid some of the tricky questions Contextualists face in saying *how* semantic values depend on features of the conversational setting.

Nonetheless, Contextualism is the standard view in contemporary semantics. This has to do with the fact that most semanticists accept the correspondence view of communication, which fits better with Contextualism. But

it is also due to persistent worries theorists have about non-propositional semantics: about the semantic values non-propositional semanticists assign to sentences and about the way in which these are meant to guide an audience to the proposition the speaker wants to communicate. For instance, some non-propositional semanticists hold that a sentence such as (1) expresses a *propositional radical*: a fragment of a proposition that is in some sense incomplete. But it has been objected that while we have a reasonably good grip on what propositions are, namely the contents of thoughts and beliefs, it is unclear how propositional radicals should be construed. Furthermore, semanticists have objected that non-propositional semantic theories that invoke propositional radicals cannot give a satisfactory explanation of how the semantic value of a sentence enables successful communication. Such theories tend to see only a loose connection between the propositional radical a sentence expresses and the proposition the speaker intends to communicate by uttering the sentence, which makes it hard to see how the former can serve as a good guide to the latter.

My first aim in this book is to show that these are not good reasons to avoid non-propositional semantic theories. I will argue that non-propositional semanticists should adopt a view of *Semantic Pluralism*, which takes the semantic values of sentences to be sets of propositions. Semantic Pluralism thus allows non-propositional semanticists to get by with the semantic values that are familiar from Contextualism. And it allows them to give a systematic account of how semantic values guide the audience to the proposition the speaker intends to communicate: unless an utterance is non-literal, the proposition the speaker intends to communicate has to be a member of the set of propositions expressed by the sentence uttered. In this way, non-propositional semanticists can avoid both of the objections mentioned above.

The second aim of this book is to provide new motivation for semanticists to move away from propositional theories, and in particular to move away from Contextualism. Contextualists hold that for many utterances features of the conversational setting (such as the speaker's intentions) fix exactly one proposition as semantic value of the sentence uttered. This requires contexts to be specific. But, as I will demonstrate with a number of examples, speaker intentions (and other features of the conversational setting) are often not nearly specific enough to pick out exactly one proposition as sentential semantic value. This, I hope, might give semanticists with a correspondence view of communication a reason to reject the Contextualist dictum of one proposition per sentence (and utterance).

My third aim in this book is to put forward two concrete theories of Semantic Pluralism, and to defend them against the most pressing objections. *Flexible Pluralism* is geared to those who favour a correspondence view of communication but are moved by considerations of the kind just sketched. Flexible Pluralism accepts widespread context-sensitivity, like Contextualism, but denies that every sentence expresses exactly one proposition (on a given utterance). *Strong Pluralism*, by contrast, is a non-propositional and insensitive version of Pluralism, which fits best with a guide view of communication.

Let me now give a brief outline of how I will proceed. Chapter 2 will set the groundwork for the following chapters. I will discuss which explanatory aims semanticists should pursue and which kinds of explanations they should provide. The primary aim of semantics, I will argue, is to contribute to an explanation of how speakers can use language to successfully communicate complex and diverse thoughts. Further aims are explanations of the productivity of language and of judgements of speakers about truth, validity and acceptability. I will argue that these latter aims are plausible because meeting them seems to be a precondition for meeting the primary aim of explaining communicative success. Then, I will look at different kinds of explanations in semantics. Theorists in philosophical semantics usually aim for rational reconstructions of their explanatory targets, and I will argue that this is a sensible and fruitful approach.

In the second half of the chapter, I will introduce important theories in philosophical semantics, classifying them according to two criteria: on the one hand, I will distinguish between propositional and non-propositional semantics, and on the other, between sensitive and insensitive semantics. This will locate Flexible Pluralism and Strong Pluralism in the landscape of semantic theories. The following table shows the theories I will discuss and the result of applying both criteria:

	Propositional semantics	*Non-propositional semantics*
Sensitive semantics	Contextualism	Flexible Pluralism
Insensitive semantics	Propositional Minimalism Semantic Relativism	Radical Minimalism Strong Pluralism

In Chapter 3, I will put forward two arguments against Contextualism, the main view of propositional semantics. The arguments are based on examples of ordinary utterances of sentences featuring gradable adjectives, quantifiers and modals. Contextualists take these expressions to be context-sensitive and hold that they have exactly one semantic value in context if they occur in an ordinary utterance. The arguments attack this assumption. The first argument uses the aforementioned examples to show that, for many ordinary utterances, the semantic treatment Contextualists provide for gradable adjectives, quantifiers and modals does not lead to exactly one semantic value in context. Contextualism thus requires contexts to be more specific than they in fact are. The second argument uses the examples to show that the semantic values Contextualists assign in many cases are of no explanatory value: they do not help to meet the explanatory targets mentioned above. Most of the examples of this chapter involve non-literal speech, such as irony, exaggeration or metaphor. Non-literal speech is common in everyday language, but has so far not played a role in the debate between Contextualists and their critics.

Chapter 4 spells out Flexible Pluralism and Strong Pluralism. Both of these views entail that at least some expressions have non-singleton sets of semantic values (in context), and that this leads to at least some sentences expressing non-singleton sets of propositions (in context); they disagree about how many expressions are context-sensitive. I will consider which expressions Flexible Pluralists and Strong Pluralists should take to have sets of semantic values, and which sets of semantic values they should assign to such expressions. I will outline how Pluralists can provide a compositional semantics and how Pluralism fits into a broadly Gricean theory of communication. I will also show how Pluralists can capture the notion of what is said.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss and respond to important objections to non-propositional semantics, and thus to Semantic Pluralism as a non-propositional theory. I will begin by discussing an objection aimed at *moderately* non-propositional theories, which pair *some* but not all sentences with non-propositional semantic values. The objection aims to show that such a position is unstable and collapses into a *thoroughly* non-propositional theory, according to which *all* sentences have non-propositional semantic values. I will show that Flexible Pluralism is not likely to suffer from such a collapse, and that it is thus not clear that Pluralist views have to be thoroughly non-propositional. Nonetheless, I will respond to the remaining objections under the assumption that Pluralism is thoroughly non-propositional. Three of these objections allege that non-propositional theories are unable to account for ordinary

speaker judgements of truth, of validity and of literality. I will show that Pluralists do have the resources to account for such judgements, and that they can account for judgements of the third kind better than certain other non-propositional and propositional theories. According to the remaining objection, non-propositional theories do not fit with the way we use sentences to ascribe beliefs and give reasons for belief. I will demonstrate that this objection, too, is ineffective against Pluralist views.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I will take stock and provide an outlook: I will consider further ways in which Pluralism could be supported and developed; and I will point to some outstanding challenges for the view.

2

Semantics: aims, explanations and theories

In this chapter, I will discuss the aims and methods of semantic theorising, and I will provide an overview over different kinds of semantic theories.

The chapter has three sections. In the first section, I will look at the aims of semantics. While semanticists of course aim to assign semantic values to the expressions of a language, the constraints on *how* this should be done are not as obvious. These constraints follow from the explanatory aims of semantics: whether a semantic theory is right to pair an expression with a certain semantic value depends on whether this helps to explain the things semantics should explain. I will present five explanatory aims that are widely accepted and that I take to be plausible. The primary aim of semantics, I will argue, is to contribute to an explanation of our remarkable success in communicating with language. But semantics must also meet more specific aims: it should contribute to explanations of how languages can be productive and it has to account for speaker judgements of truth, validity or acceptability about sentences and arguments. I will argue that these specific aims should be in place because they help to meet the overall aim of explaining communicative success.

In the second section, I will offer a short discussion of the methods of semantics and the kinds of semantic explanations that are offered to meet the previously mentioned aims. I will vote for an approach that is common in philosophical semantics, which is based on thought experiments and provides broadly Gricean explanations that take the form of rational reconstructions of linguistic communication.

The third section will give a brief overview over theories in philosophical and linguistic semantics, which will hopefully make obvious how the views advanced in this book fit in with and differ from existing semantic theories.

2.1 The aims of semantic theorising

Natural language semantics investigates the meanings of expressions of natural languages, such as English and German.[1] The immediate aim of a semantic theory of a language is therefore to pair the simple and complex expressions of that language with meanings, which I am calling *semantic values*. But there are other, less immediate aims of semantic theorising: semanticists aim to determine the semantic values of expressions *in order* to explain certain phenomena or to account for certain data. These less immediate explanatory aims guide semanticists in assigning semantic values and thus place desiderata on semantic theories.

I will now present five widely accepted desiderata on semantic theories, which are also the desiderata I will rely on in this book. These require semantic theories to contribute to explanations of certain features of a language (such as that it is productive), of certain judgements of speakers of a language (e.g. about the truth or falsity of utterances) and of the general fact that speakers can use a language to successfully communicate complex and diverse information. I will use versions of these desiderata that place comparatively weak constraints on semantic theories, and thereby hope to capture the methodological views of most participants in the debate. After presenting the desiderata, I will say why they are plausible.

Productivity

Semanticists commonly claim that semantics has to contribute to an explanation of the *productivity* of a language. A language is productive if (in general) a speaker is able to understand (and produce) complex expressions of that language simply by being able to understand (and produce) their component expressions and by knowing the rules by which they are composed. It is thought that most or even all natural languages are productive, and English serves as a good example. As a reader of this text, you are able to understand the following sentence, even though you are likely to never have come across it before:

> (1)   Antonio Stradivari was an Italian violin maker who
>   lived in Cremona.

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[1]   As I will not be concerned with artificial languages in this book, I will from now on simply use *semantics* to refer to natural language semantics.

You understand (1) upon first encounter because you understand its component expressions and are familiar with the rules by which they have been put together. It is thus the productivity of English that facilitates an understanding of (1).

Explaining productivity requires input from semantics as well as from the neighbouring discipline of syntax: while semantics aims to show how the meanings of complex expressions are put together out of the meanings of simple ones, syntax aims to provide the grammatical rules by which complex expressions are composed. Semantics thus need not provide an explanation of productivity all by itself, but rather has to *contribute* to such an explanation. This leads to the following first desideratum on semantic theories:

> (Des1): Productivity
> A semantic theory of a given natural language has to contribute to an explanation of its productivity.[2]

In order to fulfil (Des1), semanticists construct theories that are *compositional*. In a compositional semantic theory, the semantic value of a complex expression is determined by the semantic values of its constituents and the way they are put together. Compositional semantic theories are thus suited to contribute to an explanation of productivity.

Judgements of truth and falsity

Many semanticists hold that a semantic theory has to contribute to an explanation of why speakers judge some utterances to be true and others to be false (relative to a certain situation). For example, let us assume that Anne is a competent speaker of English and is talking to Bert about Italian violins. Bert utters (2) and (3):

> (2)   The Molitor Stradivarius was built in 1697.
> (3)   The Molitor Stradivarius is expensive.

If Anne happens to know that the Molitor Stradivarius was built in 1697 and, in 2010, was sold for $3.6 million, then she will judge (2) and (3) to be true. Furthermore, she will hold that (2) and (3) would not be true if the Molitor Stradivarius had been built in 1698 and if it had recently been sold for $36.

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[2]   Productivity is accepted as an explanatory aim of semantics e.g. by Frege (1923: 36), Lewis (1970: 18), Borg (2004: 2) and Yalcin (2014: 20).

Anne's judgements concern the truth or falsity of an utterance in a situation, and, more generally, the conditions under which an utterance would be true or false. It seems plausible that most speakers of English (who have the relevant background information) would make the same judgements about these utterances of (2) and (3), and it is widely believed that semantic theories must contribute to an explanation of such judgements. Semanticists thus accept a desideratum along the following lines:

> (Des2): Judgements of truth and falsity
> A semantic theory of a given natural language has to contribute to an explanation of the truth-value judgements of speakers of that language.[3]

Some theorists might disagree with my formulation of (Des2) and instead argue for a stronger desideratum that concerns the *truth-values* of sentences, and not merely *judgements* about truth-values. Such a desideratum would be more in line with the widespread following of truth-conditional semantics and the view, expressed by Lewis (1970: 18) and accepted by many semanticists, that '[s]emantics with no treatment of truth conditions is not semantics'.[4]

But, for one thing, these theorists will accept that semantics has to *at least* contribute to an explanation of truth-value judgements. So these theorists will accept (Des2), as well as accepting further, stronger constraints on semantics. Given that some theorists do not accept a strong version of (Des2), the current formulation fits with my aim of capturing uncontroversial and widely accepted desiderata on semantic theories.

And secondly, I think that (Des2) should not be formulated in a stronger way. For a requirement according to which semantic theories have to account for the truth-values of sentences (and not merely for truth-value judgements) presupposes that sentences have truth-values. That, however, is not pre-theoretically obvious. The datum we have is that speakers judge utterances of sentences to be true or false, but there are several explanations for *why* this is the case. On one explanation, sentences themselves have truth-values and these are detected by speakers. But on other explanations, sentences need not have truth-values and what speakers judge to be true or false is e.g. what a speaker communicates by uttering a sentence. For this reason, I think that

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[3]   Among those accepting a desideratum similar to (Des2) are Stanley & Szabó (2000: 240), King & Stanley (2005: 160–161) and Yalcin (2014: 20).

[4]   Heim & Kratzer (1998: 1), Borg (2004: 5) and Stanley (2007: 5) are among those who have explicitly claimed that semantics must be truth-conditional.