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Semantic content and utterance context: A spectrum of approaches

EMMA BORG AND SARAH A. FISHER

9. 1 Introduction

It is almost unarguable that words (and, somewhat more controversially, sentences) mean things independently of the context in which they are currently being used. A speaker who points at a cow and calls it "a horse" is generally making some kind of mistake, because the meaning of the English word formed of the letters [h^o^r^s^e] doesn't include cows in its extension. This meaning, which attaches to spoken and written forms in a language, we might term their *literal, standing,* or *conventional* meaning.

Of course, someone who points at a cow and says "That is a horse" might still, in some contexts, be judged to have made a perfectly acceptable contribution to the conversation, for instance, if they were making a joke, or using the term "horse" metaphorically or ironically. Yet this doesn't seem to entail that the English word "horse" must literally mean something like *horse-or-cow*; rather, what it shows is that sometimes we use bits of language to convey things other than their literal meaning. It seems that we, as ordinary speakers, are sensitive to a difference between standing meaning and what we might call *conveyed* or *communicated* meaning. In philosophy of language, this has come to be understood as a difference between 'semantic' meaning on the one hand, which picks out something like literal meaning, and 'pragmatic' meaning on the other, which focuses on communicated, contextually derived meaning. However, once we recognise these two different kinds of meaning, crucial questions immediately emerge; for instance, exactly which meanings should we treat as the semantic ones, and exactly which appeals to a context of utterance yield pragmatic, as opposed to semantic, content? It is these questions and, specifically, how we should model the relationship between semantic content and utterance context, that will concern us in what follows.[1]

We will explore five contemporary answers to this modelling question, and consider the benefits and challenges of each. The five accounts lie on a spectrum from what we might think of as 'formalist' approaches through to 'use-based' accounts (these terms are explained below). We will begin, however, by considering the limits of purely formal, conventional meaning as, for some philosophers, these have been the stepping off point towards embracing increasingly pervasive and penetrating contextual influences on meaning.

[1] As a shorthand, we talk about 'speakers' producing 'utterances' received by 'hearers'. However, the discussion applies mutatis mutandis to cases of written or signed communication.

9. 2 The limits of conventional meaning

Words have conventional meanings which are generally held to be part of their 'lexical entries'.[2] Groups of words from the lexicon of a language can be put together in accordance with the language's grammatical rules to produce infinitely many well-formed sentences. However, it is a matter of some controversy how the meanings of these complex expressions should be characterised.

The views of contemporary theorists can be located on a spectrum ranging from 'formalist' through to 'use-based' approaches (Borg, 2004, chapter 1; 2016c).[3] The formalist tradition, which has its roots in the early twentieth century work of Frege, Russell and the early Wittgenstein, maintains that stable and complete meanings can be traced back to linguistic forms (words and sentences). At the other end of the spectrum, the use-based tradition, developed from the mid-twentieth century by the later Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Austin, claims that the meanings of utterances depend essentially on what speakers are *doing* with their words. On this view, the linguistic forms speakers deploy to achieve their purposes are of only secondary importance; chameleon-like, they take on meanings fluidly across contexts.

According to formalists, then, there is a complete and theoretically relevant meaning expressed by any sentence, which is determined *compositionally*; that is to say, this meaning is held to be a function of the lexical entries of its constituents, together with their manner of combination. An extreme version of formalism is the view (sketched here as a boundary) that a sentence's meaning is entirely *exhausted* by the output of the compositional process. Although we are not aware of anyone who actually holds this view, seeing why the boundary position is implausible will help to introduce the different roles context can play.

We take as a case study the following passage from J. K. Rowling's 2008 Harvard commencement address, 'The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination':[4]

> Now, I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun. That period of my life was a dark one, and I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution. I had no idea then how far the tunnel extended, and for a long time, any light at the end of it was a hope rather than a reality.
>
> So why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.

[2] Lexical entries are often also held to capture words' phonological and syntactic properties.

[3] As a reviewer helpfully pointed out, 'formalist' and 'use-based' are both controversial descriptors with various understandings. The debate of interest for us is between those who think standing meanings ground complete, theoretically relevant contents, and those who think such contents always depend on the context of utterance. This is one, though not the only, way of understanding the distinction between formalist and use-based approaches (e.g. Grice (1989, pp. 22-24) reserves the term 'formalist' for those who advocate the construction of an 'ideal language').

[4] The full text is available at the following link: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2008/06/text-of-j-k-rowling-speech/. This text is used for the purpose of illustrating certain linguistic phenomena. We do not mean to take a stance on any of the author's views.

This passage presents several challenges for the idea that sentences have complete, stable, standing meanings. The first problem concerns ellipsis. Take the following clause from the quoted passage:
(1) Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential.

As it stands, this string of words is not a grammatically well-formed sentence of English; it is missing a constituent. We can capture this in an underlying semantic representation of the uttered sentence (its 'logical form'):[5]

(2) *[…] simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential.*

The missing constituent is provided by the wider discourse context, specifically the immediately preceding rhetorical question ('So why do I talk about the benefits of failure?'):

(3) ***I talk about the benefits of failure*** *simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential.*

Thus completed, the enriched representation in (3) now has the potential to bear a complete meaning.

The second challenge concerns what philosophers call 'indexicality'. Take the following sentence:

(4) I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun.

This contains the indexical expressions 'I' and 'you' and the context-sensitive adverb 'here'. The lexical entries of these expressions do not directly specify their referents. For example, although 'I' clearly means *Rowling* in this instance, *'Rowling'* does not appear anywhere in the lexical entry for 'I'. Obviously this has to be the case since 'I' can refer to other individuals on other occasions of use. 'I''s lexical entry, then, instead of listing referents, is essentially context-sensitive, encoding a rule we might characterise roughly as *the speaker of this token of 'I'*.[6] A similar analysis applies to 'here' and 'you', giving us the following 'gappy' logical form for (4):

(5) *[The speaker, x] is not going to stand [at the speaker's location, y] and tell [the hearer(s), z] that failure is fun.*

As is clear from this 'gappy' form, with its 'placeholder' variables, x, y, and z, sentence (4) cannot be associated with a single complete content entirely independently of context. It is necessary to enrich the logical form, by providing contextual values for x, y, and z. In the context of Rowling's address, (4) has something like the following form:

[5] We will use the convention of showing logical forms in italics, with missing elements in square brackets and enriched elements in bold. On some accounts, these logical forms are thought to be tokened (or tokenable) in the mind of the speaker or hearer (Carston, 2002; Chomsky, 1976). According to other, less psychologically committal, views, they are merely abstract representations, employed by theorists in an attempt to characterise a sentence's content (Quine, 1972). For further discussion see (Borg, 2004, chapter 1). Either way, note that the precise structure of logical forms may turn out to be less intuitive than the sentence-like way we characterise them here.

[6] In reality, the lexical entry for 'I' is likely to be more complicated (see, for example, (Predelli, 1998)). However, the way we have characterised it here is good enough for current purposes.

(6) ***Rowling is*** not going to stand ***on the podium at Harvard University*** and tell ***audience members at the 2008 Harvard graduation ceremony*** that failure is fun.

Each of the substitutions in bold depends on the particular context of utterance, and not just the sentence's standing meaning. In other contexts, 'I', 'here' and 'you' could take different values and (4) would express a different content. More generally, any sentences containing linguistically context-sensitive elements require relativization to the extra-linguistic context in order to express complete, stable contents. [7] [8]

Third, the passage contains several ambiguities. For example, in sentence (7) below, 'press' has (at least) two meanings, as *print media* or *a device for applying pressure*. Meanwhile a 'resolution' can be a *conclusion* or a *decision*.

(7) I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution.

This time, background information (perhaps concerning our knowledge of Rowling's rise to fame, and our familiarity with certain media tropes) may enable the disambiguation of these expressions at the level of logical form:

(8) ***Rowling*** *had no idea that there was going to be what the press* ***(print media)*** *has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution* ***(conclusion)***.

In general, wherever a single phonological or orthographic form is associated with multiple lexical entries, a hearer will need to draw on wider information to select between these.

There is widespread acceptance of the need for at least these three kinds of contextual enrichment. So it seems that all parties ought to acknowledge that context plays *some* role in determining the contents expressed by sentences (*pace* the boundary formalist view). So far, however, this is a role that we might think more moderate formalists could accommodate, since it is clearly called for by overtly context-sensitive elements in the sentence form. In other words, the enrichment processes are what we might term 'mandatory' or 'bottom-up'; just paying attention to the words and structure of the sentence will be sufficient to trigger a contextual contribution. Yet, even if we think that formal theorists can accommodate these cases, the challenge from context-sensitivity doesn't stop there, for opponents have argued that language is more *deeply* dependent on context. Before turning to look at these further kinds of potential contextual enrichment, however, it will be helpful next to introduce Grice's seminal distinction between what is said by a speaker and what is implicated.

9. 3 Grice's 'what is said'

Writing in the late twentieth century, Grice famously introduced a distinction between what is 'said' by a sentence and what is 'implicated' by its use on a particular occasion. This distinction has been enormously influential in subsequent semantic and pragmatic theorizing.

[7] This notion of 'completeness' is sometimes cashed out terms of a requirement for 'truth-evaluability'. Fisher (2019) argues that this is a mistake.

[8] The tense-markers in (4) may also fall into the category of overtly context-sensitive elements. However, we put these to one side for now (though see § 9.7 for limited further discussion).

According to Grice, what a sentence 'says' is largely determined by the meaning it encodes as a matter of linguistic convention. He writes:

> In the sense in which I am using the word *say*, I intend what someone has said to be closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) he has uttered. (Grice, 1989, p. 25)

Specifically, the role of context is supposed to be limited to enrichment processes like disambiguation and reference assignment, as described above. This notion of 'what is said' by a sentence is contrasted with what an utterance of the sentence might be used to *implicate*. According to Grice, communicative exchanges are governed by some quite general rules of engagement, the most general of which is that hearers are entitled to assume that speakers are entering into the conversation in a cooperative manner (i.e. they are not trying to hide information or mislead hearers).[9] A conversational implicature is a content which the hearer must attribute to the speaker, in order to maintain a view of him/her as a rational and cooperative communicator.

Let's return to sentence (4) and the logical analysis in (6), which captures what Rowling 'said', in Grice's sense:

(4) I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun.

(6) ***Rowling is*** not going to stand ***on the podium at Harvard University*** and tell ***audience members at the 2008 Harvard graduation ceremony*** that failure is fun.

On the face of it, Rowling's utterance simply makes a claim about something she is not going to say in her speech, regardless of whether or not it is true (i.e. whether or not failure *is* fun). However, by uttering (4) she implicates (9):

(9) Failure is not fun.

A Gricean analysis can capture this by showing that (4) flouts one or other conversational principle.[10] Conversationally implicated contents, then, depend not (only) on relatively arbitrary conventions of language but on general, rational principles of communication.[11] Correspondingly, deriving an implicature involves bringing to bear potentially any kind of information about the speaker or the world.

Grice thus observed that what a sentence 'says' does not exhaust its communicative potential. Crucially, though, he still considered 'what is said' to be *part of* what a speaker means. He argued that speakers *intend* hearers to grasp 'what is said' (and to

[9] This is captured by Grice's Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1989, p. 26). Grice further identified a set of specific conversational maxims, organised under the headings of *Quantity* (say as much as is required but no more), *Quality* (say only what you believe to be true), *Relevance* (be relevant), and *Manner* (be clear, brief, and orderly).

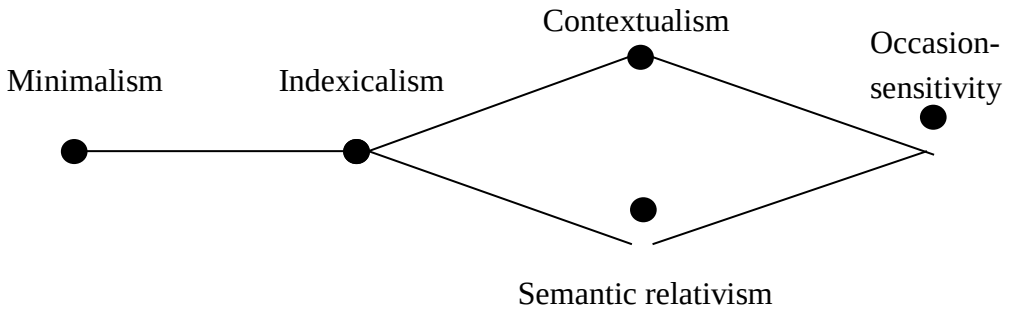
[10] For example, it might be thought to provide more information than is appropriate, flouting *Quantity*, or to provide irrelevant information, flouting *Relevance*. The cumbersome formulation might even be thought to flout *Manner*, depending on how that principle is understood (we are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion).

[11] Although note that Grice also identified 'conventional implicatures', which he held to be linguistically encoded but excluded from 'what is said'. Since our focus will be on 'what is said', we do not have the space here to explore the notion of 'implicatures' in full detail; for further discussion, see chapter 17 of this volume

do so by recognising that intention).[12] According to Grice, then, what is 'said' is a dual-aspect notion, defined on the one hand with respect to a formal, linguistic criterion (the conventional meaning of the sentence) and, on the other, by a use-based, communicative criterion (what the speaker intends to convey). An enduring problem with Grice's legacy is that these two aspects often seem to pull in different directions.[13] As we will see, the question of how to balance them continues to pervade the contemporary debate, with opposing camps embracing alternative ways to develop, dispute, or dismantle the notion of what is 'said'.[14]

We will explore five distinct approaches (semantic minimalism, indexicalism, contextualism, semantic relativism, and occasion-sensitivity), describing how they capture in distinct ways Grice's linguistic and communicative dimensions of meaning. These positions form the spectrum below, adapted from (Borg, 2012, p. 28).[15] At one end, semantic minimalists maintain that sentences express truth-conditional semantic contents that are only minimally dependent on context. At the other end, occasion-sensitivity claims that meaning is always deeply contextually embedded.[16]

Figure 9. 1. Spectrum of approaches, from minimalism to occasion-sensitivity



9. 4 Semantic minimalism

According to semantic minimalism (also known as 'insensitive semantics', 'invariant semantics' or, simply, 'minimalism') every well-formed declarative sentence expresses a complete content, with a fixed set of truth-conditions; and this content is determined by formal, standing meaning, given an assignment of values to recognised

[12] This is a rough characterization of Grice's notion of 'M-intending' (Grice, 1989, pp. 219-220).
[13] See (Borg, Forthcoming).
[14] Note that, for Grice, speaker meaning depends on the communicative intentions of the speaker, independently of the hearer's interpretation. Davis (1998) and Saul (2002) discuss some potential implications of this; see also chapter 22 of this volume. However, since the distinction is not made by the main protagonists in the current debate, we will not adhere to it strictly in what follows and will often refer instead to what speakers *intuitively communicate*. In doing so, we remain agnostic between contents which speakers intend to convey and those which hearers actually arrive at. Roughly speaking, they are the contents probed by truth judgement tasks (discussed further in § 9.4.1.1).
[15] As noted there, since the positions differ from one another on various dimensions, this linear representation smooths over some important contours in the landscape (Borg, 2012, p. 28). We seek to bring out several of these in the detailed discussion that follows.
[16] For arguments that the intermediate positions are unstable and ultimately doomed to collapse into one of the two poles, see (Cappelen & Lepore, 2005) and (Borg, 2012).

variables.[17] A sentence's 'minimal' semantic content thus lines up nicely with the linguistic aspect of Grice's notion of what is 'said'. Importantly, all contextual contributions (resulting from ellipsis, indexicality, and ambiguity) are traceable back to lexical or syntactic features.[18] In this way, minimal content remains closely connected to a sentence's linguistic form, with contextual information coming into play only derivatively. Accordingly, the context itself can be specified in a minimal, formal way, as the ordered set of elements that provide values for the context-sensitive items in the sentence. Minimal contents are then derived from sentence-context pairs.[19]

As noted above, Grice also thought of what is 'said' as being part of what a speaker intends to *communicate*. Whereas some minimalists (including Cappelen and Lepore) maintain that minimal contents play a similar role, others (including Borg) deny that they need always be intended by speakers (or arrived at by hearers); in many cases, they won't be. Instead, it is proposed that speakers often communicate only wider pragmatic contents In any case, all minimalists allow for an array of speech acts to be undertaken by speakers, which are affected to a greater or lesser extent by context. However, such contents are sharply distinguished from the minimal semantic contents of sentences. Minimal contents thus remain unconstrained by what is intuitively communicated by the use of a sentence (since our intuitions will often limn pragmatic contents); however, the reverse is not true – minimal contents *do* constrain what a speaker can communicate.

9. 4. 1 Challenges to minimalism

9. 4. 1. 1 Context shifting arguments

Non-minimalists have argued that context-sensitivity is a much more pervasive feature of language than minimalists suppose. A popular strategy for pressing this kind of objection is through so-called 'context-shifting arguments', or 'CSAs' (Cappelen &

[17] Bach's 'radical' minimalism notably denies this, claiming instead that sentences often express incomplete 'propositional radicals' (Bach, 2001, 2006). Since Bach argues that completion requires enrichment processes that operate freely, rather than being mandated by lexical or syntactic features, we categorise his position as a form of contextualism. Other, more traditional, minimalists have also avoided committing themselves to 'propositionalism', including Cappelen and Lepore (2006) in their 'Reply to Bach'; for further discussion of whether this is a tenable position, see (Borg, 2012, p. 4, n. 3). Nevertheless, they still claim that complete contents are expressed by many sentences that non-minimalists consider to be indeterminate.

[18] There is some disagreement within the minimalist camp over exactly how to define the set of genuinely context-sensitive formal features. Cappelen and Lepore (2005) focus on defining a relatively small 'Basic Set' of context-sensitive elements, more or less exhausted by those enumerated by Kaplan (1989). These include personal pronouns ('I', 'you', 'she', 'he', 'it'), demonstrative pronouns ('that' and 'this'), syntactic markers of tense, and a small number of open-class words (adverbs like 'there' and 'now'; adjectives like 'actual', 'present'; perhaps also 'contextuals', like 'enemy', and 'native'). Against Cappelen and Lepore's purely quantitative definition, Borg (2012) argues for a qualitative constraint, whereby context-sensitivity arises just where it is specified by lexical or syntactic features. In principle, this approach offers greater flexibility (at the cost of greater vagueness), allowing for the discovery of further indexicality. However, it is expected that, in practice, linguistic evidence will continue to support the presence of only a relatively small set of context-sensitive elements (in contrast with what is claimed by indexicalists).

[19] Borg (2004, 2012) further argues that they must be derived *deductively*, such that inferences about others' mental states never enter into the psychological processes involved in semantic interpretation. In contrast, Cappelen and Lepore (2005) allow that semantic processing can involve reasoning about wider, subjective, features of context.

Lepore, 2005).[20] CSAs aim to show that, when a sentence is evaluated for truth against a fixed state of affairs, it may be judged true in some contexts and false in others. Take as an example the following sentence from Rowling's Harvard address:

(10) I had an old typewriter

The minimal content might be captured by the following logical form:

(11) ***Rowling*** *had an old typewriter.*

Let's imagine that Rowling's typewriter was made in 1983. By the technological standards of the 1990s (and certainly by the time of her 2008 address) such a typewriter could reasonably be considered *old*. We might therefore judge her utterance to be *true*.

Imagine now that Rowling is contacted by the police. They have intercepted a thief near her house, who is in possession of a valuable antique – a late nineteenth century typewriter. The police want to know whether Rowling ever owned an old typewriter. In this scenario, if Rowling uttered 'I had an old typewriter' she would seem to have said something false; her typewriter from 1983 no longer counts as 'old' in this context.

In the two scenarios described, the age of the typewriter is the same, yet in one case it seems to count as 'old' (making the first utterance of (10) true) and in the other it doesn't (making the second utterance of (10) false). It is argued that the shift in truth-value shows that sentence (10) cannot express a single, complete, minimal content, with a fixed set of truth-conditions.

Note that the 'shiftiness' here seems to focus on the gradable adjective 'old', as it interacts with different contextual standards of 'oldness'. In the first context, the typewriter from 1983 counts as old (with respect to recent technological standards), whereas in the second context it fails to count as old (with respect to late nineteenth century technological standards). This is despite the fact that the expression 'old' has not standardly been treated as context-sensitive.[21]

The CSA strategy can be widely applied, well beyond the case of gradable adjectives.[22] Although the details of individual CSAs can be disputed,[23] overall, they highlight a genuine puzzle requiring explanation and, as we will see, they have led non-minimalists to deny, in one way or another, that sentences like (10) really express minimal contents at all. Instead, they argue that such sentences are used to express contents with different truth-conditions on different occasions.

9. 4. 1. 2 Incompleteness, internalism, and irrelevance

[20] As noted by Hansen and Chemla (2013), this terminology is liable to conflate two distinct components of the strategy:

> It is helpful to think of a context shifting argument as consisting of two parts: (i) a *context shifting experiment*, which elicits intuitions about uses of an expression *e* in different imagined contexts, and (ii) an argument that the best way to explain the intuitions generated in response to the experiment involves semantic features of *e*. (Hansen & Chemla, 2013, p. 287)

In this section, we focus primarily on the experimental component but go on to consider how this has played into the debate between minimalists and their opponents.

[21] Although arguments to that effect can be made; as we discuss in § 9.5, Rothschild and Segal (2009) maintain that such expressions are indexicals.

[22] In particular, Travis (2006, 2008), provides a wealth of entertaining and ingenious scenarios to demonstrate how ubiquitously truth-value judgements shift across contexts.

[23] And it is important to consider CSAs on a case-by-case basis, as there may be significant differences between them; see (Borg, 2012, pp. 73-74).

Building on the intuition data from CSAs, three distinct challenges have been raised for minimalism. The first concerns the completeness of minimal contents. The worry is that, even given the kinds of mandatory, linguistically-driven processes of contextual enrichment accepted by the minimalist, we will end up with sentences expressing partial contents.

Take another sentence from Rowling's Harvard address:

(12) I was set free.

This is arguably semantically incomplete, pending contextual specification of the thing from which the agent was set free. The thought is that one is not set free *simpliciter* but only from some particular constraint – in this case something like *fear of failure*.

Borg (2012, pp. 81-111) discusses a variety of possible minimalist responses to incompleteness challenges (see also (Sainsbury, 2008)). First, one might acknowledge the possibility of genuine, linguistically-motivated context-sensitivity or ambiguity. Alternatively, one might posit a context-insensitive null syntactic constituent (as in '*I had an old typewriter [by some standard]'* or '*Rowling was set free [from something]')*. The least conciliatory strategy (adopted by Cappelen and Lepore (2005)) is to maintain that all such contents are straightforwardly complete – or at least no less complete than other, apparently unproblematic, contents. However, advocates of incompleteness arguments remain unconvinced by these kinds of responses.

A second, closely related challenge comes from internalists about meaning, who deny that words refer directly to things in the world, arguing instead that their meanings consist primarily of intralinguistic features. The most radical forms of internalism claim that virtually no linguistic expressions encode real-world properties; only their uses do so (Chomsky, 2000; Pietroski, 2005, 2018). On this view, minimal truth-conditional contents turn out to be impossible. Minimalists, for their part, have sought to block this line of attack by maintaining that linguistic expressions can and do correspond to genuine properties in the world. The difficulty they face, however, is to explain precisely what these could be.

A third kind of objection denies that minimal contents have any useful role to play in semantic, psychological, or sociological theorising, even if they are accepted in principle. Minimal contents are therefore argued to be practically inert and theoretically irrelevant. Consider the following sentence, taken from the earlier passage:

(13) I still had a daughter whom I adored.

Intuitively, (13) communicates that Rowling still had *her own* daughter. Presumably, this is what she intended to convey, and what the audience understood her to mean. In fact, though, the minimal content requires only that she had *a* daughter (i.e. *anyone's* daughter). This condition could still be met if, for example, Rowling had kidnapped someone else's daughter. But, if the minimal content is neither what the speaker intended nor what the audience grasped, what is this content *for*?

Minimalists have attempted to respond to this final challenge in various ways. For example, it is maintained that minimal contents do play an important psychological role. Cappelen and Lepore (2005, chapter 12) argue that such contents are part of what interlocutors mentally represent on *every* communicative occasion. Taking a more flexible line, Borg (2004, 2012) argues that, although it is the function of a particular cognitive module to derive minimal semantic contents, competent language users will

only actually recover these contents under suitable conditions (Borg, 2012, p. 63). Nevertheless she claims that the possession of that capacity underpins our communicative success and explains certain developmental trajectories (Borg, 2019). Minimalists also emphasise the important function minimal contents play in our social practices, as the meanings we fall back on when communication comes up short (Cappelen & Lepore, 2005) or those for which speakers are held strictly liable (Borg, 2019) – see also § 9.9 below.

9. 5 Indexicalism

Indexicalists take seriously the idea that data from CSAs bear directly on semantics. At the same time, they retain the formalist requirement for contextual processes to be mandatory and 'bottom-up', in the sense of being determined by the lexical and syntactic features of sentences. According to indexicalism, then, linguistic context-sensitivity is simply argued to be far more pervasive than minimalists (and Grice) supposed. The context itself, while still characterised in formal terms, is now held to comprise a much larger set of entities. By claiming that our ordinary intuitions about meaning are closely tracking genuine elements in the structure of language, indexicalists hold together both of the linguistic and communicative aspects of the original Gricean notion of 'what is said'.

Rothschild and Segal (2009) endorse a version of indexicalism that posits large amounts of 'overlooked' indexicality (Borg, 2012). They argue that many ordinary predicate expressions require contextual enrichment, including colour terms like 'red' (and, possibly, gradable adjectives like 'old'). These expressions are claimed to function in similar ways to 'I', 'you' and 'here', having (sometimes multidimensionally) context-sensitive lexical entries. The main challenge for this approach is to show that the linguistic behaviour of such expressions is genuinely comparable with that of standard indexicals. Many have argued against this, including Stanley, who proposes an alternative version of indexicalism.

On Stanley's view the underlying logical forms of sentences contain covert variables requiring contextual saturation (King & Stanley, 2005; Stanley, 2000, 2002, 2005). Specifically, Stanley proposes that each nominal cohabits with a contextually-determined domain variable. To see how this works, consider again sentence (10).

(10) I had an old typewriter

The logical form of (10) is held to include a hidden variable, attaching to 'typewriter', which relates the referent (Rowling's typewriter) to a contextually-determined comparison class:[24]

(14) ***Rowling*** *had an old typewriter [relative to comparison class, x]*.

The hidden comparison class variable, x, affects how 'old' will be interpreted on different occasions of utterance of (10).

[24] We simplify slightly here by expressing the variable as 'x' rather than using Stanley's more complex function, which is designed to ensure the quantifier domain is a contextually-determined *set* rather than an *object* (Stanley, 2002).

9. 5. 1 Challenges to indexicalism

A key challenge for indexicalists is to justify additional lexical or syntactic context-sensitivity on independent linguistic grounds. One attempt to do so is seen in Stanley's 'binding principle' (Stanley, 2000, 2005). Drawing on (Partee, 1989), Stanley observes that some uses of expressions like 'old' *require* us to appeal to hidden variables, in order for the whole expression to be syntactically well-formed. For example, take the following sentence:

(15) In each decade of the twentieth century, old typewriters were used.

On one acceptable reading of this sentence, the first clause binds the second, so that 'old' means *old for that decade of the twentieth century*.[25] Crucially, this reading is only available if we posit a hidden comparison class variable, x, which restricts the domain of relevant typewriters to those available in the relevant decade:

(16) *In each decade of the twentieth century(x), old typewriters(x) were used.*

This is taken by Stanley-style indexicalists as evidence that there is *always* a hidden comparison class variable, even in a sentence like (10) where there is no binding.

However, the binding principle faces problems, both over- and under-generating cases of context-sensitivity (Cappelen & Lepore, 2002; Recanati, 2004). Although other linguistic arguments can be made for implicit variables, an overarching methodological worry facing indexicalism is that semantic intuitions are driving the interpretation of the linguistic data, rather than being treated purely as evidence for context-sensitivity (Borg, 2012; Collins, 2007; Neale, 2007).

9. 6 Contextualism

Contextualists argue that the semantic contents posited by minimalism and indexicalism will often be incomplete or practically inert. Thus in a radical departure from those accounts, contextualism carves out a qualitatively different role for context: rather than playing second fiddle to lexical and syntactic features, context *freely* enriches the contents expressed by uttered sentences.[26] Weakening the connection with conventional meaning, contextualists prioritise the communicative aspect of Grice's notion of what is 'said'.[27] In this sense, the contextualist's strategy is the reverse of the minimalist's.[28]

[25] Although some have simply denied that there is ever any binding in such cases (see (Rothschild & Segal, 2009)).

[26] There are (at least) two kinds of free enrichment. First, elements in the sentence may be modulated, for example to give particular words narrower, looser, or wholly different, meanings from those which they encode as a matter of linguistic convention. Second, additional syntactic elements (so-called 'unarticulated constituents') may be added to the logical form. The relationship between these two kinds of process is discussed further in (Borg, 2016b).

[27] Although the connection with linguistically-encoded meaning is not completely severed, since it still forms part of the enriched logical form.

[28] The 'contextualist' label is sometimes applied to a broader set of views than those included in our narrower characterisation. For instance, readers may be aware of 'epistemic contextualism', whereby expressions like 'knows that' are context-sensitive. However, despite the shared terminology, the approach of 'epistemic contextualism' may or may not be a form of contextualism as described here – for epistemic contextualists often leave the semantic details of their accounts underspecified.

Borg (2004) conceptualises contextualism as a form of 'dual pragmatics' since it posits two separate iterations of pragmatic effects. In one step, the logical form associated with the linguistically-encoded meaning of an utterance is somewhat enriched or developed, to capture a level of content that accords with our ordinary intuitions about what the speaker directly communicated. A separate, second step involves the inference of further, indirectly communicated contents, such as implicatures.

Returning to Rowling's utterance of sentences (10), (12), and (13), contextualists might posit something like the following expanded logical forms (with *freely* enriched components underlined):

(17) ***Rowling*** *had an old typewriter* ***by 1990s technological standards****.*

(18) ***Rowling*** *was set free* ***from failure****.*

(19) ***Rowling*** *still had a daughter* ***of Rowling*** *whom* ***Rowling*** *adored.*

These directly communicated contents are thought to remain distinct from the wider implicatures that may be associated with the respective utterances; for example, by uttering (10), Rowling may additionally implicate that one doesn't need the latest technology to achieve success.

A prominent account in the (heterogeneous) contextualist camp is Recanati's 'Truth-Conditional Pragmatics' (Recanati, 2010). According to Recanati, what is 'said' by an uttered sentence (corresponding to (17)-(19) above) is a mental representation that results from a set of 'primary' pragmatic processes (see also (Recanati, 2004)). These processes are held to take place at a sub-personal, often unconscious level and may include free contextual enrichment in addition to linguistic decoding and mandatory saturation.[29]

Recanati claims that the *output* of primary processes (i.e. 'what is said') should be consciously accessible.[30] Competent language users should also be able to access further implicatures of the utterance, derived through 'secondary' pragmatic processes of the full-blooded, inferential kind characterised by Grice.

A different kind of broadly contextualist view emerges from Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1996). Relevance Theory (RT) offers a cognitive account of linguistic communication (and many other kinds of non-linguistic communication). The basic idea is that the production and comprehension of utterances is guided by a 'principle of relevance', according to which utterances produce cognitive effects (adding to, or modifying a hearer's beliefs) that are commensurate with the effort required to retrieve those effects.

[29] According to Truth-Conditional Pragmatics, free contextual enrichment is optional; it is not always required to produce a content that is complete and matches what was intuitively communicated. Thus, what is 'said' may sometimes coincide with the minimalist's minimal semantic content. However, Recanati denies that minimal contents are of fundamental importance. Instead, what is 'said' is, first and foremost, a content that is actually communicated; how minimal it then turns out to be is a question which itself depends on contextual facts for an answer. Recanati (2004, 2017) also contemplates a more radical position, according to which there are no such things as minimal contents, even in principle.

[30] This 'availability principle' is expected to rule out minimal contents from counting as what is 'said' in any situation where speakers and hearers are only aware of some further enriched content.

Relevance theorists argue that the linguistically-encoded meaning of a sentence is typically an incomplete logical form.[31] However, the utterance of the sentence in context will make certain complete contents readily accessible to hearers (for example, because of encyclopaedic information hearers hold concerning the encoded concepts). Hearers may then engage in a process of backward inference (making mutual adjustments with wider implicatures) to derive a fleshed-out logical form, which is the 'explicature' of the uttered sentence. Although similar to Recanati's notion of 'what is said', Relevance Theory's explicatures are supposed to be generated through the *same* kinds of pragmatic processes involved in arriving at secondary, indirect, implicature contents.

9. 6. 1 Challenges to contextualism

A preliminary problem for contextualist accounts is whether they can specify enriched logical forms in ways that make them invulnerable to further CSAs, as it seems additional scenarios could always be developed that require ever more precision. For example, with respect to (17) above, we can distinguish contexts in which the typewriter would need to be old relative to technological standards in either the *early*1990s or *late* 1990s. Contextualists may be able to address this kind of regress worry by arguing that the logical form need only rule out *contextually relevant* possibilities (see, for example, (Rayo, 2013)). However, fleshing out this response may prove tricky

Another challenge is to maintain a principled distinction between the somewhat enriched contents posited by contextualists and the wider implicatures of an utterance. Various attempts have been made to ground the distinction using logical, linguistic, or psychological criteria. However, each of these faces problems (see (Borg, 2016b, 2019)).

9. 7 Semantic relativism

Semantic Relativism shares elements in common with each of the preceding accounts but differs fundamentally in the way it detaches the *content* expressed by a sentence from the *truth-conditions* associated with distinct utterances of it (Lasersohn, 2005; MacFarlane, 2009, 2014; Predelli, 2005).

Like minimalists, relativists argue that the contents expressed by sentences include only standard kinds of lexically- or syntactically-mandated contextual enrichment. However, these contents are no longer thought to have stable truth-conditions. Like indexicalists, relativists aim to capture both aspects of Grice's notion of 'what is said' within formal semantics, and do so by positing additional contextual parameters. However, these parameters are thought not to be located in the underlying syntax of the sentence but in the external context. The view is thus akin to contextualism, in that the contextual parameters affect truth-conditions freely, without being traceable back

[31] This linguistically-encoded meaning is often described as the utterance's 'semantics'. However, unlike minimalists and indexicalists, Relevance Theorists expect that this semantic meaning will generally fall short of completeness. Indeed, Carston (2002) argues that it may always do so. Elaborating on this, Carston (2013) offers an account of lexical meaning on which all open class words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) encode only very schematic meanings. In more recent work, she explores the possibility that what is linguistically encoded merely provides an index, or address, for accessing a rich, essentially pragmatic, lexicon (Carston, 2019).

to lexical or syntactic features. Nevertheless, the relativist claims that context *only* affects truth-conditions, whereas contextualists maintain that it first affects the *content* expressed. According to relativism, then, content remains closely tied to conventional meaning, while fluctuating truth-conditions capture what is communicated on different occasions.

To see the move being made here, it is helpful to contrast temporalist and eternalist approaches to capturing the time parameters of utterances.[32] Consider again sentence (13):

(13) I still had a daughter whom I adored.

Let's assume Rowling is referring to the daughter she gave birth to in 1993. On that basis, the truth of (13) depends on its being indexed to some period of time after Rowling's daughter was in existence. There are two ways of capturing this fact. First, according to 'eternalism', the *content* expressed by the sentence Rowling uttered in her Harvard address should be adjusted to include an explicit temporal element, as in (20):

(20) ***At some time before 5 June 2008***, ***Rowling*** *still had a daughter whom* ***Rowling*** *adored.*

Meanwhile, had Rowling uttered the same sentence exactly 17 years earlier, the logical analysis would be something like the following (and would be straightforwardly evaluable as false):

(21) ***At some time before 5 June 1991***, ***Rowling*** *still had a daughter whom* ***Rowling*** *adored.*

An alternative, 'temporalist', approach avoids building the temporal element into the content itself, which can instead be captured by (22):

(22) ***Rowling*** *still had a daughter whom* ***Rowling*** *adored.*

Nevertheless, when we come to evaluate the truth of (22), we must do so with respect to a temporal parameter residing in the *context*. Thus, the single content in (22) may be true relative to the temporal parameter relevant when Rowling uttered (13) in 2008; but would have been false relative to the relevant temporal parameter if Rowling uttered (13) in 1991.

Relativists apply the latter, broadly temporalist, strategy to accommodate a wide range of other cases of shifting truth-value judgements. Returning to another earlier example, the logical form of (10) may be similar in form to the minimal content:

(23) ***Rowling*** *had an old typewriter.*

However, the relativist might well maintain that this content is truth-evaluable only relative to a non-standard contextual parameter (such as what is required to *count as old* in the given context).

[32] Recanati (2007) and MacFarlane (2009) make a similar appeal in setting up the positions they call 'moderate relativism' and 'nonindexical contextualism', respectively.

Note that the relevant contextual parameters, whilst always being *determined* by the context of utterance, may either reflect what obtains at *that* context, or at some further context of assessment. MacFarlane (2014) argues that allowing truth to vary with the context of *assessment* is what distinguishes genuinely relativistic accounts from the more moderate position he terms 'nonindexical contextualism'. Another radical approach involves relativizing truth to individual assessors (Lasersohn, 2005).

9. 7. 1 Challenges to relativism

A key challenge for relativists is to show that contents without fixed truth-conditions constitute genuine, theoretically important entities, with substantive roles to play in our theorising. According to relativists, the lexical entry of an expression like 'old' is neither overtly context-sensitive, nor do sentences containing it include a hidden comparison class variable. In that sense, the expression is supposed to be the bearer of a complete meaning by itself. However, relativists equally claim that something may be correctly assessed as being 'old' in some contexts but not in others (even though the chronological age of the item remains constant). It therefore remains unclear what kind of property 'old' could pick out; and it is unclear what logical, psychological, or sociological role any such property could play. Furthermore, some theorists have sought to undermine a central argument relativists deploy in favour of their account, in terms of so-called 'faultless disagreement' (see also § 9.9).

9. 8 Occasion-sensitivity

Each of the accounts considered up to now appeals to contents and truth-conditions that can, in principle, be formally characterised (regardless of how far they end up departing from the sentence's surface form). According to our final approach, however, it doesn't make sense to talk in formal terms at all. Proponents of occasion-sensitivity argue that it is altogether impossible to specify the content, or truth-conditions, of some particular uttered sentence, independently of the rich communicative context in which it is situated. Travis writes:

> Meaning fixes *something* words would do (and say) wherever spoken meaning what they do; something they are for, so also something about what they ought to do. Truth requires that they do all that sufficiently well, that is, up to the standard truth imposes. But all that meaning fixes allows for words to state truth, but also falsehood, of given items in given conditions. What meaning fixes often enough leaves both possibilities open. This means, I will argue, that these requirements for truth cannot be captured in the form '*If* words expressed the proposition *P*, then they are true only where the condition for the truth of *P* is satisfied'. A given proposition is true just where the world is thus and so (or so the deflationist picture asks us to suppose). But there is no *one* way the world must be to supply what is required for the truth of words with given meaning. On the contrary, for different speakings of words alike in meaning, there are different ways the world must be. (Travis, 2008, p. 96)

On this view, linguistically-encoded meaning is seen as simply enabling sentences to be used for doing certain things. Even the increasingly enriched representational forms of indexicalism and contextualism, it is argued, will fail to capture what is meant; they are themselves occasion-sensitive, and can never reconstitute the rich situational context that is essential to meaning. Relativism, too, is thought to be mistaken in its attempt to isolate individual contextual parameters, stripping away much richness and complexity in the way circumstances shape meaning. In other words, we can't rest at

any point along the spectrum until the uttered sentence is fully embedded in its original context of use.

9. 8. 1 Challenges to occasion-sensitivity

Although this use-based approach captures the relationship between meaning and action, it leaves some details obscure, for example how language can be *normative*. We ordinarily treat certain uses of language as correct, and others as incorrect; for example, the English word 'horse' can only be used literally to refer to horses, not to cows (or anything else). Travis (1989, chapter 2) argues that the semantic properties any expression possesses on a given occasion of use are just those which 'reasonable judges' would take it to have. On that basis, language is used (or interpreted) correctly to the extent that one aligns with the linguistic behaviour of reasonable judges. Of course, this invites questions about which individuals count as reasonable judges, and which linguistic and non-linguistic facts they are sensitive to, and answering these questions is likely to prove tricky.

This completes our survey of the theoretical debate. The table 9. 1 summarises how each position captures the formal linguistic meaning of a sentence, as compared to what is directly communicated when it is uttered on particular occasions.

Table 9. 1. Key features of minimalism, indexicalism, relativism, contextualism, and occasion-sensitivity

	Minimalism	**Indexicalism**	**Contextualism**	**Relativism**	**Occasion-sensitivity**
Sentence meaning	Semantic content	Semantic content	Often incomplete/ inert meaning	Semantic content (often not truth-evaluable)	Incomplete meaning
What the utterance (directly) communicates	Pragmatic content	Semantic content	What is said/ explicature/ impliciture	Truth-conditional meaning	Occasion-specific meaning

9. 9 New directions

As the conceptual differences between each of the five positions have become increasingly well-established, a question arises about how to take the debate forward. One direction of travel involves developing alternative semantic frameworks, for instance see Roberts' (2012a, 2012b) 'question under discussion' model,[33] Predelli's (2013) theory of 'bias', and Lepore and Stone's (2015) expansion of semantics to include conventions of language *use*.

There has also been a discernible trend towards deeper consideration of what hangs on adopting one position rather than another. A range of implications – psychological, sociological, and political – have begun to attract significant attention in the literature (see also (Borg, 2016a) and the 2020 Special Issue of the Ratio journal, on 'Applied Philosophy of Language').

Recanati has recently sought to combine his contextualist account of meaning with a 'mental files' account of singular thought (Recanati, 2013, 2016). In the theory he develops, cognitive structures are essentially connected to objects in the world via rich, 'epistemically rewarding' contextual relations.

There are also potential parallels between occasion-sensitivity and emerging approaches in the philosophy of mind, which emphasise the embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive nature of thought (so-called '4E cognition'). These connections are beginning to be discussed in more detail (see, for example, (Bergen, 2012)).

On the sociological side, conceptual distinctions between formalist and use-based accounts have been applied to a range of real-world linguistic phenomena. One set of issues involves the phenomenon of disagreement, particularly so-called 'faultless' disagreement (for further discussion, see (Cappelen & Hawthorne, 2009; Iacona, 2008; Lasersohn, 2005; MacFarlane, 2014)). Another concerns polysemous word meanings (see chapter 28 this volume). The semantics/ pragmatics distinction has also been mapped to a sociological question concerning which contents speakers assert, and can therefore be held liable for. The difference between lying and misleading is investigated in depth by Saul (2012) (amongst others), who argues that it hinges on a somewhat contextually-enriched notion of 'what is said'. Borg's (2019) alternative tiered account assigns an important role to minimal contents, as those for which speakers have 'strict liability', whilst acknowledging that speakers may also be 'conversationally liable' for pragmatically conveyed contents, allowing for various degrees of contextual enrichment and various degrees of liability.[34]

Meanwhile, the recent explosion of interest in problematic language, especially *slurring terms*, draws extensively on the conceptual debate we have discussed here. Some theorists endorse a full-blooded semantic account of pejorative meaning while others take slurs' offensiveness to be non-truth-conditional (see chapter 25 this volume). Other kinds of problematic speech attracting significant study include 'dogwhistles' (Saul, 2018), hate speech (Langton, 2012, 2018a, 2018b; Tirrell, 2012), propaganda (Stanley, 2015) and (to the extent that it falls under the category of 'speech') pornography (Hornsby et al., 2011; Langton, 2009; Langton & West, 1999; Saul, 2006). For further recent analyses, see the papers collected in (Sosa, 2018) and (Fogal, Harris, & Moss, 2018).

[33] For discussion of how this model applies to the semantics/ pragmatics divide, see (Schoubye & Stokke 2016) and (Grindrod & Borg, 2019).

[34] For more on the notions of 'strict liability' and 'conversational liability', see (Borg & Connolly, Forthcoming).

Another burgeoning debate concerns language in the law; specifically, whether and how legal language depends for its meaning on contextual features, including legislative intentions. So take the issue of statute interpretation, where judges must consider to which particular actions a statute applies. Settling this question will depend on what content the statute is taken to express and, in turn, answering this requires a stance on exactly the kinds of issues discussed in this chapter (for further discussion, see (Neale, 2007) and the various papers in (Marmor & Soames, 2011)).

The applied issues discussed in this section are deeply intertwined with research in the social sciences. In this way, at least, contemporary philosophy of language is itself becoming increasingly contextualised. As a result, the repercussions of how we decide to model semantic content and utterance context are likely to stretch far beyond the boundaries of pure philosophy.

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