

# MINIMALISM AND THE PRAGMATIC FRAME

**Ana Falcato**

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Humboldt *Research Fellow* na Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

Natal, v. 22, n. 39  
Set.-Dez. 2015, p. 39-67

Princípios  
Revista de filosofia

E-ISSN: 1983-2109



**Resumo:** No debate entre literalismo e contextualismo em semântica, o projecto de Kent Bach está normalmente associado ao segundo campo da discussão. Neste artigo defendo que esta é uma posição equivocada e justifico a minha tese contrastando a avaliação que Bach faz da eliminabilidade teórica das proposições mínimas supostamente expressas por frases bem formadas de uma língua natural com perspectivas minimalistas *standard*, e contrastando a sua abordagem da divisão do trabalho interpretativo adscrito a semântica e pragmática com uma análise paralela das duas esferas interpretativas explorada pela versão mais radical de oposição ao minimalismo: o ocasionalismo de Charles Travis. Sendo a minha análise correcta, o resultado imediato é uma destruição das principais dicotomias defendidas por Bach.

**Palavras-chave:** Minimalismo semântico; Proposições mínimas; Ocasionalismo; Quadro pragmático, o.

**Abstract:** In the debate between literalism and contextualism in semantics, Kent Bach's project is often taken to stand on the latter side of the divide. In this paper I argue this is a misleading assumption and justify it by contrasting Bach's assessment of the theoretical eliminability of minimal propositions arguably expressed by well-formed sentences with standard minimalist views, and by further contrasting his account of the division of interpretative processes ascribable to the semantics and pragmatics of a language with a parallel analysis carried out by the most radical opponent to semantic minimalism, i.e., by occasionalism. If my analysis proves right, the sum of its conclusions amounts to a refusal of Bach's main dichotomies.

**Keywords:** Semantic minimalism; Minimal propositions; Occasionalism; Pragmatic frame, the.

## Introduction

Kent Bach has argued for a peculiar minimal account of semantics<sup>1</sup>, which he claims is based on a systematic improvement of some of the fundamental theses set forth by Grice, especially in ‘Logic and Conversation’<sup>2</sup>. Despite what is sometimes assumed by defenders of semantic literalism<sup>3</sup> – namely, that Bach’s proposal is a form of contextualism –, what in fact Bach aims at is to target all conceivable forms of contextualism about language. With this said, however, Bach’s account of semantics intersects at interesting points with the most radical contextualist framework on the market in the philosophy of language: Charles Travis’s occasionalism<sup>4</sup>. As in Travis’s occasionalism, Bach’s proposal – henceforth referred to as minimalism without minimal propositions (MWMP) – rejects the stipulation of a minimal proposition as the invariant semantic content of all tokens of the same sentence-type. Both positions can therefore accurately be described as *anti-propositionalist*. What I will demonstrate, however, is that, when analyzed in its own terms, Bach’s minimalism encloses a deep-rooted conceptual inconsistency, ascribing a ‘pure semantic content’ to a linguistic entity which does not exist as purely semantic – namely, an uttered sentence.

### 1. How to obtain a minimal proposition

Both in *Insensitive Semantics* and in several articles Cappelen & Lepore<sup>5</sup> defend and define Semantic Minimalism in the following lines:

(a) It recognizes just a limited number of context-sensitive expressions in a natural language such as English and thus acknowledges a small effect of the context of utterance on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kent Bach, 1994; 1999a; 2001; 1999b.

<sup>2</sup> See Grice, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> See García-Carpintero, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See Travis, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See Cappelen; Lepore, 2005a; 2005b.

semantic content of the uttered sentence. In this framework, the only recognized context-sensitive expressions are those listed and analyzed in Kaplan's 'Demonstratives'<sup>6</sup>, that is, the set of indexical expressions Kaplan divides in 'pure indexicals' and 'true demonstratives'.

(b) Because of this limitation in the phenomenon of context-sensitivity in natural languages, semantic minimalists argue that all semantic context-sensitivity should be grammatically triggered.

(c) Beyond fixing the semantic value of indexicals and demonstratives, the *context of utterance* has no relevant effect on the proposition semantically expressed or on the truth-conditions of the uttered sentence. Thus, the semantic content of each utterance *u* of a sentence *S* is the proposition that all utterances of *S* express (keeping stable the semantic values of indexicals and demonstratives).

Moreover,

(d) In Emma Borg's approach to Minimalism an even stronger claim is made to the effect that 'every contextual contribution to semantic content must be formally tractable'<sup>7</sup>.

(e) As a consequence of (d), Borg also restricts the correspondent semantic theory. If we want a semantic theory that provides a general, systematic, and syntax-driven account of sentential content, then we cannot allow any aspect of the context of utterance, which determines its content, to be formally intractable. Under 'formally intractable aspects of the context of an utterance' we should count current speakers' intentions, as they are not considered as semantically decodable in this framework.

---

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Borg, 2007, p. 19.

As we shall see, this semantic approach to the content of an utterance of any sentence in a natural language gives us an extremely poor account of the content actually *communicated* by the sentence uttered. When we think about the Gricean distinction between *sentence-meaning* and *speaker meaning* (tantamount to what Borg calls ‘speakers’ intentions’), we soon reach the conclusion that the latter type of meaning, far from including only the implicated content of an utterance in a particular speech-act, also concerns what is said or the proposition actually expressed by such an utterance of one particular sentence-type – or the speaker wouldn’t have uttered the sentence he did. Let me illustrate this topic with an example. The sentence:

(1) I am a woman

has a conventional meaning which, as the meaning of a sentence-type, is not affected by different utterances of that sentence on different occasions of speaking. The context-independent meaning of the sentence-type in (1), however, contrasts with the multitude of possible context-dependent contents expressed by different utterances of this sentence in different contexts. Thus if I now utter (1), this utterance expresses the proposition that *I* (the speaker of (1)) am (at the moment of my speaking) a woman. But if my sister Mary happens to utter that same sentence-type at a different time, her utterance will express the different proposition that she is a woman at the time of her utterance, even though the linguistic (or literal) meaning remains the same across both contexts of use.

So far, I have only illustrated those features of context-sensitivity that are so obvious as to obtain consensus and rule-theoretical treatment on the part of philosophers and linguists. We are still, more or less, within the scope of the unproblematic point (c), well-accepted by (different) semantic minimalists. But we can be said to have already started departing from Minimalism once we have pointed out that, although the most remarkable feature of a sentence-type is the context-independent character of its

conventional meaning, in general this conventional meaning falls short of being propositional – even in minimal terms – and thus, truth-evaluable. To sum up: we have pointed out that what is said by each utterance of a sentence *S* does not correspond to the conventional meaning of *S*, in so far as the character-deficiency of indexicals and demonstratives always demands case-to-case resolution.

Still, the propositions that an interpreter can arrive at through the contextual filling-in of the conventional meaning of a propositional schema are constrained by the schema which serves as input to the propositionality process, i.e., the interpretive-process that allows interpreters to ascribe fully-propositional contents to propositional schemata. This is the reason why the sentence-type ‘I am a woman’ can express a multitude of propositions in different utterances by different speakers, but this set of propositions ought to be compatible with the semantic potential of the sentence, and so it cannot be used to express the proposition that twenty butterflies are around my desk (because this proposition cannot be paired with the semantic potential of the sentence-type).

Generally understood, thus, the minimalist framework stresses the close connection between the conventional meaning of a sentence-type and what is said by particular tokens of the former. Together, sentence-meaning and what is said (by an utterance *u* of a sentence *S*), obtained as soon as particular values are ascribed to indexicals and demonstratives in *u*, deliver the literal meaning or the *minimal proposition* expressed by *u*, quite detached from the correspondent speaker meaning.

## **2. Bach’s minimalism and the Pragmatic Frame**

Bach’s minimalism, though, is a theory for interpreting utterances of sentence-types that is based on a sharp dissociation between the semantics and pragmatics of natural languages and doesn’t accept the picture sketched above. Its most distinctive feature – also the most problematic – is its strong support for a

strict semantic notion of *what is said*, i.e. the *content* of any natural language sentence *when uttered*. Such a strict notion of what is said is aimed at preventing the intrusion of interpretative pragmatic processes when it comes to obtaining the minimal content of the uttered sentence. The alleged ‘pure semantic content’ of an utterance is then constrained by the Syntactic Correlation Principle, according to which what is said in any utterance of a sentence-type should correspond to ‘the elements of the sentence, their order, and their syntactic character’<sup>8</sup>. Where there is some element of meaning the speaker wants to communicate with her utterance, and where this element lacks syntactic representation in the logical form of the sentence she utters, it must be excluded from the semantic content of the utterance at stake. Since syntactically complete and well-formed sentences to which no complete semantic content corresponds are entirely conceivable, Bach’s MWMP rejects the ‘scholarly adage’ that ascribes to a complete sentence the expression of a proposition. The defender of MWMP thus admits that a syntactically well-formed sentence can, even if no indexical or demonstrative terms are to be found in it, be semantically incomplete and thus convey no more than a ‘propositional scheme’. This is why this version of minimalism is anti-propositionalist.

Something about the theoretical framework just described would seem to be inadequate, however: namely, the way it so strictly dissociates semantic and pragmatic contents of uttered sentences.<sup>9</sup>

It is because Bach relies on a much-trivialized notion of pragmatics that he can posit a sharp divide between the two forms of linguistic interpretation. The notion of pragmatics relied upon by Bach only associates the pragmatic competence of both speaker

---

<sup>8</sup> Grice, 1989, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> At this point, it is important to stress the fact that Bach always insists on an ‘utterance-based-approach’ when he argues for a strict divide between semantics and pragmatics.

and interpreter with the *use* of well-formed sentences in a natural language. This is, I believe, too narrow a view of pragmatics.

There are at least two further non-reducible working definitions of pragmatics, accompanied by two non-reducible definitions of semantics, whose combination would suffice to refute the above-mentioned approach to the semantic/pragmatic divide and thus refute the MWMP's view on that divide.

One generally accepted definition of pragmatics holds that pragmatics concerns the linguistic phenomena left untreated by phonology, syntax, and semantics. A second definition – attributable to Kalish (1967) – states that *pragmatics* 'is the study of properties of words which depend on their having been spoken, or reacted to, in a certain way, or in certain conditions, or in the way, or conditions, they were'<sup>10</sup>.

By contrast, a first definition of semantics – essentially attributable to David Lewis<sup>11</sup> – has it that semantics is dedicated to the study of certain relations between words and the world, and especially to those on which the truth or falsity of words (on their articulation in well-formed sentences) depends. On this view, a semantic theory that does not contain a systematic treatment of truth-conditions is not to be counted as such. A second definition of semantics has at its core the idea that any theory of meaning for a natural language must be able to provide us with the meaning of its words and sentences, based on a recursive interpretative scheme<sup>12</sup>.

Now if one assumes – as I intend to do here – that the general conditions for referring to objects in the world with words from a natural language are inextricably related to the circumstances or the way in which they were or could have been uttered, then, given the above combination of definitions of semantics and pragmatics, *all semantic issues are, inevitably, also pragmatic ones*. According to the square of definitions of semantics and pragmatics

---

<sup>10</sup> See Travis's 'Pragmatics' reprinted in *Occasion-Sensitivity* (2008).

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson, 2001.

I have outlined above, a semantic theory for a language – no matter whether it takes the first or the second orientation, and *bearing in mind that the basic elements or semantic primitives are always signs that can be uttered* – would have little to do with either the recursive determination of the truth-conditions of all the sentences that can be built in that language as independent from the circumstances in which they can in fact be built and uttered or with the ascription of minimal propositions to any and every token of a given sentence-type in the language. Let us call this the Pragmatic Frame.

The Pragmatic Frame represents the most radical form of contextualism in the philosophy of language, stressing one idea set forth by J. L. Austin, namely, that we can only speak about the truth and falsity of sentences in a language to the extent that evaluating a token of a sentence-type therein refers us to an ‘historical event’<sup>13</sup>. By ‘historical event’ is meant a specific utterance act, whereby a speaker addresses a specific audience, at a specific historical moment. This general framing has served as the theoretical background for the occasionalist examples we shall discuss below.

Now this scenario is at odds with any kind of theory of meaning for a language that aims exclusively to determine the recursive truth-conditions of sentences that can be built in it, based on its semantic primitives, their grammatical disposition, and correct syntactic articulation. Supporting the Pragmatic Frame implies accepting that questions about the truth and falsity of uttered sentences within a natural language only arise at the level of ‘historical events’ performed by competent speakers. Furthermore, in the Pragmatic Frame, what counts as the meaning of a sentence in a natural language is what makes it *a means of expressing thoughts* – and not the semantic conveyer of a thought as a fixed propositional content. The meaning of a sentence enables it to express thoughts because it is a description of how things are (or

---

<sup>13</sup> Austin, 1950.

should, or could be), and thus the possibility of uttering the same sentence-type in different circumstances is the possibility of describing different states of affairs. Since every description admits of many applications, and since the possibilities for sentence utterance are unlimited, *different applications of a single description* correspond to many different thoughts. If one and the same description (sentence) can correspond to many different thoughts, then the truth-conditions of any such thought cannot be the truth-conditions of the sentence.

### 3. Pragmatic Frame and availability of content

Henceforth my aim is to deal with differences within the contextualist camp itself. The main disagreement concerns the so-called ‘Propositionality Constraint’ – which, as we’ve seen, is dropped by Bach himself, thus making him an apparently straightforward defender of contextualism. Now, a mild version of contextualism considers the formal resolution of indexicals and demonstratives, as exemplified in **1**, to fall short of all that differences in context of utterance may imply.

As against Bach, proponents of this form of mild contextualism take ‘saying’ and ‘what is said’ as pragmatic notions – which have to do with what the speaker means and/or with what the hearer understands<sup>14</sup> –, and argue that, in order to obtain the content actually expressed by an utterance, one must contextually enrich the propositional schema until we obtain what is said. Philosophers arguing for this type of contextualist interpretation of utterances, such as François Recanati, provide a set of pragmatic processes that bridge the ‘meaning-gap’ between the propositional schema and what is said<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> This, then, is Recanati’s main definition of pragmatics.

<sup>15</sup> *Saturation* is understood as a pragmatic interpretative process, linguistically mandatory, through which the complete propositional content of an utterance is obtained, when contextual values are ascribed to indexicals, demonstratives, vague predicates or those whose domain of application is not fixed by their literal meaning in the uttered sentence. By *Free-enrichment* Recanati

To explain these processes, let us consider some well-known examples of sentences discussed by contextualists and anti-contextualists alike.

- (2) I have had breakfast.
- (3) You are not going to die.
- (4) John has had enough.

Besides using the semantic rule that points out the speaker of (2) as the referent of the indexical term 'I' and the tense rule that defines the time of uttering (2) as the correspondent evaluable time-index, reaching thus the goal of saturation, a competent English speaker feels as if some interpretative data are missing in the minimal proposition (arguably) expressed by an utterance of (2) to the effect that the speaker has had breakfast before having uttered (2). Taking that minimal proposition as a truth-evaluable item, an utterance of (2) would be true even if the speaker had breakfast thirty years ago and never since. This is clearly not what the speaker means if, answering the question 'Are you hungry?' she replies: 'No, I have had breakfast'. She thereby means something more specific, namely that she has had breakfast on that very day, the day including that particular utterance of the sentence provided in (2). This aspect of the speaker-meaning, however, has

---

understands a kind of pragmatic process that is not linguistically mandatory, but which aims at obtaining the fully propositional content of an utterance. In typical examples of free-enrichment, singular expressions in an utterance – like a predicate or a connector – are focused on in order to find out whether their local meaning surpasses the content of their literal meaning. *Loosening* is what Recanati calls the pragmatic process whereby the application-conditions of a given predicate are expanded to create a new, locally determined concept, with broader application-conditions. Finally, *Transfer* is the pragmatic process whereby a new meaning is ascribed ad hoc to a concept. That new meaning, even if semantically bound by the literal meaning of the predicate, extrapolates its normal conditions of application. By means of a set of sub-conscious inferences, the pragmatic interpretation of an utterance obtains its intuitive truth-conditions, and these typically exceed both its literal meaning and its literal truth-conditions, compositionally obtained.

to be construed as external to the conventional meaning of the sentence-type plus the indexical resolution. The time-span indicated by 'today' results from a non-minimal and optional pragmatic process of free enrichment. On Recanati's account, free enrichment, jointly with semantic transfer and loosening are considered *optional* primary pragmatic processes with regard to what I have labelled the 'Propositionality Constraint'. This is so because the minimal interpretation of (2) to the effect that the speaker's life was not entirely breakfastless, of (3) to the effect that the addressee is not going to die tout court (as if she were immortal) and of (4) to the effect that John has had enough of something or other, are supposed to be sufficient to make any utterance of those three sentences propositional or to make them express a complete thought. But is this correct? What turns a propositional schema into a 'complete thought', whether minimal or non-minimal?

I have already stated that, according to Recanati's (mild) contextualist proposal, the content or what is said by an utterance of a sentence S includes both the conventional meaning of S and contextual factors of some particular occasion where S is uttered. This is the reason why, in Recanati's framework, the Propositionality Constraint concerns only the sub-personal level of the literal meaning of an uttered sentence.

Including contextual relevant factors, what is said has a non-minimal character and must be *consciously available* to the participants in the speech situation at issue, according to this mild contextualist framework. What is meant by the requirement of 'conscious availability'? Perhaps we should leave the sentences stated above and add a more flagrant example. Let us take the following sentence:

(5) Ludwig has five dogs.

According to a formalist or literalist approach, the proposition literally expressed by an utterance of (5) is the proposition that

Ludwig has at least five dogs, that is, no less than five, but possibly more. If we think about (5) as part of the antecedent of a counterfactual conditional, as in:

(6) If Ludwig had five dogs, he could benefit from a discount in veterinary appointments.

We can imagine some contexts where the minimal content arguably expressed by an utterance of (5) would correspond to what the speaker actually means. Nevertheless, in the majority of imaginable contexts someone who utters (5) will mean that Ludwig has exactly five dogs, neither more nor less. In most of the circumstances in which we can imagine (5) being uttered, this last non-minimal proposition (to the effect that Ludwig has exactly five dogs) is the only one a competent speaker of English will be conscious of having expressed. In particular, she will be unaware of having expressed the minimal content that Ludwig has at least five dogs.

The same principle holds of a non-enriched interpretation of an utterance of (3). In the situation of a cut, the minimal content of (3) would not be relevant to the communicative process involving speaker and hearer. Clearly, no reasonable speaker or interpreter would thereby be aware of having said that the addressee is not going to die tout court – as if she were immortal.

Within Recanati's mild contextualist framework, this is the reason why the role of minimal propositions within communicative exchanges is hard to find out. A minimalist analysis of each of the mentioned sentences could be tempted to consider those enriched aspects in the overall meaning of utterances as conversational implicatures, since they do not belong to the sentence-meaning of the correspondent sentence-type. However, conversational implicatures, as secondary pragmatic processes, do have an inferential character and thus take us from the speaker's saying  $x$  to something else that follows from the fact that she has said  $x$ . In implying something by saying something else, the speaker intends

the hearer to recognize both contents (the implicature as well as what is said) and the inferential process holding between them. What is said, what is implied and the connection between the former and the latter must be consciously available to the interpreter if the speaker's speech act is to be felicitous.

It is easy to see that, in standard uses of sentences (2)-(5), we do not have two consciously available types of contents (the minimal and the non-minimal), as the supposed minimal content could be unidentifiable even to the speaker. The Availability Principle states that what is said *must* be intuitively accessible to the conversational participants<sup>16</sup>. Since the minimal content of an utterance can be unavailable to speech-act participants, sometimes requiring deduction from the intuitive content of an uttered sentence (just as implicatures do), the available content and the minimal content of an utterance *u* of a sentence *S* can differ. From an analytical point of view, a choice between the two is required concerning the content and the truth-conditions of *u*.

#### 4. A purely semantic content

When establishing the notion of *conversational implicature* in his theoretical framework, Grice narrows down the *what is said/what is implicated* dichotomy in quite an inflexible way. His target is the stipulation of a fundamental distinction between the literal content of an uttered sentence *S* and another kind of propositional content, which is not articulated by *S* but could be inferred from the uttering of *S* by linguistically competent interlocutors, given the relevant conversational features of the locutionary act, the intentions of the speaker, and a set of conversational maxims which, as a whole, determine what Grice calls the Cooperative Principle.

The Cooperative Principle commands that the speaker make his contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which

---

<sup>16</sup> Bach, as we shall see below, refuses this principle.

he is engaged. The cooperative effect is reached if the speaker respects the four Conversational Maxims set forth by Grice<sup>17</sup>:

- *Maxim of Quality*: do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- *Maxim of Quantity*: your intervention has to bring enough information and it does not have to bring more information than what is necessary.
- *Maxim of Relation*: the information you give must be relevant to the purposes of the conversation you are engaged at.
- *Maxim of Manner*: be clear, by avoiding obscurity of expression or ambiguity; be brief, by avoiding unnecessary prolixity; speak orderly in your contribution to the conversation.

Now, if speakers and interpreters in a conversational interchange presuppose that the four maxims are being respected by their partners, and so too the Cooperative Principle, they can also presuppose that, whenever any of the four maxims is violated by the speaker, he intends such a violation to be computed in the interpretative process as the conveying of an extra, linguistically non-articulated but conversationally relevant piece of information: a conversational implicature. Or so Grice thought.

The stipulation of the *what is said/what is implicated* dichotomy pushed Grice to argue that these two kinds of content fully cover the scope of conversationally available data. Furthermore, he defended a literalistic view of the semantic content – *what is said* – of an utterance. What is said by an utterance of any sentence-type cannot exceed, according to Grice, the syntactically articulated components of the sentence, being thus subjected to the Syntactic Correlation Principle described above. Grice thus argues for the ascription of a literal semantic content to any particular utterance of a sentence-type as its corresponding *what is said*.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, n. 2.

In case the interpretation of an utterance brings to the fore non-articulated elements in the sentence as used, those elements should not be considered part of the semantic content of the utterance at stake.

Now, in spite of the Syntactic Correlation Principle, Grice did not argue for a contextually-invariant notion of what is said. His proposal includes the interpretation of indexicals and demonstratives in the sentence-type as uttered, along with the semantic disambiguation of terms, whenever such processes are necessary to fix the pure semantic content of an utterance. And that is all. Even if the referent of an indexical varies from context to context, the presence of the indexical can be traced into the syntactic structure of the sentence-type. And even when the content of an utterance is ambiguous – whether because the sentence uttered contains ambiguous terms or the sentence itself is structurally ambiguous – the operative meaning of the utterance under analysis will still correspond, after disambiguation, to a strict interpretation of its syntactic elements.

One of my main objections to this Gricean scenario is the imposition of a pure (or minimal) semantic content ascribable to every utterance. I justify my opposition as follows: because the great majority of sentences that can be construed in a natural language confirm semantic incompleteness or indeterminacy, even after the ascription of referents to indexicals and demonstratives and the disambiguation of terms (as we've confirmed with the examples above), they do not express a complete thought or proposition. And this is troubling for the Gricean dichotomy because, if true, *nothing is said* when most sentences are uttered.

By contrast, it is a pragmatically well-known fact that many *complete* sentences are not always used to express the minimal proposition extractable by the Syntactic Correlation Principle. This minimal proposition can even fail to be psychologically computed by both speaker and interpreter in the communicative process, as we've seen.

Now, given the above-listed criticisms of the idea of a purely semantic content of utterances, several questions might be raised, to wit:

- I. What purpose does the Gricean dichotomy *what is said/what is implicated* serve, if it can well happen that no propositional content can be ascribed to the first member, such that, the second member being essentially inferred from the first, when nothing is said, nothing can be implicated?
- II. Can a semantically pure content, obtained by the application of the syntactic correlation norm, be incomplete?
- III. If so, what is its status in a theory for interpreting utterances of a natural language?

Kent Bach answers these questions with a theory (MWMP) that is based on impoverished notions of both semantics and pragmatics, and which follows three main lines of argumentation:

- i. In a modified version of the Gricean dichotomy, a *purely semantic notion of what is said by an utterance* can be defended and the Syntactic Correlation Principle maintained.
- ii. The semantic content of an utterance must not correspond to a complete thought or proposition, not even a minimal one.
- iii. The main factor determining the communicated content of an utterance of a sentence-type is not the context in which it is uttered, but the communicative intentions of the speaker. (This point, strongly insisted upon in his *Context ex Machina*, actually shows that Bach doesn't align himself with any form of contextualism<sup>18</sup>).

---

<sup>18</sup> See Bach, 2005.

## 5. Meaning what you say and communicative intentions

When Grice explores the contrast between ‘implicating’ and ‘saying’ in ‘Logic and Conversation’, he stresses the ‘non-natural’ kind of meaning produced by both actions; furthermore, he defends what he labels an intuitive understanding of *saying* – which on his view attaches the latter to the Syntactic Correlation Principle. To the extent that, for Grice, the content of what is said by an utterance never includes non-articulated components of the correspondent sentence-type<sup>19</sup> and is constrained by syntactic correlation, one can infer that:

- a) The only kind of linguistic material that counts as the pure semantic content of an utterance is the literal meaning of the correspondent sentence-type.
- b) The isolation of that content is determined by a commitment to a strict compositional combination of the meaning of the primitive semantics of a sentence and their syntactic disposition.

Grice further assumes that *saying something implies meaning what one says*. Because of the Maxim of Quality, the speaker must commit himself to a belief in the truth of what he says. And this is why Grice had to establish another locution to classify examples of irony, metaphor, etc., where the speaker clearly does not mean

---

<sup>19</sup> One can spot the first inconsistencies of the Gricean dichotomy by noticing this strange concession. For if Grice stipulates that what is said, as a pure semantic content, constrained by syntactic correlation, is no more than a mere projection of the syntactic structure of the sentence uttered, how could the interpretive extraction of such a content allow for the resolution of indexicals or demonstratives and for disambiguation, since that first interpretive process, through semantic rules or demonstration, already alters the initial syntactic structure of the sentence at hand? Even if the disambiguation process and the contextual ascription of referents to indexicals and demonstratives are usually taken as pre-semantic processes, there is already a great distance between that level of interpretation and the pure logical form of the sentence at stake – and that much disallows the request for syntactic correlation, I believe.

what he says (Grice classifies these as cases of ‘making as if to say’). To a certain extent, Grice conflates ‘saying’ and ‘stating’: a speaker who says something must be taken to be stating it. Having seen that this is not what happens in non-literal utterances (such as those involving irony or metaphor), Grice had to adjust his own first dichotomy in order to account for these distorted examples of the first term (what is said).

It is not completely certain, however, that in non-literal uses of language the speaker is merely ‘making as if to say something’. Rather, it seems more intuitive to take examples of irony or metaphor as cases where the speaker does say something, but means something else instead. Suppose, for instance, that I say to my cat:

(7) You are my honey bun.

Even if the literal content of (7) is what I effectively say, that is surely not what I mean when I utter the sentence in (7). In a framework that stands for a purely semantic notion of what is said, however, the literal meaning of (7) is the corresponding *what is said*, and that content should be preserved if one wants to maintain a clear distinction between semantic and pragmatic contents – contrary to what we already said about the Pragmatic Frame’s view. In a Gricean framework, where the literal content of (7) is the corresponding *what is said*, what I (really) mean to say when uttering (7) should be taken as a conversational implicature.

Besides non-literal uses of language, one can count on further counterexamples to the Gricean notion that ‘saying something implies meaning what one says’. A speaker may *want to say* something, but unintentionally say something else (e.g. slips of the tongue); or he can *say something without intending to say anything whatsoever* (as in pronunciation exercises, recitals, or oral translation).

But MWMP considers relevant the distinction between non-literal uses of language – in which the speaker does not mean what

he says, but there is still something that has been said, i.e. the literal content of the uttered sentence or expression – and cases of conversational implicature.<sup>20</sup>

Insisting upon a refinement of the original Gricean dichotomy does have a purpose, as well as a new cluster of theoretical consequences within the scope of MWMP as a whole. Let us focus on those now. If a speaker uttering *F* in a context *C* does not commit himself to the truth of *F*, then the *what is said* of *F* must not coincide with the content the speaker wants to communicate when uttering *F*. The content of what the speaker wants to communicate and have recognized by his interlocutors can:

- I. Coincide with what is said by the uttered sentence *F* in *C*.
- II. Exceed the (literal) *what is said* by *F* in *C*.
- III. Be completely distinct from *what is said* by *F* in *C*.

Be this as it may – and that is the main thesis of MWMP – the content a speaker wants to communicate when uttering a sentence *F* in *C* is only determined by the *communicative intentions* of the speaker in *C* and not by the features of a conversational context like *C*.

What *can be communicated* by the utterance of a given sentence *F* in a context like *C* is not necessarily encoded in the literal

---

<sup>20</sup> I think this categorical divide is quite plausible, since Grice's proposal to deal with non-literal uses of language is quite problematic from the point of view of a structural ascription of explanatory work to his own sub-dichotomies. Grice classifies non-literal uses of language – like metaphor or irony – as cases of 'making as if to say'. He simultaneously classifies them as conversational implicatures. If, however, there is nothing the speaker says in an ironical utterance – since he only makes as if to say something – how can anything count as a conversational implicature of that utterance (an utterance, that is, where nothing is said)? This perplexity only grows when one considers that Grice himself defined 'conversational implicatures' as pragmatic phenomena taking place when a speaker does say something and means something more on top of what he says, something that should be inferred from what he said and the conditions in which he said it.

meaning of *F*. The content communicated by a use *x* of *F* in a context like *C* is inferred by an interlocutor, based on the fact that the speaker uttered *F* at *C*. This communicative presumption is available in the communicative situation where *F* is uttered, even if in such a situation what the speaker means to say coincides with the literal meaning of *F*. As a result, in the framework of MWMP, even when *what is communicated* in a use *x* of a sentence-type *F* coincides with the corresponding *what is said* – i.e. when a sentence is uttered to convey its literal meaning – such a coincidence must still be accounted for as a consequence of the *communicative intentions* of the speaker uttering *F*.

## 6. Back to the Pragmatic Frame

The minimalist objections and objections against those objections that were raised above, in what concerns the ascription of a purely semantic content to utterances of sentence-types, are less important within the scope of this paper than identifying the essential theoretical failure of MWMP as a project. In identifying this failure, we can establish a grounded rejection of this version of minimalism, opening up a whole space of support for the Pragmatic Frame.

Bach does not reject the first definition of semantics I presented in section 2; on the contrary, he endorses it. For MWMP a semantic theory for a language decodes and analyses literal information encoded in utterances of sentence-types that can be built in that language and that kind of information, even when it is not propositional (hence the acronym), constitutes the formal input for all the pragmatic processes that will deliver a fully-propositional content, with fixed truth-conditions. This final propositional content thus derives from an effective act of utterance, by computing the interpretative work of primary and secondary pragmatic processes, and delivering what Bach labels *communicated content*.

Even when this final content (the output of the so-called ‘purely semantic content’ Bach wants to keep in the theory) results from

the application of different sorts of pragmatic process, this special sort of minimalism nonetheless argues for an interpretation-process that ends up delivering a propositional content with specifiable truth-conditions. The so-called ‘purely semantic content’ of an utterance may not yet be propositional or truth-evaluable; but its expanded communicated content surely is.

These dyads (purely semantic content/communicated content; propositional schema/propositional content) are not only incompatible with the Pragmatic Frame. *They are incompatible with themselves*, to the extent that they violate the very definitions held by MWMP and thus constitute its main failure. Since MWMP stipulates *a semantically pure content for utterances* as the information encoded in the sentence-type as uttered; and since that content must account for neither the communicative intentions of the speaker nor the audience’s grasping of them, it is the strict divide defended by minimalism that incurs a fundamental inconsistency at the level of its basic notions. Textual evidence for Bach’s own notion of the semantics/pragmatics divide can be found in the following excerpt from ‘You don’t say?’:

A semantic-pragmatic distinction can be drawn with respect to various things [...]. For me it applies fundamentally to types of information. Semantic information is information encoded in what is uttered – these are stable linguistic features of the sentence – together with any extralinguistic information that provides (semantic) values to context-sensitive expressions in what is uttered. Pragmatic information is (extralinguistic) information that arises from an actual act of utterance. Whereas semantic information is encoded in what is uttered, pragmatic information is generated by, or at least made relevant by, the act of uttering it.<sup>21</sup>

But there can be no such thing as a ‘pure semantic content of utterances’ because an *utterance is a sentence-type used by a speaker at a definite moment*, and the mere definition of ‘utterance’ already contains the information ‘sentence-type tokenized by a speaker’.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 22, n. 1.

There is, thus, no such thing as a pure semantic content extractable from a linguistic entity that exists only to the extent that it is *pragmatic*.

In section 2, two non-reducible definitions of pragmatics were introduced, to which we shall now turn. The second characterization of pragmatics ('the study of properties of words which depend on their having been spoken, or reacted to, in a certain way, or in certain conditions, or in the way, or conditions, they were') is the one adopted by MWMP, as we've confirmed with the above quotation. Now the theoretical framework I have been referring to as the Pragmatic Frame states that, when we adopt either of the non-reducible definitions of semantics presented in section two, along with the second definition of pragmatics, every seemingly semantic question is a pragmatic question. As we've seen, MWMP argues for an 'utterance-based approach' to discuss issues of content and truth-conditions of sentence-types tokenized by competent speakers of a language, and so adopts the second definition of pragmatics offered above. The corresponding idea of an overly strict distinction between semantic and pragmatic information systematically falls short, however, when we aim to ascribe semantically pure contents to linguistic entities 'which depend on their having been spoken, or reacted to, in a certain way, or in certain conditions' – i.e. to entities which, like tokens of sentence-types in a natural language, only exist to the extent that they are pragmatic (dependent on language use).

## 7. Occasionalism and the Pragmatic Frame

In *Literal Meaning* we find a diagram defining the boundaries between Literalism and Contextualism. On the contextualist side, a gradable set of positions is listed, from the weakest to the strongest one. The main question of the debate between Literalism and Contextualism concerns the legitimacy of ascribing truth-conditional content to natural-language sentences or to uttered sentences in different speech-acts, respectively. Once we have reached this point, I will argue that the main criterion to evaluate

positions within the contextualist scope itself is the role given to Minimal Propositions – and because Bach doesn't ascribe to them any theoretically-binding role, his position might be taken as standing on the contextualist side of the debate. Recanati himself schematizes two different contextualist positions with regard to this criterion:

From the optional character of modulation, it follows that the minimal proposition, even if it plays no causal-explanatory role, has at least this counterfactual status: it is the proposition which the utterance would express if no pragmatic process of modulation took place. To get full-fledged Contextualism we must deprive the minimal proposition even of this counterfactual status. While quasi-Contextualism considers the minimal proposition as a theoretically useless entity, and denies that it plays any effective role in communication, Contextualism goes much further: it denies that the notion even makes sense. Contextualism ascribes to modulation a form of necessity which makes it ineliminable. Without contextual modulation, no proposition could be expressed. In this framework, the notion of 'minimal proposition' collapses: there is no proposition that is expressed in a purely 'bottom-up' manner.<sup>22</sup>

In order to go further in the analysis of what effectively counts as a 'full-fledged' contextualist approach to the meaning of sentences from a natural language, I think it is worth depicting the occasionalist argument for radical contextualism, which concretely embodies the motto of the Pragmatic Frame. In his 'Insensitive Semantics', Travis<sup>23</sup> stated that his main disagreement with minimalists is about which properties we should legitimately ascribe to simple expressions and utterances of a natural language such as English.

Accepting that the main goal of minimalism in assigning properties to sentences in a natural language is to obtain theorems such as:

---

<sup>22</sup> Recanati, 2005, p. 179.

<sup>23</sup> Travis, 2006.

(T) The sentence ‘The submarine is yellow’ (expresses the minimal proposition that the submarine is yellow and) is true *iff* the submarine is yellow,

Travis insists that we should also recognize (T) as identifying what the sentence ‘The submarine is yellow’ says to be so and which state of affairs should obtain for such a sentence to be true. And his occasionalist argument against the validity of such theorems runs as follows:

- a. The state of affairs described by all possible utterances of some sentence S simply does not exist. Thus a theorem like (T) is unable to state the conditions that the world must satisfy for a sentence such as ‘The submarine is yellow’ to be true.
- b. Travis argues that open sentences in a natural language (e.g. *\_\_is yellow*) are always susceptible to understandings, which are pragmatic, case-to-case based properties of sentence-components that arise from an actual act of utterance, by a particular speaker at a particular time. Therefore, in order to ascribe the predicate *\_\_is yellow* to an object *o* referred to in some utterance *u* – and make a statement about *o* that can express a complete thought and be truth-evaluable – we must specify an understanding for such a predicate in the utterance under analysis.

Following this standpoint, Travis goes on to argue that in a theorem such as (T), the predicate *\_\_is yellow* in the consequent of the biconditional either is used on some particular understanding (of being yellow) or it is not. If the predicate is used on some particular understanding (1st scenario), then the necessary and sufficient conditions that must obtain for the sentence to be true consist in assigning to the predicate (and so to the sentence) a property that it does not have (for the mentioned sentence on the left-hand side of the biconditional does not specify any understanding for being yellow). But, if the predicate *\_\_is yellow* is not

used on any particular understanding (2nd scenario), then the biconditional fails to determine any condition under which the sentence could be true. Why should this be the consequence of the second scenario? Because on the right-hand side of the biconditional (which provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the mentioned sentence to be true), the whole sentence is used (and so is the predicate *\_\_is yellow*), and without ascribing any particular understanding to the predicate, the biconditional just fails the purpose of providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for the sentence to be true, because it doesn't specify which is the worldly-state that should obtain for it to be either true or false. For a speaker to evaluate an object *o* as being yellow or not she must rely on some parameters, and these parameters specify in language the ways the world is.

If we accept Travis' premises, we must cope with two desolating possible inferences. Within the scope of the first scenario the biconditional proves false. Within the scope of the second scenario – and in the absence of necessary and sufficient conditions for the sentence to be true – a theorem such as (T) simply fails to state anything whatever about its truth conditions.

What we would need in order to turn Minimalism – in any of its forms – into a defensible position and block both scenarios is that things and states of affairs in the world be such a way that we might speak of them without understandings. If this were achievable, then we could reasonably infer theorems which, like (T), ascribe the minimal proposition *P* to some sentence *S*, stating thus the truth-conditions of *S*.

The 'occasionalist challenge' to this theoretical method of learning and giving the meaning of sentences from a natural-language addresses the indispensability of understandings to say something that might be true (this, put in occasionalist terms, is what Recanati calls the 'necessity of modulation' for full-fledged contextualism). If we do not go further than accepting the general compositionality rules for building and analysing the meaning of sentences, we certainly will not be able to say whether and when a

particular submarine we are talking about would count as yellow, and which understanding will turn some particular utterance u22 of ‘The submarine is yellow’ into a true utterance.

Now, in this refined application of the Pragmatic Frame to linguistic analysis, assigning an understanding  $x$  to the predicate *\_\_is yellow* in u22 blocks the possibility of ascribing to u22 (or to any other token of the same sentence) any one of the minimalists’ favorite semantic properties. Understandings bar the ascription of *a minimal proposition* expressed by such an utterance, in a model like Cappelen and Lepore’s or Borg’s – for minimal propositions, in not specifying understandings to its components, will fall in one of the scenarios described above. And they also cancel Bach’s ‘pure semantic content’ of utterances, constrained by the Syntactic Correlation Principle and independent of any element of meaning the speaker wants to communicate with her utterance, because understandings are inevitably drawn from speakers’ grasping of different world-states accompanying each ‘historical act’ of utterance they perform at different moments and are thus pragmatic projections (even in Bach’s own use-based understanding of Pragmatics) that must accompany each and every act of utterance that can be truth-assessable.

## References

- AUSTIN, J. L. Truth. In: AUSTIN, J. L. *Philosophical Papers*. 3. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950. p. 117-133.
- BACH, K. Conversational Implicature. *Mind and Language*, 9, 1994, p. 124-162.
- BACH, K. The Semantic-Pragmatics Distinction: What it is and why it matters. In: TURNER, Ken. (Ed.). *The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface from different points of view*. Elsevier: Oxford, 1999a. p. 65-84.
- BACH, K. The Myth of Conventional Implicature. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, v. 22, n. 4, 1999[b], p. 327-366.

BACH, K. You don't say? *Synthèse*, 128, 2001, p. 15-44.

BACH, K. Context ex-machina. In: SZABÓ, Z. (Ed.). *Semantics vs. Pragmatics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005. p. 15-44.

BORG, E. Minimalism versus contextualism in semantics. In: PREYER, G.; PETER, G. (Ed.). *Context sensitivity and semantic minimalism: essays on semantics and pragmatics*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

CAPPELEN, H.; LEPORE, E. *Insensitive Semantics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2005a.

CAPPELEN, H.; LEPORE, E. A Tall Tale: in Defence of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism. In: PREYER, G.; PETER, G. (Ed.). *Contextualism in Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005b. p. 197-220.

DAVIDSON, D. Truth and Meaning. In: DAVIDSON, D. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 17-40.

GRICE, P. *Studies in the Ways of Words*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1989.

GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, M. Recanati on the semantics/pragmatics distinction. *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*. v. 38, n. 112, 2006, p. 35-68.

KALISH, D. Semantics. In: EDWARDS, P. (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1967. Vol. X, p. 348-358.

KAPLAN, D. Demonstratives: an essay on the semantics, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology of demonstratives. In: ALMOG, J.; PERRY, J.; WETTSTEIN, H. (Ed.). *Themes from Kaplan*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. 1989. p. 481-563

LEWIS, D. General Semantics. *Synthèse*, 22, 1970, p. 18-67.

RECANATI, F. *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

RECANATI, F. Literalism and Contextualism: Some Varieties. In: PREYER, G.; PETER, G. (Ed.). *Contextualism in Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 171-196.

TRAVIS, C. Insensitive Semantics. *Mind and Language*, 21, 2006, p. 39-49.

TRAVIS, C. *Occasion-Sensitivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Artigo recebido em 30/04/2015, aprovado em 27/09/2015