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The future of the proposition



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ABSTRACT

A primary aim of this research is to show that the foundational term 'proposition' tends to be used in different ways by different factions, in recent debates surrounding the semantics/pragmatics interface. First, I give a brief sketch of some relevant background terrain. Next, I investigate the extent to which different senses of the term 'proposition' are associated with differing theoretical orientations toward the S/P interface. I close by bringing these lessons to bear toward the end of disentangling terminological from substantive differences, in the case of certain ongoing disputes.

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There continues to be considerable disagreement among experts when it comes to exactly how to divide up the labor between semantics (the study of linguistic meaning) and pragmatics (the study of language use). To be sure, we can point to some uncontroversial paradigm cases in which semantic content is (relatively) cleanly separable from pragmatic implication, and the latter is straightforwardly calculable from the former – for example, [Grice's \(1975\)](#) letter of reference semantically expresses that Mr. X has a good command of English and attendance record, while pragmatically implicating that Mr. X is no good at philosophy. However, to the contrary, an illustrative (but by no means remotely exhaustive) list of phenomena whose relation to the S/P interface is a matter of ongoing controversy might include: metaphor, irony, focus, deferred interpretations, expressives (including especially pejoratives), gradable adjectives, conventional implicatures, domain restriction, and referential uses of quantified noun phrases. More globally, there is even controversy as to whether semantics and pragmatics are, in general, discretely separable,¹ which may count among its effects the spurring of undue pessimism regarding whether any such disputes could possibly be settled by anything other than brute stipulation.

This state of controversy is exacerbated by the proliferation of distinct theoretical orientations toward the S/P interface. The extreme poles on this issue, **minimalism** (roughly, linguistic meaning generally determines truth-conditions) and **contextualism** (roughly, pragmatic enrichment is generally required in order to determine truth-conditions²) are relatively well-known, tracing their roots back to the mid-20th-century formal semantics and communication-intention traditions (respectively). However, the last two decades have seen the development of some innovative intermediate positions which aim to be distinct from both of those old war-horses. Some of the main contenders here include **indexicalism** (roughly, an enhanced notion of linguistic meaning suffices to determine truth-conditions), **radicalism** (roughly, linguistic meaning

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E-mail address: arthurs@mun.ca.¹ Cf., e.g., [Carston \(2002, 2009\)](#), [Recanati \(2004, 2010\)](#).² This conception of 'contextualism' has some precedent in the literature, and is a useful one for this introductory framing of the terrain, but it is not the one that is taken as fundamental in §2. There I take the distinctive claim of contextualism to be that semantic contents generally vary with the context of utterance, as opposed to this weaker claim that pragmatic enrichments generally affect truth-conditions. While this latter, weaker claim does give you a general, identifiable contrast between minimalism and contextualism, as I will explain in some depth in §2, it blurs pertinent distinctions between indexicalism, radicalism, relativism, and contextualism.

commonly falls short of determining truth-conditions – in certain distinctive sorts of case, and for a specific sort of reason), and **relativism** (roughly, truth-conditions must be understood as relativized to certain non-classical parameters).³ The inevitable result of this proliferation of theoretical orientations is that, to some extent, the aforementioned ongoing controversies lack for focused, mutual engagement, because differing conceptions of the S/P interface are one ingredient tacitly mixed in, along with substantive differences of opinion as to how certain object-level phenomena ought to be classified.

Another complication obfuscating the terrain is that there is no one single point of contention which divides these distinct orientations toward the S/P interface, and so one gets a different map of the terrain depending upon what one takes to be the crucial diagnostic question.⁴ For example, [Cappelen and Lepore \(2005\)](#) classify Stanley's indexicalism as a variety of contextualism, because they take the crucial diagnostic question to be 'How prevalent is context-sensitivity?', and indexicalists are clearly a bit extreme in how prevalent they take context-sensitivity to be. In contrast, if we take the crucial diagnostic question to be 'To what extent is free pragmatic enrichment generally required in order to determine truth-conditions?' (as do, say, [Neale \(2007\)](#) or [Borg \(2012\)](#)), then Stanley's position is much closer to minimalism than to contextualism.⁵ Indeed, Stanley gives a firm statement of something very close to the core minimalist thesis at ([2007: 6](#)): "... there is no gap between the linguistically determined content of a sentence, relative to a context, and the proposition it intuitively seems to express". Where indexicalism differs from minimalism, down this avenue, is over exactly what counts as "the linguistically determined content of a sentence". (More on this in §2.3.)

Further, as we will see, similar things can be said about relativism – approached down some avenues it can be seen as a variety of contextualism (i.e., as further showing up the gap between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions), while approached down some others it rather seems to be a refined descendent of the formal-semantics, minimalism stream (i.e., as engaged in the sophisticated, self-conscious resistance against the unruly encroachment of free pragmatic enrichment prior to determining semantic content).

As for radicalism, here a prevalent charge is that, despite its protests to the contrary, there is just the merest terminological difference between radicalism and contextualism.⁶ Given that the proponents of radicalism do not see it that way, it seems that here again we have an underlying difference between radicalists and their opponents when it comes to the question of precisely what ought to be taken to be the crucial diagnostic question.

One primary aim of this research is to make some progress concerning one of these sorts of stumbling blocks, which serve to reinforce the state of stalemate at the S/P interface: namely, that the foundational term 'proposition' tends to be used in different ways by different parties. First, I will give a brief sketch of some relevant background terrain. Next, I will investigate the extent to which different senses of the term 'proposition' are associated with differing theoretical positions at the S/P interface. I will close by bringing these lessons to bear toward the end of carefully disentangling the terminological differences from the substantive differences, in the case of certain ongoing disputes.

1. The propositionalist tradition in semantics

1.1. Brief overview

Our focal issues may be helpfully seen as situated within a longstanding program in the philosophy of language which [Braun and Sider \(2006: 669\)](#) call "the propositionalist approach to semantics". This program:

... sets as a goal for philosophical semantics an assignment of entities – semantic contents – to bits of language, culminating in the assignment of propositions to sentences. Communication, linguistic competence, truth conditions, and other semantic phenomena are ultimately explained in terms of [these] semantic contents.

Propositions are sentence-sized semantic contents, which are a function of the semantic contents of their parts and the way in which they are combined. They are essentially ways of categorizing utterances and attitudes into equivalence classes,

³ Each of these views will be further elaborated below in §2. For defenses of minimalism, see [Borg \(2004, 2012\)](#), [Cappelen and Lepore \(2005\)](#). Influential proponents of contextualism include [Searle \(1978\)](#), [Travis \(1989\)](#), [Carston \(2002, 2009\)](#) and [Recanati \(2004, 2010\)](#). (Though it is fairly common to see relevance theory classified as a version of contextualism, this is controversial, and may ignore some significant distinctions. Though, for the most part, I will not get into relevance theory at all in this paper, it might be more happily classified (in the terms of §1.4 below) as rejecting the propositionalist tradition, as opposed to making a contextualist move within that tradition.)

Important works in the indexicalist program include [Stanley \(1998\)](#), [Stanley and Szabo \(2000\)](#), and [King and Stanley \(2005\)](#). For the development of relativism, see [Kolbel \(2003, 2008\)](#) and [MacFarlane \(2005, 2008\)](#). Varieties of radicalism are developed by [Bach \(2005, 2006, 2011\)](#), [Soames \(2005, 2008, 2010\)](#), and [Neale \(2007\)](#).

⁴ Cf. [Stojanovic \(2008: 2\)](#), [Borg \(2012: 19–21, 28–9\)](#) for discussions of this complication.

⁵ For an indexicalist, there is a crucial distinction between weak and strong pragmatic effects. Weak pragmatic effects (e.g., disambiguation, saturation) are generally conceded to be truth-conditionally relevant. However, like minimalists, indexicalists deny that strong ("free", "optional", "top-down", etc.) pragmatic effects are truth-conditionally relevant. Contextualists and relativists unequivocally reject this claim, and radicalists would question the pre-suppositions undergirding any simple two-fold, 'weak'/'strong' bifurcation.

⁶ Cf. [Cappelen and Lepore \(2005: Part 1\)](#), [Stanley \(2007: 235–6\)](#), [Carston \(2009: 324–9\)](#). Note that the distinction drawn in note 2 between the two senses of "contextualism" is most pertinent here.

As a further illustration of these distinct non-equivalent ways of carving up this terrain, Bach's radicalism is explicitly classified as a variety of minimalism by some (e.g., [Borg \(2012\)](#)), but as a variety of contextualism by others (e.g., [Cappelen and Lepore \(2005\)](#)).

with respect to their information content – whether of the same or distinct agents, whether in the same or distinct languages. And, as the above quote attests, they are often called in to serve various purposes in the philosophy of language and mind (as well as epistemology, logic, metaphysics, etc.).

I will not here directly engage with issues pertaining to the metaphysical status of propositions – e.g., whether such things as *ways of categorizing* ought to be said to exist, or what their constituents should be taken to be. Rather, I take it as given that much theorizing within philosophy (and within related parts of the cognitive sciences) avail of propositions, and that, at least *prima facie*, there are awfully strong grounds in favor of their so-doing. My focal questions are more purely semantic ones, which are theoretically prior to metaphysical questions about the contents and structure of propositions.⁷ Given that propositions are essentially ways of categorizing utterances and attitudes into equivalence classes, how should these equivalence classes be defined? Identity of information content, fair enough; but that is merely to introduce a new label for the problem. How, then, exactly, should information content be individuated?

To illustrate: Frege and Russell have bequeathed two classic answers to this foundational semantic question about propositions. The Fregean criterion for the individuation of propositions concerns cognitive significance. For example, even if *Aphla* = *Ateb*, '*Aphla* is 5000 meters high' expresses a different proposition than '*Ateb* is 5000 meters high', *since* "...someone who takes the former to be true need not take the latter to be true" (1980: 80). In contrast, the Russellian criterion for the individuation of propositions solely concerns truth-conditions: "... if one thing has two names, you make exactly the same assertion regardless of the two names you use ..." (1918: 245). So, Russell holds, and Frege denies, that identity of truth-conditions entails identity of propositional content.

This is of course very familiar: much of 20th-century philosophy of language has been dedicated to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of these respective approaches to propositional content. However, the aim of §2 is rather novel: i.e., to show that some contemporary debates at the S/P interface include as an ingredient some analogous differences concerning foundational semantic questions about propositions. Before getting to that, though, I will describe some pertinent developments within the propositionalist tradition.

1.2. Losing our propositional innocence

Due in large part to increasing sophistication in our understanding of such phenomena as indexicality and modality,⁸ we now distinguish several varieties of sentence-sized semantic entity, each of which is suited to some but not all of the jobs traditionally associated with the term 'proposition'. In the course of progress, golden-age, canonical propositions (as Frege or Russell conceived of them) have been methodically pulled apart.

The phenomenon of indexicality provides a relatively simple way to illustrate this point. Given a use of 'I am here now' (in context), there are (at least) two different sentence-sized semantic entities which must be distinguished, both of which are plausibly thought of as (in some sense or other) semantically expressed by the utterance. There is what Kaplan (1989) calls the 'character' (i.e., the information that is identifiable independently of the context of utterance), and then there is what he calls the 'content' (i.e., the information that issues once the character becomes saturated by the relevant features of the context of utterance).

As long as what Quine (1960) calls 'eternal sentences' were taken to be paradigmatic, it was reasonable to believe that sentential characters and contents are very closely linked. However, to the extent that indexicality is thoroughly prevalent, important differences emerge between character and content. For present purposes, consider just two of the proposition's main jobs within the propositionalist tradition (mentioned by Braun & Sider, cited above) – 'linguistic competence' and 'truth-conditions'. As for 'linguistic competence', insofar as we demand of propositions that they be that which is grasped by one who understands the sentence (whether or not they can ascertain all pertinent features of the context of utterance) then it is sentential characters which fit the bill. In contrast, insofar as propositions are the bearers of truth-conditions, then here contents are much better suited.⁹

Indexicality is just the thin end of the wedge. Things get more and more complicated for poor old golden-age propositions once we recognize the prevalence of context-sensitivity, semantic underdetermination, etc. Even further, much has transpired since the 1970s, when it comes to the various semantic entities associated with sentences; such that by this point there are several other alleged denizens in what Taylor (2007) calls "the sub-syntactic basement of the language" – unarticulated constituents, hidden variables, non-classical relativistic parameters, etc. It is not altogether clear exactly how such posits should be taken to affect the individuation conditions for propositions.

⁷ Collins (2007, 2014) vs. King (2007, 2013) provides a case study which illustrates the relations between foundational semantic questions about propositions, and subsequent metaphysical questions about propositional contents. King's approach to the metaphysics of propositions commits him to the claim that no two sentences with different syntactic structures could express the same proposition. Collins, in contrast, holds that "syntactically type-distinct sentences can express the same proposition" – which is easy to accommodate on, and indeed a motivating intuition for, this information-content-equivalence-class conception of 'proposition'. Hence, this information-content-equivalence-class orientation on the ontogenesis of the theoretical term of art 'proposition' may preclude certain options as to the metaphysics of propositions.

⁸ Cf. especially Kaplan (1989), Perry (2001), Stalnaker (2001).

⁹ Here see Kaplan (1989: 539): "The bearers of logical truth and of contingency are different entities. It is the *character* ... that is logically true [in cases such as 'I am here now'], producing a true content in every context. But it is the *content* ... that is contingent or necessary."

1.3. Some cases to illustrate the general problem

I turn next to a brief description of some recent debates which illustrate the focal problem motivating this research – i.e., it seems likely that the opposing factions are adhering to distinct conceptions of a proposition.

First, on the one hand, the minimalists [Borg \(2004, 2012\)](#) and [Cappelen and Lepore \(2005\)](#) insist that sentences like “Jill is ready” or “Simon is tall” express propositions. On the other hand, in different ways, the radicalists [Bach \(2005, 2006, 2011\)](#) and [Soames \(2005, 2008, 2010\)](#) (among many others) deny that such sentences express propositions, insisting rather that what they semantically express is (in some sense) incomplete. More generally, there is growing interest in this alleged phenomenon of ‘semantic underdetermination’ – i.e., syntactically complete sentences which nonetheless do not seem to semantically express propositions. In general, whether there is such a thing as semantic underdetermination, let alone what the best theoretical account of it is, turns on exactly how one understands the notion of a proposition.¹⁰

For a second example, [Potts \(2005\)](#) defends a multiple-proposition theory of expressives, arguing that, say, “I have to look after Sally’s **damn** dog while she is away” semantically expresses two logically and compositionally independent propositions. In reviewing Potts’ work, while [Bach \(2007\)](#) finds the multiple-proposition approach to be plausible for some other phenomena (e.g., supplements of certain sorts), he rejects the multi-propositional approach to expressives, largely on the grounds that which expressives semantically add to a statement should not be classified as ‘propositional’. To the extent that there are several non-equivalent senses of the term ‘proposition’ employed in the literature, though, it is difficult to see exactly what is at issue in such disagreements.¹¹

There can be little hope of even sorting out these sorts of debate, let alone making progress on them, without further clarifications to the operative conceptions of ‘proposition’.

1.4. Some current options

There are a number of different directions in which the propositionalist tradition might evolve, once the loss of innocence has sunk in. Most drastically, such heavyweights as [Lewis \(1979: 143, 1986: 54\)](#) and [Kripke \(1979: 259, 1980: 21\)](#) express skepticism as to the future prospects of the propositionalist research program. (Lewis’ complaint is that no one semantic entity can play all of the roles traditionally associated with the term ‘proposition’. Kripke cautions – ominously but vaguely – that the “apparatus of propositions may even break down”.)¹² Other skeptics about the prospects for propositionalism include some varieties of contextualism, which hold that the very idea of propositional content should now be seen as “incoherent” ([Recanati, 2004: 4](#)). Here the objection is that the traditional conception of a proposition depends on a clean and precise split between semantics and pragmatics which has by now been shown to be an untenable relic from a bygone era.

There are, of course, lots of sophisticated subsequent positions within the propositionalist tradition, including precisely these orientations toward the S/P interface which we have already encountered:

- (i) rearguard conservative **minimalists**, who seek to save propositionalism by demanding scandalously little work from propositions
- (ii) **indexicalists**, who hold that a proper understanding of the syntax–semantics interface reveals that there is a lot more to the proposition than meets the ear
- (iii) **radicalists**, who take semantic underdetermination to be a relatively widespread and deeply significant phenomenon
- (iv) **relativists**, who hold that the solution to various challenges lies in recognizing that truth-conditions need to be understood as relativized to various sorts of non-classical parameters

These are not the only significant sophisticated moves within the broad confines of the propositionalist tradition.¹³ However, for clarity of focus, I will confine the discussion to the relations between these aforementioned views and the S/P interface here.

The aim of this present research is not so much to further crowd the space of theoretical options, but rather to help to clarify some of the issues which divide these contrasting positions – especially by working toward sorting the terminological from the substantive differences between them.

¹⁰ For example, as will be explored below, the questions of exactly where indexicalism or relativism stands, when it comes to semantic underdetermination, are not straightforward, depending on exactly which specific conception of a proposition is operative.

¹¹ A couple of further illustrations: First, all of this shows up as being relatively toothless [Recanati’s \(2004: 101\)](#) “optionality constraint” for distinguishing mandatory (weak, pre-propositional) from optional (strong, free) pragmatic enrichments. The optionality constraint presumes that all parties agree on what it takes to “express a complete proposition”, but, as we have seen, there are reasons to be skeptical about that presumption. Second, consider also [Borg’s \(2012: 85–7\)](#) discussion of an exchange between Cappelen & Lepore and Bach over whether there could be generally applicable tests for whether or not a sentence (in context) expresses a proposition. Again, given that there are multiple distinct conceptions of ‘proposition’ at work in the literature, it is not even clear exactly what is being stalked here.

¹² Quine was also famously skeptical about propositions – cf., e.g., “The very question of conditions for identity of propositions presents not so much an unsolved problem as a mistaken ideal” (1960: 206). However, much of his reasoning is premised on behaviorist tenets which are much less common in the wake of the cognitive revolution in the human sciences.

¹³ Other options include two-dimensionalism (e.g., [Stalnaker \(2001\)](#), [Chalmers \(2006\)](#)), semantic relationism (e.g., [Fine \(2007\)](#)), and multi-propositionalism (e.g., [Bach \(1999\)](#), [Neale \(2001\)](#), [Perry \(2001\)](#), [Korta and Perry \(2011\)](#)).

2. Linking specific conceptions of propositional content to the minimalist-contextualist spectrum

2.1. The proposition's central jobs

This terrain is complicated by the fact that propositions have been put to many different jobs, within the propositionalist tradition. (This is attested by the Braun and Sider (2006) quote above, with its broad and open-ended mention of “communication, linguistic competence, truth conditions, and other semantic phenomena”). A short-list of the central jobs associated with the term ‘proposition’ must include at least:

1. the context-independent semantic properties of sentences
2. the bearers of truth or falsity
3. the objects of the propositional attitudes

This list could easily be doubled or tripled – e.g., 4. the referents of ‘that-’ clauses; 5. that which stays common among changes in illocutionary force; 6. that which must hold common for an adequate translation of a sentence into a different language; and so on – but I take it that the above three are, historically and conceptually, the most fundamental.

My next task is to develop the suggestion that one of the factors involved in the entrenched S/P border wars is a dispute over the relations between jobs [1] and [2]. (For ease of exposition, I will sometimes refer to job [1] propositions as ‘**context-independent semantic properties**’, and to job [2] propositions as ‘**truth-bearers**’.) I aim to show that it is an upshot of these recent borders wars that we can no longer innocently presume that one and the same semantic entity is fitted for both jobs [1] and [2].¹⁴ This is a further important loss of innocence within the propositionalist tradition, which has yet to be clearly detected and thoroughly digested.

2.2. Can any one semantic entity play both jobs [1] and [2]?

In general, a guiding idea behind job [1] is that the term ‘proposition’ is primarily introduced to designate that which holds constant throughout all uses of a sentence, across various contexts of utterance. Job [1] propositions are what the semantic module delivers, completely determined by the lexicon plus the grammar.

This distinction between jobs [1] and [2] brings into sharp relief a fundamental difference between minimalists and contextualists. Contextualists by no means deny that there are such things as job [1] propositions, or that they have a useful role to play in semantic theorizing. (It simply cannot be denied that linguistic expressions have context-independent semantic properties.) Rather, where contextualists depart from minimalists is on the question of whether job [1] propositions constitute or determine definite truth-conditions. In general (with the circumscribed exception of indexicality), minimalists take job [1] propositions to be relatively determinate – i.e., for any well-formed complete sentence, the lexicon plus the grammar will specify a truth-bearer. In contrast, contextualists hold that no more substantive content could be given to job [1] propositions than relatively unspecific ‘semantic potentials’ (cf. Recanati (2004: 97, 152, 2010: 44)). Thus, for contextualists, job [1] propositions are nothing more than vague and variable recipes, constituted by vague and variable semantic potentials.

The issue between minimalists and contextualists is then over whether one needs (free, strong) pragmatic interpretive processes to get from job [1] to job [2] – i.e., whether what the semantic module delivers generally falls short of specifying a truth-bearer. Hence, we could take minimalism to be the position that one and the same semantic entity does both job [1] and job [2], and contextualism as the position that context-independent semantic properties generally fall short of specifying truth-bearers.

Various criticisms of both of these extreme poles of minimalism and contextualism, when it comes to the general relations between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, are by now quite familiar. The minimalists Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 3) try to just avoid some hard questions on this front (“... we try to stay neutral ... on whether semantic content is a proposition, or truth conditions, or what have you ...”). Not surprisingly, several commentators have found this to be a major flaw in their work.¹⁵ More ambitiously, Borg (2012: Ch.3) has tried to handle a diverse variety of cases in various different minimalist-friendly ways, when it come to the relations between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions. However, this project of Borg’s, of coming up with accounts for various sorts of *prima facie* semantic underdetermination cases, is a pristine example of work which could benefit immensely from some foundational work on exactly what sense, or senses, of ‘proposition’ is at stake. It is not clear exactly what it is, to which Borg alleges that these contested cases do in fact measure up, or manage to attain.

As for contextualism, a standard objection is that the gap which it posits between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions is thoroughly problematic. Without this close, constitutive link between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, this

¹⁴ Cf. Pietroski (2005) for a confluent argument that developments within generative linguistics also provide significant motivation for this conclusion.

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Carston (2009: 329–38) for arguments that Cappelen & Lepore’s semantic contents are ill-suited to serve as linguistic meanings, and Hawthorne (2006: 443) for a case that they are ill-suited to serve as truth-conditions.

objection goes, we cannot explain linguistic expressions' constant communication-potentials, across different speakers and across different contexts¹⁶ – not to mention fundamental considerations about learnability or systematicity.

Again, these old war horses have been engaged in debate for over half a century. With a view to seeing past this minimalist-contextualist logjam, let us now investigate where indexicalism, relativism, and radicalism stand on this question of the relation between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, as it pertains to the relation between job [1] and job [2] propositions. §2.3 investigates indexicalism and lexico-syntactically enhanced propositions, §2.4 is an exploration of propositional radicals, and §2.5 delves into relativism and situationally enhanced propositions.

First though an important segue anticipated above at note 2, where I contrasted two different glosses on 'contextualism' – namely: (i) pragmatic enrichment is generally required in order to determine truth-conditions, vs. (ii) semantic contents generally vary with the context of utterance. There I said that while (i) has some historical precedent, and does afford a general, identifiable contrast between minimalism and contextualism, it is not the proper discriminating tool for present purposes, because it blurs pertinent distinctions between indexicalism, radicalism, relativism, and contextualism. All three of these other views might allow that (certain kinds of) pragmatic effects are relevant to truth-conditions (cf., e.g., note 5); but that is not yet to concede that semantic content varies with context. (Much more on all of this in §§2.3–2.5 below.) So, for example, when MacFarlane (2008) styles his semantic relativism as "non-indexical contextualism", it is clearly contextualism in the first, weaker sense (e.g., truth-conditions are context-sensitive), but not so clearly contextualism in the second, stronger sense (e.g., semantic content is context-sensitive). In contrast, Searle (1978), or Recanati (2004, 2010), for example, do explicitly endorse that latter, stronger claim. In any case, 'contextualism' is henceforth understood in the stronger sense (ii), as the claim that semantic contents generally vary with the context of utterance.

2.3. Indexicalism and lexico-syntactically enhanced propositions

Let us take indexicalism first, for its position with respect to propositional content is relatively (perhaps even bracingly) straightforward. The driving idea here is that if multiple uses of a given sentence (in different contexts) can differ truth-conditionally (e.g., 'It is raining', 'Jill is ready', 'Simon is tall'), a plausible explanation is that the lexical syntax of the sentence is more complex than one might have otherwise assumed. A properly discriminating lexical syntax must recognize so-called hidden variables in logical form – though unpronounced or aphonic at the level of surface grammatical form, they are there in the proposition expressed, and they suffice to distinguish the content semantically expressed by truth-conditionally distinct uses of the same sentence.

There are various different ways in which this driving idea might be implemented, in a semantic model. Perhaps hidden domain variables are a good way to distinguish the propositions expressed by distinct utterances of 'It is raining' at different places but the same time (i.e., the proposition expressed is of the form 'It is raining *at location x*'). Perhaps hidden predicate variables are a good way to distinguish the distinct propositions expressed by distinct utterances of 'Jill is ready', or 'Simon is tall' in relevantly different contexts (i.e., the proposition expressed by the latter is of the form 'Simon is tall *relative to the standards appropriate to category x*'). The key point is the unprecedented prevalence of something like pre-propositional saturation, which explains why this general approach has been labeled 'indexicalism'. We have a reasonable, compelling, and widely accepted explanation for why distinct utterances of 'I am hungry' or 'Tomorrow is Wednesday' (say) can express distinct propositions – the characters of 'I' or 'tomorrow' get saturated differently, given different contextual factors, to produce distinct propositional contents. Indexicalism generalizes this bottom-up, saturation model beyond the bounds of the phenomenon of the traditionally recognized indexical expressions. Indexicality abounds, on this approach.

So, insofar as indexicalism is a way to save the traditional minimalist maxim that linguistic meaning determines truth-conditions (cf., e.g., Stanley (2007: Introduction, 182ff., or 202–5) for various statements to that effect), it does so by greatly enhancing linguistic meanings. The proper response to the contextualists' challenge (to the traditional minimalist tenet that linguistic meaning determines truth-conditions), on this view, is to recognize that there is a lot more "lexico-syntactically licensed context-sensitivity in our language" (as Borg (2012: 20) puts it) than had previously been thought. The contextualists' alleged gap between job [1] and job [2] propositions can and should be resisted. We just need to make the move from the crude and out-dated minimalists' propositions (e.g., *that Jill is ready, that Simon is tall*) to the indexicalists lexico-semantically enhanced propositions (which contain at the level of logical form something along the lines of the above hidden (domain or predicate or etc.) variables).

Though I have said very little about general motivations for, or criticisms of, indexicalism,¹⁷ what matters for present purposes is its commitment to lexico-syntactically enhanced propositions, and how this positions indexicalism with respect to the minimalist vs. contextualist controversy. The guiding idea is that once we recognize that there is a lot more to job [1]

¹⁶ To cite one example, Cappelen and Lepore (2005: x) give for a nice clear statement of one central line of argument against contextualism: "The common thread that runs throughout our criticism of contextualism is that it fails to account for how we communicate *across contexts*. People with different background beliefs, goals, audiences, perceptual inputs, etc. can understand each other. They can agree or disagree. They can say, assert, claim, state, investigate, or make fun of the very same claim. No theory of communication is adequate unless it explains how this is possible. Contextualists cannot provide such an explanation."

¹⁷ For some pertinent criticisms of indexicalism cf., e.g., Collins (2007), Neale (2007).

propositions than, say, Cappelen and Lepore (2005) presume, that will yield one semantic entity capable of doing both job [1] and job [2].

2.4. Propositional radicals

Radicalists respond rather differently to the contextualists' arguments for a gap between job [1] and job [2] propositions. If minimalism is the view that linguistic meaning determines truth-conditions, and contextualism is the view that meaning generally fails to determine truth-conditions, then radicalism may be characterized as the view that meaning commonly falls short of determining truth-conditions – in certain distinctive sorts of case, and for a specific sort of reason. The sorts of case in question are those in which the semantic contents of sentences, even relative to a context of utterance, are non-propositional. (Again, oft-discussed, illustrative examples include 'Jill is ready', 'Simon is tall', and 'I have not eaten'.) As Bach (2006) puts it:

... [T]he sentences in question are semantically incomplete – their semantic contents are not propositions but merely propositional radicals ... (p.435)

I call [these semantic contents] ... a "propositional radical" to indicate that, although it comprises the entire semantic content of the sentence, it lacks at least one constituent needed for it to be true or false, and for it to be the content of a statement ... (p.438)¹⁸

Radicalism makes a major concession to contextualism, by countenancing this gulf between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions. However, as compared with contextualism, radicalism seeks to retain a recognizably traditional, though refined, conception of the S/P border. (Semantic competence is still a tractable phenomenon which plays a distinctive role in interpretation; there is still a crucial difference in kind between a literal and a non-literal usage for Bach or Soames – as distinct from, say, radical contextualists Searle (1978) or Travis (1989); and so on.) Radicalists deny the contextualists' assertion that semantic contents vary with context. Its guiding idea is that while contextualists are quite correct to stress the prevalence and importance of context-sensitivity and semantic underdetermination, thereby showing up as untenable various traditional conceptions of the S/P interface, nonetheless a firm and principled S/P divide is still needed in order to make sense of the very idea of non-literal usage or pragmatic implicature, not to mention fundamental considerations about learnability or systematicity.¹⁹

The border between radicalism and contextualism, then, concerns the question of whether the semantic content a given sentence expresses varies with context. According to radicalists, contextualists are quite right to point to a gap between job [1] and job [2], but quite wrong to overstate its import. Contextualists hold that free pragmatic enrichment is often or typically required prior to the identification of the content expressed, with an utterance of a sentence in context; whereas radicalists hold that the content semantically expressed is context-invariant, though in certain cases sub-propositional. For a radicalist, there is always a distinctive semantic entity which does job [1], and hence radicalism differs from contextualism in orientation, when it comes to general theoretical questions about the compositionality and systematicity of semantic content, about the modularity of the various components which comprise our linguistic competence, etc. Relatedly, radicalists are bound to carve up the terrain differently from contextualists, when it comes to various object-level linguistic phenomena, as they see contextualists as prone to mistaking pragmatic phenomena for having semantic relevance.²⁰ (That is: radicalists see contextualism as similar to indexicalism (and also relativism, for that matter) in mis-classifying intuitions about the shiftiness of truth-conditions as having semantic significance, agreeing with the minimalist that the proper explanation for many such cases is pragmatic, not semantic.)

There are also myriad criticisms of radicalism in the literature.²¹ The coherence or worth of propositional radicals is a matter of some contention, and it very much remains to be seen whether they can afford firm footing for a tenable and distinctive middle ground, between minimalism and contextualism. Still, though, it is a novel take on the relation between jobs [1] and [2], quite distinct from minimalism, indexicalism, or contextualism. That is, radicalists differ from the other three in holding that: (i) even though many of the core motivating tenets of minimalism are not just tenable but compelling (here agreeing with minimalism and indexicalism, contra contextualism), (ii) still there are principled and defensible exceptions to the notion that linguistic meaning, as traditionally conceived, determines truth-conditions (here agreeing with indexicalism and contextualism, contra minimalism), (iii) and yet lexico-syntactic enhancements are not an appropriate or tenable means of accounting for them (here agreeing with minimalism and contextualism, contra indexicalism).

¹⁸ Compare Soames' (2008) talk of 'skeletal' propositions, and his earlier (2005) notion of a 'propositional matrix'. Another instance of radicalism is described by Neale (2007: note 7) as follows: "... I prefer to talk of sentences encoding blueprints for propositions. No proposition blueprint is itself a proposition (any more than a building blueprint is a building). Many distinct propositions (or buildings) may satisfy a single blueprint."

Though I do not mean to suggest that these are exact equivalents, I will treat them as a class for present purposes, and henceforth use 'propositional radical' as a shorthand for 'propositional radical-skeleton-matrix-blueprint, etc.' 'Radical', then, is henceforth a generic name for that which is (allegedly) semantically expressed in such (allegedly) sub-propositional cases.

¹⁹ Cf., e.g., the opening section of Bach (2005) for a clear programmatic statement, or Bach (2011: §8.1) for a recent statement of the distinction between radicalism and contextualism.

²⁰ Compare, for example, Recanati (2004) v. Bach (2005) on quantifier domain restriction, or Recanati (2010) vs. Bach (2011) on epistemic modals.

²¹ Cf., e.g., Carston (2009: 324–9), Borg (2012: Ch.1).

2.5. Relativism and situationally enhanced propositions

What then does semantic relativism have to say when it comes to propositional content, concerning the relation between job [1] (context-independent semantic properties) and job [2] (truth-bearers)?

Relativism, again, is the view that truth-conditions must be understood as relativized to certain non-classical parameters. Here the paradigm is not indexicality or underdetermination, but is usually taken to be tense (or temporal parameters). For example, to determine the truth-value of what is semantically expressed with a use of ‘Obama is sitting’ (in context) we need to know exactly when to consider, for there are periods during which Obama is sitting, and periods during which Obama is not sitting. Temporality, then, is a classically recognized parameter relative to which truth-values can vary. Semantic relativism is the view that there are many other factors which are similar to tense, in this respect – as Kolbel (2012: 257) puts the view: “... judgements of various sorts can be evaluated as true or false only in relation to certain parameters, such as a standard or perspective.”

Prima facie, this relativist, generalization-from-the-case-of-tense, model well befits gradable adjectives (e.g., ‘Simon is tall’), as well as many other of the radicalists’ underdetermination cases (e.g., ‘Jill is ready’, ‘Steel is not strong enough’). The driving idea that such cases can only be evaluated for truth or falsity relative to certain salient parameters is fairly compelling. Proponents of relativism also see great promise here to account for the intuition of faultless disagreement concerning predicates of personal taste (e.g., ‘Fish sticks are tasty’), without resorting to anything like ambiguity or indexicality. Indeed, some see semantic relativism as promising helpful ways to think about some wide-ranging, perennial philosophical questions (cf., e.g., Kolbel (2012: 257) on ‘know’ or ‘cause’, or MacFarlane (2012) on epistemic modals or future contingents). However, my interest here is focused on what relativists have to offer concerning the notion of propositional content, and how it relates to the S/P interface.

MacFarlane (2008) styles his relativism as “non-indexical contextualism”. This label is well-chosen in many respects, underlining as it does the ways in which relativism differs from both minimalism and indexicalism. It departs from minimalism in conceding the prevalence and significance of the underdetermination of truth-conditions by linguistic meaning (at least as traditionally conceived), and so concedes a gap between jobs [1] and [2]. Contra indexicalism, relativists do not base their accounting for this phenomenon on the indexicalists’ bottom-up, lexico-syntactically mandated, weak pragmatic effects. (All parties concede the difference between the saturation required to get from “She is tall” to the appropriate truth-value, and the relativization required to get from “Obama is sitting” to the appropriate truth-value.²²) However, understanding the exact ways in which relativism differs from radicalism or contextualism requires some finessing of the notion of “proposition”. Do these non-standard but truth-conditionally relevant parameters affect semantic content? How exactly do they affect the individuation conditions for propositions?

Now, MacFarlane (2005, 2008) tends to simply avoid such questions by talking about the truth-conditions of utterances, or of uses of sentences; and both Stojanovic (2008: 12) and Borg (2012: 77) seem to hold that exactly what happens to ‘proposition’ once we have made the move to semantic relativism is a fairly boring terminological question. All that is fair enough, for surely at least one of the motivations for semantic relativism is precisely the idea that the classical toolkit in the philosophy of language is simply too impoverished. However, in the present context, it may still prove worthwhile to investigate what relativists have to add to our ongoing discussion of job [1] vs. job [2] propositions.

One way to put the crucial diagnostic question at this juncture is this: Are the relativists’ non-classical semantically relevant parameters to be understood as operating pre-propositionally or post-propositionally? Pre-propositional processes are things the interpreter has to figure out *prior to* identifying the proposition expressed, while post-propositional processes “presuppose the prior identification of some proposition serving as input” (2004: 23). In contrast to pre-propositional saturation, disambiguation, etc., conversational implicatures are standardly taken to be post-propositional. They are conceptually pursuant to what is semantically expressed, as some grasp – however tacit – of the content of the proposition semantically expressed is crucial to identifying the content being implicated.²³ If the relativists’ parameters operate pre-propositionally, then relativism and indexicalism might appear to be sister nodes on a decision tree quite close to minimalism (i.e., distinct enhanced conceptions of linguistic meaning, given which linguistic meaning determines truth-conditions). If they should rather be understood as post-propositional, then relativism is much closer to contextualism (i.e., a sophisticated means of explaining why there is generally a gap between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions).

The majority of commentators who have discussed this question take the relativists’ parameters to operate post-propositionally.²⁴ Down this avenue, the relativist is akin to radicalists and contextualists in explicitly countenancing job [1] propositions which cannot also serve as job [2] propositions. (As Borg (2012: 78) puts it, the relativist countenances “...complete propositions which are not, *per se*, truth-evaluable”.) Post-propositional relativism would still differ from

²² Cf., e.g., Salmon’s (1989) discussion of some relevant semantic differences between indexicality and tense.

²³ Cf. Recanati (2004: pp.23ff) for discussion of this distinction. Significantly, tense can also be handled pre-propositionally or post-propositionally. The classic statement of the notion that tense is pre-propositional comes in the course of Frege’s (1918: 27–8) discussion of the case of “This tree is covered in green leaves”. Frege holds that: “Only a sentence with the time-specification filled out, a sentence complete in every respect, expresses a thought”. Hence, for Frege, if the time-specification is left unsaid, then what is semantically expressed is something like a propositional radical. In contrast, to hold that “This tree is covered in green leaves” (in context) expresses a proposition which is true at some times and false at some (other) times is to treat tense post-propositionally.

²⁴ Cf., e.g., Kolbel (2008: 4, 27), Bach (2011), Borg (2012: 23–6, 28n, 77–8).

contextualism, despite conceding this general gap between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, in resisting the claim that semantic content is context-sensitive. Hence, post-propositional relativism is consistent with a recognizably traditional S/P interface, and with its attendant traditional notions of semantic compositionality and systematicity, which contextualists might dismiss as well lost. It would also differ from radicalism in holding that a complete but non-truth-evaluable proposition, as opposed to merely a schematic radical, is semantically expressed in the underdetermination cases. And so Bach (2011), for example, criticizes post-propositional relativism both for its commitment to these somewhat oxymoronic, non-truth-evaluable-but-nonetheless-complete, propositions, as well as for (allegedly) making the aforementioned mistake, (allegedly shared by indexicalism and contextualism), of mistaking properly pragmatic phenomena for having semantic relevance.

If, on the other hand, the relativists' parameters are taken to operate pre-propositionally, then relativism turns out to look very similar to indexicalism. Notwithstanding the important differences between indexicality and tense, both would be seen as endorsing enhanced notions of linguistic meaning, given which linguistic meaning determines truth-conditions. However, there is a fairly devastating objection to pre-propositional relativism.²⁵ Namely, if the relativist parameters are seen as operating pre-propositionally, then the relativist loses any claim to be able to handle the faultless disagreement cases which are typically taken to be core parts of the motivation for semantic relativism. That is, if the relevant standard or perspective is taken to be constitutive of the content semantically expressed by (say) "Fish sticks are tasty" or "I know that I have two hands" then relativism is no better suited than indexicalism (or indeed any of these other views) to account for the sense in which there can be faultless disagreement about such cases.

To sum up, then, while semantic relativism is not *per se* a position about propositional content (as opposed to, say, indexicalism or radicalism), it clearly seems to provide a novel conception of the general relation between jobs [1] and [2]. It is a distinct way of developing the familiar charge that it is a mistake to look to linguistic meaning by itself to determine truth-conditions. Just as the job [1] proposition associated with "Obama is sitting" is insufficient to specify a truth-condition (in the absence of a temporal parameter), a similar point applies much more broadly. Determining the truth-value of 'Erin is tall' or 'Fish sticks are tasty' or 'Everyone is here now' or 'I know that I have two hands' or etc. involves a similar relativization to an extra parameter, in addition to competently identifying the job [1] proposition and having access to the relevant matters of fact in the context of evaluation. Hence, this general category of situationally enhanced propositions must be distinguished from minimal propositions (i.e., linguistic meaning, traditionally conceived, generally determines truth-conditions), lexico-syntactically enhanced propositions (i.e., a syntactically enhanced notion of linguistic meaning suffices to determine truth-conditions), and propositional radicals (i.e., there are circumscribed underdetermination cases in which linguistic meaning fails to determine truth-conditions).²⁶ Relativism offers a genuinely distinct conception of the relation between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, and hence of how the notion of propositional content relates to the S/P interface.

3. Summary and morals

§1 was largely a summary of major events in the recent history of the propositionalist tradition, while §2 was focused on a survey of some current contender conceptions of the relation between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, as they pertain to, illustrate, and embody distinct conceptions of a proposition. One very general moral of this investigation is to recognize that the five different orientations towards the S/P interface discussed herein relate in non-trivially distinct ways to the notion of propositional content – and specifically to the relations between job [1] (context-independent semantic properties) and job [2] (truth-conditions).²⁷ A related important moral is that the debates between the views cataloged in §2 are only going to be useful and productive if viewed against the background of the issues dissected in §1.

As for the end of carefully disentangling the terminological differences from the substantive differences, in the case of certain core, ongoing disputes, the most important point here is to be on the lookout for the different senses of the term 'proposition' operative in different contexts (or sometimes even in the same context). There are several distinct things, each with its own historical precedent and conceptual integrity, which might be at play when a claim is staked under the 'propositional' banner. So, first and foremost, when one encounters a claim that (say) "Jill is ready" expresses a proposition, or that the expressive dimension is not propositional (cf. §1.3), one must ask: in what sense, exactly? Given that some talking-past is marring some of these ongoing debates, due to the fact that disputing factions have non-trivially different senses of 'proposition' in mind, this present work should go some way toward helping to disentangle the terminological differences from the substantive differences.

Significantly, claims that indexicalism, radicalism, or relativism differ drastically from the two more traditional orientations (i.e., minimalism and contextualism) may turn out to be overblown, once we pay careful heed to distinctions between different operative senses of 'proposition'. Each of these three might even be seen as, on the one hand, a fairly conservative extension of the minimalist tradition (i.e., resisting the incursion of pragmatic enrichment into job [1] propositions), and, on

²⁵ It is developed by Recanati (2010) and Bach (2011), among others.

²⁶ As above, again, my current interest is not primarily in developing criticisms of semantic relativism. On that cf., e.g., Recanati (2010), Bach (2011), Borg (2012).

²⁷ Indeed, as noted at §1.4, the picture is messier still, as at least two-dimensionalism, multi-propositionalism, and semantic relationism may well also turn out to differ significantly from the above five camps on these matters.

the other hand, a way to accommodate many of the contextualists' demands (i.e., incorporating pragmatic enrichments into job [2] propositions).

In any case, it is all but unanimous that we have to clearly distinguish job [1] from job [2] conceptions of a proposition. (Cf. note 14.) In this sense, the future of the proposition lies in the direction of these refined alternatives to traditional minimalism. So, to cite one prominent example, while Borg (2004, 2012) has done significant work in articulating the motivations underlying the traditional conception of the S/P divide, however, there is less to be said in favor of her subsequent arguments to the effect that only semantic minimalism can really cohere with these core motivations. To be sure, there is lots of work to do before any of these intermediate options has a firm claim to have established itself as a coherent and comprehensive stance on the S/P interface. Still, given the daunting and well-known problems with the radical minimalist and radical contextualist views on the relations between linguistic meaning and truth-conditions, it is rather likely that the future of the propositionalist tradition lies somewhere therein.²⁸

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