
In this ambitious and provocative book, Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore (hereafter C&L) assign themselves the task of putting out of business a growing industry in linguistics and philosophy of language. They put forward a number of sweeping arguments against all forms of Contextualism. They even hold that sentences of the form ‘A is tall’ and ‘A is ready’ have context-independent truth conditions. *Insensitive Semantics* raises discussion of context sensitivity to a new level: it forces anyone with Contextualist sympathies to consider the grounds for such sympathies more carefully, and to spell out precisely what a thesis about context sensitivity amounts to.

C&L’s strategy is to unite and conquer. First, they try to show that any argument in favor of Contextualism about sentences of the form ‘A is tall’ and ‘A is ready’ would, if successful, also entail Contextualism about all English sentences. In other words, they hold, Moderate Contextualism is an unstable view, since there is a slippery slide from it to Radical Contextualism. Thus, for C&L, the enemy is one. The second part of their strategy consists in attacking Contextualism directly. They devise three tests that, according to them, show that both Moderate and Radical Contextualism are incompatible with our actual linguistic practices, and mount two additional arguments against Contextualism. Before discussing these arguments, I will present C&L’s own positive view, which they call *Semantic Minimalism*, and contrast it with Contextualism.
C&L call an expression context-sensitive if its semantic value varies from one context of utterance to another. According to C&L’s Semantic Minimalism, there are very few context-sensitive expressions. The set of such expressions, which C&L call the Basic Set, consists of: ‘The personal pronouns ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’ in their various cases and number (e.g., singular, plural, nominative, accusative, genitive forms), the demonstrative pronouns ‘this’ and ‘that’ in their various cases and number, the adverbs ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘now’, ‘today’, ‘yesterday’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘ago’ (as in ‘He left two days ago’), ‘henceforth’) (as in ‘There will be no talking henceforth’), and the adjectives ‘actual’ and ‘present’’ (1). What characterizes expressions from the Basic Set, C&L write, is that they are obviously context-sensitive. There may be context-sensitive expressions that are not obviously so, they concede, but there will be only a handful of them. What is clear, C&L contend, is that expressions such as ‘ready’, ‘tall’ and ‘rich’ are not context-sensitive. Thus, for C&L, the sentence ‘Tipper is ready’ has the same truth conditions in every context: ‘Tipper is ready’ is true just in case Tipper is ready, full stop. The same goes for sentences such as ‘Beans are cheap’, ‘Giraffes are tall’ and ‘Rudolf is rich’.

The opponents of Semantic Minimalism are Moderate and Radical Contextualists. Moderate Contextualists hold that many English sentences that don’t contain expressions from the Basic Set are not truth-evaluable independently of the context in which they are uttered. Radical Contextualists, on the other hand, hold that no English sentence ever expresses a complete proposition; only an utterance, whose content depends on features of the context, expresses a complete proposition, and so, has truth conditions.

The contrast between Semantic Minimalism and Contextualism may seem clear enough, but there is an important distinction between two components of Semantic Minimalism that C&L fail to spell out clearly. Consequently, as I will explain, many of their arguments miss their mark. For C&L, the conventional, or standing, meaning of any English sentence S determines a complete proposition, unless S

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1 Words and aspects of words that indicate tense also belong to the Basic Set, but for simplicity’s sake, I will assume throughout this paper that we keep time fixed.

2 Contextuals, that is, expressions such as ‘alien’ and ‘local’, are plausible candidates, but C&L have their doubts.

3 Like C&L, I will make the simplifying assumption that every proper name refers to one and only one individual.