

# INSENSITIVE ENOUGH SEMANTICS

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## Abstract

*According to some philosophers, sentences like (1) “It is raining” and (2) “John is ready” are context sensitive sentences even if they do not contain indexicals or demonstratives. That view initiated a context sensitivity frenzy. Cappelen and Lepore (2005) summarize the frenzy by the slogan “Every sentence is context sensitive” (Insensitive Semantics, p. 6, note 5). They suggest a view they call Minimalism according to which the truth conditions of utterances of sentences like (1)/(2) are exactly what Convention T gives you. I will distinguish different propositions, and refocus semantics on sentences. As distinct from what the protagonists in the ongoing debate think, I argue that the content or truth conditions of utterances of both context sensitive sentences and sentences like (1)/(2) are not interesting from a semantic point of view, and that the problem sentences like (1)/(2) raises is not about context sensitivity or context insensitivity of sentences, but relevance of the content of utterances.*

## 1. The Problem

Sentences such as the following give rise to familiar problems:

- (1) There are no French girls.
- (2) Michael is tall.

(1) is false while some utterances of (1) are true; (2) is famous for being incomplete, and utterances of (2) call for a comparison class for truth valuation. John is tall *for a teenager*, for example. *Prima facie*, these sentences are too weak to determine the truth conditions of utterances. Other sentences are reputed to raise similar problems:

- (3) It is raining.
- (4) John is ready.
- (5) Steel is strong enough.
- (6) I have had breakfast.

For instance, according to Bach (1999) utterances of (4) have something missing for them to be truth valuable, something that should be added to the truth conditions of the utterance. Ready for what? *For the exam*, for example, should be added to the truth conditions of an utterance of (4) so as to provide that utterance of (4) determinate truth conditions. (1)–(6) call for a reexamination of how *sentences* determine the truth conditions of *specific utterances*. They also initiate a “context sensitivity frenzy” (Travis, Récanati, Bezuidenhout): according to some, (1)–(6) are all supposed to be context sensitive sentences even if they do not contain indexicals or demonstratives. Cappelen and Lepore (2005) summarize the frenzy by the slogan “Every sentence is context sensitive” (p. 6, note 5).

## 2. Minimalist Solution

Cappelen and Lepore’s reaction is to accept the usual context sensitive terms, “I” and “Now”, plus what Nunberg and I call contextuals (“foreigner” and “domestic” for example), and to contend that none of (1)–(6) is context sensitive. They also offer a different view which they call Semantic Minimalism. The latter is motivated by the following assumptions:

(A) *The semantic content of a sentence S is the content that all utterances of S share. It is the content that all utterances of S express no matter how their contexts of utterance are. It is also the content that can be grasped and reported by someone who is ignorant about the relevant characteristics of the context in which an utterance of S took place. (2005, ch. 10, par. 2)*

(B) *The minimal proposition cannot be characterized completely independently of the context of utterance. Semantic minimalism recognizes a small subset of expressions that interact with context of utterance in privileged ways; we call these the genuinely context sensitive expressions. When such an expression occurs in sentence S, all competent speakers know that they need to know something about the context of utterance in order to grasp the proposition semantically expressed by that utterance of S, and to recognize the truth conditions of its utterance. (2005, ch. 10, par. 3) (my italics)*

The first part of the quotation mentions content determined by the linguistic meaning of the sentence, independently of the context of utterance. The second

mentions content of specific context sensitive utterances, and goes well beyond linguistic meaning. Knowing that something about the context is required is one thing; knowing what is required is another. I contend that (A) and (B) introduce two different kind of proposition, and that the minimal proposition expressed by utterances of context sensitive sentences is not semantically interesting. This will have consequences for (1)–(6). Two main clauses of Semantic Minimalism specify that

- (i) One of the propositions expressed by a genuine utterance of an English sentence is the proposition semantically expressed.
- (ii) That there is a proposition semantically expressed is presupposed by any coherent account of linguistic communication, i.e., accounts which fail to recognize a semantically expressed proposition (more or less as characterized in this book [*Insensitive Semantics*] are incoherent. (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, p. 144)

What I will say about (A) and (B) will support a critical view on these clauses, especially (ii). I will distinguish different propositions, and refocus semantics on sentences. According to Minimalism, the truth conditions of utterances of (1)–(6) are exactly what Convention T gives you. For example:

An utterance of “Steel is strong enough” expresses the proposition that steel is strong enough and is true if and only if steel is strong enough

The utterance then expresses a “trivial” proposition. If Minimalism leads to that result, then there is something very unappealing about it. As distinct from what the protagonists in the ongoing debate think, I argue that (\*) the content or truth conditions of utterances of both context sensitive sentences and (1)–(6) are *not* interesting from a semantic point of view, and that (\*\*) the problem (1)–(6) raises is not about context sensitivity or context insensitivity of sentences, but relevance of the content of utterances. Cappelen and Lepore make the content of these utterances irrelevant. Let me add two notes.

### Contextuals

First, contextuals (Vallée 2003) clearly pass two tests Cappelen and Lepore use for context sensitivity. Consider the following:

- (7) The local bars are great.

*Principia*, 10(1) (2006), pp. 67–79.

It passes:

*Inter Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports*

“If the occurrence of an expression *e* in a sentence tends to block disquotational indirect reports, then you have evidence that *e* is context sensitive” (ch. 7, p. 2)

Consider

Richard talking about London: The *local* bars are great.

My utterance is true.

Ernie reporting that statement in Petaluma: Richard said that the *local* bars are great

I did not say that about bars in Petaluma, and the word “local” blocks that report. It also passes:

*Inter-Contextual Disquotation*

There can be false utterances of “S” even though S. And vice-versa.

There are false utterances of “BMW’s are imported cars”/“The local bars are great” even though BMW’s are imported cars / The local bars are great.

These sentences contain terms having semantic features sensitive to specific aspects of the context — see also the examples in Cappelen and Lepore.

## Plural pronouns

Second, I would like to propose a consideration of plural indexicals (Vallée 1996). Consider the following:

(8) We are philosophers.

Knowing the linguistic meaning of the sentence type (8) is one thing; knowing the truth conditions of a specific utterance of (8) is another and *go well beyond knowledge of the meaning of “we”*.

(1)–(6), and (7)–(8), raise problems, and I am not convinced that Minimalism is fit for solving, or dissolving, these problems. I contend that it underestimates the role of the linguistic meaning of context sensitive terms, as well as the scope of the distinction between sentence type and utterance, and undervalues the new focus on utterances. I begin with uncontroversial indexical sentences, move to (7) and (8), and then return to (1)–(6).

### 3. Semantics and Context Sensitivity

Sentences have linguistic meaning as type, and until indexicality enters the picture, all sentences, tokens/utterances of the same type were reputed to have the same truth conditions. The meaning of sentences was then identified with their truth conditions. Utterances of indexical sentences of the same type, and that have the same linguistic meaning, do not share the same truth conditions. My utterance of “I like Sponge Bob” is true, while Suzanne’s utterance of the same sentence is false. The linguistic meaning of the indexical is identical in both utterances, but it semantically determines a truth conditional component changing from speaker to speaker, and introduces that component into the truth conditions of the utterance. Call the truth conditions of an *utterance* of a sentence its *content*. Semantics is supposed to account for *how* the linguistic meaning of sentences containing context insensitive and context-sensitive terms *determine* the truth conditions or contents of utterances.

Indexicals, including plural indexicals like “we”, have a descriptive meaning specifying strict constraints on features of the world fit to enter contents and to be part of the truth conditions of utterances of indexical sentences. “I” refers to *the speaker of the utterance*, and “now” to *the time of the utterance*, and so on. Demonstratives are less constraining. Contextuals are not referring terms. However, their meaning also constrains the relevant aspect of the context: “local”, as well as “domestic”, is sensitive to specific places; “insider” and “friend” are sensitive to persons. “The local beer is good” is true about some places, and false about others; “Paul is an insider” is true when considering specific people, say the *Hell’s Angels*, and false when considering others, say the police. Some terms have *meaning* or *semantic features* directing them *systematically* to different entities — but entities of the same category — from utterance to utterance. This is true of indexicals and, I contend, contextuals.

Context Sensitivity introduces a *well defined notion of context*: a context contains entities of a category *determined by the meaning* of the context sensitive lexical items.

### 4. Semantic Values

The content of utterances of context sensitive sentences depends on the meaning of the terms and the context of utterance. Kaplan (1989) focuses on sentences in context and introduces two semantic values:

*Principia*, 10(1) (2006), pp. 67–79.

Character:	sentence type
determine	
Content:	sentence in context

The character of the sentence type is the linguistic meaning of the sentence type, and the content is identified with the truth conditions of the sentence in context. Having two semantic values seriously changes the semantic framework. Perry (2001) focuses on utterances and adds more semantic values:

role or linguistic meaning:	sentence type
determines	
content <i>M</i> of utterance:	proposition extracted from linguistic meaning
determines	
content <i>C</i> of utterance:	proposition specific to the utterance
determines	
Content <i>D</i> :	official truth conditions of the utterance

In the case of singular indexicals, the meaning determines a category of object, and selects in the context a specific object of that category fit to be introduced into the content of the utterance. Consider “I like Sponge Bob”, and assume that we have its linguistic meaning. It determines

Content <i>M</i> :	the speaker of the utterance likes Sponge Bob; <i>u</i>
determines	
Content <i>C</i> :	the speaker of <b>u</b> likes Sponge Bob
determines	
Content <i>D</i> :	ME, <i>likes</i> , SPONGE BOB

*u* is a variable for an utterance, **u** stands for a specific utterance, ME stands for the speaker, and SPONGE BOB stands for Sponge Bob. From content *M*, and focusing on a specific utterance **u**, you obtain Content *C*. From Content *C*, focusing of the speaker of **u**, you can obtain Content *D*. Now, my argument does not depend on any specific picture, Kaplan’s or Perry’s. It just depends on distinguishing meaning (character/role) and content (Kaplan)/content *D* (Perry) of utterances. Once this distinction is introduced, Cappelen and Lepore’s requirement that meaning gives truth-conditional content of utterances is much less significant, if not wrong, in the semantic enterprise.

## 5. Meaning and Truth Conditions

Philosophy of language is concerned with the linguistic meaning of sentences as type and what speakers know independently of the context of utterance, not with contents or truth conditions of specific utterances. This is made explicit by (A). It is also part of (B): speakers know that sometimes knowledge of the context of utterance is required, and they know where to look thanks to their knowledge of the descriptive meaning of context sensitive terms. However, once meaning is understood, what speakers need to know to know the truth conditions or content of specific context sensitive utterances — the specific features of the context of utterances — goes well beyond semantic competence and does not qualify as semantics. It is knowledge of facts, not knowledge of language. The fact that the referent of an utterance of an indexical is a specific object — say, me — and is part of the content of an utterance is quite irrelevant in semantics. Semantics tells us *how* an object is selected, *not which* specific object is selected for a specific utterance. Once you know how an object is selected, you can know which object is selected if you are given more factual information about the utterance.

The fact that I make true my utterance of “I like Sponge Bob” might be interesting, but it is not interesting from a semantic point of view. The Minimal propositions expressed by indexical utterances are of no interest in semantic. The phone rings. I answer and someone says “Sorry, I dialled the wrong number”. Thanks to my semantic competence I understand the sentence: the speaker of the utterance dialled the wrong number. Due to my ignorance of who the speaker of the utterance is, I do not have the content of that utterance. Whatever the content of the utterance, it is probably true. This is of no importance in semantics. The relevant, semantic part of (B) was captured by the linguistic meaning of the terms. The more specific truth conditions of utterances are outside the scope of semantics.

The components of the truth conditions of utterances of context sensitive sentences vary systematically from context to context. We want to capture how systematicity across contexts is achieved, not what it provides in specific contexts. Once this is done, there is no interesting generalization to be made. I am not denying that the truth conditions or contents of utterances are important. I am just saying that there is nothing backing up completion of content, or minimal proposition, of specific utterances of context sensitive sentences as a serious semantic project. “Tall” is not a context sensitive term: *prima facie* nothing in the meaning of that term directs it to a comparison class. Comparatives are puzzling

because systematicity is present, a comparison class is always required, but it does not echo the meaning of the terms.

Consider now “We like Sponge Bob”. Knowing the meaning of “we”, you know that the speaker of the utterance and at least another person has the predicated property. Any utterance of this sentence is true if and only if the speaker of the utterance and at least another person like Sponge Bob. This is (A).

Content M:	The speaker of the utterance and at least one other individual like Sponge Bob: $u$
determines	
Content C:	The speaker of $u$ and at least one other individual like Sponge Bob
determines	
Content D:	$\langle \langle \ , \ , \ \rangle, \text{like, Sponge Bob} \rangle$

Let us now focus on utterances. Utterances are actions made following Gricean maxims. The two maxims important for us here are:

- Try to make your contribution one that is true
- Be relevant

They are norms of rational linguistic actions applying to contents, even to contents of utterance of non context sensitive sentences. An utterance of “We like Sponge Bob” is made by your daughter watching TV with a friend, and another one by me at a party about myself and the chair of my department. To make your daughter’s utterance true and relevant, you introduce your daughter and her friend in the content D of her utterance. To make my utterance true and relevant you introduce myself and the chair of my department in the content D of my utterance. Identifying the content for each specific utterance of “We like Sponge Bob” goes beyond the linguistic meaning of the sentence, requires knowledge of facts, and is outside the scope of semantics.

Consider finally an utterance of “The local beer is good”. Since you know the linguistic meaning of “local”, you know that any utterance of this sentence is true if and only if the beer characteristic of a specific place is good. This reflects components (A) of the quotation and is echoed in Content M and Content C.

Content M:	The beer characteristic of <i>a specific place</i> is good: $u$
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“Local” is not reflexive, and does not refer to the utterance. One can move directly from M to C.



determines  
 Content C:     The beer characteristic of *a specific place* is good

Semantically competent speakers know that it cannot be the truth conditions of the specific utterance: the condition determined by “specific place” is not part of the content of the utterance, the speaker is *talking about a specific place p*, and the latter is part of the truth conditions of the utterance.

determines  
 Content D:     ⟨the beer characteristic of . . . . ., be good⟩

Not knowing the place under consideration, you do not know the truth conditions of this utterance — the minimal proposition it expresses. Semantics tells us that “local” is place sensitive. It has nothing to say about specific places and specific utterances. It goes beyond semantics to explain how speakers/hearers identify the relevant place for a specific utterance of “The local beer is good”.

Minimalism blurs the distinction between the meaning of a sentence type and the truth conditions of specific utterances of that sentence — what one knows thanks to one’s knowledge of the world. It blurs the distinction between knowledge that a specific feature is required to make the utterance true, and knowledge of which specific feature is required on an occasion.

## 6. Utterances

Consider now an utterance of the non indexical “Steel is strong enough”:

Content M:     Steel is strong enough; *u*  
 determines  
 Content C:     Steel is strong enough  
 determines  
 Content D:     Steel is strong enough

There is something missing in content *D* for the utterance to be true and relevant: strong enough for what? Moderate Contextualists add that material to Content *D*. It has no impact on the linguistic meaning of the sentence. I am a Moderate Contextualist. Cappelen and Lepore do not add the relevant material to the content of the utterance and make an utterance of the sentence hard to evaluate with respect to truth, and irrelevant. Minimalism packs in what

is expressed by an utterance — the proposition it expresses — exactly what is provided by the sentence: the truth conditions of an utterance are given by the Convention T. Radical Contextualism packs in a sentence what makes the proposition expressed by an utterance true. I disagree with both sides.

Utterances have properties that sentences do not have: they are made by speakers supposed to speak truly and relevantly. Sometimes, meaning is enough in the context to give contents satisfying the maxims. This is the case with an utterance of “I like Sponge Bob”. Sometimes, meaning gives a hint, but is not enough in the context and the truth and relevance maxims then constrain truth components of an utterance. This is the case with an utterance of “We like Sponge Bob”: truth and relevance prompt the hearer to identify other people having that relation to Sponge Bob — in the previous examples, your daughter’s friend and the chair of my department. It is also the case with an utterance of “The local beer is good”: truth and relevance prompt the hearer to identify a specific place. Sometimes, meaning gives no clue on what must be supplemented to satisfy the Truth and Relevance maxims, and what must be supplemented does not depend on the meaning of the sentence, i.e. it does not then depend on semantics. It is then out of the scope of semantics. This is the case with an utterance of “Steel is strong enough”. Semantically constrained, specific truth conditional components of propositions expressed by utterances of “I”, “we” and “local”, for example, are not interesting from a semantic point of view: they are affected by, but do not affect, the linguistic meaning of the sentences type. Semantically unconstrained truth conditional components of contents of utterances are also uninteresting from a semantic point of view: they are not affected by, and do not affect, the linguistic meaning of the sentences type.

## 7. Incompleteness

The linguistic meaning of a sentence — like (1)–(8) — does not always provide an appropriate content for a true and relevant utterance of this sentence. If the semantically determined content cannot be the content of an utterance made following the famous maxims, adding material is required to make sense of the action, the utterance. In contrast with Cappelen and Lepore, I see no metaphysics at work here, just relevance. The material added does not affect the meaning of the sentence, but only the content of the utterance. Perspicuous hearers of “We like Sponge Bob” and “The local beer is good” try to make sense

of the truth and relevance of the utterance. They basically do the same thing. My argument that objects making true indexical and contextual utterances are outside the scope of semantics extends to whatever is supplemented to semantically determined content of utterances to satisfy the maxims, as is the case with the content of utterances of (1)–(6). Beyond the linguistic meaning of sentences, there is no uniformity / systematicity to capture, and no theory on how specific material is added to contents of utterances in specific contexts. But don't forget that sometimes something should be added. The truth conditions of an utterance of (1)–(6) given by Cappelen and Lepore make these utterances totally lacking relevance. I tell you that steel is strong enough, and you are a minimalist:

An utterance of “Steel is strong enough” expresses the proposition that Steel is strong enough and is true if and only if Steel is strong enough.

The point of my utterance is unclear: strong enough for what? One uttering (5) usually knows for what, and what makes true and relevant the content of the utterance. Hearers make utterances of (5) true and relevant by adding material to content *D* (Perry). The “context”, in a wide sense, enables the hearer to provide that component to the content of the utterance. The same goes for

I have had large breakfast.  
You are not going to die.  
Jack and Jill went up the hill.

And in any case, what is added goes well beyond linguistic meaning and is outside of the scope of semantics.

## 8. Conclusion

Sentences (1)–(8) have linguistic meaning (a character (Kaplan)), and express any proposition you can extract from it, a content *M* and a content *C* (Perry). Semantics stops there. Content *M* is a good enough semantic content, and it fits clause (A). In addition, Content *M* is shared, a feature Cappelen and Lepore want (2005, p. 152). If we accept content *M*, then we can account for the context sensitivity of certain terms — they contribute different entities to the truth conditions of utterances — without caring too much about what is contributed for specific utterances, that is, without caring too much about utterances and content *D*. If my picture of the content of indexical utterances is right, (1)–(8)

do not raise problems in semantics, because the content, or truth conditions, of some utterances is outside the scope of semantics, especially when not completely determined by meaning or content *M*. Minimalism is wrong because it asks semantics to assign truth conditions to all utterances. It is not appealing because the content assigned to some utterances makes them hard to evaluate and irrelevant. Not a good way to account for linguistic communication. The latter is about true and relevant utterance. Let us return to (i) and (ii). I fail to see why these are clauses of a semantic theory, since they concern the content of utterances, and if I am right, the content of utterances — especially utterance of indexical sentences, utterances of contextual sentences and utterance of (1)–(6) — is outside the scope of semantics.

Cappelen and Lepore can reject Kaplan/Perry's many values framework, or the distinction between meaning of sentence type and the propositions extracted from it. They can also refuse the status I give to contents of utterances — not important in Semantics — and miss what is specific about them: bound to knowledge of facts, relevant and sometimes messy. I think that they would then be wrong.

An insensitive enough semantics does not really care about the content of utterances, and, in a sense, about what people say.

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## Keywords

Semantics, pragmatics, contextualism, minimalism, reflexive-referential semantics.

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### Resumo

*De acordo com alguns filósofos, sentenças como (1) “Está chovendo” e (2) “João está pronto” são sentenças sensíveis ao contexto mesmo não contendo dêiticos ou demonstrativos. Tal concepção deu início a uma intensa atividade no que diz respeito a sensibilidade ao contexto. Cappelen e Lepore (2005) resumem essa agitação por meio do slogan “Toda sentença é sensível ao contexto” (Insensitive Semantics, p. 6, nota 5). Eles propõem uma concepção que denominam Minimalismo, segundo a qual as condições de verdade de sentenças como (1)/(2) são precisamente o que nos dá a Convenção T. Distinguirei diferentes proposições, e recolocarei o foco da semântica nas sentenças. Diferentemente do que pensam os protagonistas desse debate continuado, afirmo que o conteúdo ou condições de verdade de proferimentos tanto de sentenças sensíveis ao contexto quanto de sentenças como (1)/(2) não são interessantes de um ponto de vista semântico, e que o problema levantado por sentenças como (1)/(2) não é sobre a sensibilidade ou não ao contexto de sentenças, mas sobre a relevância do contexto de proferimento.*

### Palavras-chave

Semântica, pragmática, contextualismo, minimalismo, semântica reflexivo-referencial.