

ON WHAT UNDERLIES RADICAL CONTEXTUALISM

In this paper I raise the hypothesis that radical contextualism sometimes relies on an underlying principle to claim that certain sentences lack context-independent truth-conditions:

(RC) If one is unable to form a mental picture of what a sentence *S* is supposed to be about, one is not in a position to know the truth-conditions of *S*.

I hold that RC stems from a more general principle RCe according to which one can represent the world as being *p* iff one can form a mental picture of it as being *p*. I argue that (RCe) is false since (i) it entails the unacceptable claim that subjects entertain mental pictures of mental pictures when their thoughts are about mental pictures (e.g., “That mental picture might have never occurred in my mind”) and (ii) one can sometimes represent the world as being *p* even if one is unable to form a mental picture of it being *p*.

To establish (ii), I look at (1) (‘Paul is inside Mary’) and reason as follows: the radical contextualist would accept that if an utterance is true iff *p* then the utterance represents the world as being *p*. Thus if we show that the sentence ‘(1) is not false iff Paul is inside Mary’ is *true*, the radical contextualist ought to agree that (1) represents something and does have truth-conditions. To get to this, I show that A3 logically follows from A1 and A2 and argue that we have plausible reasons to hold that A1 and A2 are true:

(A1) (1) is false iff Paul is outside Mary.

(A2) For every object *x* and every object *y*, *x* is inside *y* iff *x* is not outside *y*.

(A3) (1) is not false iff Paul is inside Mary.

The conclusion is that the T-sentence for (1) just tells us how the world would have to be for (1) to be true. Everyone who grasps the meaning of (1) entertains a representation of the world even if, I claim, she is prevented from forming a mental picture of what is represented – i. e., Paul being inside Mary.

If my hypothesis as to the contextualist’s commitment is right, he should take (1) to be devoid of truth-conditions. However, it might be replied, there is a sense in which we are able to form a mental picture of Paul being inside Mary. To account for this plausible intuition, I distinguish two kinds of mental pictures: mental pictures endowed with lack of specificity (MP1) and mental pictures devoid of lack of specificity (MP2) (the distinction need not be sharp; the phenomenon may be graded). I claim that as for (1) we can form a MP1 of its truth-conditions but not a MP2; hence, I reformulate the radical contextualist’s commitment in terms of this distinction as follows:

(RC*) If one is unable to form a MP2 of what a sentence *S* is supposed to be about, one is not in a position to know its truth-conditions.

I then look at one possible reply from the radical contextualist: the reason why it is assumed that sentences such as ‘Oscar cuts the sun’ or ‘That apple is red’ lack context-independent truth-conditions is not that we are unable to form a MP2 of what they are supposed to be about, but the guessed fact that those sentences are semantically incomplete. The inability to form MP2s, if any, is just a consequence of the incompleteness of such sentences. I reply that, in this case, the contextualist *needs to justify his intuition of incompleteness*. One of the problems of radical contextualism is, indeed, that it simply assumes by intuition that certain sentences are semantically incomplete (e.g., because we do not intuitively grasp what would be literally and strictly meant by an utterance of ‘cut the sun!’, for which there is no ready background of practices which might help us to enrich the sense). In cases such as the utterance of ‘cut the sun’ (or ‘cut the sand’), I will then argue in accord with some of the claims of semantic minimalists, intuitions of incompleteness might result from applying pragmatic considerations to reach semantic conclusions, thereby committing what Salmon called a “pragmatic fallacy”. The idea is roughly as follows: if someone suddenly instructs me to cut the sand, I might

not understand what I am supposed to do because, *in trying to construct an ad hoc concept CUT**, the absence of a ready background of common practices which involve somehow cutting the sand might be responsible for leading the process to a failure: I don't manage to construct any ad hoc concept to the occurrence of 'cut'. Although this is why I have the feeling that I don't understand what is literally and strictly meant by the utterance, I cannot take this as reliable evidence for the semantic incompleteness of the sentence since *I am not actually entertaining the literal linguistic meaning of the sentence at all*. Yet, if one assumes that what the speaker means in uttering 'cut' is just the encoded concept (something like PRODUCE A PHYSICAL SEPARATION ON A SURFACE BY MEANS OF A MORE OR LESS SHARP INSTRUMENT), I will hold that the only reason for one to suggest that the sentence is semantically incomplete is to assume (RC*), that is, a misleading principle.

I end by emphasizing what I think is really at stake in the debate in which radical contextualism is involved: the issue of whether given the outstanding amount of contextual variability as to what we say by using sentences, it still makes sense to think of the semantics of natural languages in the way the more or less invariantist pictures (e.g., Borg, 2004; Cappelen and Lepore, 2005; Montminy, 2010) do. Truth-conditional invariantists have not yet given a satisfactory answer. The challenge to provide a reliable foundation to the more or less traditional pictures of meaning against the cases raised by radical contextualists is then a challenge still to be tackled.