

Precis of *Insensitive Semantics*
***PPR*, 2006**

Insensitive Semantics (I) has three components: It defends a positive theory; it presents a methodology for how to distinguish semantic context sensitivity from other kinds of context sensitivity; and finally, it includes chapters critical of other contributors on these issues. In this Précis, we outline each component, but before doing so a few brief 'big picture' remarks about the positions defended in *IS* are in order:

- An important motivation for *IS* is our opposition to a growing trend in contemporary philosophy towards various versions of 'contextualism' (not just in the philosophy of language, but also in epistemology, ethics, philosophical logic, metaphysics and linguistics). This trend, we argue, is fundamentally mistaken, both in its methodology and in its substance. Zoltan Szabo, commenting on *IS*, articulates this component of our view as follows:

...appeals to context sensitivity have become 'cheap' – the twenty-first century version of ordinary language philosophy's rampant postulations of ambiguity. Not only is this 'the lazy man's approach to philosophy,' it undermines systematic theorizing about language. The more we believe context can influence semantic content, the more we will find ourselves at a loss when it comes to explaining how ordinary communication (let alone the transmission of knowledge through written texts) is possible' (Szabo 2006)

This is an excellent articulation of the central motivation behind *IS*.

- At the same time, arguments and data adduced in favor of massive context sensitivity are not easy to dismiss. *IS* provides a *Neo-Gricean* framework for interpreting them; we introduce a theoretical framework and methodological principles fundamentally different from those that underlie Grice's distinction between conversational implicature and what is said. Yet our goals are the same: to explain the data about context sensitivity in a way that leaves room for a systematic (and largely context *insensitive*) semantics.
- If we're right, the study of speech act content and semantic content are sharply distinct areas of investigation. Failure to separate them is the main source of a

misguided commitment to contextualism in contemporary philosophical discussion.

In what follows, we present our positive theory, our central methodological claims, our central critical points, and we end with an elaboration on one of our positive theses, namely, Speech Act Pluralism.

1. The Positive Theory

Our positive proposal is presented in the last four chapters of *IS*. It is motivated by the methodological and critical chapters preceding them, but can be presented independently, as we will do here. As the subtitle of *IS* indicates, we defend two views: Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism. We'll say something about each and then elaborate on three important auxiliary theses.

Semantic Minimalism

Semantic Minimalism is the view that there is a level of content minimally influenced by context. In summary form, it is the view that for an utterance *u* of a well-formed sentence *S* in a context *C*, if you fix the referents of the obviously indexical/demonstrative components of *S* (the Basic Set of context sensitive expressions with which Kaplan begins 'Demonstratives' (1989), give or take a few contextuials) and if you disambiguate the ambiguous expressions, then what you end up with is a proposition.¹ We call this proposition the minimal semantic content of *u*.²

Take, for example, this utterance *u*: *Rudolf has a red nose*. We claim that once you fix the referent of 'Rudolf', say, to Rudolf, then you can describe the proposition *u* expresses, i.e. the proposition *that Rudolf has a red nose*. This proposition will be expressed by every utterance of 'Rudolf has a red nose' in which 'Rudolf' refers to Rudolf.

Though this might seem obvious, it is controversial and not unsurprisingly many philosophers would dispute what we just said. Stanley and Szabo (2000), for example, advocate the view that 'nose' is a context sensitive expression. Many philosophers, including Travis (1985, 1989, 1996) and Szabo (2001), argue that 'red' is. Almost all philosophers defend the view that quantifiers are context sensitive. In general, Semantic

¹ We also require that vague expressions be precisified, but this is inessential to our view and was done mostly in reply to opponents; see our 'Reply to Korta and Perry' below.

² We elaborate on this choice of terminology in 'Reply to Korta and Perry' below.

Minimalism is opposed to *any* view that postulates semantic context sensitivity beyond Kaplan's Basic Set, whether it be 'know', 'nose', 'red', 'could', 'possible', 'some', 'no', or any other of a variety of expressions philosophers, for various reasons and with differing agendas, classify as semantically context sensitive.

There's a summary of the arguments for Semantic Minimalism on pp. 150ff.

Speech Act Pluralism

According to Speech Act Pluralism (SPAP), every utterance of a sentence says a plurality of things. What an utterance says is massively context sensitive. It depends not only on the context of utterance, we argue, but also on the context of the interpreter (see Auxiliary Thesis (b) below).

The intended contrast is with Speech Act Monism, according to which each utterance says only one thing.³ Almost every philosopher since Frege has been committed to Speech Act Monism, wittingly or not.

Here's an example of the kind we use to motivate Speech Act Pluralism (from our 1997): Imagine an utterance of (3).

3. A: At around 11 p.m., I put on a white shirt, a blue suit, dark socks and my brown Bruno Magli shoes. I then got into a waiting limousine and drove off into heavy traffic to the airport, where I just made my midnight flight to Chicago.

According to SPAP, (4)-(6) are all true descriptions of what's said by an utterance of (3) (note that 4-6 are all different propositions):

- 4. A said that he dressed around 11 p.m., went to the airport and took the midnight flight to Chicago.
- 5. A said that he dressed before he went to the airport.
- 6. A said that he put on some really fancy shoes before he went to the airport.

The extent to which (4)-(6) will seem natural depends on the circumstance of the report; so arguments for SPAP are accompanied by small stories that describe the context for the report. Having argued that these reports are literally true (and not just appropriate or

³ For the record, our commitment to SPAP came long before our commitment to Semantic Minimalism. We first publicly advocated SPAP in our 1997 'On an alleged connection between indirect quotation and semantic theory'. Our Semantic Minimalism did not surface explicitly in print until a few years ago.

warranted), SPAP proponents conclude that in uttering (3), A (literally) said the complement clauses of (4)-(6). And that's just a tiny sample of what was said in uttering (3). In §4 below we elaborate on this view in ways that we did not in *IS*.

Arguments for Speech Act Pluralism are presented in Chapter 13.

Three Auxiliary Theses

Speech Act Pluralism and Semantic Minimalism are the two main views defended in *IS*. The rest of the book consists of arguments about semantic methodology, criticisms of alternatives, and responses to criticisms of our positive views. (In Chapter 11 we respond to the objection that some of our minimal propositions aren't real propositions and in Chapter 12 to the objection that they are psychologically unreal – a theoretically spinning wheel.) There are, however, three corollaries of our positive views worth highlighting:

Corollary (a) - Surprising Semantic Invariability: We speculate that even terms such as 'tall', 'fast', and 'ready' are semantically context *insensitive*. We make this suggestion not because it is central to Semantic Minimalism (as some critics suggest), but because the evidence indicates that they are. Those who disagree need to explain away the data. If that explanation is forthcoming, nothing in Semantic Minimalism *requires* a commitment to surprising semantic invariability. We go wherever the data lead us.

Corollary (b) - Denial of Context of Utterance Centrism: We claim that what speakers say with an utterance *u* of a sentence *S* in a context of utterance *C* is, in part, determined by features of the contexts in which *u* is interpreted. On this view, context sensitivity is not just sensitivity to the context of an utterance, but also to the context of interpretation.

Corollary (c) - Denial of First Person Authority over what's said: One consequence of (b) is that speakers don't have access to all of what they say with a single utterance. Speakers need not know anything about the contexts from which their utterances are interpreted. Nonetheless, these contexts are in part determinants of what they say.

2. Methodology

We make three central methodological claims in *IS*:

Methodological Claim (a) - Denial of MA/the Speech Act Conception of Semantics:

Since our 1997 paper, much of our work has involved criticism of a thesis that we call MA. In *IS* we formulated MA as:

MA: A theory of semantic content is adequate just in case it accounts for all or most of the intuitions speakers have about speech act content, i.e. intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, and state by uttering sentences.

We deny MA. It is a principle, we argue, that confuses semantic content with speech act content. Tacit, and sometimes explicit, acceptance of MA has, we argue, led philosophers to postulate more semantic context sensitivity than there is. Indeed, acceptance of MA implies, we argue, that context sensitivity is ubiquitous, i.e. that the Radical Contextualists are right. In this respect, recent work by Salmon has, from a very different perspective, come to the same conclusion (Salmon 2005). (Though we use the label 'MA', we wish we had used Salmon's more informative label, 'The Speech Act Conception of Semantics'.)

It is the denial of MA that enables us to combine Speech Act Pluralism with Semantic Minimalism. If you endorse MA, you cannot maintain both Speech Act Pluralism and Semantic Minimalism – the massive context sensitivity of what's said would imply that semantic content is massively context sensitive as well.

Methodological Claim (b) - Rejection of Context Shifting Arguments:

Context Shifting Arguments (CSA) require us to consider two utterances of an unambiguous, non-vague, non-elliptic sentence S. If the consensus intuition is that what's said or expressed by, or that the truth-conditions and so possibly the truth-values of, these two utterances differ, then CSA concludes S is (semantically) context sensitive (or at least you have evidence that it is). Appeal to CSA's are ubiquitous in the philosophy of language. As soon as you relinquish MA, these arguments must, we argue, be given up as well. They are uniformly bad. It is bad methodology, based on a tacit or an explicit acceptance of MA, to appeal to such arguments.

Methodological Claim (c) - Good Tests for Context Sensitivity:

We do *not* claim there are *no* interesting or informative connections between intuitions about speech act content and semantic content. One way to exploit intuitions about *what is said in uttering S* in order to locate its *semantic content* is to identify tests that help the theorist focus on the speech act content that a wide range of utterances of S share or with the content you can grasp if your knowledge of the context of utterance is minimal. A second strategy we use is to see whether the expression in question behaves like classical context sensitive expressions (such as ‘I’ and ‘you’) in certain respects. We exploit such strategies in Chapter 7.

4. Criticism

There are two important critical theses in *IS*:

- a. Moderate Contextualism is an unstable position: consistent Moderate Contextualists should become Radical Contextualists.
- b. Radical Contextualism is empirically inadequate and internally inconsistent.

We discuss these in turn, but first an explanation of the labels ‘Moderate Contextualist’ and ‘Radical Contextualist’:

- *Radical Contextualism* is a tradition that traces back to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, on through Austin, and is today represented by a wide range of philosophers, some of whom call themselves Relevance Theorists,⁴ some Neo-Wittgensteinians, some Sellarsians. We call them all Radical Contextualists. These theorists all hold some version or other of the view that every single expression is context sensitive,⁵ and that the peculiarities of members of the Basic Set of context sensitive expressions are of no deep theoretical significance.
- *Moderate Contextualism* tries to steer a middle course between Semantic Minimalism and Radical Contextualism by minimally expanding the Basic Set. Some Moderate Contextualists come to semantics with an agenda from, e.g.,

⁴ Cf., e.g., Sperber and Wilson (1986); Carston (2002) and Recanati (2004)

⁵ Different ways of characterizing their views: Every sentence is context sensitive, if the only context sensitivity you take into account is that due to expressions in the Basic Set, you won’t get a proposition or anything truth-evaluable.

epistemology or ethics and claim that expressions of particular importance in their field (e.g. 'know' or 'good') are context sensitive. Others are serious semanticists committed to MA and are led from MA to Moderate Contextualism via Context Shifting Arguments.

a. Instability of Moderate Contextualism

In Chapters 3-6, we argue that the arguments invoked by Moderate Contextualists inexorably lead to Radical Contextualism. No consistent Moderate Contextualist can remain moderate. In this regard, the Radical Contextualist is more consistent than the Moderate Contextualist.

b. Radical Contextualism is empirically false and internally inconsistent

In Chapters 7-9, we argue that Radical Contextualism is empirically inadequate and internally inconsistent. It is empirically inadequate because it cannot account for the ways in which we share contents across contexts. We bring this out by various thought experiments involving ways in which we talk about contents across contexts.

4. Further Elaboration on Speech Act Pluralism

There's one feature of SPAP we did not emphasize in *IS* that we would like to sketch here: namely, that SPAP follows naturally from the fact that speech acts are acts. We hope once this is clear support for SPAP will be enhanced.

We begin, then, with the entirely common place view inside the philosophy of action that any piece of behavior can, under the right circumstances, evince a plurality of acts. Donald's finger moves. It does so because he moved it. With that movement he also flipped the switch, turned on the light, alarmed the burglar, frightened a young girl; and panoply of other acts. Did he achieve all this with a single finger movement? The customary answer is 'Yes'.

It's true that the philosophical community divides on how best to characterize this plurality. But the issues here are universally recognized as metaphysical – namely, how best to individuate actions (and other events)? Kimeans say Donald performed as many distinct acts as are co-incidental with his single bodily movement; Davidsonians, in contrast, speak of the finger movement as constituting a single action, but admitting of multiple distinct and unequivalent action descriptions. As with SPAP, these distinct descriptions might be entirely independent of each other: it is surely possible for someone

to move his finger without, for example, turning on a light, or alarming a burglar. As Davidson once so aptly put it, ‘We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature’.

Sometimes our acts are more tightly connected. There cannot be a loud singing without a singing. The Kimean insists, though, that even here the acts are distinct, while the Davidsonian insists they might be two descriptions of the same act.

In short: everyone who writes on action agrees that a single bodily movement, like a finger’s moving, can instantiate a plurality of actions or at least admit of a range of distinct and independent action descriptions.

We see right away, then, a strong connection between SPAP and standard views about action attributions. Sayings are, after all, things we do – speech acts we perform. Movements of our larynx, lips, tongue and the other relevant articulators are bodily movements and under the right circumstances constitute actions we perform. Just as with other bodily movements, utterances, felicitously performed, can constitute a plurality of actions (or admit of a multitude of independent descriptions).

The connections run deeper: Take Donald’s turning on the light. Is this an act he *intended* to perform? Well, if he formed the intention to turn on the light, his act is surely one he intended to perform, and if carried out ‘in the right way’, he performed it intentionally.

What about his flipping the switch? Well, although it is an act he performed, he may not have intended to. Just the same, since it was an act he had to carry out to turn on the light – which let’s suppose was his ultimate goal in moving his finger – it is an act many theorists conclude he performed intentionally (assuming it was carried out in ‘the right way’).

What about alarming the burglar? This is an act he did and, suppose, that in virtue of so doing he brought about the burglar’s arrest. In that case, although his act is not one he intended and not one he even performed intentionally, still it is his act and that explains why he (and no one else) can be lauded for.

We are moving quickly into areas where controversy abounds – but the main points we hope are clear. There is a respectable area of philosophical research that struggles to settle on when an agent’s bodily movements constitute action, and for any

particular action what determines whether it is intended, unintended but intentional or unintended and unintentional. Of immediate interest to us here is that these very same issues arise when the domain is speech acts proper. Since speech acts are acts, none of what follows should surprise.

When John intended to tell you he thought Bill's lecture was awful, he can do so by uttering a sentence with the exact opposite meaning – e.g. he might utter 'Bill's lecture was great'. If his utterance is layered with the right degrees of sarcasm, he can still succeed in saying that Bill's lecture was no good. Sarcasm is a feature of John's behavior over which he has some authority but other external circumstances beyond his control can also determine which acts his movements perform.

If no burglar is present when Donald flipped the switch, it is impossible for him to alarm the burglar. If the electrical wiring is damaged, it is impossible to turn on the light. Likewise, when you utter 'Smith's murderer is insane', nodding in Stanley's direction, your utterance can say that Stanley is insane.

Furthermore, an act might be Frank's pushing your grandmother into a lake in 1970 because Ann, whom Frank pushed, later gave birth to Mary, who in turn gave birth to you. Point: circumstances absent at the time of the initial behavior can still shape what it is an agent does. Likewise, John's utterance of 'Bill's lecture was great' can later be correctly reported as saying that your grandfather gave a good lecture, even though Bill was not your grandfather when John made his utterance. Circumstances after that utterance influence what is said.

In sum: with a single bodily movement an agent can instantiate a plurality of acts: Some determined by events caused by the initial bodily movement; some determined by constituents of the initial bodily movement; some determined by events that occur after the initial bodily movement but not causally related to it; some intended; some though unintended are still intentional; and some neither intended nor intentional. These are but some ways in which a plurality of acts can be generated by a single bodily movement. The same, not so surprisingly anymore we hope, extends to speech.

With a single utterance a speaker can perform a plurality of speech acts: Some determined by constituents of the initial utterance; some determined by events that occur

after the initial utterance but are causally unrelated to it; some intended; some though unintended are still said; and so it goes.

To the extent that the facts about action in general are uncontroversial, the parallel ones for speech acts should be as well. But it is just this galaxy of facts that constitutes Speech Act Pluralism.

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