

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib
College of Agriculture/University of Al-Qadisiya

Abstract

Linguists who have worked according to Wittgenstein's notion "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use," aim to defuse various linguistic problems by analyzing key words in terms of what they are used to do or the conditions for appropriately using them. Although Moore, Grice and Searle exposed this error – mixing pragmatics with semantics – it still gets committed, now to a different end. Nowadays, the aim is to reckon with the fact that the meanings of a great many sentences undetermine what they would normally mean in using them – even if the sentence is free of indexicality, ambiguity, and vagueness. This can be so because the sentence expresses a "minimal" proposition or even because it does not fully express any proposition. Many theorists are led to defend "truth-conditional pragmatics" (or linguistic "contextualism"), to find a hidden index in every syntactic nook or semantic cranny, or otherwise to pay undue respect to seemingly semantic intuitions and intentions. This paper tries to identify various such moves and explains what is backward about them.

1. Introduction

Linguists have operated according to the notion – of Wittgenstein, that is – "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use." In ethics, for example, it is (and sometimes still is) supposed that because sentences containing words like *good* and *wrong* are used to express affective attitudes, such as approval or disapproval (or, alternatively, to perform speech acts like commending and condemning), such words are not used to make statements, hence that questions of value and morals are not matters of fact. This line of argument is fallacious. As Moore has pointed out, although one expresses approval (or disapproval) by making a value judgment, it is the act of making the judgment, not the content of the judgment, that implies that one approves (1942: 540-45). Sentences used for moral evaluation, such as 'Gambling is wrong' and 'Greed is good', are no different in form from other declarative sentences, which, whatever the status of their contents, are standardly used to make statements.¹

The fallacious line of argument exposed by Moore commits what Searle(1969: 136-141) called the "speech act fallacy". Searle gives further examples, each involving a speech act analysis of a linguistically important word. According to such analyses, the terms *true*, *know*, and *probably* do not express properties. Rather, because *true* is used to endorse statements (Strawson), *know* to give guarantees (Austin), and *probably* to qualify commitments (Toulmin), those uses constitute the meaning of these words. In each case, the mistake is the same: identifying what the word is typically

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

used to do with its semantic content.

Searle (1969: 141-46) also exposes the “assertion fallacy” which confuses conditions of making an assertion with what is asserted. Here are two examples. You wouldn’t assert that you believe something if you were prepared to assert that you know it, so knowing does not entail believing. Similarly, you would not describe a person as trying to do something that involves no effort or difficulty, so trying entails effort or difficulty. Grice (1961) has already identified the same fallacy in a similar argument, due to Austin, about words like *seems*, *appears*, and *looks*. Because you would not **say** that a table looks old unless you doubted or were even prepared to deny that it is old, the proposition that the table looks old entails that its being old is doubted or denied. This argument is clearly fallacious, since it draws a conclusion about semantics of the sentence from a premise about conditions on appropriate assertion. You can misleadingly implicate something without its being entailed by what you say.

These claims from linguists have been discredited for decades. So the reason why the researcher dredge them up now is that because essentially the same mistakes keep getting made. There continues to prevail an illicit mixing of pragmatics with semantics. Yes, people are no longer serving up misguided analyses of linguistically interesting expressions. Now they have a different concern: to reckon with the fact, appreciated only recently, that the meanings of a great many sentences, at least those are at all likely to be used, generally undetermine what they would normally mean in uttering them. This can happen even if the sentence in question is free of indexicality, ambiguity, and vagueness, and even if the speaker is using all of its constituents literally. In other words, what a speaker means in uttering a sentence, even without speaking figuratively or obliquely, is likely to be an enriched version of what could be predicted from the meaning of the sentence alone. This can be because the sentence expresses a “minimal” (or “skeletal”) proposition or even because it fails to express a complete proposition at all.

According to a number of theorists who appreciate the fact that sentence meaning undetermines speaker’s meaning grant that semantics concerns sentences (and their constituents) and that pragmatics concerns acts of uttering them. But they will then go ahead and conflate them anyway. They just don’t seem to appreciate what makes the pragmatic utterance sounds pragmatic and, in some cases, what makes the semantic item sounds semantic either. As a result, some theorists have been led to defend some form of “contextualism” or “truth-conditional pragmatics” and others to propose inflated conceptions of semantics. The researcher will not attempt to examine specific theories in any detail but will instead identify a series of moves that are central to one or another of them. Each move, the researcher will suggest, in one way or another conflates the semantic and the pragmatic. Before taking up these moves, (section 1) is set as an introduction of this paper whereas (section 2) states the researcher’s viewpoint of the nature of pragmatic utterance and then (section 3) gives a sample of sentences whose use typically does not make fully explicit what one would mean in uttering them. Then (section 4) identifies some suspect moves underlying different ways of trying to account for the fact that such sentences are typically used in enriched ways. The researcher

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

suggests that each of these moves needlessly conflates something pragmatic with something semantic.

2. Nature of Pragmatic Utterance

A speaker can convey a thought without putting **it** into words. He/She can say one thing (as determined by sentence meaning, perhaps relative to context) and mean something else (speaker's meaning). In order to communicate something to someone, the speaker has to come up with a sentence whose utterance makes evident, even if the sentence itself does not express, what it is that he/she intends to convey. The hearer's task is to understand the speaker or, more precisely, to recognize the speaker's communicative intention in making the utterance and, in particular, to identify what the speaker means. The meaning of the sentence provides the hearer with only part of his/her basis for figuring that out. The hearer needs also to take into account the fact that in that situation, the speaker utters that sentence with that meaning.

The very fact that a sentence is uttered gives rise to distinctively pragmatic facts. As Grice (1961) observes, it is the fact that a speaker utters a sentence with a certain semantic content (or even that sentence rather than another with the same content) that generates what he/she would later call a conversational implicature. His first example of this was an utterance of 'Jones has beautiful handwriting and his English is grammatical', made as an evaluation of Jones's philosophical ability, to implicate that Jones is no good at philosophy. A different sort of illustration is provided by Moore's paradox (so-called). If you say, "Snow is white, but I don't believe it," you are denying that you believe something you have just asserted. The contradiction here is pragmatic. That snow is white does not entail your believing in it (nor vice versa), and there's no contradiction in **my** saying, "Snow is white, but you don't believe it." The inconsistency arises not from what you are asserting but from the fact that you are asserting it. That is what makes it a **pragmatic** contradiction.

By way of asking what it would mean in uttering sentences containing such terms as *good*, *true*, *try*, and *appears*, ordinary language linguists came up with pragmatics-laden accounts of their meanings. They try to supplant sentences' truth-conditions with conditions for their appropriate (especially non-misleading) use and to equate what a speaker does in uttering a sentence with the semantic content of the sentence itself. However, a sentence has its content independently of being uttered.² Understanding a piece of it with hearing it and parsing it. A sentence's semantic content is a projection of its syntactic structure, as a function of the semantic contents of its constituents, and is something a competent hearer grasps by virtue of understanding the language. The speaker's act of uttering that sentence, with that content, provides or invokes additional information the hearer is to use in understanding an utterance of the sentence – there is no intermediate level of meaning between the semantic content of the sentence and the speaker's communicative intention in uttering it (see section 3.4 below).

As illustrated by generalized conversational implicatures (Grice's 1975: 37-8), there are regularities of use that, despite being systematic, should not be confused with linguistic meanings. Such pragmatic regularities can be explained by combining facts

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

about the semantic contents of sentences people utter with generalizations about people's acts of uttering them. To explain these regularities it does not have to resort to fanciful stories about the meanings of expressions based on observations about the conditions for their typical or appropriate use. Instead, it can apply what Robert Stalnaker (1999: 8) has aptly described as "the classic Gricean strategy: to try to use simple truisms about conversation or discourse to explain regularities that seem complex and unmotivated when they are assumed to be facts about the semantics of the relevant expressions"

Executing this strategy requires taking into account three key elements of communication. First, there is the distinctive nature of a communicative intention. As Grice has discovered, such an intention is "reflexive": the speaker intends his/her utterance "to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention" (Grice (1957: 220). Specifically, although Grice does not identify it as such, this effect is the recognition of the attitude the speaker is expressing (whether or not he actually has that attitude is another matter). So, an act of communication succeeds by way of recognition of the very intention with which it is performed. Compare this with, for example, the act of getting an audience to laugh, say by telling a joke. They can recognize your intention to get them to laugh without actually laughing. Normally, this would require that they find your joke funny (of course, they could find it funny that you are trying to get them to laugh, but that's not what you intend them to laugh at). In contrast, all it takes for an act of communication to succeed is for the audience to recognize the speaker's intention in performing it. In other words, a communicative intention has this distinctive property: its fulfillment consists in its recognition (by the audience). A communicative intention includes, as part of its content, that the audience recognize this very intention by taking into account the fact that they are intended to recognize it. Correlatively, in figuring out what the speaker's communicative intention is, the hearer takes into account, at least implicitly, *that* he/she is intended to figure out.³ To understand an utterance is to recognize the intention it which it is made.

Second, there is the fact that the speaker said what he said rather than something else. Perhaps he/she could have said something more informative, more relevant, or more appropriate. So the fact that he/she said what he/she said contributes to the explanation of why he/she said it, hence to the recognition of the intention with which he/she said it. Perhaps he doesn't know more, perhaps he doesn't want you to know more, perhaps it's obvious what he could have added. Also, the fact that he said what he said in the way he said it, using those words and with that intonation, rather than in some other way, may contribute further to the explanation, as with Grice's (1975/1989: 35-37) manner implicatures .

Third, although what the speaker says, the semantic content of the words he utters, provides the primary input to the audience's inference, the audience also takes into account what is loosely called "context." This is the mutually salient contextual information that the audience is intended to use to ascertain the speaker's communicative intention, partly on the basis that words are intended to do so. Here,

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

it must be stressed, context does not literally determine, in the sense of constituting, what the speaker means. Rather, at least when communication succeeds, it provides the audience with the basis for determining, in the sense of ascertaining, what the speaker means. What the speaker does mean is a matter of his communicative intention, not context, although what he/she could reasonably mean depends on what information is mutually salient.

Taking such information into account goes beyond semantics, for what a speaker means need not be the same as what the uttered sentence means. It is generally though not universally acknowledged that explaining how a speaker can say one thing and manage to convey something else requires something like Grice's theory of conversational implicature, according to which the hearer relies on certain maxims, or presumptions (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 62-65), to figure out what the speaker means. However, it is commonly overlooked that these maxims or presumptions are operative even when the speaker means exactly what he/she says. They do not receive just when something is implicated.⁴ After all, it is not part of the meaning of a sentence that it must be used literally, strictly in accordance with its semantic content. Accordingly, it is a mistake to suppose that "pragmatic content is what the speaker communicates over and above the semantic content of the sentence" (King and Stanley, 2005: 117). Pragmatics does not just fill the gap between semantics and the conveyed content. It operates even when there is no gap. So it is misleading to speak of the border or, the so-called "interface" between semantics and pragmatics. This mistakenly suggests that pragmatics somehow takes over when semantics leaves off. It is one thing for a sentence to have the content that it has and another thing for a speech act of uttering the sentence to have the content it has. Even when the content of the speech act is the same as that of the sentence, that is a pragmatic fact, something that the speaker has to intend and the hearer has to figure out.

There are various ways in which what a speaker means can go beyond or otherwise be distinct from the semantic content of the sentence he utters. One familiar case is speaking in a nonliteral way, by using metaphor, irony, metonymy, or some other figure of speech, whereby one says one thing and means something else. For example, 'You are the ribbon around my life' and 'That was the cleverest metaphor I've ever heard' are sentences likely used to convey something different from what their semantics predicts. In the other familiar case, of conversational implicature (or indirection generally), the speaker typically means not only what he says but also something else, as in Grice's example, "Jones has beautiful handwriting and. his English is grammatical."

Less familiar but no less common is what is called by this work as conversational "implicature" (Bach, 1994), where what the speaker means is not made fully explicit and is an enrichment of what he/she says. This can occur either because the sentence he/she utters expresses a 'minimal' proposition or because it is semantically incomplete, expressing no proposition at all, even relative to the context. This phenomenon is widely thought to undermine any dichotomous conception of the semantic/pragmatic distinction or at least to pose special challenges in accounting for

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

the relationship between what a speaker says and what he means in saying it. Such worries are illustrated by the nine different strategies to be discussed later for treating cases of implicature. In my view, however, these doubts are unwarranted, and the moves they have inspired actually confuse meaning and use. After giving (section 2), an assortment of examples of implicature, (section 3) will explain why these nine strategies are regarded as backward moves in pragmatics.

3. Examples

It is generally recognized that most sentences people utter in everyday life have semantic contents that are either too variable or too skimpy to comprise what people mean in uttering them, even when all of their constituents are used literally. Indexes whose semantic content are a function of context are the source of variable semantic contents, but here the researcher will focus on sentences whose semantic contents are too skimpy. The semantic content of a sentence can be too skimpy, relative to a speaker's likely communicative purposes in uttering it, either because the proposition it expresses lack elements that are part of what the speaker means or because what it expresses, its semantic content, falls short of comprising a proposition (presumably the things people mean in uttering sentences are propositions). Sentences of the first sort express so-called 'minimal' propositions, and sentences of the second sort are said to be semantically incomplete.⁵ When a speaker utters a sentence with minimal propositional content, what he/she means is an expansion of that. When a speaker utters a semantically incomplete sentence, what he/she means is a completion of its incomplete propositional content.

The first set of examples to follow contains sentences that express minimal propositions.⁶ In each case, what the speaker is likely to mean is expressible by an expanded version of the sentence he/she utters, perhaps one containing the italicized material in brackets.

Implicit quantifier restriction

Everyone [*in my family*] went to the wedding.

Lola had nothing [*appropriate*] to wear.

The cupboard [*in this house*] is bare.

Only Bill [*among those present*] knows the answer.

I have always [*since adulthood*] liked spinach.

Implicit Qualification

I will be there [*at the agreed time*].

I haven't had a coffee break [*this morning*].

Jack and Jill went up the hill [*together*].

Jack and Jill are married [*to each other*].

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

Jack walked to the edge the cliff and *[then]* jumped *[off the cliff]*.

Ronnie insulted his boss and got fired *[for insulting him]*.

Ronnie got fired and insulted his boss *[because he got fired]*.

Scalar “implicature” denial

It doesn't *[merely]* look expensive – it is.

He didn't *[just]* try to lift the desk – he did it.

Sam doesn't have *[only]* three kids – he has four.

“Metalinguistic” negation

I didn't trap two *[what are called]* mongeese – I trapped two mongooses. He's not *[what I'd call]* a shrink – he's psychiatrist.

In these cases, what the speaker means is, in the researcher's terminology, an “implicature,” is neither fully explicit nor merely implicated. Here the researcher is avoiding the unfortunate but common tendency to describe the whole thing, even though part of it is implicit, as the “explicit content” (or “explicature”) of the utterance. Calling it the “proposition expressed” or “what is said” by the utterance, as many do, is also inaccurate, since part of it is *not* expressed or said. It has to be inferred as being part of what the speaker meant.

The following are examples of semantically incomplete sentences, sentences that fail to express a proposition, even relative to a context. In each case, what the sentence expresses, as the result of semantically composing the semantic values of its constituents in accordance with its syntactic structure, is an abstract entity that is proposition-like but falls short of being a full proposition because it is missing at least one constituent. In these examples, complete propositions would have been expressed had the speaker included material that answers the question in parentheses.⁷ But since the speaker did not do this, what the speaker means is partly implicit, so that the hearer must figure what needs to be added to complete the proposition that is meant but not fully said.

Argumental incompleteness

Danielle just FINISHED a novel. (doing what: reading, writing, editing, typing, eating?)

Gentlemen PREFER blondes. (to what: brunettes, sheep?)

Brad is TOO old/not young ENOUGH. (for what?)

Psychological facts are not RELEVAN Psycho T. (to what?)

Spinach TASTES GREAT. (to whom?)

Vladivostok is FAR AWAY (from where?)

John is READY/LATE/EAGER. (to or for what?)

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

Parametric incompleteness

That statue is SHORT/CHEAP/OLD. (relative to what?)

That player is GOOD/TALENTED/VALUABLE. (in what respect?)

EVEN cowgirls sing the blues. (in addition to who?)

Gregor was MERELY a bookkeeper. (as opposed to what?)

Arnold MIGHT (for all who knows?) be in Los Angeles.

The examples of semantic incompleteness given so far are cases in which what the sentence expresses requires an additional constituent to comprise a proposition. In other cases the incompleteness is due to a particular term or phrase that does not determinately express one property (or relation), but not because of ambiguity or vagueness.⁸ Here are some examples:

Lexical undetermination (not ambiguity)

GET, PUT, TAKE; AT, BEFORE, IN, ON, TO

Phrasal undetermination (not syntactic ambiguity)

HAPPY girl/face/days

CONSCIOUS being/state

child/drug ABUSE

FAST car/driver/engine/tires/fuel/track/race/time

Willie ALMOST robbed a bank (he refrained, failed, robbed something else instead?)

A different kind of undetermination involves unspecified scope relations. I will not argue for this, but a case could be made that the logical form (as a level of syntax) of each of the following sentences does not specify the relevant scope relations. If so, these sentences are not structurally ambiguous but semantically undetermined.

Scope undetermination

The NUMBER of planets MAY be even.

FIVE boys ate TEN cookies.

I love you TOO. (interpretable in four distinct ways)⁹

4. Misoriented Moves

A sequence of moves will be outlined each of which in one way or another commits something like the error that have been made by the linguists more than fifty years ago. Each of these moves is a way of confronting the fact that a great many of the sentences used in everyday speech, typified by the examples above, either does not express the proposition the speaker is likely to mean or does not express a proposition at

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

all. The error is to suppose that this requires bringing something pragmatics into semantics.

1. Contextualism

The first move is that if a sentence expresses a minimal or an incomplete proposition and the speaker means more than that, then context fills the gap – by “supplying” the sentence with additional or more specific content. So, according to this idea, the context somehow manages to fill out, restrict, or complete the “proposition expressed” by “providing” needed constituents or by tightening, loosening, or otherwise modulating concepts expressed by particular constituents of the sentence.

The trouble with this move is that context is incapable of doing these things. It can play the limited semantic role of fixing the references of whatever pure indexicals occur in the sentence, but otherwise it cannot endow a sentence with additional semantic content, content not derived from the semantic values of its constituents in accordance with its syntactic structure. As mutually salient information, context can play merely the pragmatic, epistemic role of providing information for the *hearer* to use to infer what the speaker means in uttering the sentence.

This first move conflates the broad, pragmatic role of context with its limited semantic role, by confusing being determined (= ascertained) in context with being determined (= constituted) by context, and thus credits context with something it is incapable of.¹⁰ Context cannot determine, in the sense of constitute, what a speaker means. For example, if Alice says to Trixie, “Ralph hasn’t taken a bath,” and means that Ralph hasn’t taken a bath **today**, it is not the context that makes this the case. After all, Alice could have meant something else, however far-fetched, e.g. that Ralph hasn’t taken a bath since he found a dead rat in his bathtub. Of course, Alice could not reasonably mean this – she would have no reason to expect her communicative intention to be recognized.

2. Intentionalism

The next move is that the gap, construed as a gap in sentence semantics, is filled by the speaker’s communicative intention and, further, that since context, if restricted to mutually salient information, can not fill the gap, context must include the speaker’s intention. Since context so restricted is not fit to do that, it must be the speaker’s intention is, and so the intention is part of context, now more broadly conceived.

The trouble with this move is, first, that the speaker’s communicative intention can not endow sentences or particular expressions with semantic contents.¹¹ Nor is the intention part of the context. After all, this intention is what the hearer has to figure out, partly on the basis of the semantic content of that very sentence (along with mutually salient contextual information, given the presumption that the speaker uttered the sentence with an intention the hearer is to recognize). The speaker’s communicative intention can not add to the information the hearer needs to identify that very intention. Its identity is the conclusion, not a premise, of the hearer’s inference. Moreover, the sentence does not acquire additional semantic properties just by being uttered. Rather, it is by uttering the sentence with the semantic properties it already has that the speaker provides the hearer with the linguistic semantic part of his basis for figuring out

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

the speaker's communicative intention.¹²

3. Propositionalism

There is one move that seems to underlie those considered so far, that a declarative sentence has to express a proposition (at least relative to a context). This idea apes the deep-seated grammar school lesson that a complete sentence expresses a complete thought. According to this move, if a sentence does not express a proposition independently of context, then context or the speaker's intention (or something) simply **must** enable it to do so.

The trouble with this move is that it overlooks the possibility that some sentences are semantically incomplete or undetermined and fall short of expressing a proposition at all, even relative to a context. Presumably complete thoughts are fully propositional, but that does not mean that any sentence a speaker uses to convey a complete thought must itself have a complete propositional content (even relative to a context). As illustrated in section 2, some well-formed sentences do not. And it is a mistake to suppose that being semantically incomplete is to be context-sensitive.¹³

4. Utterance semantics

Many radical contextualists claim that most (if not all) declarative sentences do not express propositions, even relative to contexts. Some even are regarded as misguided at the very move of truth-conditional semantics for sentences. They are moved by the observation that for every true utterance of a given sentence, the speaker could have used the same sentence in the same circumstances to make a false utterance. So, they conclude, it must be the utterance, not the sentence, that expresses a proposition. The move, then, is that utterances, not sentences, are the primary linguistic items with propositional or truth-conditional contents, in which case utterances are the only available subject matter for truth-conditional semantics, or what Recanati (2004) prefers to call "truth-conditional pragmatics." A further rationale is that the semantic contents even of sentences that do seem to express propositions are too skimpy to comprise the stable and robust contents that our so-called semantic intuitions are responsive to.

One trouble with this move, and with the observation it is based on, is that it implies that thoughts are ineffable. For if they're not, a speaker can always use a more elaborate sentence to make fully explicit the thought he/she wishes to express. And those more elaborate sentences would have complete propositional, truth-conditional contents, assuming thoughts themselves do.

But there is a simpler trouble with this move: utterances do not express anything – speakers do.¹⁴ If by *utterance* one means an act of uttering a sentence rather than the uttered sentence (contextualists suppose sentences generally fall short of expressing propositions anyway), there is nothing for the content of an utterance to consist in other than what the speaker means. It is an illusion to suppose that utterances are **linguistic** entities over and above sentences.¹⁵ They are speech **acts**. And their contents are what

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

speakers mean in performing them. So there is nothing in between sentences and intentions (in uttering sentences) also capable of having contents. Accordingly, commonly used phrases like “the proposition expressed by an utterance” and the “truth-conditional content of an utterance” are highly misleading. Even more misleading, but just as commonly used, are the bare phrases “proposition expressed” and “truth-conditional content.” In any case, there is nothing for the truth-conditional “semantics” of utterances to be about, and calling it “truth-conditional pragmatics” does not help – it is really about what speakers mean.

The fact that many declarative sentences are semantically incomplete and do not have truth-conditional semantic contents does not begin to suggest that linguistic entities of some other sort do have such contents. But coherent sentence is still possible: the semantic content of a sentence is still a projection of its syntactic structure. Its content can be built up from the semantic contents of its constituents in accordance with its syntactic structure, whether the result is a complete structured proposition or a structure that fall short of being fully propositional. The job for pragmatics is not to provide a surrogate for semantics but to explain how semantically incomplete sentences can be used to convey complete propositions.

5. Indexicalism

Rather than indulge in the fanciful enterprise of utterance semantics, some linguists adopt a different strategy for saving Propositionalism. They stick with sentence semantics but suppose that sentences that seem not to express propositions actually do (relative to contexts, of course). Their move is that such sentences contain either hidden indexicals (variables) in their syntax or overt expressions that, contrary to appearances, actually are indexical. So, for example, in the sentence ‘Tom is tall’ the claim would be either that there is a hidden indexical whose semantic value is the relevant reference class (or standard) or that *tall* is itself an indexical, whose semantic value depends on the relevant reference class (or standard).

The trouble with this move is that it collapses semantic incompleteness into context-sensitivity. Otherwise, why fish for inaudible or unobvious context-sensitive sentence constituents whose semantic values complete the propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur? Except for when there is special syntactic or lexical justification, going on this expedition is like fishing in the Dead Sea.¹⁶ It is only by overlooking or dismissing the category of semantic incompleteness that one could suppose that any sentence that appears not to express a proposition actually does express one – by virtue of containing some context-sensitive element, whether hidden or disguised. Moreover, positing hidden or disguised indexicals does not simplify the explanation of how communication is possible when an apparently semantically incomplete sentence is used. After all, what the speaker means still has to be figured out by the hearer, by relying on mutually salient information that he/she can reasonably take the speaker to have intended him to take into account, and this is an entirely pragmatic matter. The hidden/disguised indexical approach needlessly assumes that whatever more the speaker means in order to convey a proposition corresponds to something in the syntax of the sentence and that this is somehow “supplied” or “provided” by the context. Proponents of this approach not only fail to explain how context manages to work this

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhammad Abbas Mitib

trick but also fail to realize that the only plausible account of it would inevitably appeal to the same intentional/inferential processes that the pragmatic approach requires. Adding indexical bells and whistles to sentences does not contribute to the explanation but misdirects it instead.¹⁷

6. Positing unarticulated constituents

This move gives up on the supposition that the semantic value of something in the syntax of a seemingly semantically incomplete sentence completes the proposition the sentence expresses. Rather, this semantic value is “unarticulated”: it is a constituent of the proposition expressed by the sentence even though this constituent does not correspond to anything in the sentence (whether phonologically articulated or merely present in the syntax). In other words, if a sentence seems not to express a proposition but the speaker is using all of its constituents literally and is conveying a proposition, then this sentence, as used in the context, semantically expresses that proposition – despite the fact that this proposition has at least one constituent that is not the semantic value of any constituent of the sentence.¹⁸

The trouble with this move is that there is no clear sense to the notion that the proposition with its unarticulated constituent is the semantic value of the uttered sentence. Rather, it is the semantic value of a different sentence, a more elaborate one that the speaker could have uttered, which does contain a constituent whose semantic value is the unarticulated constituent of the proposition in question. But this constituent is not the semantic value of a constituent of the sentence actually uttered. Once again, the mistake is to assume that since a sentence does not seem to express a proposition but the speaker is using all of its constituents literally and is conveying a proposition, this sentence, as used in the context, semantically expresses that proposition. It overlooks the fact that there is often a mismatch between what it takes for a declarative sentence to be well formed and what it takes for the sentence to express a proposition. Because the latter is partly a metaphysical matter (of, for example, whether or not what the predicate *is ready* expresses is a property), from a semantic point of view one can only let the propositional chips fall where they may.

7. Dichotomizing (what is said/implicated)

Another move appeals to the dichotomy between what is said and what is implicated. It supposes that if the speaker means something he is not implicating, he must actually be saying it.¹⁹ Suppose the semantic content of the sentence a speaker utters is at most a minimal proposition but the speaker is using all of the sentence’s constituents literally, so that what he/she means is an enrichment of its semantic content. Then, it is claimed, what he/she says is not fully determined by the semantic content of the sentence. What is said in this liberal sense is often described as the “proposition expressed” by the utterance, or as its “explicit content.”

The trouble with this move is that it is based on a false dichotomy. It conflates being implicated with being partly implicit. Of course a speaker can mean something that goes beyond the semantic content of the sentence he utters even if he is using all of its constituents literally. Even if he is not implicating anything, what he

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

means can be an enriched version of the sentence's semantic content, especially if what the sentence expresses is merely a minimal proposition or even no proposition at all. In the first case what he means is an expansion of what he says, in the second case a completion of it. In either case, part of what he means does not correspond to anything in the sentence. So it is not said but merely implicit in the saying of what is said.²⁰ To regard what the speaker means as the "proposition expressed," that is, as the (fully) explicit content of the utterance, is to treat something that's pragmatic as if it were semantic.

The confusion here stems partly from neglecting Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts, between saying something and doing something in saying it. This distinction is commonly neglected these days, perhaps because it is so easy to use *say* interchangeably with *state* or *assert*. But stating or asserting is to perform an illocutionary act, of trying to communicate something, and that goes beyond mere saying in the locutionary sense. As it has been pointed out previously (Bach 2001: 17-18; Bach 2005: 25), the locutionary notion of saying is needed, along with the correlative, strictly semantic notion of what is said, to allow for cases in which the speaker does not say what he intends to say, as in the misuse of a word or a slip of the tongue, (intentionally) says one thing but is not speaking literally and means something else instead, means what he says but means something else as well (cases of implicature and of indirect speech acts in general), or says something but does not mean (intend to communicate) anything at all. These are all cases in which the speaker says something that he does not mean.

8. Intuitionism

The next move takes a different route toward an expansive conception of what is said. It supposes that the business of semantics is to explain intuitions about what is said. This allows enrichments of strictly semantic contents to count as what is said. So if such intuitions are responsive to pragmatic contributions to the contents of utterances, then so much the worse for a purely semantic conception of what is said, and what we need is a "pragmatics of what is said" (Recanati, 1989).

The trouble with this move, insofar it is accurate about what the relevant intuitions are,²¹ is that it puts too much credence in them. Of course, semantics must reckon with supposedly semantic intuitions, but it does not have to take them at face value, much less have to explain them. It can explain some of them away, to the extent that they are found to be responsive not just to semantic contents but also to pragmatic regularities. Pragmatic regularities include default assumptions about the speaker's likely intent, standardized implicatures involving particular forms of words, and general facts about efficient communication. They all involve streamlining stratagems on the part of speakers and inferential heuristics on the part of listeners. These regularities count as pragmatic because it is the speaker's act of uttering the sentence, not the sentence itself, that carries the additional element of information. Intuitions are tainted also by the fact that when we consider a sentence in isolation, we make stereotypical assumptions about the circumstances of utterance. So one tends not to discriminate between the semantic content of a sentence and the likely import of uttering a sentence with that content. This is just what you'd expect if speakers typically do not make fully explicit what they

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

mean and exploit the fact that it's obvious what they've left out. Accordingly, we should not equate the semantic content of a (declarative) sentence with what it is normally used to assert (see Bach 2005 and Soames forthcoming).

9. Meaning as use again: pragmatic intrusionism

The final move is that pragmatics intrudes into semantics, not because intuition says so but for cognitive psychological reasons. Pragmatics contributes to what is said, so the argument goes, because what many sentences express in the would-be strict semantic sense – a minimal proposition or an incomplete proposition – plays no psychological role in understanding, and moreover, because implicatures are often calculated before the strict semantic content is calculated, if indeed the latter is calculated at all.

The trouble with this move is that it effectively conflates competence with performance, calculability with actually being calculated, and interpretation in the abstract semantic sense with interpretation in the pragmatic, epistemic sense. Claims about the semantics of a sentence and the information it encodes do not have specific implications for how that information is utilized. The argument fails to appreciate that what is said can play a psychological role even if it is not calculated, and that the relevant “implicatures” are really implicatures, which can be calculated during the course of sentence processing (see the experimental work of Storto and Tanenhaus (forthcoming) on the case of (so-called) scalar implicatures). So, for example, if the speaker says, “John has three wives and seven children,” and means that John has exactly three wives and exactly seven children, this can be understood without first representing the proposition that John has three wives and seven children, a proposition that is compatible with his having more than three wives and more than seven children. Moreover, the speaker does not mean two things, explicitly asserting this last proposition while implicating the distinct proposition that ‘John has exactly three wives’ and exactly ‘seven children’. He means only one thing, the latter, and this is an implicature, an expansion of what he says.

5. Conclusion

Many sentences are semantically incomplete, and many others express propositions that speakers are not likely to mean. There is no need either to bemoan this fact or make something of it, at least from the standpoint of sentence semantics. The only consequence this fact has for semantics is that the semantic contents of many sentences are not propositions (even relative to contexts) or are not the propositions people may intuitively suppose. Sentence semantics does not need bolstering from context or from speaker's intentions, which are instead relevant to the pragmatics of communication. There is no need to divert the attention of semanticists from sentences to utterances, for that would give them nothing to do. Nor is there any need to give them more to do, by finding, wherever semantic incompleteness lurks, hidden variables behind every syntactic bush or unarticulated constituents under every semantic stone.

The implications for pragmatics are straightforward. Allowances can be made for the fact that even if a speaker is using all of a sentence's constituents literally, he can mean,

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

without merely implicating, something beyond what the semantics of the sentence predicts. The additional element(s) are implicit in his saying what he says, and what he means is an enriched version of what he says. If the sentence is semantically incomplete, what he means includes a completion of what he says; if it expresses a minimal proposition, it includes an expansion of what he says. The fact that some linguists and some philosophers have intuitions that lead them to treat completions and expansions as explicit, as part of what is said, attests only to the fluency of their inferential abilities as speaker-hearers. And the fact that inferences about what speakers mean often do not include explicit representations of the semantic content of the uttered sentence, because they can operate locally on particular sentence constituents, does not suggest any sort of intrusion of pragmatics upon semantics. Rather, it suggests the need for enforcing the distinction between competence and performance, insofar as cognitive processes can be sensitive to available information without having to represent all of it explicitly.

There are many specific linguistic and psychological issues here that have not been taken up. For example, in many cases it is debatable whether a given lexical item is semantically undetermined or ambiguous and, similarly, whether a given phrase or sentence is structurally undetermined or ambiguous. In some instances, such as relational words like *local* and *enemy*, there may be a good case for positing hidden variables in syntactic structure. It may turn out that in some cases sentences that seem to be semantically incomplete are actually indexical. As for psychology, there are legitimate questions concerning how speakers manage to come up with sentences that make their communicative intentions evident and, when what speakers mean are enriched versions of what they say, how hearers manage to identify speakers' communicative intentions, given that the speaker said what he said in the context in which he said it. And there is the question of demarcating the constraints on what a speaker can be plausibly be supposed to mean in uttering a given sentence. These and related issues can be addressed without committing new versions of the speech act or assertion fallacies.

End Notes :

1- This leaves open the possibility that there is something fundamentally problematic about their contents. Perhaps such statements are factually defective and, despite syntactic appearances, are neither true nor false. But this is a metaphysical, not semantic, issue about the status of the properties ethical predicates purport to express.

2- Of course, in denying that meaning is use, the researcher is not denying the platitude that linguistic meaning is ultimately grounded in use. The researcher does deny that individual uses (other than effective stipulative definitions) endow expressions with new meanings.

3- Grice (1957: 219) anticipates that this may seem "to involve a reflexive paradox," but insists that "it does not really do so". The audience does not have to already know **what** the speaker's intention is in order to figure what it is, but merely **that** he/she is intended to

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhammad Abbas Mitib

figure this out.

4- So it is **not** a “standard Gricean assumption ... that any material derived via conversational principles constitutes an implicature” (Carston, 2002: 100). For one thing, the maxims come into play in resolving ambiguities and determining references. Indeed, they can even bear on figuring out what the speaker uttered, as when one does not hear the utterance clearly.

5- The term ‘minimal proposition’ was introduced by François Recanati (1989: 304), but the term has been used recently by Cappelen and Lepore (2005) slightly different, for what they take to be the propositions expressed by sentences that almost everyone else takes to be semantically incomplete.

6- To keep matters relatively simple, the researcher limits the discussion to declarative sentences, the ones that are generally assumed to express propositions.

7- The researcher assumes that the highlighted words in the sentence (*finished, prefer, etc.*) does not have associated with it a hidden variable, whose value is the constituent in question, and that the term itself is not a disguised indexical. For present purposes it does not matter if this assumption is wrong about particular terms, so long as there are plenty of other good examples (contrary to the idea discussed in section 3.5).

8- It is important to understand that semantic undetermination in particular and semantic incompleteness in general is a case of not fully expressing a proposition. It is not a case, as is sometimes supposed, of the sentence underdetermining the proposition explicitly expressed by the sentence, since the sentence does not express a proposition. Nor is it a kind of indexicality, in which the linguistic meaning provides for variable semantic content.

9- Well worth noting are examples like *The cat is on the mat, John cut the grass, The kettle is black, and The ball is round.*, which Searle (1978) and Travis (e.g. 1997) think are semantically undetermined – and to be typical of most sentences. Their reason is that whether one would count the sentence as true or false depends partly on the context. However, perhaps what one is really evaluating is what the speaker would mean in uttering the sentence. Maybe the sentence is not really semantically undetermined, but in uttering it a speaker is likely to intend something more specific than its semantics predicts, something that includes a perhaps elaborate but implicit qualification on what he says. But if Searle and Travis were right, including more words would rarely suffice to make one’s thought fully explicit – and most thoughts would be inexpressible.

10- The narrow, semantic role of context is to provide values for the parameters set by the “character” of an indexical (Kaplan 1989).

11- The researcher is not talking about the speaker’s linguistic intention to use an ambiguous expression in one of its senses rather than another. But even that intention does not endow the expression with a meaning – it just makes operative a particular meaning the expression already has.

12- A special case of Intentionalism concerns reference by demonstrative pronouns and phrases. The idea is that since the reference of a demonstrative is not determined by the context of utterance, it can only be determined by the speaker’s referential intention

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

in using it. And, since demonstrative reference is a matter of sentence semantics, the speaker's intention must be semantically relevant after all. The trouble with this idea is that it conflates what the demonstrative itself does with what the speaker does in using it. Yes, the speaker's referential intention, as part of his/her communicative intention, determines what he/she is using the demonstrative to refer to, but this intention does not thereby endow it with referential properties itself. Demonstratives suffer from a character deficiency – they do not refer, even as a function of context. Their meanings can only impose constraints on speakers' referential uses of them. See Bach, 1987: 186-192, Bach 2005: 39-41, and Soames forthcoming.

13- Interestingly, even critics of semantic contextualism, notably Cappelen and Lepore (2005), buy into this idea. They agree with contextualists that **if** a given sentence did not express a proposition it would be context-sensitive, even if it contains no obvious indexicals, but they deny that there are any such sentences and suppose instead that sentences that seem to everyone else to be semantically incomplete actually express a complete but very weak proposition. Clearly they assume that being semantically incomplete entails being context-sensitive.

14- This is also the trouble with Levinson's (2000) contention that generalized conversational implicature establishes the need for a level of utterance-type meaning intermediate between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. Without actually giving an argument for this contention, Levinson seems to assume that because GCIs are associated with forms of words but are not literal meanings (he calls them "presumptive meanings" because, like particularized conversational implicatures, they are cancelable), they comprise a distinct level of meaning. However, the only difference between GCIs and PCIs is that GCIs do not require special contextual triggering. This difference bears on the hearer's inference, not on the meaning of anything.

15- It won't help to invoke sentence tokens, as if they have autonomous semantic properties. Token semantics is, well, token semantics (see Bach 1987: 85-88).

16- One proponent of this idea, Jason Stanley (2000), claims that there is syntactic justification for hidden variables. He relies on a "Binding Argument," due originally to Barbara Partee (1989), for the existence of

hidden variables in the syntax. The idea is that in a sentence like 'Every species of mammal has members that are tall', *tall* picks out a different property with respect to each species, hence that either it is bindable or has a bindable variable associated with it. However, Recanati (2004: 110-114) has argued that this argument is fallacious (not that his appeal to unarticulated constituents is any more warranted – see section 3.6), and, as Cappelen and Lepore have argued (2005: ch.6), this argument overgenerates, leading to an absurd proliferation of variables. The researcher would add that the likely use of the above sentence involves an implicature: Every species of mammal has members that are tall **for that species**.

17- The researcher is not denying that there can be lexical grounds for attributing implicit arguments to particular expressions, such as *local*, *foreign*, and *enemy* (see Bach 2001: 38). But one must be judicious in using such arguments.

18- It should be noted that John Perry (1986), when introducing the notion of unarticulated constituents, claimed that certain utterances, not sentences, express

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhammad Abbas Mitib

propositions with unarticulated constituents. However, as argued above (section 3.5), there is no job for utterance semantics to do.

19- Worth noting here is the common misconception that what is implicated is inferred from what is said. What is inferred is what it is that is implicated, and what this is inferred from is the fact that the speaker said what he said. See Bach 2006 for discussion of other misconceptions about implicature.

20- Here, the researcher assumes what has been called the Syntactic Correlation Constraint and what Carston calls the Isomorphism Principle (2002: 22).

21- Psychological research suggests otherwise. Experimental work by Gibbs (2002) indicates that many subjects count the contents of metaphorical utterances as what is said.

References

- Bach, Kent (1987), *Thought and Reference*, paperback edition, Oxford: O.U.P.
- _____ (1994), "Conversational implicature," *Mind & Language* 9: 124-162.
- _____ (1999), "The semantics-pragmatics distinction: What it is and why it matters," in Ken Turner (ed.), *The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface from Different Points of View*, Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 65- 84.
- _____ (2001), "You don't say?" *Synthese* 128: 15-44.
- _____ (2005), "Context *ex machina*," in Z. G. Szabó (ed.), *Semantics versus Pragmatics*, Oxford: O. U. P., pp. 15-44.
- _____ (2006), "The Top 10 Misconceptions about Implicature," in B. Birner and G. Ward (eds.), *Drawing the Boundaries of Meaning: Neo-Gricean Studies in Pragmatics and Semantics in Honor of Laurence R. Horn*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- _____ and Robert M. Harnish (1979), *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cappelen, Herman and Ernie Lepore (2005), *Semantic Minimalism*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carston, Robyn (2002), *Thoughts and Utterances*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gibbs, Raymond W., Jr. (2002), "A new look at literal meaning in understanding what is said and implicated," *Journal of Pragmatics* 34: 457-486.
- Grice, Paul (1957), "Meaning," in *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 213-223.
- _____ (1961), "The causal theory of perception," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 35 (suppl.): 121-152.
- _____ (1975), "Logic and conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 22-40.
- Kaplan, David (1989), "Demonstratives," in J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: O.U. P., pp. 481-563.

Backward Moves in Pragmatics and Semantics

Muhannad Abbas Mitib

King Jeffrey and Jason Stanley (2005), in Z. Szabó (ed.), *Semantics versus Pragmatics*, Oxford: O. U. P., pp. 111-164.

Levinson, Stephen C. (2000). *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Moore, G. E. (1942), "A reply to my critics," in P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp. 535-677.

Partee, Barbara (1989), "Binding implicit variables in quantified contexts," in C. Wilshire, B. Music, and R. Graczyk (eds.), *Papers from CLS 25*, Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society, 342-365.

Perry, John (1986), "Thoughts without representation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60 (suppl.): 263-283.

Recanati, François (1989), "The pragmatics of what is said," *Mind & Language* 4 (1989): 295-329.

_____(2004), *Literal Meaning*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John R. (1969), *Speech Acts*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

_____(1978), "Literal meaning," *Erkenntnis* 13: 207-224.

Soames, Scott (forthcoming), "The gap between meaning and assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean," in M. Hackl and R. Thornton, *Asserting, Meaning, and Implying*.

Stalnaker, Robert (1999), *Context and Content*. Oxford: O. U. P.

Stanley, Jason (2000), "Context and logical form," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23: 391-424.

Storto, Gianluca and Michael Tanenhaus (forthcoming), "Are scalar implicatures computed online?," *Proceedings of WECOL 2004*.

Travis, Charles (1997), "Pragmatics," in B. Hale and C. Wright (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 87-107.

الخلاصة

ان اللغويين الذين عملوا وفقا لفكرة فيتجنشتاين " لا تبحث عن المعنى ، ابحت عن الاستخدام " يرومون حل المشاكل اللغوية المختلفة من خلال تحليل الكلمات الرئيسية (المفتاحية) من حيث استخدامها أو الظروف الملائمة لاستخدامها بشكل مناسب . على الرغم من أن مور ، جرايس و سيرل قد وضخوا هذا الخطأ - خلط البراغماتية (التداولية) مع علم الدلالة (المعاني) - لا يزال يرتكب هذا الخطأ (الخلط بين الاثنيين) الآن إلى غاية ما مختلفة . إن الهدف في الوقت الحاضر هو اعتبار حقيقة أن معاني جمل كثيرة وعديدة يقلل من اثبات ما نعني عادة في استخدامها - حتى لو كانت الجملة خالية من المتغيرات ، اللبس ، و الغموض . يمكن أن يكون هذا الامر و ذلك لأن الجملة تعبر عن "حد ادنى" لما تقترحه او تتضمنه او تفترضه أو حتى انها لا تعبر عن أي مقترح تماما . ويقود هذا الامر العديد من المنظرين للدفاع عن " البراغماتية (تداولية) الحقيقة/ الحالة المشروطة" (أو " السياقية " اللغوية) ، لإيجاد دليلا خفيا في كل زاوية نحوية أوركناً دلالي ، والا لا يولى اي احترام لا مبرر له على ما يبدو إلى حدسنا الدلالي ونوايانا . تحاول هذه الورقة تحديد مختلف هذه التحركات وشرح ما هو متخلف عنها او يخالفها .