

Minimal (Disagreement About) Semantics

Introduction

The semantic minimalist maintains that for every grammatical sentence the semantic values of the words it contains (perhaps relative to a context) and the logical form of the sentence determine a unique proposition that is the *semantic content* of the *sentence* (perhaps relative a context). The truth conditional pragmatist denies that *sentences*, even relative to a context, encode such semantic contents.¹ My purpose here is to argue that on this point of contention Semantic Minimalism faces a daunting challenge, one that its advocates have thus far failed to meet. The challenge, which I will call the *naturalistic challenge*, is this: Suppose it is a fact that a sentence S (perhaps taken relative to a context) encodes proposition P as its *semantic content*. What *fixes*, or *grounds*, this fact? In other words, of the uncountably many propositions or sets of truth conditions there are, what makes it the case that P, as opposed to P*, is *the* semantic content of S? I think that it is agreed on all sides that *if* it is a fact that P is the semantic content of S (perhaps relative to context), then this fact must be grounded in natural psychological and/or sociological facts concerning the abilities and practices of competent speakers and interpreters. If the alleged facts concerning semantic content are not somehow grounded in such natural facts, then semantics would not fit into Chomsky's cognitive paradigm in linguistics, nor even into the broader project of "naturalizing epistemology." This is a consequence that I believe all parties would like to avoid.² Indeed, though no semantic minimalist has *explicitly* addressed the naturalistic challenge, semantic minimalists have apparently been motivated to provide an account of

semantic content which illustrates how such facts are grounded in facts concerning the ability and behavior of competent language users.

In what follows I will first explain in general terms the dispute between Truth Conditional Pragmatics and Semantic Minimalism, and then I will consider three potential responses to the naturalistic challenge: The first response to the challenge is provided by Borg (2004); the second by Soames (2002); and the third by Cappelen and Lepore (2005a, 2005b, 2005c). I will argue that none of these responses is adequate. The tentative conclusion is then that even if Semantic Minimalism were correct in maintaining that associated with every grammatical sentence S (perhaps relativized to a context) there is a unique proposition that is the semantic content of S, such facts would fall outside the explanatory domain of empirically oriented semantics that is concerned to explain the abilities and practices of competent language users. I will conclude with some remarks concerning the consequences of this conclusion for the debate between Semantic Minimalism and Truth Conditional Pragmatics.

I. Semantic Minimalism and Truth Conditional Pragmatics

Both Semantic Minimalism (SM) and Truth Conditional Pragmatics (TCP) have developed as responses to counterexamples against traditional Frege and/or Davidson inspired semantic theories which utilize what I call the “assign and combine model.” According to this model, what is said by an uttered sentence is determined compositionally by the relevant syntactic structure of the sentence, and the semantic values of the words in the sentence (some of which can be determined only relative to contexts). Thus, according to this model, what competent interpreters do when they come to understand what is expressed by an utterance is, first, determine the logical form

of the utterance and what words occur in it. Then, relying on their lexical knowledge, they assign semantic values to these words; at this stage interpreters appeal to context to assign semantic values to indexicals and demonstratives. Finally, they apply their knowledge of the compositional semantic theory for their language to the logical form and the semantic values of the words, and thereby arrive at the truth conditions of, or equivalently what is said by, the utterance.³ A semantic theory according to this model consists of a finite number of rules stating how semantic values of lexical items are combined, in accordance with the logical form, to determine truth conditions; a semantic theory thus expresses a function *from* the logical form of a sentence and the semantic values of words in the sentence *to* the truth conditions of the sentence.

Since semantic theories that utilize this “assign and combine” model express a function *from* (i) logical forms and (ii) the semantic values of words (relative to contexts), *to* truth conditions, they are subject to counterexamples of the following form: Suppose that according to such a semantic theory sentences S and S’ (perhaps identical) have (i) the same logical form, and (ii) there are contexts C and C’ such that the semantic values of the words in S relative to C are the same as those of S’ relative to C’, *but* the truth conditions of S in C are not the same as the truth conditions of S’ in C’.⁴ Such a pair of sentences and contexts would constitute a counterexample against an assign and combine theory because it would demonstrate that, contrary to the theory, the truth conditions of sentences relative to contexts are not a *function* of the “formal” properties and features described in conditions (i) and (ii). For example, consider two utterances of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’. Since there are no context sensitive words in the sentence, conditions (i) and (ii) are satisfied for any pair of contexts. (I will ignore tense

throughout this paper.) But now consider the intuitive truth conditions of utterances of this sentence in the following contexts: In context C one is attempting to identify the ten largest organisms that have ever lived. In such a context an utterance of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ would intuitively express something *false*. In context C’ one is discussing the sizes of terrorist leaders. In such contexts an utterance of the sentence would intuitively express something *true*. Hence ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ constitutes at least an apparent counterexample against the assign and combine model.

The debate between the proponents of TCP and SM concerns what the appropriate response to such apparent counterexamples is. Advocates of TCP maintain that such examples demonstrate that the assign and combine model is inadequate for natural language. They maintain that such counterexamples demonstrate that the “formal” semantic properties and features described in conditions (i) and (ii) are insufficient to determine truth conditions, and that other information and inferences, *pragmatic* information and inferences, are required. According to TCP, interpreting an utterance is a two-step process. The first step is identical to the process described by the assign and combine model except that according to TCP the output of this purely semantic processing is not propositional; it is not truth conditions, nor “what is said.” In the words of Neale (2004), the result of this purely semantic decoding of a sentence X is merely “a *blueprint* for ... what someone will be taken to be saying when using X to say something” (2004, p. 85). The second step consists of pragmatic processes that utilize the blueprint produced in the first step, and information provided by the context of utterance, to produce fully propositional, truth-conditional, content. According to TCP

then, propositions, or truth conditions, are not semantically encoded; only *blueprints for* truth-conditional content are semantically encoded.⁵

The advocates of SM, however, maintain that the alleged counterexamples against the assign and combine model do not undermine the model.⁶ They maintain that advocates of TCP mistakenly take such alleged counterexamples to undermine the model because TCP does not distinguish between two sorts of propositional content: *speech act content*, and *semantic content*. According to SM there are two sorts of facts concerning truth conditions: facts concerning the truth conditions of speech acts, and facts concerning the truth conditions of sentences (relativized to contexts). Moreover, SM maintains that the *semantic content* of a *sentence* S (relative to a context) and *the speech act content* of an utterance (in, or relative to, the same context) are typically radically different. In the following passage Cappelen and Lepore express this radical divergence:

... speakers use sentences to make claims, assertions, suggestions, requests, ... statements, raise hypotheses, inquiries, etc., the contents of which can be (and typically are) *radically different* from the semantic contents of ... these utterances. The speech act content ... depends upon a potentially indefinite range of facts about the speaker, his audience, their shared context *These facts have no bearing on the semantic content of the utterance.* (2005c p. 211, my italics)

Borg also draws sharp distinction between our intuitive judgments of speech act content and the semantic content of sentences. Borg identifies “what is said” with speech act content, and she uses the “notions of [*oratio obliqua*] and judgments of what is said interchangeably” (2002, p. 8, footnote 1). She declares that

...there is *no* semantically privileged notion of ‘what is said’, and thus no considerations concerning *oratio obliqua* should constrain or otherwise affect our semantic theorizing” (2002, p. 7.)

Indeed, SM maintains not only that speech act content is radically different from semantic content, but moreover SM maintains that competent speakers have intuitive access only to speech act content. Soames, for example, writes,

... we ought to give up the assumption that individual speakers have internalized semantic theories that provide them with the means of identifying the propositions semantically expressed by sentences and distinguishing them from other propositions the sentence may be used to assert or convey. Having done this, we have no reason to expect that whenever two sentences semantically express the same proposition [or two utterances of the same sentence express the same proposition] competent speakers who understand the sentences will recognize that they express the same proposition... (2002, p. 71-2).

By positing a layer of semantic content that is not only radically different from what is intuitively said by utterances but also hidden from our intuitive judgments, SM is able to insulate the assign and combine model from apparent counterexamples. For any apparent counterexample involving S in C and S' in C', SM will maintain that the intuitive judgment that S in C expresses different truth conditions than does S' in C' concerns only speech act content, and not semantic content. Because semantic content is not accessible to our intuitive judgments, the apparent counterexamples provide no reason for thinking that the semantic content of S in C and S' in C' are distinct. And thus there is no counterexample against the assign and combine model because the model applies only to semantic content, and not to speech act content.

There can be little doubt that *if there is* in addition to intuitively accessible speech act content a layer of more theoretic semantic content that is tailor-made for the assign and combine model, then SM succeeds in insulating the assign and combine model from apparent counterexamples. But once one discerns the underlying theoretical motivations of SM, the significance and relevance of the naturalistic challenge becomes evident.⁷ For this additional layer of truth conditions seems to be an *ad hoc* posit, the only purpose of

which is to preserve the assign and combine model at some level of abstraction. What reason, independent of the assign and combine model, can be provided for thinking there is such a layer of truth-conditional content? Indeed, if the semantic content of S (relative to contexts) is, as the advocates of SM insist, radically different from the intuitive content competent speakers express and communicate to each other using S, then how *could* this alleged fact be fixed by, or grounded in, the psychological processes and/or social practices of competent speakers and interpreters? And if such natural facts do not fix the fact that P, as opposed to some other proposition P*, is the semantic content of S (relative to a context), then what role could such content play in theorizing about how competent speakers are able to express their thoughts and communicate using language?

II. Why Borg Fails to Meet the Naturalistic Challenge

Borg maintains that our tacit purely linguistic knowledge is encapsulated in a module which realizes a Davidson-style semantic theory. According to Borg,

... there is a discrete language faculty, containing specialized bodies of knowledge and operations on that knowledge, dealing with phonetics, orthographics, syntax, and semantics. ... It would ... fall within the purview of the language faculty to calculate the mental representation of the truth-condition of the natural language sentence 'The cat is on the mat', where what is constructed is a language of thought sentence which exhibits connections to the external world just to the extent that the language of thought expressions out of which it is constructed exhibit such relations (to put it crudely, since CAT hooks up to cats, and MAT hooks up to mats, the truth-conditions for the natural language sentence 'the cat is on the mat' turns on how things stand with some cat and some mat). (Borg, 2004, p. 84).

It might seem that the sort of cognitivist Davidsonian view Borg is advancing is well-suited to provide a response to the naturalistic challenge. The challenge, put in terms of Borg's example sentence, is this: "Suppose that the proposition semantically encoded by 'The cat is on the mat' is P, and not P*. What makes it the case that P, as

opposed to P*, is the semantic content encoded by the sentence?" Borg can respond that P rather than P* is the semantic content because the semantic component of the language faculty, which is an encapsulated mental module, "calculates" mental representations that she would represent something like this:

(1) 'The cat is on the mat' IS TRUE *IFF* THE CAT IS ON THE MAT.

The capitalized items represent expressions in the language of thought. And Borg maintains that the content of an expression in the language of thought is "determined by its connection to a certain object, or a certain property, in the world." So, the language faculty of a competent interpreter will take a sentence as input, and calculate a bi-conditional such as (1) which represents the truth conditions encoded by the sentence in virtue of the way the language of thought expressions "hook up" to the world. As Borg puts it, "word-world relations [are] (somewhat derivatively) ... a proper part of the language faculty" (2004, p. 85). Hence in response to the naturalistic challenge Borg can respond that 'The cat is on the mat' encodes P, as opposed to P*, because of the way the semantic component of the language faculty functions. So on Borg's view the semantic facts are fixed by psychological facts concerning competent interpreters, though according to Borg the facts that do the fixing concern the unconscious processes of the semantic component of the language faculty, which are not in any way "constrained or affected" by intuitive judgments of speech act content.

Borg's example sentence, 'The cat is on the mat', and what she says about the semantic content of this sentence, reveals that the response to the naturalistic challenge sketched above is not adequate. Borg says that the semantic content of 'The cat is on the

mat' is something to effect that "some cat" is on "some mat." Consider two such propositions:

P: { w : in w , at particular time t , the cat Fatty is sitting squarely in the middle of a doormat in front of #10 Downing Street}

P*: { w : in w , at particular time t , the cat Fluffy is sitting squarely in the middle of a doormat in front of the White House}

Unless the language faculty fixes one of these propositions as *the* semantic content of 'The cat is on the mat', Borg's response fails to respond to the naturalistic challenge. If 'The cat is on the mat' semantically encodes the proposition that some particular cat is on some particular mat, then – if it is to adequately respond to the naturalistic challenge – the language faculty must determine *which* particular cat, Fatty or Fluffy, or Fuzzy, or ... is on *which* particular mat. But, as Borg's loose gesture in the direction of "some cat" and "some mat" betrays, the language faculty, simply by translating English into mentalese, will fail to do this.

Clearly then Borg should deny that 'The cat is on the mat' has as its semantic content a singular proposition involving some particular cat and some particular mat. Rather, she should follow Lepore (2004) and maintain that sentences containing definite descriptions semantically encode propositions corresponding to Russellian expansions of those descriptions. On this view then the language component would "calculate" something like this biconditional:

(1a) 'The cat is on the mat' IS TRUE IFF $(\exists!x)(\exists!y)[CATx \ \& \ MATy \ \& \ ON(\langle x,y \rangle)]$

This particular sentence of mentalese is now, and has always been, obviously false, since there are many cats and many mats. And thus whenever a speaker utters 'The cat is on the mat' she will be uttering a sentence which encodes an obviously false proposition.

This result of course conflicts with our intuitive judgments concerning the truth conditions of such utterances, but this conflict should not deter Borg from adopting a Russellian analysis. For on her view our intuitive judgments concerning the truth conditions of utterances must not “affect our semantic theorizing” (2002, p. 7). Because Borg insulates her semantic theory from the intuitive semantic judgments of competent interpreters, there can be no “conflict” between her semantic theory and such intuitive judgments.

But putting the matter this starkly underscores the significance of the naturalistic challenge for Borg’s version of SM: If the facts about semantic content are so radically different from, and are not in any way affected by, the intuitive semantic judgments of competent interpreters, then what fixes these facts? What makes it the case that P, and not P*, is the semantic content of ‘The cat is on the mat’? Borg’s response is that the language faculty links ‘The cat is on the mat’ to ‘THE CAT IS ON THE MAT’ and this sentence of mentalese hooks up to P, and not P*. But this response only relocates the problem. For what, if not the intuitive judgments of competent language users, makes it the case that THE CAT IS ON THE MAT hooks up to P, and not P*? Above we noted that if Borg’s response is to succeed, each sentence in the language of thought, e.g. ‘THE CAT IS ON THE MAT’, must “hook up” with a *unique* proposition, and thus Borg cannot allow that ‘THE CAT’ hooks up with different cats on different occasions.⁸ So it seems that the language of thought correlates of definite descriptions must have a Russellian semantics (or some other sort of contextually invariant semantics). But merely invoking a Russellian analysis of definite descriptions is not going to solve the fundamental problem. Set aside the questions concerning definite descriptions, and

consider the other expressions in the language of thought. For example, what exactly is the contextually invariant semantic value (or extension) of 'ON' and what makes it the case that *that*, rather than some other extension, is *the* extension?

Consider a world w^* in which there is only one cat, Fluffy, and only one mat, m , and, for reasons that do not concern us, in w^* (at the relevant time) Fluffy is hovering one inch over m , though Fluffy's tail periodically brushes m .⁹ Now suppose, for reductio, that the language faculty for competent speakers links, via Davidsonian calculations, the natural language sentence 'The cat is on the mat' with 'THE CAT IS ON THE MAT' and that this sentence in the language of thought hooks up to one and only one proposition P . Now either the semantic content of 'The cat is on the mat' is true in w^* , or not. That is, either $w^* \in P$, or $w^* \notin P$. Thus, if it is facts concerning the semantic module of the language faculty that make it the case that P is the semantic content of 'The cat is on the mat' then there must be something about this semantic module which determines whether or not $w^* \in P$. But, according to Borg, all that semantic modules do is produce instances of representations such as (1) and (1a), and the calculation of such representations will not suffice to determine whether or not $w^* \in P$. Thus such calculations in the language faculty will not suffice to determine a proposition that can serve as *the* semantic content of 'The cat is on the mat.' The initial challenge was, "What, if not the judgments and practices of competent speakers, makes it the case that P is the semantic content of 'The cat is on the mat'?" And Borg's response was, "The language faculty links 'The cat is on the mat' to 'THE CAT IS ON THE MAT' and the unique content of this sentence of mentalese is P . That's what makes it the case that P is the semantic content of 'The cat is on the mat'." But now it is apparent that Borg's response merely relocates the problem.

For what, if not the judgments and practices of competent speakers, makes it the case that the content of ‘THE CAT IS ON THE MAT’ is P, rather than P*?¹⁰

That Borg’s appeal to a Davidsonian language of thought model fails to address the naturalistic challenge is disguised as a result of Borg’s conflation of, and equivocation between, two importantly different notions of *truth conditions*.¹¹ Sometimes Borg uses ‘truth conditions’ in such a way that *truth conditions* are *representations*, specifically T-theorems such as (1) and (1a). But other times Borg uses the term to refer to *truth makers*, entities relative to which representations are evaluated for truth or falsity (e.g. possible worlds, situations, facts, etc.). Borg does not appreciate the inadequacy described above because she infers *from* the plausible premise that the language faculty produces some sort of T-theorem-like representations *to* the conclusion, which is not at all plausible, that the language faculty all by itself fixes the *truth-maker* truth conditions encoded by sentences. This equivocation is apparent in the following passage in which Borg summarizes her view with regard to an utterance of the indexical sentence ‘That is mine’:

... to grasp the literal content of an utterance of ‘that is mine’ one need only entertain a thought of the form: α belongs to β . We have already noted that to find out more precisely what belongs to whom, one needs to look beyond the information which is linguistically encoded, yet this does not entail that the language faculty alone is incapable of yielding complete [truth-maker] truth-conditions (or ‘fully saturated propositions’, if one prefers proposition talk). For the [T-theorem] truth-conditions of such token sentences can be generated entirely within the language faculty; for instance, ...the proper [T-theorem] truth-condition for a token of ‘that is mine’ is simply:

[(2)] If t is a token of ‘that is mine’ uttered by β , and the token of ‘that’ therein refers to α then t is true iff α is β ’s. (p. 206).

The advocate of TCP is willing to grant to Borg that every competent speaker of English has a modular language faculty, and even that their understanding of utterances

of ‘That is mine’ is partially explained by the fact that this faculty produces instances of (something like) (2). Indeed, it seems to me that the advocate of TCP must grant that the cognitivist Davidsonian model is very plausible with regard to our competence with regard to *linguistic meaning*, i.e. with regard to what Neale would call *blueprints*. Since TCP does maintain that *sentences* encode such blueprints, the advocate of TCP can agree with Borg that, in a sense, sentences encode *T-theorem* truth conditions. But the advocate of TCP denies that such blueprints themselves determine propositional content, or *truth maker* truth conditions. For according to TCP *truth-maker* truth conditions are determined only after a blueprint is developed via pragmatic processes which depend upon contextually variant sorts of information. So, in equivocating between the two sorts of truth conditions, Borg is conflating the two aspects of meaning – now using that term in the most general sense – that TCP is concerned to distinguish, viz. meaning qua blueprints, and meaning qua propositional content.

III. Why Soames (2002) Fails to Meet the Naturalistic Challenge

Soames’ (2002) offers a different sort of potential response to the naturalistic challenge. Soames, like Borg, also attempts to ground facts concerning the semantic content of sentences in facts concerning what competent speakers and interpreters do. But whereas Borg appeals to putative facts concerning the cognitive processing which account for an individual’s semantic competence, Soames appeals to sociological facts concerning the linguistic judgments and behavior of a linguistic community:

... semantic claims about the expressions of a language are not claims about the individual psychologies, or states of mind, of language users; rather they are social claims about the conventions and commonalities found in a linguistic community (Soames, 2002, p. 71.)

The relevant conventions and commonalities fix the “competency conditions” for using S (assuming S has no indexical features). The competency conditions for S consist of “information grasp of which explains speaker’s ability to understand it, and be able to use it competently” (2002, p. 56). Since what counts as *understanding* and/or *competent use* of S can be determined only by a community of language users, the competency conditions for S are fixed by sociological facts.

Moreover, the competency conditions associated with S fix the semantic content of S. According to Soames, “the information (proposition) [S] semantically encodes ... is invariant from context of utterance to context of utterance” (Soames, 2002, p. 55). This is simply to say that if we are to assign to each (non-ambiguous, non-context-sensitive) sentence *type* a unique proposition as its semantic content, then semantic content cannot vary from utterance to utterance, as does speech act content. Thus, “the constant information semantically encoded by a sentence must be carefully distinguished from the varying information it is used to convey [and/or or assert] in different contexts” (Soames, 2002, p. 55). But what determines the core semantic content from all the other information that is conveyed and/or asserted by an utterance of S? The core semantic content is, according to Soames, the minimal core of information that is determined by the competency conditions associated with S as opposed to information which is grasped by interpreters in virtue of special features of the contexts in which S is uttered.

Soames is especially concerned with the semantics of proper names, and his view is best illustrated in terms of one of his examples involving proper names.¹² Consider an utterance by Soames of

(3) Carl Hempel lived on Lake Lane in Princeton.

to a graduate student in the philosophy department at Princeton University. In such a context of utterance both the speaker and the interpreter have mutual knowledge of each other's expertise in analytic philosophy. Given this special mutual knowledge, Soames' utterance of (3) conveys, and probably even asserts, to the student *that Prof. Carl Hempel, the great philosopher of science, lived on Lake Lane in Princeton*. But this relatively rich proposition is not the semantic content of sentence (3) because this proposition is not determined solely by the competency conditions associated with (3). For instance, Soames explains, "one doesn't have to know that Carl Hempel was a philosopher at all in order to understand and be a competent user of the name ['Carl Hempel']" (Soames, 2002, 64). What then is the core semantic content expressed by (3)? According to Soames it is the singular, or Russellian, proposition consisting of Carl Hempel – under no description whatsoever – and the property of having lived on Lake Lane in Princeton. It is "the conditions governing what it is to be a competent user of an arbitrary proper name n" (p. 65) that determine this singular proposition to be the semantic content of (3).

So according to Soames it is the competency conditions associated with S, as established by a community of language users, that determine what the semantic content of S is. This view concerning what metaphysically determines the semantic content of a sentence S implies a sort of epistemological procedure for discerning what the semantic content of a given sentence S is: "If S is a sentence that doesn't contain indexicals or other context-sensitive elements, then the semantic content of S (i.e. the proposition it semantically expresses) should consist of information that a competent speaker who assertively utters S asserts and intends to convey *in any context* in which S is used

nonmetaphorically (without irony, sarcasm, and so on) with its normal literal meaning” (Soames, 2002, p. 57, my emphasis). Since the semantic content of S is fixed by the competency conditions associated with S, and the competency conditions do not vary across normal contexts, the semantic content of S cannot vary across normal contexts, where a *normal* context is, roughly, a context in which S is used *literally*. So to discern the semantic content of S, it will suffice to find the proposition that is conveyed and/or asserted by *every* literal utterance of S.¹³ To put the idea somewhat metaphorically, let each literal utterance of S determine a set of asserted or otherwise conveyed propositions. To discern the semantic content of S, take the *intersection* of *all* these sets; the semantic content of S is *the* proposition that is a member of every such set. In what follows I will refer to this general procedure for discerning the semantic content of S as the *intersection procedure*.

As presented thus far there is a glitch in the intersection procedure for discerning semantic content. For it is plausible that whenever a proposition P is conveyed, so are some of its obvious entailments. If this is right, then the intersection procedure will never yield a unique proposition, since every proposition obviously entails some distinct proposition. For example, suppose, as is plausible, that every literal utterance of ‘Dogs bark’ conveys the proposition *that dogs bark*. *That dogs bark* obviously entails the proposition *that either dogs bark or pigs fly*. And therefore the intersection procedure does not distinguish between *that dogs bark* and the disjunctions this proposition obviously entails as being *the* semantic content of ‘Dogs bark’. Because obvious entailments of conveyed propositions are also conveyed, the intersection procedure will never yield unique propositions as semantic contents. It is relatively clear, however, what

the intuitively correct results should be, and thus Soames proposes to solve this problem by invoking the following intuitive idea: the fact that *that dogs bark* is conveyed by an utterance of ‘Dogs bark’ *explains* the fact that the disjunction is conveyed, but not vice versa. As Soames puts it, “there is an explanatory priority here” (2002, p. 61). Thus, in order to avoid the problematic result that the intersection procedure does not yield *unique* propositions, Soames appeals to this intuitive idea of explanatory priority. The amended intersection procedure is then expressed in the following principle:

SC1. A proposition *p* is semantically expressed by a sentence *s* **only if** *p* [is a member of the intersection] and there is no other proposition *q* such that the fact that *q* [is a member of the intersection] explains why *p* [is a member of the intersection] (2002, p. 62).

The real problem with the intersection procedure, however, is not that it will result in *too many* candidates to serve as the semantic content of *S*, but rather that it will not yield *any* candidates; sometimes, often, the intersection procedure will yield the empty set. What this means is that for many sentences *S* the sorts of facts that Soames says fix the semantic content of *S* fail to fix the semantic content of *S*; i.e. Soames’ response to the naturalistic challenge is inadequate. Soames himself has acknowledged this shortcoming with the intersection procedure, and in response he has, correctly in my view, rejected SM in favor of TCP.¹⁴ One of the examples that Soames (2005) provides to motivate this rejection of his former view again involves identity and proper names. First, let us apply the intersection procedure to the identity sentence

(4) Carl Hempel is Peter Hempel.

According to Soames, the intersection procedure applied to (4) will yield the result that its semantic content is simply the singular proposition relating the referent, Hempel, to himself via the identity relation; the semantic content cannot contain any descriptive

information because there is no descriptive information, no mode of presentation, that is conveyed by *every* literal utterance of (4). The only proposition (with explanatory priority) conveyed by *every* literal utterance of (2) is the singular one. Since semantic content is compositional – recall that the real motivation for positing semantic content is to preserve a layer of truth-conditional content that preserves the assign and combine model – it follows that a knowledge ascription such as

(5) Mary knows that Peter Hempel is Carl Hempel.

has as its semantic content the singular proposition that relates Mary, the referent, to the singular proposition encoded by (4) via the *knowledge* relation. Now suppose that Mary, a graduate student in philosophy at Princeton, knows that Carl Hempel is a great philosopher of science, and she has just been introduced to Peter Hempel, but she does not know that Peter Hempel is Carl Hempel. Scott understands Mary's failure to identify Peter and Carl, and he intends to convey this to his audience with a literal utterance of the negation of (5):

(Neg-5) Mary does *not* know that Peter Hempel is Carl Hempel.

Again because semantic content must obey compositionality, the semantic content of (Neg-5) must be the singular proposition which denies that the *knowledge* relation holds between Mary and the singular proposition semantically encoded by (4). The problem is that this negated proposition is *obviously* false, but competent speakers do *not* interpret Scott as conveying obviously false information with his literal utterance of (Neg-5). As Soames puts it, “no ordinary conversational participant – not even those fully apprised of Peter Hempel's identity – would dream of accusing the speaker of falsely asserting that Mary doesn't know of the pair consisting of Mr Hempel and Mr Hempel that the former

is the latter” (2005, p. 374). The upshot is that *no* proposition is conveyed by *every* literal utterance of (Neg-5). For, as Soames argues, no one proposition containing descriptive information is conveyed by *every* literal utterance of (Neg-5), and Scott’s utterance of (Neg-5) does not convey the singular proposition with no descriptive content. So the intersection contains no propositions containing descriptions of Mr Hempel, nor does the intersection contain the singular proposition containing only Mr Hempel. There is thus *no* proposition conveyed by *every* literal utterance of (Neg-5); the intersection procedure yields the empty set. Hence, the intersection procedure yields the result that (Neg-5) has no semantic content – *or at least the result that its semantic content is not truth-conditional*.

One might think that the problem arises only because of Soames’ acceptance of the principle of semantic innocence, according to which the semantic content of a sentence remains constant regardless of whether the sentence appears on its own or as a clause in a larger sentence. But the problem arises regardless of one’s allegiance to semantic innocence. Consider

(Neg-4) Carl Hempel is not Peter Hempel.

As Soames argues, the semantic content of (Neg-4) cannot contain any descriptive information, since the descriptive information conveyed by utterances of (Neg-4) varies from utterance to utterance. So the only plausible candidate that could serve as the semantic content of (Neg-4) is the necessarily, and obviously, false singular proposition denying that Mr Hempel is related to himself via the identity relation. But this necessarily false singular proposition cannot be the semantic content of (Neg-4) either. For consider the graduate student Mary; though she is a bit confused about Mr Hempel,

she is certainly a competent user of both ‘Peter Hempel’ and ‘Carl Hempel’, and thus she is a competent user of (Neg-4). But if she were to sincerely and literally utter (Neg-4) she would not convey the necessarily and obviously false singular proposition that Mr Hempel is not self-identical. So again the intersection procedure yields the empty set – there is no proposition that can serve as the semantic content of (Neg-4).

The two examples above involve proper names, and thus one might think that it is Soames’ direct reference account of the semantic content of proper names that is the source of the problems for the intersection procedure. But, first, this response gets matters backwards: the direct reference account of proper names is a *consequence* of the intersection procedure; Soames uses the intersection procedure to argue against description theories and thereby support Kripke’s direct reference theory. Second, there are many obviously problematic sentences that do not contain proper names. Consider

(6) The woman cannot continue.¹⁵

Some of the problems result from the definite description. Clearly competent speakers can and do use (6) to convey information about different women, so the only hope for the semantic minimalist is to endorse a Russellian semantics for definite descriptions; if Soames were to endorse some sort of referential treatment, the intersection procedure would yield no one proposition as being *the* semantic content. But a Russellian treatment of the definite description will result in the intersection procedure again yielding the empty set. For it is implausible to suppose that any competent speaker will *ever* use (6) to convey, among other things, that there is one and only one woman in existence. But Soames (2002) must endorse an even stronger claim, viz. that competent speakers *always* use (6) to convey this obviously false proposition. But this strong claim is clearly false.

Since not every literal utterance of (6) by a competent speaker conveys, among other things, that there is one and only one woman in existence, it again follows that the intersection procedure yields the empty set. The result of the intersection procedure is that no proposition is the semantic content of (6).

The verb phrase of (6), with its elided direct object, is problematic for similar reasons. Competent speakers use literal utterances of (6) to say of various specific women that they cannot continue doing various specific activities: studying, working, running, breathing, etc. But of course the activity about which something is being said varies from utterance to utterance, and thus no one specific activity can feature in the semantic content of (6). Thus, in a move analogous to the appeal to Russell's existential analysis of the definite description, Soames (2002) might claim that the elided direct object is replaced by an existential quantifier (perhaps one that is somehow both singular and plural). So the semantic content of (6) would then be something along the lines of, *that the woman cannot continue doing something(s)*. (I am here ignoring the problems with the definite description, as well as tense.) But this analogous response fails for analogous reasons: It is extremely implausible that competent speakers *ever* use (6) to convey the obviously (and perhaps *necessarily*) false proposition *that the woman cannot continue doing something(s)*. But, again, Soames (2002) needs to endorse an even stronger claim: viz. that competent speakers, when speaking literally, *always* use (6) to convey this obviously (and necessarily) false proposition. But this strong claim is, again, clearly false.¹⁶

Consideration of sentences such as (6) ought to cause one to wonder if the intersection procedure *ever* yields a unique result. Is there *any* sentence S and

proposition P such that it is even relatively plausible that every literal utterance of S conveys P?¹⁷ It is somewhat ironic that the examples Soames (2002) provides to support the thesis that “the phenomenon of asserting more than the semantic content of the sentence one utters is all but ubiquitous” (2002, p. 77) seem to do more to support the thesis that the intersection procedure often fails to yield a proposition. Consider Soames’ “Coffee, Please” example:

A man goes into a coffee shop and sits at the counter. The waitress asks him what he wants. He says, “I would like coffee, please.” The sentence uttered is unspecific in several respects – its semantic content does not indicate whether the coffee is to be in the form of beans, grounds, or liquid, nor does it indicate whether the amount in question is a drop, a cup, a gallon, a sack, or a barrel. (2002, p. 78).

Given that the sentence ‘I would like coffee’ could be used to assert that one has any one of the wide diversity of desires Soames gestures toward, and many others as well, how plausible is the claim that there is some unique proposition that is conveyed by *every* literal utterance of ‘I would like coffee’? Or, to account for the indexical ‘I’, our question really needs to be, “How plausible is it that for every class of utterances of ‘I would like coffee’ where the referent of ‘I’ is held fixed, there is some proposition such that every utterance in the class conveys this proposition?” Again taking our cue from Russell’s existential analysis of definite descriptions, if there were such a proposition it would have to be a very abstract sort of existential proposition concerning a desire regarding some entity or event that bears some sort of relation to coffee, in some form or other. For only such an abstract existential generalization could be conveyed by both, e.g., Hillary Clinton’s utterance of ‘I want coffee’ used to indicate her preference concerning the color of a formal gown she is buying, and also conveyed by her utterance of the sentence to instruct her staff that the caterers should serve coffee, and not tea, at a

fundraising breakfast for her constituents. Could such an abstract existentially generalized proposition serve as the semantic content of ‘I would like coffee’ (or ‘Hillary Clinton would like coffee’)? I am skeptical that any such existentially generalized proposition could be formulated, but the point is moot. For even *if* there were some very abstract existentially generalized proposition such that *every* possible literal utterance of ‘I would like coffee’ (by Hillary Clinton) conveyed this proposition, it is clear that no such proposition would, for every such utterance, have *explanatory priority*.

Recall that in order to avoid the result of the intersection procedure yielding *too many* candidate propositions to serve as *the* semantic content of a sentence, the procedure was amended so that only propositions with *explanatory priority* were candidates for semantic content. Now consider Hilary’s utterance of ‘I would like coffee’ used to assert proposition

(A) *that Hillary Clinton wants the caterers to serve the liquid made from coffee in the usual way at the fundraising breakfast.*

If Hilary’s utterance succeeded in asserting this proposition, then it is at least plausible that it would also assert all of the obvious entailments of (A), including all of the obvious existential generalizations of (A); some of these existential generalizations might be thought to be asserted by *all* of Hilary’s literal utterances of ‘I would like coffee’. One such existential generalization is

(B) *that Hillary Clinton wants some event E to take place were E bears some relation R to some form F of coffee.*

Suppose that both (A) and (B) are conveyed, indeed asserted, by one of Hilary’s utterances of ‘I would like coffee’. Which proposition has explanatory priority? Does the fact that (A) is asserted explain the fact that (B) is asserted, or does the fact that (B) is

asserted explain the fact that (A) is asserted? Clearly the former is the case: It is (A) that Hillary intends to assert, and that she does assert this relatively specific information is what explains how she also manages to assert the existential generalization (B) (granting for the sake of argument that (B) is asserted). The general point is that even if one could find some existentially generalized proposition that all possible literal utterances of ‘I would like coffee’ by Hillary Clinton asserted, such an abstract proposition could not serve as the semantic content of ‘I would like coffee’ (relativized to Hillary Clinton) because it would not be *explanatorily prior* to all of the more specific propositions Hillary asserted.¹⁸

Perhaps then the advocate of SM should not appeal to existential generalization to articulate what the semantic content of ‘I would like coffee’ (relativized to Hilary Clinton) is. Perhaps he should just say that the semantic content of ‘I would like coffee’ (relativized to Hillary Clinton) is simply

(C) *that Hillary Clinton would like coffee*

and that’s that. But we must be careful here not to confuse the two notions of truth conditions. Nobody denies that every utterance of the following T-theorem is true:

(7) ‘I would like coffee’, relativized to Hillary Clinton, is true iff Hillary Clinton would like coffee.

The naturalistic challenge for SM is, what conditions, what possible worlds, satisfy, or make true, ‘I would like coffee’ (relativized to Hillary Clinton) and moreover what determines that just those situations, as opposed to others, are the ones that make true the sentence? For example, is the sentence (relativized to Hillary Clinton) made true by situations in which Hillary wants Bill to spill hot coffee, as opposed to warm milk, on himself? And what determines whether or not situations of this kind satisfy the sentence

(relativized to Hillary Clinton)? Simply being told that the sentence (relativized to Hillary Clinton) encodes the proposition *that Hillary Clinton wants coffee* does nothing to answer these questions.

At this point the semantic minimalist may start to wonder if I am demanding too much. Perhaps the appropriate response to the naturalistic challenge is not to attempt to ground (alleged) facts about the semantic content of sentences in the cognitive processing of competent speakers, nor in the judgments and behavior in communities of competent language users. Perhaps the appropriate response is to pass the buck: If the challenge is metaphysical, then perhaps it should be left to the metaphysicians. This is the response endorsed by Cappelen and Lepore.

IV. Why Cappelen and Lepore Fail to Meet the Naturalistic Challenge

Recall the naturalistic challenge: Suppose SM is correct, and every sentence S has as its semantic content some proposition P (perhaps relative to contexts), where the semantic content of S is typically “radically different” (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005c, p. 211) from the speech act contents interpreters intuitively judge utterances of S to assert. What then fixes or determines the purely semantic fact that P, rather than P*, is the semantic content of S? Cappelen and Lepore do not, to my knowledge, address precisely this objection, though it is, I suggest, what is really behind the two objections against SM they do consider.¹⁹ The first, which they call the “metaphysical objection,” calls into question the existence of propositions which might serve as the semantic contents of certain sentences. For example, a critic advancing the metaphysical objection denies that there is a unique proposition that is the semantic content of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall.’ The second objection considered by Cappelen and Lepore, which they call “the

psychological objection,” is that even if there were such a proposition, it would “play no role whatsoever in the mental life of communicators” (2005a, p. 182). My purpose in this section is thus to analyze the responses Cappelen and Lepore provide to these objections and discern whether or not these responses suggest a way for SM to meet the naturalistic challenge.

The objector raising the metaphysical objection doubts, e.g., that the sentence ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ encodes a proposition, or expresses truth conditions. Cappelen and Lepore present this objector as posing the question “what is it to satisfy the semantic truth conditions of ‘[Osama Bin Laden] is tall?’” (2005c, p. 205, ignoring tense). And here is Cappelen and Lepore’s reply:

Our quick, and we think completely satisfactory, reply is given by ... [(8p)]:

[(8p)] ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ semantically expresses the proposition *that Osama Bin Laden is tall*.

At this point we are very much in danger of again making the mistake, illustrated in the above passage from Borg, of conflating the truth-maker sense of ‘truth conditions’ and the T-theorem sense of ‘truth conditions’. To answer the question, which concerns *truth-maker* truth conditions, they must do more than *mention* (8p); they have to make an *assertion by using* (8p), and thereby specify – with the use of the right-hand-side of the bi-conditional – the proposition P that is, allegedly, the semantic content of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall.’ It is not clear that they have even attempted to make such an assertion, but let us suppose they had. What would follow?

First, note that, according to Cappelen and Lepore, the content we interpreters intuitively judge this assertion to have is probably “radically different” than the semantic content the sentence encodes. This is because, again, the speech act content we interpret

utterances as asserting “depends on a potentially indefinite range of facts about [Cappelen and Lepore], and [we interpreters] and [our shared context] ... These facts have no bearing on the semantic content of the [sentence uttered]” (2005c, p. 211). Given the sharp distinction that SM *must* draw between intuitive speech act content and encoded semantic content, and the difficulty of distinguishing them,²⁰ Cappelen and Lepore’s confidence that they have succeeded in helping us discern the proposition encoded by ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ is misplaced. If intuitive speech act contents are as different from semantic contents as Cappelen and Lepore suggest, then it seems that simply uttering a sentence will never suffice to specify the semantic content of a sentence.

But these worries are somewhat tangential to the naturalistic challenge, which grants to Cappelen and Lepore both that ‘Osam Bin Laden is tall’ encodes a unique proposition P, and even that they can somehow communicate to us what this proposition is. The naturalistic challenge in this case amounts to the following question: Suppose ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ encodes P. What fixes this alleged semantic fact? Why does the sentence encode P, as opposed to some other proposition P*? Consider, for example, a possible world w^* in which Osama Bin Laden is 5’11”. Is w^* in the semantic content of “Osama Bin Laden is tall” or not, and what determines this? Even ignoring the difficulty Cappelen and Lepore face in communicating to us the semantic content of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’, the appeal to (8p) does nothing to address the naturalistic challenge.

Thankfully for my purposes, however, Cappelen and Lepore do not stop with their quick appeal to (8p), for they imagine their objectors responding to their quick appeal to (8p) as follows:

... I can't take this theory seriously unless you tell me more about what the right-hand side of [that] bi-conditional mean[s] (or require[s], or demand[s] or ...) (2005c, p. 205).

Now for the reasons stated above, the imaginary objector who wants to know what proposition is the semantic content of 'Osama Bin Laden is tall' is right to demand more information, for an assertion of (8p) is too polluted with speech act content to specify for interpreters whatever the unique proposition encoded by the sentence is. But that objector is not me; I am willing to grant to Cappelen and Lepore that some proposition P is the semantic content of the sentence. What I demand to know is why P, and not P*, is the semantic content. Fortunately what Cappelen and Lepore say in response the imaginary objector also at least addresses the naturalistic challenge. Here's what Cappelen and Lepore say:

If you think there is such a thing as tallness [and Cappelen and Lepore are confident that you do], then let that be the semantic value of 'tall' in 'Osama Bin Laden is tall' and in answer to the question as to what it takes for that sentence to be true we say that it is whatever it takes for Osama bin Laden to have that property (2005c, p. 208).

Now Cappelen and Lepore confess that they are not accomplished metaphysicians, and thus they have only some crude guesses as to what it takes for something to instantiate tallness. And thus they confess that they really do not know what it takes for the sentence to be true; i.e. since they do not know what it takes for Osama to instantiate tallness, they do not know if world w^* (a world in which Osama Bin Laden is 5'11") is a member of the truth conditions of 'Osama Bin Laden is tall'. But, they do not think this is an embarrassment for SM, for the objector's view that they "qua semanticists, are required to respond to this challenge" is "absurd" (2005c, p. 206).

So Cappelen and Lepore's response to their imaginary objector who demands to know the truth conditions of 'Osama Bin Laden is tall' is this: Of the many potential truth conditions – world's in which Osama is 5'10", 5'11", 6', etc. – they do not know which are the semantic truth conditions of the sentence, because these conditions are determined by certain deep and hoary metaphysical facts concerning the real nature of tallness, and they, being mere semanticists, do not know what these facts are. Note, however, that in excusing themselves from responding to their imaginary objector in this way Cappelen and Lepore actually address the naturalistic challenge head-on: According to Cappelen and Lepore, if P is the semantic content of 'Osama Bin Laden is tall' then what determines this fact is not anything to do with how speakers use this sentence to communicate; rather what determines this fact are deep and as of yet unknown metaphysical facts concerning Osama and tallness. So, generalizing now, according to this response to the naturalistic challenge what makes it the case that P, as opposed to P*, is the semantic content of S is unknown facts concerning the individuals and properties referred to by the words in S. Does this appeal to as of yet unknown metaphysical facts concerning the real natures of properties and individuals constitute an adequate response to the naturalistic challenge?

I suggest that it does not, or at least it does not if one thinks that the explanatory domain of semantics pertains to empirical questions about how competent language users communicate by using language and does not concern questions about, e.g., the real nature of tallness. If you are interested in explaining how competent language users are able to communicate by uttering 'Osama bin Laden is tall', and the alleged semantic content of this sentence is determined not by the communicative abilities and practices of

competent speakers but instead by metaphysical facts concerning the real nature of Osama and tallness, then you will have no interest in semantic content. I am thus agreeing with Cappelen and Lepore about the sorts of issues semanticists should concern themselves. They are correct that it is absurd to require semanticists to address metaphysical questions concerning, e.g., the real nature of tallness. (It might even be absurd to expect anyone to answer such questions.) But if it is such metaphysical facts that determine that P is the semantic content of S, it follows that it is absurd to require semanticists to address questions concerning semantic content. If knowing whether or not proposition P is the semantic content of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ requires one to address issues concerning the real nature of tallness, then questions concerning semantic content should be addressed not by semanticists, but by metaphysicians (if at all).

One might respond on behalf of Cappelen and Lepore that I am incorrectly assuming that the metaphysical issues concerning, e.g., the real nature of tallness are wholly distinct from issues concerning the abilities and practices of competent speakers. If the fact that P is the semantic content of ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’ is in part determined by metaphysical facts concerning the real nature of tallness, but these metaphysical facts are themselves determined by the abilities and practices of competent speakers, then it would not be absurd to require semanticists to address issues concerning semantic content. I have two points in response to this suggestion: First, Cappelen and Lepore would not endorse this suggestion, since they maintain that it is absurd to require semanticists to address metaphysical issues; clearly then they take such metaphysical issues to be independent of issues concerning the abilities and practices of competent speakers. Second, I find the suggestion plausible. It may be no longer be popular, but it

seems to me that seemingly deep questions about the natures of properties and individuals collapse into questions concerning our linguistic abilities and practices. I find this familiar idea plausible because I cannot take seriously the possibility of some hard-working metaphysician discovering that, contrary to the beliefs and practices of competent speakers, giraffes are *really* not tall. But invoking this familiar idea at this point in the dialectic only serves to reintroduce the naturalistic challenge: If the facts concerning semantic content are determined by metaphysical facts, yet these metaphysical facts are in turn determined by facts concerning the abilities and practices of competent speakers, then semantic content is, in the end, determined by facts concerning the abilities and practices of competent speakers. So, semantic content is relevant to semantic theorizing after all. But, again, how *could* facts concerning semantic content be fixed by the abilities and practices of competent speakers, given SM's claim that the speech act contents communicated by speakers "can be (and typically are) radically different from the semantic contents of ... utterances" (2005c, p. 211)?

How do Cappelen and Lepore respond to the psychological objection? Recall the objection: Even if there were a unique proposition encoded by, e.g., 'Osama Bin Laden is tall', it would "play no role whatsoever in the mental life of communicators" (2005a, p. 182). How do Cappelen and Lepore respond to this objection, and does their response provide SM with a way to meet the naturalistic challenge? Cappelen and Lepore suggest that the semantic content encoded by a sentence plays the following role in the cognitive life of communicators: "minimal semantic content is a 'shared fallback content' and ... this content serves to guard against confusion and misunderstandings" (2005c, p. 215). Cappelen and Lepore remind us of all the ways a speaker and interpreter can fail to have

a “shared context”: they can have distinct beliefs about what the other believes and knows, about their perceptual environment(s), about the content of the preceding discourse, etc. All such these divergences lead to communicative breakdowns of various sorts. Cappelen and Lepore suggest that “the proposition semantically expressed is our minimal defense against confusion/misunderstanding/indifference, and it is that which guarantees communication across context of utterance” (2005c, p. 214). But *why* can minimal semantic content, yet not speech act content, play this role in our cognitive lives? The reason, according to Cappelen and Lepore, is that semantic content, unlike speech act content, does not depend upon such variable and potentially confused features of context: “the proposition semantically expressed is that content the speaker can expect the audience to grasp (and expect the audience to expect the speaker to expect them to grasp) even if they have mistaken or incomplete communication-relevant information” (2005c, p. 214).

This explanation of why semantic content, as opposed to speech act content, can serve as this minimal defense against confusion suggests a response to the naturalistic challenge. If P is the semantic content of sentence S, then what makes it the case that P, as opposed to P*, is the semantic content of S is this: *all* competent speakers *s* can expect *all* competent interpreters *i* to grasp (and *s* can expect *i* to expect *s* to expect *i* to grasp) P upon witnessing a literal utterance of S, yet *s* cannot have this expectation for P*. In other words, the proposal for meeting the naturalistic challenge that can be extracted from Cappelen and Lepore’s response to the psychological objection is that if P is the semantic content of S, then what makes this the case is that the *competency conditions* for using S fix P, as opposed to some other proposition P*, as the proposition encoded by S.²¹ But

this is the very proposal suggested by Soames (2002), which was shown to be inadequate in the previous section of this paper (and also in Soames 2005). The problem, in short, is that if P were determined to be the semantic content of S by the *competency conditions* associated with S, then the result of applying what I earlier called the *intersection procedure* to S would yield one, and only one, proposition; i.e. one, and only one, proposition would be conveyed by *every* (literal) utterance of S. But, as was demonstrated in the previous section, for many sentences S the intersection procedure does not yield any truth evaluable content; it yields no *proposition*.²² Note, however, that this conclusion does *not* entail that there is no common core of *linguistic meaning* associated with every grammatical sentence. Cappelen and Lepore are correct at least to the extent that communication would be impossible if every sentence did not encode *some sort of blueprint for constructing communicated content*. It is, I suggest, this non-truth-conditional linguistic meaning that serves as our “minimal defense against confusion” and as the “starting point” for linguistic communication (2005c, p. 214-5).

Conclusion

The tentative conclusion is that either sentences (perhaps relativized to contexts) do not encode truth-conditional semantic content, or they do but such encoded content falls outside the explanatory domain of empirically oriented semantics that is concerned to explain the abilities and practices of competent language users. The conclusion is tentative because I have here considered only three potential responses to the naturalistic challenge; I cannot claim to have considered all the possible responses available to SM.

Let us suppose, however, that the tentative conclusion is correct, and moreover let us further suppose that the advocates of SM have no interest in positing a layer of pure

semantic content that exists wholly independent of the abilities and practices of competent language users. Let us suppose, in short, that TCP is endorsed instead of SM. To what extent must the advocates of SM revise their general approach to semantic theory? The answer is, “very little.” For TCP and SM agree that there is a minimal linguistic meaning associated with every grammatical utterance. They agree, moreover, that though this minimal linguistic meaning is distinct from asserted or otherwise conveyed truth-conditional content, it is nonetheless the common core, the “starting point,” without which communication would be impossible. Moreover, they agree that though *speech act content* depends upon all sorts of contextually specific factors concerning both speakers and interpreters,²³ the linguistic meaning associated with an utterance remains fixed across contexts. The only way in which the advocate of SM is required to revise his position is this: He will have to concede that the compositionally determined minimal core of linguistic meaning does not all by itself determine truth-conditional content, but rather a sort of blueprint for constructing truth-conditional content in particular contexts.²⁴

Given the cogency of the arguments advocates of SM have proffered to distinguish the sort of meaning that is encoded in *sentences* from the sort of meaning that is intuitively conveyed by *utterances*, it is difficult to discern what could motivate principled resistance to this revision. This suggests that the appearance of significant schism between analytic philosophers of language and semantic theorists who advocate SM and those who advocate some form of TCP is for the most part an illusion, resulting from the fact that the focus of the semantic minimalists’ theorizing is the context invariant linguistic meanings competent speakers associate with sentence types, whereas

the focus of truth conditional pragmatists's theorizing concerns the processes competent interpreters utilize to infer *from* an utterance of sentence with a certain invariant linguistic meaning *to* a context specific speech act content.

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Notes

¹ Representatives of Semantic Minimalism include Soames (2002), Borg (2004), and Cappelen and Lepore (2005a), and representatives of Truth Conditional Pragmatics include Carston (2002), Recanati (2004) and Neale (2004).

² Passages such as the following suggest that the semantic minimalists I consider here think that facts concerning the semantic contents of sentences are, in various ways, grounded in facts concerning the linguistic abilities and practices of competent speakers:

... let me borrow from the framework made familiar by Chomsky, Fodor, and others. I assume a broadly modular picture of the mind, containing discrete bodies of information and encapsulated processes acting on that information, dealing with such subjects as vision, hearing ... and of course language. The language faculty, as I conceive of it, is comprised of at least three sub-domains: orthography and vocalized speech recognition, syntax, and semantics. The semantic information the faculty contains is of quite limited form; say just that required for generating the truth-conditions of complex linguistic items on the basis of their parts and their mode of composition. It is this quite constrained item (the 'minimal proposition' ...) which feeds out of the language faculty ... (Borg, 2002, p. 23.)

... semantic claims about the expressions of a language are ... social claims about the conventions and commonalities found in a linguistic community. (Soames, 2002, p. 71)

The proposition semantically expressed is that content the speaker can expect the audience to grasp (and expect the audience to expect the speaker to expect them to grasp) ... (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005c, p. 214)

³ The semantic minimalist need not be committed to the strong claim that this three step process accurately describes the cognitive processing competent speakers actually perform. They can retreat to a weaker and vaguer claim to the effect that this three step process is a sort of rational reconstruction that accurately models the sort of processing interpreters perform.

⁴ What Cappelen and Lepore (2005a) call "Context Shifting Arguments" are alleged counterexamples in which S is identical to S'. And what they call "incompleteness arguments" are a special sort of context shifting argument.

⁵ An anonymous referee has suggested that this "blueprint" model does not apply to Recanati. Recanati claims that "it is possible for an utterance to receive a non-literal interpretation *without the literal interpretation of that utterance being ever computed*" (Recanati, 2004, 29). The worry is that this is incompatible with the idea that an interpreter must compute the blueprint corresponding to an utterance *before* engaging in pragmatic reasoning to determine what is intuitively said by the utterance. But there is no incompatibility here. What Recanati calls "the literal interpretation" is a development of the mere linguistic meaning of an utterance, and thus – to translate Recanati's terms into mine – a "literal interpretation" is a pragmatic development of a blueprint. For example, with regard to Nunberg's example involving an utterance of 'The ham sandwich has left', Recanati suggests that the "proposition literally expressed [is] the absurd proposition that the ham sandwich itself has left without paying" (Recanati, 2004, 29). The absurd literal proposition is about a particular ham sandwich, and thus is a *development of the mere linguistic meaning of the sentence*.

⁶ Semantic Minimalism is one of three influential responses to alleged counterexamples on behalf of the assign and combine model. The other two are what I have elsewhere (Clapp, forthcoming) referred to as "Kaplan's Strategy" and "Grice's Strategy." (Lepore, 2004, refers to these as

“semantic proposals” and “pragmatic proposals,” respectively.) As I agree with SM that Kaplan’s and Grice’s strategies are not adequate for defending the assign and combine model from counterexamples, I will not criticize them here.

⁷ An anonymous referee has suggested that the underlying theoretical motivation for SM is not merely to preserve the assign and combine model, but moreover to account for linguistic communication. (See, for example, “the seven virtues of SM” described by Cappelen and Lepore, 2005a, 151-4.) But I think this suggestion confuses the issue: All parties in the debate – both advocates of SM and advocates of TCP – want to account for linguistic communication. Moreover, it is generally agreed that *if* the assign and combine model applied to our linguistic abilities, then many aspects of linguistic communication would be accounted for. The debate concerns whether or not the assign and combine model *really does* apply to our linguistic abilities; for the sorts of counterexamples offered by the advocates of TCP provide cogent reasons for thinking it does not.

⁸ An anonymous referee suggested that Borg could allow that ‘the cat’ – and its mentalese correlate – refers to different cats on different occasions by positing a “demonstrative element” within the phrase. But to posit such “hidden indexicals” in response to counterexamples is to embrace what Borg calls “contextualism” (2004, 44-8) and Borg considers contextualism to be a version TCP. So positing such hidden indexicals is antithetical to Borg’s project. In Clapp (forthcoming), I call the strategy of undermining counterexample’s by positing hidden indexicals “Kaplan’s strategy.”

⁹ This example is inspired by similar situations described in Searle (1978).

¹⁰ I am not, at this point, claiming that there is no answer to this question. I am claiming that Borg’s appeal to a language module which calculates T-theorems merely replaces the original question concerning the semantic content of natural language sentences with the corresponding question for the corresponding sentences of mentalese. That is, Borg’s view merely replaces the question “Why is P, and not P*, the semantic content of ‘The cat is on the mat?’” with “Why is P, and not P*, the semantic content of THE CAT IS ON THE MAT?” To meet the naturalistic challenge Borg must now answer this latter question.

¹¹ This conflation of two notions of truth-conditions is also noted by Recanati:

The central idea of truth-conditional semantics (as opposed to mere ‘translational semantics’) is the idea that, via truth, we connect worlds and the world. If we know the truth-conditions of a sentence, we know which state of affairs must hold for the sentence to be true. T-sentences display knowledge of truth-conditions in that sense only if the right-hand-side of the bi-conditional is used, that is, only if the necessary and sufficient condition which it states is transparent to the utterer of the T-sentence. If I say ‘Oscar cuts the sun is true iff Oscar cuts the sun’, without knowing what it is to ‘cut the sun,’ then the T-sentence I utter no more counts as displaying knowledge of truth conditions than if I use it without knowing who Oscar is ... (2005, p. 185)

¹² Soames is of course aware that proper names are often not uniquely referring; e.g. many streets may be named ‘Lake Lane’. As it is not directly relevant to my concerns, I will ignore this complication throughout the paper.

¹³ The restriction to *literal* utterances, or as Soames says ‘normal’ utterances, is intended to rule out sarcastic, metaphoric, and other non-literal utterances. Such non-literal utterances must be excluded on pain of every sentence expressing no semantic content at all: Suppose that the one proposition that all non-sarcastic utterances of, e.g., ‘John is nice’ convey is the proposition that John is nice (ignoring tense). But a sarcastic utterance of the sentence will not convey the proposition that John is nice, but rather that John is not nice. Thus, if the sarcastic utterance is

taken into account, there is no proposition conveyed by every utterance, and thus the sentence has no semantic content at all. And hence the need to exclude sarcastic and other non-literal utterances from the intersection procedure.

¹⁴ In the following passage Soames rejects his earlier view that sentences encode propositions, or truth conditions, and endorses the view of TCP that sentences encode only something like blueprints for asserted propositional content:

... the semantic content of a sentence in a context is often not something asserted by an utterance of the sentence in that context. Instead, its function is to constrain the candidates for assertion in certain ways, while allowing speakers and hearers a degree of freedom to operate within these constraints (2005, p. 357).

¹⁵ A similar sentence is discussed by Carston (2002) and Borg (2004).

¹⁶ If the elided direct object is to be replaced by an existential quantifier, then there is a possible scope ambiguity between the negation and this "hidden" quantifier. The two resulting potential propositions can be represented as follows:

- (i) Not Some X (Mary can continue X)
- (ii) Some X Not (Mary can continue X)

(For the sake of simplicity I have replaced the definite description with 'Mary'.) I have argued, in essence, that (i) cannot serve as the semantic content of 'Mary cannot continue' because it is obviously and necessarily false, and thus it is clearly not conveyed by every utterance of the sentence. Proposition (ii) cannot serve as the semantic content of 'Mary cannot continue' for somewhat different reasons, for (ii) is obviously and necessarily true and there is no reason to suppose that such an obviously true proposition could not serve as the common semantic core. The reason that (ii) cannot serve as the semantic content is that this claim would violate the explanatory priority constraint built into the intersection procedure. Suppose that Scott utters (6) and thereby conveys, say, that Emma cannot continue endorsing semantic minimalism. *Because* this proposition has as one of its obvious entailments the existential generalization of the direct object position, viz. (ii), by uttering (4) Soames also asserts proposition (ii). That is, the general proposition (ii) is conveyed only because the more specific proposition is conveyed, and thus (ii) has a lower explanatory priority, and cannot serve as the semantic content of (6).

¹⁷ The obvious place to look for such pairs would be in abstract and technical areas of language use, such as advanced science and mathematics. Bach (1994) defends the intermediate view that *some* common-place sentences semantically encode unique propositions, while other common-place (non-indexical) sentences do not encode propositions. Here I am not concerned with this intermediate sort of view; here I am concerned to argue only that *not every* (non-indexical) grammatical sentence semantically encodes a unique proposition.

¹⁸ A point of clarification: I do *not* deny that every competent speaker must associate very general information of the sort represented by (B) with utterances of 'Hillary Clinton would like coffee'. I agree that information of roughly the sort (B) represents must be included in the linguistic meaning, the *blueprint*, encoded by 'Hillary Clinton would like coffee'. I *do* deny that this very general sort of information is always *asserted*, *conveyed*, or otherwise *communicated* by literal utterances of 'Hillary Clinton would like coffee'. Moreover, *if* this very general information is asserted, or otherwise communicated, by some utterance of 'Hillary Clinton would like coffee', then it is communicated only in virtue of being entailed by some more specific proposition that is also communicated by the utterance, in which case the more specific proposition has higher explanatory priority.

¹⁹ That this is so is suggested by the fact that neither objection on its own really makes much sense. The critic advancing the psychological objection apparently grants that sentences do encode propositions, but denies that such propositions play any role in the mental life of communicators. This is a strange position. If S encodes P, and Mary understands, or interprets, or utters, S, then is P not “playing some role” in Mary’s mental life? In what other way could a *proposition* “play a role” in Mary’s mental life? The critic advancing the metaphysical objection, on the other hand, grants that sufficiently precise sentences encode propositions, but maintains that some insufficiently precise sentences, e.g. ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall’, fail to encode (complete) propositions. As Cappelen and Lepore point out, this critic occupies an unstable position (and one reminiscent of logical atomism at that). The task of “precisifying” ‘Osama bin Laden is tall’ would lead to a regress of not yet precise enough sentences: ‘Osam Bin Laden is tall’; ‘Osama bin Laden is tall *for a man*’; ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall for a man *born in Asia*’; ‘Osama Bin Laden is tall for a man born in Asia, and *not born prematurely*’, etc.

²⁰ Cappelen and Lepore assert that “if you want to use intuitions about speech act content to fix semantic content, you must be extremely careful. It can be done, but it’s a subtle and easily corrupted process” (2005c, p. 199). They seem to think that the way it can be done, if one is careful enough, is by applying three “tests” for finding out whether or not an expression is context-sensitive. But, even granting that these tests are adequate tests for real context-sensitivity, it is obvious that they will not suffice for the task at hand. According to SM there are relatively few real context-sensitive expressions. So consider a sentence S that contains no such expressions. (I continue to ignore tense.) How are tests for context-sensitive expressions going to help us determine what the semantic content of S is?

²¹ If Cappelen and Lepore endorse this strategy of response to the naturalistic challenge they cannot merely *stipulate* that there is a proposition (the semantic content of S) that is conveyed by every utterance S. Such a stipulation would get the order of explanation wrong: According to the intersection procedure, if P is the semantic content of S then it is so *in virtue of the fact* that P is the unique proposition conveyed by every utterances of S.

²² Elugardo (this volume) demonstrates with a number of interesting examples that, in effect, for many sorts of grammatical utterances the intersection procedure yields no proposition, and thus semantic content cannot play the role of “minimal fallback content.”

²³ That is, SM and TCP are in agreement concerning what Cappelen and Lepore refer to as “Speech Act Pluralism.” See Cappelen and Lepore 2005a, Chapter 13.

²⁴ A very similar proposal for amending SM is made by MacFarlane (this volume). MacFarlane suggests that SM deny that a proposition (i.e. the semantic content encoded by a sentence) is equivalent to an intension (i.e. a function from possible worlds to truth values); rather on MacFarlane’s proposal a *proposition* will yield an intension only relative to a “counts-as” function. Such functions are determined by features of contexts of utterance and interpretation including “the speaker’s intentions, the conversational common ground, and other such things.” Thus what MacFarlane calls a *proposition* is roughly equivalent to what I have called, following Neale, a *blueprint*.