

## **Semiotics' Internal Conflict. The role of pragmatic processing in the constitution of meaning<sup>1</sup>**

**Filippo Domaneschi**

FB Sprachwissenschaft – Universität Konstanz  
filippo.domaneschi@uni-konstanz.de

**Carlo Penco**

EPILOG – Università di Genova  
penco@unige.it

**Abstract** The aim of this paper is to give a short overview of the debate on the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics, and to point out both its origins and the main problem behind: the definition of what is said. Many participants in the debate challenge the standard view proposed by Paul Grice between *literal (semantic) meaning* given by conventions and *speaker's meaning* given by intentions. In 1. we will trace the origin of the problem in some early definitions of semiotics and in the development of Kaplan's theory of demonstratives; in 2. we will then give a general assessment of what is at stake: the notion of what is said, or propositional content; in 3. we present some of the main alternatives on the market; in 4. we will claim that the rigid distinction between metaphysical and epistemological aspects of meaning is not so rigid after all, and there is space for pragmatic processing in the constitution of meaning – of what is said.

**Keywords:** Semantics, Pragmatics, *Literal (semantic) meaning*, *Speaker's meaning*

### **1. A short piece of intellectual history**

Peirce's principal heir, Charles Morris 1938 defined semiotics as the joint venture of syntax, semantics and pragmatics, as fields of dyadic relation: syntax deals with the relation among signs, semantics deals with the relation between signs and objects, and pragmatics deals with the relation between signs and interpreters. According to Carnap 1942,<sup>2</sup> who follows at least in part Morris 1938, "pragmatics is the basis of all linguistics" and "all knowledge in the field of *descriptive semantics* and descriptive syntax is based upon previous knowledge of pragmatics". Pragmatics, however, has for Carnap a wider definition than the one given by Morris: pragmatics

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Massimiliano Vignolo and an anonymous referee for comments and corrections on a previous version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Carnap 1942 develops the more formal aspects of semantics that unfortunately Morris did not develop (we have always to recall to mind that, while Carnap built upon the Fregean tradition in logics and semantics, Peirce himself was a relevant logician in the tradition of Boole).

deals with every research where “explicit reference is made to the speaker”. This means that Carnap does not restrict pragmatics to the relation signs-speakers, but to the study of language use where also the speaker is taken into account, implicitly suggesting that there is *no sharp line* between semantics and pragmatics.

However, *pure semantics* is viewed as independent of pragmatics. In pure semantics we lay down definitions of concepts and consequences of these definitions; in choosing the definitions or the rules we are guided by pragmatic factors, that is considerations of a given language; “but this concerns only the motivations of our choice and has no bearing upon the correctness of the results of our analysis of the rules” (Carnap 1942:10). What happened after Carnap? Which element provoked a radical change in the relations between semantics and pragmatics? Just one simple thing: semantics started dealing with indexicals that is something that makes explicit reference to the speaker.

Indexicals or deictic expressions like “I”, “this”, “today” are a mixed set of different syntactic categories; classifying them together in a semantic classification (Perry 1997) requires defining them as a unique phenomenon driven by context dependence. Their content depends on the context of utterance, i.e. on time, space and speaker (+ possible world). “I” refers to different speakers depending on who is speaking; “now” to different times depending on when is spoken; “here” to different places depending on where it is said. A classification of indexicals as context dependent elements includes necessarily a reference to the speaker; therefore, even from the point of view of pure semantics, it seems to concern also pragmatics, following Carnap’s definition.

The formal treatment of indexical expressions developed suggestions given by Gottlob Frege (1918) and by Hans Reichenbach, who migrated to US in 1938 with the help of Charles Morris himself, and taught at the University of California in Los Angeles. In 1947 Reichenbach published his *Elements of Symbolic Logic*, where he gave the first attempt of a formalisation of indexical expressions. Few years later Bar Hillel 1954 pointed out that pragmatics should take into account what Peirce had called “indexicals expressions”. After some decades California became the center of the debate on indexicals, starting with the work of Richard Montague 1970, where the author says that in pragmatics “we should speak about truth and satisfaction with respect not only to an interpretation, but also to a context of use.” (Montague 1970: 69). While Montague developed the formalization of what he called a “pragmatic language”, in the seventies David Kaplan (1979, 1989) worked on similar ideas – in a way that became a paradigm for philosophers and logicians – claiming that, in semantics, context needs to be taken into account together with possible worlds: a sentence like “I am here now” is always true in all the contexts of utterance,<sup>3</sup> but not in all possible worlds and therefore it is not necessary: I could have been elsewhere. Therefore, the contents of indexicals are functions from contexts to contents: only given a context we have the content of the indexical. Kaplan avoids however dealing with pragmatics, implicitly following Carnap’s point of view: “once the semantical

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<sup>3</sup> More precisely the utterance is true in all contexts of utterance of the possible worlds in which the sentence is uttered. It is a case of a sentence which is “a priori” true, but not necessary (not true in all possible worlds). This is a typical example of a contingent a priori, but also an example of (contingent) analytic sentence (See Russell 2008:51-56).

and syntactical features of a language have been found by way of pragmatics, we may turn our attention away from the users and restrict it to those semantical and syntactical features” (Carnap 1942: 13).

Although connected with ideas developed by Peirce, formal semantics became – after the tradition of Frege, Wittgenstein and Carnap – the analysis of the truth conditions of sentences in context; truth conditions are identified with the sense of a sentence (or the sense of a sentence in context): to know the truth conditions is to know how the world should be for the sentence to be true.

## **2. The battle ground**

A solution of the debate on the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics à la Carnap is satisfying for most logicians. However, not everybody accepts this simple solution, where pragmatics just fills the elements of the index (time, location and speaker) and then leaves semantics to do its proper job.<sup>4</sup> In this paragraph we will hint at what are the most worrisome problems and in the next how the different fighters in the battlefield are lined up.<sup>5</sup>

The problem concerns the content of what is said, or also what we mean by “truth conditions”. In compound sentences logical connectives define when a compound sentence is true depending on the truth or falsity of the component sentences. But most of our elementary or not-compound sentences, besides the ones with indexicals, seem not to have clearly defined truth conditions, but truth conditions that are heavily dependent on many contextual factors. Take a simple list:

- (1) Serena is ready
- (2) The book is on the table
- (3) All the bottles are in the fridge
- (4) The ham sandwich has left without paying
- (5) The car is red
- (6) Alyson is tall
- (7) I had breakfast

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<sup>4</sup> Somebody might put it in reverse, like Predelli (2006: 74), according to whom the semantic module “sits and waits” for clause-index pairs to be delivered by pragmatic processes of contextual reasoning. This classical stance suggests two conceptions of pragmatics: (i) what is needed to fill the elements of the index in order to get the truth conditions right, and (ii) what is needed to understand implicatures and presuppositions. The debate on the pragmatics/semantics distinction often does not consider the first more traditional aspect and give more relevance to the second, which is linked to the development of pragmatics after Grice’s work. On the distinction see Bianchi 2004 and Carston (2008: 324), who recalls a basic distinction of semantics as dealing with the encoded meaning of types of words and pragmatics as dealing with tokenings of linguistic expressions. In this paper we are dealing with semantics intended as the analysis of truth conditions.

<sup>5</sup> A fundamental discussion we will not deal with is whether the import of contextual features are syntactically guided, or if there is something in the logical form of a sentence to guide us towards some syntactically articulated constituents, even if not evident from the surface grammar. A typical example is a sentence like “it rains” which seems to have a hidden indexical of location or time; is this constituent articulated or non-articulated in the logical form? For some authors (like Perry 1998, 2000) we have to deal with unarticulated constituents; for others (Stanley 2000, 2005) we may trace in the logical form the hidden articulated constituents.

It is not clear exactly what we mean by truth conditions in these cases, apart from the standard version of the disquotational schema

“*p*” is true if and only if *p*

In fact, if you substitute “*p*” with any of these sentences, you have not yet made it clear *how the world should be for the sentences to be true*. What does it mean to assert that Serena is ready? Is she ready for her next tennis match or is she ready to go shopping, or maybe she is ready to present her last project on new fashion dresses? Which book is on which table? And which fridge may contain all the bottles of the universe? And how can a ham sandwich leaving without paying? And what is red? The surface of the bodywork or also the interior? And what for is Alyson tall? For her classroom or for a basketball team? And is (7) true if I had breakfast only once in my life or just a month ago?

An answer is to give context a role in determining the truth conditions of utterances. Recanati (2001, 2005) has once defined a general contrast between “literalists” and “contextualist”, which may help as first introduction. Literal meaning is a notion used by Grice to distinguish *what is said* from *what is implicated*, semantic meaning from speaker’s meaning. In saying “I have to wake up early tomorrow” – as an answer to an offer of coffee tonight – I imply that I reject the offer. The literal meaning is that I have to wake up early tomorrow; the speaker’s meaning is that I prefer not to have coffee tonight. What is said are literal truth conditions; once you have understood what is literally said, you may work on what the speaker means by what she says. But it is exactly this distinction that is put into question by the new directions in pragmatics.

While literalists claim that we need to adhere to the literal meaning of every expression and give the truth conditions according to the literal meaning, authors like Francois Recanati, Robyn Carston and many others suggest that there is no proper literal meaning, but meaning is almost always context dependent. Carston 2004: 633-4) claims that “[...] ‘semantic’ representation (or logical form) is typically not fully propositional, so does not have a determinate truth condition, but consists of an incomplete conceptual representation which functions as a schema or template for the pragmatic construction of propositional forms” (Carston 2004: 633-4). Context has to do its proper role in defining the content of what is said in a much stronger way than the one considered by Kaplan.

What should take the place of *what is said* then?

Slightly different, but very similar answers come from Truth Conditional Pragmatics (Recanati’s perspective) and Relevance Theory. Recanati 2004, 2010 distinguishes primary pragmatic processes that are automatic, and secondary pragmatic processes that are inferential. Among the primary pragmatic processes Recanati distinguishes between mandatory and optional pragmatic processes. Mandatory are the *disambiguation* of expressions or the *saturation* of indexicals: we need to get the content of an indexical given the context of utterance, the mere meaning of “I” or “now” is not enough to understand which is the individual we are referring to or the time we are referring to. Optional processes are *modulation* process, as broadening or narrowing, transfer or enrichment of the meaning of an expression. For instance, in

(1) “ready” may be “enriched” and stand for “ready for the tennis match” and in (4) “the ham sandwich” may stand for “the customer who ordered the ham sandwich” or the reference to “all the bottles” in (2) may be narrowed down to “all the bottles we have bought” or “all the bottles in the fridge”.

While Recanati refers to *automatic* processes, Relevance Theory claims that the whole linguistic comprehension involves *inferential* processes, driven by the *Principle of Relevance*, according to which “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Speakers always produce and understand meanings that are more relevant in the communicative context, namely, those that provide, from the inferential point of view, the best cognitive benefit with the least effort. The content expressed by an utterance is therefore the outcome of a pragmatic inference addressed at fixing the most relevant content. As result, *what is said* by an utterance is directly inferred by the hearers on the basis of the relevant pragmatic information available in a certain communicative context. From this perspective, the theory searches and finds confirmation of its plausibility in cognitive psychology experiments. The description of communicative models is in fact driven and supported by empirical data concerning, for example, the cognitive efforts and the different cognitive and communicative deficits involved in communication.

Relevance theory introduces the concept of “explicature” as the primary component that requires pragmatic inference: *what is said* is the content a speaker intends her utterance to have, and the context helps reaching this content, through pragmatic processing as narrowing, broadening etc. Without a link to the context in which a sentence is uttered there is no proper literal meaning, no proper truth conditions. This point impose a strong requirement on the meaning of the individual words; the meanings of our words are underdeterminate: in order to be properly meaningful they have to undergo a pragmatic process that uses its schematic meaning to build a specific meaning intended by the speaker in the context of utterance. (see Carston 2013: 200-201)

Notwithstanding the differences, both Truth Conditional Pragmatics and Relevance Theory share a common core that is the idea of a “rich” conception of proposition that is enriched by pragmatic processing depending on the context of utterance.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. The main front lines: contextualism, minimalism, and relativism**

There are many aspects of the conflict and apparent enemies may become allies against some other enemies. If the war is a strong conceptual metaphor, “polemics” among philosophers is standard (where “polemic”, old fashioned for “controversy”,

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<sup>6</sup> Among the alternative options a “divide et impera” strategy has been developed by Perry and Korta: let us recognize different layers of truth conditions, given certain information. We should stop speaking of “proposition”, “content” or “truth conditions” without specifying the layer of analysis, distinguishing reflexive contents and referential contents. If we hear the utterance of a sentence without realizing who is speaking, we will have some idea of the “reflexive” truth conditions of this utterance: “I am tired” is true if and only if the person to whom “I” refers is tired. But what about the referential content, or – as the theory of multipropositionalism develops in a critical pragmatics framework – the critical content? Here the solution seems not to be so distant from the traditional contextualist attitude given by Relevance Theory: the critical content, the content the speaker intends her utterance to have, is analogous to the explicature. What counts here is that the process of interpretation or comprehension stops when the target cognitive fix is reached. On this connection see Korta (2013: 222-4).

derives from the Greek “*pòlemos*”, which means “war”). We have been working for a while to understand the different sides of this controversy, since some workshops on Context held in Genoa, and the publications springing from them (Penco 2000 and Bianchi 2004) and with editing the anthology *What is Said and What is Not* (Domaneschi-Penco2013). This background will help us to give the main lines of the battleground, where the weapons are arguments that sometimes kill, but more often just make strong damages that ask for repair. The two main standpoints on the market are Contextualism and Minimalism. The so-called perspective of Relativism has recently provided an attempt to mediate between the two traditional views leading nonetheless to some controversial consequences. The main problem at stake is the alternative between the new idea of proposition held by contextualists and the revenge of the traditional idea of truth conditional semantics without the insertion of pragmatic elements.

As we have seen, according to *Contextualism*, the linguistic meaning underdetermines the semantic interpretation; therefore, ‘what is said’ by an utterance corresponds to truth conditions resulting from pragmatic processes that are not restricted to the *saturation* of indexicals. Two arguments are the cornerstone of the contextualist standpoint:

(i) The *Context Shifting Argument* supports the claim that the same sentence may have different contents in different contexts. Consider, for example, the utterance (6). If Alyson is sixteen years old and 5.8 feet tall (1.75 m), then the sentence (6) will be true if uttered in context  $C^1$  where Allison is compared to a group of teens because, as a teen, she may be considered quite tall. Otherwise, (6) would express a false proposition in context  $C^2$  of a women’s basketball team whose average height is above 6 feet (1.80 m). Given that (6) does not contain indexicals and the semantic-syntactic structure is the same in both contexts, it expresses different truth-conditions in different contexts. We may conclude that same sentences uttered in different contexts will express different truth conditions and therefore different propositions; hence, what is said depends on the context.

(ii) The *Incompleteness* argument states that many utterances (short of indexicals) do not express a full truth-conditional content independently of a context of utterance. For example, (1) or (5) cannot be evaluated as true or false, as it is not evident how the pen is red (e.g., the surface or the ink?) and what Serena is ready for. Because the linguistic meaning of the utterances expresses incomplete content, a pragmatic enrichment is required to fix truth-conditions. Thus, what is said depends on the context.

These arguments support the main idea of contextualists of a “rich” propositional content or context dependent truth conditions. However, contextualism is not without drawbacks, the first of which seems to be an unnecessary proliferation of meanings: every term and every sentence become just a point of departure of infinite possible meaning depending on context. One of the main arguments against contextualism is that the Context Shifting Argument and the Incompleteness Argument can be applied, with some ingenuity, to every piece of lexicon, transforming contextualism in a radical position that requires semantic content to depend on all the intuitions of the

speaker.<sup>7</sup> But our way of using language seems to rest on some solid grounds, which permits communication through, shared meanings. A Gricean Revised Ockham's razor suggests us not to multiply meanings beyond necessity. Implicitly following Ockham's advise, Ernst Lepore, Emma Borg and many others have put forward a reaction to contextualism under the label of "minimalism".

In accordance with the traditional view on the Gricean semantic framework, *Minimalism* accept the idea of "linguistic meaning", to the effect that sentences express the same (literal) truth conditions in different contexts. In this view, the context of utterance contributes to the semantic interpretation of only a *Basic Set* of linguistic expressions consisting of pure indexicals (*I, here, now*), demonstratives (*this, that*) and some contextual expressions like ambiguities and genitive constructions. (Cappelen & Lepore 2005, Borg 2004, 2012). But they reject the generalization of a contextual contribution to what is said. The minimalist stance is therefore a reaction against the invasion of pragmatics into semantics To answer the arguments of contextualists, minimalists use a key test from indirect speech: the *Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report*. (Cappelen & Lepore, 2005: 88). The test aims to verify if a sentence contains context-sensitive expressions: a report of an utterance of a sentence *S* uttered by speaker *A* in context *C* is reported in the form 'A said that *S*'. If an expression inside the sentence *S* blocks the report, then this expression belongs to the basic set; otherwise, it is a context-*insensitive* expression. For instance, consider the following pairs of utterance, where the second is a disquotational Indirect Report:

- (8) I had breakfast [uttered by Carlo]
- (8a) Carlo said that I had breakfast [uttered by Filippo]
- (9) The car is red [uttered by Carlo]
- (9a) Carlo said that the car is red [uttered by Filippo]

(8a) is not a correct report of what is said in (8) because of 'I', that is a context-sensitive expression belonging to the basic set. On the contrary, the expression 'is red' does not block the report in (9a) of what is said in (9); hence, 'is red' is a context-insensitive expression. The content attributed to Carlo's saying in (9a) is the minimal content. Minimal contents – the propositions semantically expressed – cannot alone explain different interpretations (the car may be red inside or only the bodywork may be red, and so on).

The idea of the validity of the *Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report* as a test supporting the thesis of the existence of a constant minimal content in linguistic

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<sup>7</sup> This criticism against Contextualism, aiming to show that there is no possibility of a "moderate" contextualism, has been opposed by many, among which Vignolo 2013 who shows ways to block the slippery slope strategy of the minimalist stance and gives some good counter arguments about the supposed slippery slope of the Context Shifting Argument and the Incompleteness Argument. One of the point of his answer is to distinguish psychological facts and facts about linguistic competence, answering in this way to the criticism Cappelen and Lepore made against Taylor. The point of Taylor was that if we feel unable to truth evaluate a sentence, then the sentence contains context sensitive expression. Fodor Lepore argued that psychological facts about how speakers feel about truth evaluation do not count. But, Vignolo claims, competence factors do.

expressions, has been criticized by Cappelen-Hawthorne 2009<sup>8</sup>, but still makes a good point and deserves attention. Lepore has however shifted on different kinds of arguments to defend a minimalist stance. These arguments are based on Lewis' idea of convention and on the availability of organizing conversational records to support coordination among speakers. The semantic content will be what the speaker, uttering a sentence, contributes to the conversational record in virtue of coordination with other speakers, depending on which information is relevant and available. The subtle discussion by Stoinich & Lepore 2013 uses Lewis's ideas to answer the difficulties of the test based on indirect reports. They propose to use instead the idea of linguistic conventions that are applied to solve coordination problems in communication. They define what is said, or semantic content, as the content that can be added to the conversational record following linguistic conventions. Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone 2014 make a further step which seems more radical; they claim that truth conditional content is only part of semantic content, because some contents included in conversational records would concern *non truth conditional aspects* of meaning, like conventionally shared presuppositions.

This last step seems to go beyond the original idea of minimalism that was linked to the idea of truth conditional content, But there are more general drawbacks of the original concept of "minimal proposition" that may rise some worrisome consequences: if we accept the idea of a minimal truth conditional content we are easily led to accept a relativistic viewpoint, where propositions may assume different truth values depending on different viewpoints. Yet relativism has produced battalions of arguments for its proper acceptability.

The main polemical claim of *Relativism* (García-Carpintero & Kölbel 2008), is the following: while the (minimal) content of a sentence remains constant through different contexts of use, the proposition changes truth-values depending on extra parameters, i.e., epistemic, moral or taste standards, which are added to the possible world. For example, the truth-values of utterances like

(10) Beer is better than wine

(11) The torture is wrong

are relativised with respect to two parameters: (i) the possible world parameter and (ii) the standard provided in a certain situation or circumstance of evaluation.

For instance, (10) can be evaluated as true or false only in possible worlds where both beer and wine exist; an utterance of (10) expresses the same truth-conditions in different contexts but can be evaluated as true or false depending on the taste standard used in a specific situation. Similarly, in the case of the utterance (11) the additional parameter is the moral standard (when engaged in war, humans tend to

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<sup>8</sup> Their criticism is based on the difficulty to distinguish between normal reports and mixed quotation reports, where part of the report is intended as in quotes. It is difficult to say if the criticism really works. In the main examples they use either indexicals like "hereby" or ambiguous term like "gay", which may mean either homosexual or happy; therefore their examples touch upon examples of expressions from the Basic Set, while the main problem concerns what is out of it.

change their moral standards depending on the need to get vital information). Hence, from the relativistic point of view, a sentence always expresses the same truth conditions independently of the context of utterance; however, the truth-values vary depending on additional parameters that change from context to context. In this way, Relativism, saves the contextualist intuition that different truth-values can be assigned to the same sentence in different contexts; contemporarily, it preserves the Minimalist claim that different utterances of the same sentence share the same semantic content in different contexts of use.

More complex would be the question of epistemic standard of evaluation or how we may “count” an expression depending on the context of assessment. An example suggested by Charles Taylor in favour of a radical contextualist approach has been answered by relativists showing that even in these case they have an answer: let us perfectly paint the leaves of a rare Japanese plant, which is originally brown, with green paint. We utter “the leaves of this plant are green” in front of a painter, willing to make a painting with something green, and in front of a botanist, willing to discover the original colors of Japanese vegetation. If there is a minimal proposition expressed by “the leaves of this plant are green”, therefore we have a proposition which is true according to the context of assessment of the painter and is false according to the context of assessment of the botanist: in the first case “green” count as “green on the perceived surface” and in the second “green” counts as “green in the biological development of the plant”. Yet we cannot say that the painter and the botanist really disagree; theirs is a faultless disagreement.<sup>9</sup>

Contextualists would give a different interpretation, claiming that we have here two different truth conditions, and therefore two different propositions. Still, the relativist move against contextualism has many arrows in its quiver. The main point can be seen as a development of the intuitive idea that some proposition may change their truth value depending on time: “Today is Monday” is true every Monday and false all other days of the week. We might say, with Prior (1996: 46), “certainly there are unchanging truths, but there are changing truths also, and it is a pity if logic ignores these”. Why can’t we accept that the truth-value of a proposition depends not only on time, but also on other relevant factors like different standards of assessment?

Instead of a “rich” conception of proposition, or of what is said, where context has a relevant part – as it happens with the concept of thought in the Fregean paradigm – relativists follow a kind of strategy reminiscent of Arthur Prior’s semantics of time (Prior 1957). We are facing here a deep contrast between alternative paradigms, as Michael Dummett (2006) has insisted. The contrast is not only linked to the particular field of the philosophy of language, but it has a wider philosophical interest: “Because the notion of a proposition is linked to metaphysics in virtue of the identification of facts with true propositions, the disagreement between Prior and

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<sup>9</sup> However faultless disagreement may be difficult to detect when there is uncertainty whether the disagreement is (i) on our subjective standard of taste (ii) on the actual standards of the community (we may assume that in Italy people think that wine is better than beer) (iii) on what the standard should be (we might claim that also in Italy wine *should* be considered better than beer). In case (ii) the disagreement may be real, while in (i) or (iii) seems to be faultless. See Recanati (2008:59-61) but also Kölbel 2012. Different forms of relativism are discussed in Carpintero-Kölbel 2008. In McFarlane’s indexical contextualism the epistemic standard parameter is initialized by the context of use, rather than the context of assessment. Therefore McFarlane 2007 differs from relativism proper.

Frege is not merely about logic: it is a disagreement about the character of reality itself. Does it comprise evanescent or discontinuous states of affair? Or is it of itself unchanging, most faithfully described by propositions stating eternal facts that subsist indifferently to the passage of time?" (Dummett 2006:12).

Metaphysics enter the debate on the content of what is said in many different ways. On the one hand Dummett shows the central metaphysic contrast between two views of propositions that today are at stake. On the other hand, there is a big debate on the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology concerning semantics, whose main point is relegating to epistemology everything concerning the cognitive processing of interpreting what is said. We think this step is misleading, or at least hides deep connections between metaphysical and epistemological problems. We will end our survey on this point discussing one of the main challenges to what Neale 2004 calls "linguistic pragmatism", mainly represented by the contextualist program of Relevance Theory and Truth Conditional Pragmatics.

#### **4. Many Skirmishes, Great Battles**

It is difficult to see the real debate behind the many skirmishes on detailed analysis of different kinds of linguistic expressions or phenomena (indexicals or definite descriptions, comparatives or scalar implicatures, anaphora or presupposition etc.). The crucial point at stake is how we define meaning and its constitutive features. After the cognitive turn in philosophy and psychology, the problem of meaning is often discussed in a framework where experiments concerning the mental processing are used to clarify and to test the plausibility of our theories of meaning. There is a big debate on the validity of experiments and their ability to confirm or disconfirm meaning theories, and we don't want to enter this debate.<sup>10</sup> However, we cannot avoid discussing the general problem behind: how is what is said (or truth conditional meaning) linked to cognitive processing? While the conception of a rich propositional content developed by linguistic pragmatism is concerned with the analysis of pragmatic processing, alternative and more traditional conceptions tend to disregard those processing as something which has nothing to do with the constitution of meaning, but only with problems of communication and interpretation.

In a challenging paper on the shortcomings of linguistic pragmatism, Michael Devitt (2013) denounces a conceptual confusion between metaphysical and epistemological problems in the contextualist trends in semantics. Devitt represents a widely shared tendency to expunge pragmatic processing from semantics proper,<sup>11</sup> still giving *intentions* a central role in the determination of meaning, and relegating other aspects of pragmatic processing to the epistemology of communication. A schema of the different acts of speakers and hearers may help clarifying the point:

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<sup>10</sup> A short specification is necessary: while we agree about some serious limitations of "experimental philosophy" (see for instance Marti 2009 and Devitt 2011) we regard as very promising the new field of experimental pragmatics and many serious efforts to use psychological experiments to test aspects of the cognitive processing compatible with different linguistic or philosophical theories.

<sup>11</sup> However, this tendency takes different forms in different authors, among whom Christopher Gauker with his "zero tolerance for pragmatics". But Gauker 2008 uses his zero tolerance to avoid any intrusion of intentional aspects into semantics, exactly the contrary of what Devitt and Neale do.

	SPEAKER	HEARER
ACT TYPE	Meaning	Interpreting
ACT GOAL	Communicating	Understanding

(we take the schema above from a draft of a seminar given by Neale at NYU in 2013). Our problem is that this division seems too rigid. An act of meaning or intending something is not typical of a *speaker*; typical of a speaker is the act of *expressing* what he intends to say; a fundamental aspect of this act is the ability to *understand* the language he uses and the context in which he speaks<sup>12</sup>; you cannot (or should not) speak in the void.

Assuming instead this kind of framework, Devitt 2013 proposes a strong distinction between the metaphysics of meaning (which should derive only from intentions of the speaker) and the epistemology of communication (that should pertain only to the pragmatic processes of interpretation). Devitt claims that contextualists give too much emphasis to the hearer and to communication; the problem of how meaning is *communicated* is epistemological and does not pertain to the metaphysics of meaning – that is how meaning is *constituted*. To avoid confusion between the metaphysics of meaning and the epistemology of communication Devitt suggests differentiating *what constitutes* the meaning properties of an utterance (of what is said) from *how the hearer discovers* those properties. What the speaker does, his intentions, the objects he has in mind and conventions in which he participates give the metaphysically relevant meaning properties. Devitt (2013: 288) remarks: “none of these meaning properties is constituted *in any way at all* by what the *hearer* does in trying to *interpret* what is said or meant. The hearer problem is an epistemic one and pragmatic in the sense of the theory of communication”. In particular, Devitt reacts against Elugardo and Stainton (2004: 446) who claim that ‘the intentions that a speaker can have are importantly constrained by her reasonable expectation about what the hearer can figure out... so epistemic determining indirectly impacts on metaphysical determining after all.’ However, the point made by Elugardo and Stainton seems exactly the point made by Donnellan (1968: 209-10), who remarks

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<sup>12</sup> Understanding is certainly a goal of a hearer, but it is also a proper part of the act of the speaker; without understanding what she says in her own language the speaker cannot properly communicate anything (unless she reads something written by somebody else). Understanding her own language is something often forgotten inside a theory of meaning based on some kind of Davidson’s interpretation theory. We are referring here to the criticism made by Michael Dummett to a theory of meaning as a theory of interpretation in various papers among which Dummett 1986. Dummett’s theory however has some limits in dealing with the practice of communication and we think it possible an intermediate position between Dummett and Davidson, as in Penco 2007.

that intentions are “essentially connected with expectations”, expectations about the audience which are grounded in an established practice.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, according to Devitt (2013: 296) “it seems very dubious that ordinary speakers have these complicated expectations about interpretive process in hearers”. He refers here to expectations linked to the distinction between what is said and what is meant, “a process that theorists themselves are still struggling to discover” and “it would be surprising indeed if ordinary speakers have expectations about them”. Although the interpretative processes of the hearers in figuring out what is meant from what is said may provide evidence about the metaphysics of meaning, “pragmatic inferences always may play an epistemic role in telling what a speaker means, but never play a metaphysical role in constituting that meaning.” (Devitt 2013: 297).

The distinction between the different roles of speakers and hearers deserves careful attention, but should not be overstated; in the following we hint at two points about Devitt’s criticism that may help changing the attitude about the relation between epistemological and metaphysical worries.

On the one hand, we think there is a *non sequitur*. The fact that we still have to discover and explain the complex processing of a linguistic exchange does not mean that speakers are not able to perform it; the difficulty to distinguish between what is said and what is implicated is a theoretical distinction that attempts to clarify *what speakers actually do*: speakers are not theorists, and they may well have very complicated expectations about what hearers can understand, given that, performing often also the role of hearers, can easily imagine what passes in the hearer’s mind. This capacity of simulating the mental process of another person or placing ourselves in her shoes is basic in any cognitive development, as many classical tests in psychology have shown (for instance the false belief test, also called “Sally-Ann test”, that is supposed to discriminate the ability of taking the perspective of another person which is developed after the age of 4)<sup>14</sup>. Why not thinking that speakers are able to simulate, without theorizing, a hearer’s complex mental processes?

On the other hand, we partially agree with Devitt’s criticism to Eluado and Stanton, but with a different conclusion. There is a basic distinction to make between speaker’s intentions and ways to express them. Speaker’s intentions are not *constrained* by hearer’s expectations; if I intend to refer to somebody, no expectation I can attribute to the hearer can change my intention. *Not the intentions* of the speaker are constrained but *the linguistic means* to express those intentions, i.e. the linguistic expressions used in an utterance. In determining what is said we have to take into account the interaction

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<sup>13</sup> It appears that Donnellan is concerned with two kinds of intentions: a *referential intention* (the intention to refer to the object the speaker has in mind) and a *social intention* (the intention to use a descriptive content fit for the context of utterance). This step seems an attempt to lay down felicity or assertibility conditions for using referential descriptions: both intentions should be fulfilled for a correct act of assertion containing a referential description (see Penco 2015). In what follows we will give a simplified treatment, distinguishing between original intentions and ways of expressing them.

<sup>14</sup> The test has been originally devised by Peiner-Wimmer 1983 and analysed by Simon Baron Cohen et al. 1985. The test is a standard one, whose basic results are generally accepted (for a more recent presentation see Birch-Bloom 2004). What is discussed is the interpretation of the results; while Baron Cohen attributed to the child a theory of mind, today is more usual to accept a simulation theory, that suggests a simulation process where the child image herself as the other person, interprets the other person’s behavior and adapts its own accordingly.

between speakers and hearers, and the implicit agreements about the standard or reasonable ways of broadening, narrowing, enrichment and other features determining an explicature of the sentence in the context. These pragmatic processes are not exclusively linked to the point of view of the hearer: when I say “I have had breakfast” *I myself* typically *intend* to say that I have had breakfast *this morning* and I do not say explicitly “this morning” because I assume, without saying, that my interlocutor understands my intention without further ado.<sup>15</sup> True, I can cancel the so called enrichment “I had breakfast this morning”, but this rare case does not abolish the plain fact that, if I intend to convey the information that I had breakfast this morning, then I will normally say “I had breakfast” using an implicit enrichment myself. Typically, it is supposed that the hearer performs a pragmatic process of enrichment arriving at an explicature of what is said. However, it seems reasonable to think that a speaker, wanting to convey the same content, uses as linguistic mean an expression that requires an implicit enrichment.

When a speaker has content in mind, she has to express it in language, and we cannot exclude a priori the hypothesis that the speaker uses the same processing the hearer uses in understanding. There is always a part of guesswork from both sides, and the hearer may misunderstand the intended content. But this should not hide the fact that speakers and hearers share the same linguistic practice: the mental processing so much analyzed as ways of “interpretation” of what is said may be considered to be the same mental processes speakers use in choosing the linguistic material to express and convey what they have in mind.

It is not clear what is means to link the truth conditional meaning – what we say – with mysterious prelinguistic intentions (direct perception of something impinging on our perceptual apparatus that should prompt us to refer to what we see); we need intentions shaped with the practice of linguistic interaction. If expressing *what we say* requires mastering of a shared practice and a shared context, we cannot sharply separate the point of view of the constitution of meaning – of what we say – and the point of view of interpretation of meaning. It is not as if had meanings in the speakers’ heads on the one hand and hearer’s interpretation processes on the other: speakers and hearers are interchangeable roles and we cannot assume that speakers use the lexicon and its inferential network with a different pragmatic processing than the one performed by hearers. Pragmatics should not be so different from syntax: like a generative algorithm gives the same syntagmatic tree of its correspondent parser, it is not incongruous to suppose that the generation of what is said is in harmony with, or reveals the same structure of how what is said is understood.

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<sup>15</sup> With this regard, Sperber and Wilson (2005, 483: 12) argue that Bach’s criticism to the notion of explicature extends too far. Bach claims that, being cancellable, explicatures cannot be intended as belonging to what is said, but to some implicit level of meaning (that Bach calls “implicature”). On the contrary, Sperber and Wilson argue that, if we follow this strategy, even disambiguation and reference assignment, being cancellable, could not contribute to explicit content or to what is said, contrary to the accepted tradition.

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