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Truth, Meaning and Contextualism

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1. Michael: 'I have looked everywhere for the keys and cannot find them.' Alison: 'Those keys are in the sideboard where you put them yesterday.' Michael (goes to the sideboard, retrieves the keys): 'Sorry. You were right.'

This example of an apparently straightforward conversational interchange can trigger bewilderingly complex (and even bad-tempered) philosophical interchange. What contributes to such complexity in the philosophical interchange is that various parties seem to be operating against a background of different ground-rules for central notions such as truth, truth-condition, context, what-is-said, what-is-implicated and, not least, semantics, communication and meaning. Moreover, the many subtle, and not so subtle, differences in the background governing these notions are not merely careless. Contributors argue for the rightness of their understanding of the background and the ground-rules that shape it, insisting that only by seeing matters in their way do we have any hope of a proper theoretical grasp of what Michael and Alison managed with so little effort.

The theoretical debate now has too many twists and turns to be untangled by any single paper. And, though tempting, the Gordian stratagem is not even of metaphorical help here, since there is likely to be as much debate about what would count as cutting the knot as about anything else in this area. Still, the aim of this paper is untangling, rather than tightening, and while the length of unknotted string it will produce is not long, I hope you will come to think that I am pulling on the right thread.

The particular thread I have in mind is commonly called 'contextualism', a label that covers both lively debates in epistemology and in the philosophy of language. My concern will be with the latter, and the little dialogue that opened the paper can be used to sketch the shape of the debate.

2. A first step in an attempt to explain the interchange between Michael and Alison might go as follows:

(i) Michael and Alison uttered sentences in English, and these have the meanings they do in virtue of the meanings (or senses) of their words, and the meaning-relevant effects of their sub-sentential principles of construction. Both Michael and Alison, as speakers of English, are able to take advantage of those meanings (and effects) in their communicative interchange. Moreover, though only implicit in the description of that interchange, it takes place against a background that extends beyond the fact that the words used have the meanings they do. Included here are facts about each of the speakers, and facts about what each of them knows or believes, and knows or believes the other knows or believes, and more general facts about the world which together constitute *the* context, or separately (depending on one's view) contexts of the interchange. In sum, the communicative success of the interchange is brought about by what the participants know about the meanings and context(s) of the relevant sentences.

Of course, the above description barely scratches the surface (though I will find a use for it later). What is wanted is a more detailed account, both of the meaning/sense properties of the sentences Michael and Alison used, and the contextual factors that, together with these meanings, provide a genuine explanation of communicative success. Here is one kind of continuation:

(ii) The way to understand the idea that the sentences Alison and Michael use have meanings is to see them as having truth conditions which are, in turn, the result of the truth-conditional contributions of their words and constructions. Consider, for example, Alison's sentence:

Those keys are in the sideboard where you put them yesterday.

Some of the words in this contribute to truth conditions in a way not dependent on context. Thus, given its lexical content, 'sideboard' can be counted on to have a satisfaction condition which is intelligible without reference to the context in which

Alison used it. However, the plural demonstrative ‘those keys’, the pronoun ‘you’ and the noun ‘yesterday’ are all context-dependent expressions, so we cannot understand their contribution to truth conditions without somehow calling on context, and there is an ample choice of familiar ways of accounting for this context-dependence.

Of course, context’s contribution to our understanding of the communicative interchange doesn’t stop here. Even in the simple scenario above, it is not difficult to recognise a kind of undertone to the interchange which is context-dependent and which contributes, not to the truth conditions of the sentences used, but to something we might think of as its social intelligibility. Michael’s initial sentence has the form usually found in an assertion, but of course Alison clearly takes it to be a question. Moreover, the tenor of her reply suggests her exasperation in her having been asked it in the first place. (One has to *imagine* the context here, but then again one usually has to do this.)

In sum, the way to understand the contribution that context makes to the interchange is to see it contributing, on the one hand, to the truth conditional content of sentences used in that exchange and, on the other hand, to the (broadly) social/psychological point or points of using sentences with those truth conditions there and then.

One way to put the message of the (ii) – one I will go along with for the moment – is to say that truth conditional content is the joint product of the *semantic* features of the words and constructions in the relevant sentences, and the *semantic* contribution of context. The further contribution of context is to be counted as *pragmatic*: it lays bare features arising from (broadly) the further purposes of participants in using the sentences they do in the communicative interchange. One recent expression of what is roughly this view comes from King and Stanley (2005).

Their view has it that the sentence used by Alison has the semantic properties it does, partly in virtue of the semantic properties of its words and their modes of combination, but partly also in virtue of a certain restricted kind of contextual input which they call ‘weakly pragmatic’. The weakly pragmatic contribution of context is that which can be directly linked to words or constructions (or possibly hidden syntactic markers) in the sentence, whereas strong pragmatic contextual effects – the proper subject matter of pragmatics – consists in the contribution that context makes when it cannot be sheeted home to any overt or hidden item in the relevant sentence. Thus, fixing the truth conditional content of ‘those keys’ or

‘yesterday’ in Alison’s sentence is a weakly pragmatic contribution of context, whereas the fact that Michael’s initial sentence was taken as a question is a strongly pragmatic effect.

As noted, account (ii) of the Michael-Alison interchange is controversial partly because of the way it draws the semantics/pragmatics distinction, and partly because of the way it uses the idea of truth conditions to characterise the semantic side of this distinction, but mostly because of the way it suggests using the semantics/pragmatics distinction in explaining communicative interchanges. I will have more to say about truth conditions, and, by implication, something to say about the semantics/pragmatics distinction, but understanding this third area of controversy will take us directly to the debate about contextualism which is central to my paper.

3. Attempt (i) to explain the interchange between Michael and Alison appealed only to the notions of meaning and context. The further story (ii) – the one involving talk of semantics, pragmatics and their respective contributions – was intended to elaborate, underpin or explain the relatively common-or-garden notions of meaning and context. Roughly, semantics (where this includes so-called ‘weakly’ pragmatic input to semantics) is supposed to account for the meaning-properties of the sentences that Michael and Alison used; it is supposed to generate truth conditional contents for those sentences which are available to Michael and Alison, and which therefore contribute to the success of the interchange. As already noted, context plays two roles in this: when required by certain overt, or possibly hidden words or constructions in the relevant sentences, it contributes directly to their truth conditional content; when sentences do not contain these context-apt ‘hooks’, the effect of context is more diffuse, contributing not to the understanding of the sentential content but to the understanding of the social and psychological point of the interchange.

Against this background, the contextualist has this basic complaint: this picture fails to accord the proper role to context, at least partly because it gives semantics a role it cannot support, but mostly because it doesn’t give context its due. This complaint can take one of two forms. Borrowing a term from King and Stanley, though not using it in exactly the way that they do, one form of the complaint could be called ‘contextual intrusion’, and for reasons which will be obvious, the other will be called ‘contextual invasion’.

Citing specific examples, intrusionists maintain that there are features of context which operate, not on specific words and constructions in sentences, but, instead, globally on the sentences as used in relevant contexts. In effect, they maintain that, for many specific kinds of sentence, semantics, as described in the picture above, does not by itself result in

appropriate contents for those sentences – contents that account for what actually goes on in communicative interchanges. King and Stanley speak of ‘pragmatic’ rather than ‘contextual’ intrusion because they take as read their division of contextual effects into those which are weakly or strongly pragmatic. For them, pragmatic intrusion is essentially the intrusion of strong pragmatic effects, and while there is no harm in this terminology, it is too closely tied to their conception of the semantics/pragmatics distinction, and it makes it difficult to understand why the issue in the literature concerns *contextualism*, and not something that might be called ‘pragmaticism’.

I shall not have a lot to say about contextual intrusion, but it is probably a good idea to have an example of it. King and Stanley discuss a number, including this one:

(1) I am not happy, I’m ecstatic.

It has been claimed that the negation in (1) is difficult to interpret, unless one sees it as operating, not on the semantic content of ‘I am happy’, but on the contextually salient suggestion (implicature, as it is better known) that ‘I am not happy’ brings in train. For in usual cases, someone who asserts ‘I am not happy’ implicates something like: I am miserable, depressed, etc., and in (1) it is this implication that is negated.

Now (1) is only a very gentle example of contextual intrusion, and King and Stanley are quick to argue out that it can be resisted by telling a more complicated story about the semantics of the negation in (1). If this story is found acceptable, and they suggest that there are independent reasons for this, (1) turns out to be just like any other case in which context tamely makes what is in the end a semantic contribution by hooking onto a syntactically appropriate item, in this case ‘not’. Of course there are more difficult cases than this one, and King and Stanley spend some time discussing them. But the result they believe is the same: in every case where context threatens to intrude *globally* on the assignment of semantic content to sentences, one finds that what we really have is the perfectly ordinary semantic contribution that context makes to relevant words and constructions *within* such sentences.

As the label implies, contextual intrusion arguments turn on one’s finding specific kinds of sentence that, when used in certain contexts, seem to have a content that cannot be traced back to the semantic assignments made to their words and constructions. The intrusionist thus exerts pressure on the idea that the semantics of words and constructions (where this includes the semantic contribution of context linked to those words and constructions) generates truth conditional content for sentences in which these words and

constructions figure. However, as is obvious, this pressure is exerted on a case-by-case basis, and it thus contrasts with what I have called contextual invasion.

This is not to say that the invasionist eschews argument by cases, it is just that those used are meant to show something more general about our understanding of linguistic interchanges. Here is a clear statement of intent:

Truth conditional content depends on an indefinite number of unstated background assumptions, not all of which can be made explicit. A change in background assumptions can change truth-conditions, even after disambiguation and reference assignment. That is, even after disambiguating any ambiguous words in a sentence and assigning semantic values to any indexical expressions in the sentence, truth-conditions may vary with variations in the background.¹

And she adds a little later on:

The contextualist argues for the radical context-dependence of what is said. Yet we clearly have no trouble in understanding what other people say, despite this radical context-dependence. If we assume that this understanding is not magical, there must be a systematic account to give of what is understood (the truth conditional content of utterances) and how it is we are able to know this (what our semantic knowledge consists in and how this knowledge is used in context to understand what is said).

Together these imply that the picture given by King and Stanley (and by many others before them) is fundamentally mistaken. Semantics, even when this includes any contextual contribution to the semantics of this or that word or construction, falls short of delivering truth-conditional content. And Bezuidenhout, along with many other writers, sees the mastery by speakers and hearers of such content as necessary to their being able to participate intelligibly – not magically – in linguistic interchanges.

As noted, the basic argument for contextual invasion tends to proceed by way of an examination of cases. Though these cases are often discussed in enormous and hotly contested detail, what matters to this paper is the shape they impose on the argument, not their details.

¹ Bezuidenhout 2002, p. 105 .

Still, as with contextual intrusion, it will be good to have a headline case, and without suggesting that it is the most powerful example, let me borrow one from Bezuidenhout:

My son comes in from the backyard and when I ask him what he has been doing he replies: ‘I’ve been playing baseball’. Is what he says true? Well, the game he was playing resembles standard league baseball games only rather remotely. There certainly is no baseball diamond in our backyard. In the game my son plays with his father and our dog in our backyard, bases are marked by three trees that stand in a very rough diamond shape with respect to ‘home plate’ which is itself a rather poorly defined place somewhere at the fourth point of the rough diamond. The game is played with only a pitcher and a batter. When the batter makes it to a base, he leaves an ‘invisible man’ on base and returns to bat. The dog plays in the outfield. Sometimes he returns the ball to the batter and sometimes he chases the runner around the bases with the ball in his mouth, but not in any predictable way. Yet this joint activity counts as playing baseball, as playing baseball is understood in this context. So if my son was in fact playing baseball on this understanding, then what my son says is true.²

The point of this example, and others like it, is that of convincing us that the semantics of expressions cannot be depended upon to yield appropriate truth conditions. In the above setting, the sentence ‘I’ve been playing baseball’ has a truth condition – one that, in the circumstances makes it true – but a semantic account of its key predicate – ‘playing baseball’ – does not get right the truth-conditional contribution one would expect of this expression. And this is so even when semantics is understood in a liberal enough sense to allow it to appeal to context. This is partly because, as the example suggests, there is an indefinitely large range of things that can count as satisfying ‘playing baseball’. It is partly because, even aside from the fact that there is no obvious extra syntactic ‘hook’ onto which one can hang some particular interpretation of this predicate expression, the range of things which count as ‘playing baseball’ cannot be summarised in a way amenable to syntactic hooks. But it is mostly because, once one takes on board the difficulties revealed in this example, one can see that they could well show up in the use of virtually any predicate expression. Because the upshot of these considerations will prove crucial to my central contention, it is worth spelling them out a bit more patiently.

² Ibid., p. 106.

4. If we take the quantifier in the sentence:

(2) Every book is mouldy,

as unrestricted, we get an absurdly false claim. Of course, when this sentence is used in a typical context, speakers and hearers will understand the quantifier as restricted to a particular domain of books – perhaps those in the attic – and whether actually true or false, it will be plausible. Now while some believe this kind of example supports contextual intrusion, Stanley has argued (in many places³) that it does no such thing. Ignoring details, what he argues is that there is a covert marker of domain in the quantified expression ‘All books’, and that this marker is targeted by context. Stanley’s point is that the presence of this covert marker allows context here to make the same kind of contribution to truth conditions as it does in respect of expressions such as ‘she’ or ‘that’. Using their terminology, King and Stanley would say that context here makes a ‘weakly pragmatic’ contribution, one that we would be well within our rights to count as semantic.

As Stanley also claims, there are cases in which context makes what some might regard as a contribution to truth conditions, but in which it would be absurd to think there are covert markers. For example, in (3) there is no reason to search for a marker of ‘manner’, nor for the ‘source of the food’.

(3) John ate his breakfast.

Thus, if he ate his breakfast with his hands, or was fed intravenously, or if John’s breakfast happens to come from Mars, these contextual features do not have a syntactic marker on which to batten, and they therefore cannot be semantically house-trained. This means that, if we have the intuition that one or the other such circumstance does affect the truth conditions of (3), this sentence becomes a problem for those who think that speakers and hearers use their semantic understanding to access the truth conditions of sentences. But, as has been argued by Stanley, among others, it is far from obvious that judgements about the truth of (3) vary with the manner in which John ate, and the planet from which his food came.⁴

³ For example, Stanley 2000, Stanley and Szabó 2000, and Stanley 2002.

⁴ See Stanley 2005, pp. 224-5.

Matters are not so straightforward with the baseball-playing example. The first of the worries cited above is that there is an indefinitely wide range of activities which, in certain circumstances, could be judged as satisfying ‘playing baseball’, but which in other circumstances would not. Given that these judgements of truth are all over the place, it is not obvious how one could count ‘playing baseball’ as contributing something invariable to the truth conditions of the son’s sentence:

(4) I’ve been playing baseball.

By itself, however, this is not a definitive problem. If one could find some way to harness the contextual variations to the variations in truth value, one could still count the contribution of ‘playing baseball’ as semantic, at least in the liberal sense. But Stanley’s model of how this might be done in the case of quantified phrases seems hopeless here. On the one hand, there seems no obvious reason to think that there is some covert syntactic marker in ‘playing baseball’. In the quantifier case, there are arguments that suggest we might need, or have independent reason for, such markers – arguments involving issues of quantifier binding – but these do not transfer to the present case. But – and this is the second of my earlier worries – the presence of such a marker is only of use if we can specify the kind of contribution that context makes, a kind of contribution which brings order to the otherwise unruly behaviour of the predicate. And there seems no obvious candidate here. In the case of quantifier phrases, the marker holds a place for ‘domain of quantification’, and we understand how specifying this, case-by-case, might allow us to make sense of truth-value judgements that would otherwise be puzzling. But how could we capture the kind of contribution that context might make to the ‘playing baseball’? Should it be ‘manner’, ‘style’, ‘duration’... – the list is open-ended.⁵

In view of all this, why not just adopt the fall-back strategy that Stanley recommends in respect of (3)? What is required by this strategy is, basically, that we ignore any contextual variations that might crop up. As we saw in a previous case, whether he ate with his hands, was fed intravenously, or, whether his food came from Mars, these just don’t figure in the truth conditions of (3). Stanley writes:

⁵ The idea there might be a marker for ‘respect’ in which one is said to be playing baseball might be tempting, but is in the end no less hopeless. See Bezuidenhout 2006, p. 4, esp n2.

...when someone tells us that John ate this morning, we assume that he did so in the normal way. But no one would deem an utterance of (3) false if, contrary to the default assumptions, they discovered that John ingested his breakfast in some non-standard way, such as being spoon-fed. So the manner of eating is no part of the intuitive truth conditions of (3).⁶

However, unlike (3), the ‘intuitive’ truth conditions of (4) cannot be so easily ignored, for, as Bezuidenhout insists, there will be contexts in which what is recognisably the same activity will be judged to satisfy ‘playing baseball’ and others in which this would be denied. I will come back to this important issue below, but the point now is that there is *prima facie* reason to think that we cannot simply look the other way – as we can with ‘ate’ – in respect of the variation one finds in the use of the predicate in (4). Moreover, and this is the final worry raised earlier, there is nothing special or restricted about the baseball example, or about the other similar cases one finds throughout the literature on contextualism. Though they can often seem *recondite* or even forced, once one gets the hang of them, one can come to think that any predicate can suffer the same fate. Even the simple dialogue between Alison and Michael might lead down the same path, since it would take only a little imagination, for example, to think of ways in which ‘in the sideboard’ could be made to show relevant contextual variation.

It is precisely because virtually any predicate expression can succumb that what is in question is best described as contextual invasion. But invasions, even philosophical ones, can be resisted. And the logic of the examples intended to spear-head the invasion, has been rejected by various writers, perhaps most robustly by Cappelen and Lepore 2005 (hereinafter ‘C&L’).

5. Given the complications that have piled up in the literature, detailing the anti-invasionist side of the case could be a full-time occupation. But presenting what is, I think, the central focus of disagreement will suffice.⁷ The invasionist presents examples meant to show that the truth conditions of virtually any sentence are not made available to speakers and hearers by

⁶ Stanley 2005, p. 224.

⁷ Enormous amounts of energy have been expended in arguing about conditions for context-dependency, but, as will be clear, this is not something central to this paper. Nor, for that matter, is it clearly crucial for the debate, since neither side thinks that there can be necessary and sufficient conditions for context-dependency *tout court*.

the semantics of its contained expressions, even when we allow contextual contribution to that semantics. The anti-invasionist strategy of C&L consists basically of two elements, one defensive and one offensive.

First, and defensively, they ask us to focus on the distinction between what a sentence means and which speech acts it effects. For example, Alison's sentence:

(5) The keys are in the sideboard where you put them yesterday,

can figure in as wide a variety of speech acts as there are correct ways of reporting what went on. Thus, someone might say of Alison's use of the original sentence that she:

told Michael where the keys are,
 reminded him where the keys are,
 chided him,
 showed her exasperation with him,
 responded to what she took to be his question,
 told him to search in the sideboard,
 told him to look where he had himself put the keys,
 asked him to think what he had done with the keys yesterday.

C&L note that there is no reason to take any one of these as giving the truth conditions of the original sentence. Indeed they regard it as a fundamental mistake made by many (sometimes, one gets the feeling, most) theorists to think that we can move easily (in one or both directions) between whatever speech act is performed by the utterance of a sentence and the truth-conditions of the sentence itself. The latter, they maintain, is exactly what semantics is responsible for, and only confusion – and error – can come of thinking that speech act theory can make a direct contribution to this task.

Cleaving to this distinction, they regard the examples offered by the contextual invasionist as model exhibits of such confusion and error. Returning to the Bezuidenhout example, C&L would treat (4) as having the following pretty straightforward truth conditions (leaving aside the 'I' which I have dealt with only cursorily below):

(6) 'I've been playing baseball' is true iff the speaker has been playing baseball.

And they regard all the stuff about what specific type of game makes (4) true or false, in this or that context, as relevant to our assessment of the reports of speech act or acts that (4) figures in, rather than as relevant to its truth conditions. Thus, the mother in the example can correctly believe and report that her son *said* he was playing baseball; she can also report him as having said that he was playing a game with his father, filing in time before lunch, etc. In some contexts the content of the reported speech act will be counted as expressing a truth (e.g. in the context where the mother tells a friend what her son said about what he was doing), in others a falsehood (e.g. in the context where a major league scout who lives locally, and having asked if anyone in the his neighbourhood can play baseball, is told that so-and-so's son plays baseball). But these differences are neither here nor there in the face of the claim that (6) suffices to give the truth conditions of (4).

Having shunted the problematic cases into the siding of speech act theory, and insisted that semantics yields a perfectly good truth condition for (4), C&L are not content to rest with this merely defensive move. The second element of their strategy sees them taking the fight to the enemy. Again, the details of this can be daunting, but the underlying point is simple enough: C&L argue that the invasionist makes it difficult, if not impossible, to understand how we ever manage to communicate with one another. This is because, as they see it, if the truth conditions of virtually any sentence depend on the particular context that figures in its use, then our understanding of that sentence would indeed be magical. In a recent confrontation with Travis, they write:

We claim that radical contextualists [i.e. my invasionists] are stuck with a kind of 'contextual content solipsism' where contents cannot be carried from one context to another. We claim radical contextualism implies that the same proposition can't be expressed by people differently situated. If Travis were right, it shouldn't, for example, be possible for us to say what Travis said, and Travis shouldn't be able to say what we said.⁸

In his own commentary on C&L, Travis anticipates this criticism, and writes:

What communication requires, C&L suppose, is that from the fact that Max said, on some occasion, 'Sid Grunts, of Sid (at time t), those words meanings in Max's mouth

⁸ C&L 2006, p. 57.

what they do mean, one can extract what it is that Max thus said to be so. R[adical] C[ontextualism] of course denies that one can do that. But why in the world should one need to? Perhaps their idea is this. If Max's words are to be any use to me, I must be able to identify precisely the proposition they expressed. To do that would be to identify precisely which understanding they bore...But (their idea would continue), to do that you would really need to be there (at Max's speaking). On the RC view, though, communication just isn't like that. True, Max's words are worth little to me if I know nothing of the circumstances in which he spoke. But knowing something of them may be enough to know something of what is to be expected if things are as he said.⁹

This rejoinder is in turn greeted with a kind of derision by C&L:

Accordingly, we can never grasp exactly what another says; we can only muster something similar; something that will do for whatever purposes we are up to...In [C&L], we advance a battery of arguments for why we abhor this way of construing communication...[W]e find it shocking that Travis is willing to reject that component of our self-understanding as linguistic creatures that requires that we are capable of understanding each other across contexts.¹⁰

Nor is the issue of how invasionists might explain linguistic communication local to the interchange between C&L and Travis. Bezuidenhout, noting that she has not herself presented 'anything like a full-blown contextualist theory of meaning', has this to say of what would be required of such a theory:

How is it that these two characteristics [the reference here is to something Travis claims, but could as well refer to the views of the other contextualists she cites] allow users to understand what speakers say, given that what speakers say goes beyond sentence meaning and relies crucially on background assumptions not all of which can be made explicit? It is not surprising that no contextualist has yet spelled this out

⁹ Travis 2006, p. 46.

¹⁰ C&L 2006., pp. 58-9. C&L note that they are currently developing these arguments into a book, *Shared Content and Semantic Spin*.

in any detail, for it calls for something beyond an account of language. It calls for a general account of how our inferential abilities, of how our memories are organised and retrieved, of how we are able to integrate action and belief and of much more besides.¹¹

To which, it is quite predictable that C&L would respond: it calls for no such thing. The truth conditional biconditionals made available, as in, say, (6), give us what we need (so far as ‘playing baseball’ is concerned) to explain how hearers come to understand sentences such as (4).

These citations chart one front in the war, and it is clear from the current literature that that war continues unabated. Certainly, it is not yet possible to say whether the contextual invasionists will come to hold sway over the domain of linguistic meaning, or whether blockade and counter-offensive will prevail. I have given these rather long citations, not merely to give one the shape and flavour of the debate, but because they contain claims that will be crucial to my central contention. Perhaps surprisingly, I think that one can find in them something rather basic that is shared by both sides but which is nonetheless misguided. Since nothing in this area is simple, I think it best to preface my account of this shared mistake with some observations, first about truth conditions, and second about context.

6. Central to both sides of the contextual invasionist debate is appeal to the notion of a sentence’s truth condition, or the proposition it expresses. Invasionists deny that there is any such thing, as witness:

RC’s [i.e. invasionists] deny that (e.g. English) sentences are in the business of being true or false. They are not (RCs hold) because there is, systematically, no such thing as ‘that which a sentences says to be so’.¹²

And opponents such as C&L insist that there is, as witness¹³:

Any utterance of :

¹¹ Bezuidenhout 2002, p. 127.

¹² Travis 2006, p. 40.

¹³ C&L 2005, p. 3.

Rudolf has had breakfast,
is true just in case Rudolf has had breakfast, and expresses the proposition *that Rudolf has had breakfast*.

The ‘any’ that C&L use is important. For while the above citations might make it seem as if the issue turns on the notorious distinction between sentences as abstract objects and the linguistic acts of utterance in which they figure, this would be a mistake. For though it C&L do often speak of the truth condition of this or that sentence, they make it quite clear that it is the sentence uttered that has this truth condition. And when Travis denies this, he is not merely denying that an abstract object has a truth condition; he is also denying that it makes sense to speak of *the* truth condition of the utterance of a sentence. His view, along with other invasionists, certainly allows that the utterance of a given sentence in its contextual setting will have a truth condition – indeed that is the beginning of the truth conditional pragmatics programme that Bezuidenhout imagines. But the invasionist insists that there is no reason at all to think that this truth condition is the one that *any* utterance of that sentence will have.

One way to capture what separates the two sides is their attitude towards the biconditionals that figure so prominently in the literature on meaning. In the above citation, C&L claim that the relevant biconditional gives the content of a sentence – what they often call the minimal proposition expressed by that sentence – and they argue that only a case in which the antecedent of such a conditional is true and its consequent false would be a counterexample to their view. Thus, in response to any one of the invasionists cases (e.g. the one involving the predicate ‘playing baseball’), they would say:

To refute the view that playing baseball is that way an activity is iff it is playing baseball, you need to convince us that the biconditional is false. How would you do that? You need to find a case in which some activity satisfies ‘playing baseball’ but isn’t playing baseball (or the other way around).¹⁴

In response, invasionists could with some justice say:

¹⁴ This is pretty much a direct quote from C&L 2006, p. 55 that has been adapted to the baseball example.

Providing such a case is certainly impossible, but that is beside the point. This is because we deny that this biconditional, wrenched out of its various contexts, provides anything like a content for ‘playing baseball’, or for sentences in which this predicate figures. We can only make sense of such biconditionals fulfilling the task that Davidson and others have set them if they lead speakers and hearers to make a consistent pattern of true/false judgements across a range of linguistic interchanges. But when one looks at this range, the variability in such true/false judgements shows this to be impossible.

The issue of who is right in this particular interchange – fundamentally right, not merely right about the burden of argument – is the basic thing dividing the two sides. However, the observation I want to make concerns an understanding of ‘truth condition’, or ‘proposition expressed’ that seems to be shared by both parties. It is this: both sides assume that if a speaker uses a sentence which has a truth condition or expresses a proposition, then the grasp of this by the hearer will at least in principle allow the hearer to determine the truth value of the sentence that the speaker uses.¹⁵ That is, they both presume that a speaker’s mastery of the truth condition of a sentence prepares her to judge the sentence true or false. (I shall ignore the complications that would be needed to transpose the discussion for the case of ‘proposition expressed’, but the cases are parallel.)

The evidence for this is on the part of invasionists is everywhere, and lies behind every one of the complex examples that support their case. Whatever the details, each such case is intended to show that mastery of biconditional-style truth condition for the relevant sentence will not enable a hearer to form an adequate view of the actual truth or falsity of that sentence when used on some occasion, even though it purports to do this. This is apparent in Travis’s claim (above) that English sentences are not ‘in the business of being true or false...because there is, systematically, no such thing as “that which the sentence says to be so”.’ And it comes out in other ways, even if these are not always put with sufficient caution.

¹⁵ Here and in what follows, I leave out the obvious further fact that mastery of a truth condition isn’t *by itself* enough to decide truth value: one has also to be appropriately placed epistemically. This can sometimes cause confusion: it can seem as if the assumption I am describing requires that a truth condition already includes something like a method for verifying the truth or falsity of the sentence. But talk in the text of a truth condition as ‘enabling’ or ‘equipping’ someone to decide truth value should be understood as saying no more than that it would so enable or equip someone who was appropriately placed epistemically.

For example, Recanati writes:

The central idea of truth-conditional semantics... is the idea that, via truth, we connect words with 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*.¹⁶

And I am sure that we are meant to take the italicised phrase ‘which state of affairs’ as directly referring (via what is intended as a relative pronoun) to some bit of extra-linguistic reality, as witness something Recanati says on this topic (though in another place):

...there obviously is another way of eliciting truth-conditional intuitions. One has simply to provide subjects with scenarios describing situations, or, even better, with – possibly animated – pictures of situations, and ask them to evaluate the target sentence as true or false with respect to the situation in question.¹⁷

The assumption about the relationship between truth conditions and truth value tends also to be made by anti-invasionists. For example, C&L imagine the following question put to them:

How can speakers go around making assertions by uttering sentences that semantically express propositions [i.e. have truth conditions] they don’t even believe (since they

¹⁶ Recanati 2005, p. 185.

¹⁷ Recanati 2004, p. 92. as cited in C&L 2005, p. 197. C&L find the talk of ‘animated pictures’ bizarre, and the garbled talk of ‘scenarios describing situations’ certainly doesn’t help. In any case, it is clear enough what Recanati is getting at: he wants us to understand talk of truth conditions as somehow bringing worldly things directly into discussion. Unkindly, perhaps, but accurately, one could see Recanati’s aim as an updated version of what happened in Swift’s Academy of Lagado in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Members of that Academy carried around objects so as to avoid the difficulties of words; Recanati recommends scenarios and pictures. The observation I make in the text is not concerned with this aspect of Recanati’s proposal, but rather with his assumption that mastery of a truth condition of a sentence enables one with this mastery to judge whether the sentence is actually true or false. Clearly there is a connection between a ‘Swiftian’ conception of truth conditions and this latter point, but the two are separate. For example, I don’t think that Travis would share the idea of scenarios and pictures with Recanati, but he does insist on the relationship between truth conditions and actual truth or falsity.

certainly can't believe the semantic content unless they have beliefs about the actual truth values)?

And they refer the reader to the following chapter ('Semantics and Psychology') where, as part of their answer to the above question, they write:

We think...that there is a minimal semantic content or proposition expressed that is semantically expressed by (almost) every utterance of a well-formed English sentence. This proposition is not a 'skeleton'; it is not fragmentary; it is a full-blooded proposition with truth conditions and a truth value... We think...that this minimal semantic content is an essential part of all communicative interactions. The minimal semantic content has a function in the cognitive life of communicators that no other content can serve.¹⁸

Alright, so both sides seem to think that when someone grasps the truth condition of a sentence, this equips her with a crucial part of what is needed to judge the sentence true or false.¹⁹ Aside from the fact that both sides disagree about whether semantics do in fact yield truth conditions, is this a problem? Well, though I don't have any direct argument (yet) to show that it is, my aim just now is more observation than argument. And my observation here is that this assumption is not one we have to make, even if it is encouraged by talk of *truth* conditions. There are ways of understanding truth-conditional accounts of meaning which do not see them as furnishing speakers and hearers with specific resources enabling them to make judgements about the actual truth or falsity of sentences. More on that after an observation about the notion of context.

7. Everyone who takes sides in the contextualist wars, uses the notion of 'context' as if it were understanding it was pretty straightforward. Now it is obviously possible to question whether we really do understand what kinds of thing go to make up the contexts that figure so prominently in the literature. But, even though this pedantic stance has something to be said for it, it is not one that I will take up here. Indeed, I admit to having the perfectly ordinary reaction that I suspect we all do to examples of this or that effect of context. When words like

¹⁸ C&L 2006, p. 181.

¹⁹ See note 15 for an explanation of why I say 'a part' here.

‘I’ or ‘yesterday’ are in question, I go along with the assumption that the context includes the speaker or the time of utterance; when a demonstrative is used, that the context includes a speaker with some relevant object-directed intention which is known or at least knowable by any hearer. When Michael tells Alison that he has looked for the keys everywhere without success, I don’t have any trouble imagining why his saying this is counted as a question for Alison: the context has it that he believes she put the keys some place where he couldn’t find them, and that she will understand his hyperbolic claim as a plea to reveal where they are. When she produces her reply, it is also easy enough to imagine what makes what she says an expression of only barely concealed contempt: the context is such that she is exasperated with Michael who she regards as having the childish tendency to blame others for his own failings.

In sum, while it is surprisingly difficult to tell a single comprehensive story about what a context is, getting a grip on this notion in – well, here I have to say ‘specific contexts’ – is not difficult. In this way, context resembles another notion in this area, viz. meaning. As that concept figured in the attempt (i) above to explain the interchange between Michael and Alison, it is perfectly familiar: each of the sentences that Michael and Alison used were said to have meanings – meanings that themselves result from the meanings of the sentence’s words and constructions – and it was claimed that the participants’ grasp of these is what, at least partly, makes their linguistic interchange work. But, as we know, though meaning is easy enough to employ in this informal kind of way, proper philosophical accounts of it are anything but straightforward.

That the notion of context is both commonsensically familiar and philosophically difficult, and its sharing this with the concept of meaning, suggests something further. In its ordinary employment, we find meaning something it is natural to attribute to, or project onto, items in the linguistic interchanges they participate in, or witness. Some have, I think rightly, insisted that we do this in the direct, unmediated, way in which we perceive the world when our eyes are open. But this is controversial, and the point about attribution is not meant to be. For whether or not it has the directness of perception, what talk of attribution or projection suggests is that the notion of meaning is something we employ to make sense of linguistic interchanges, rather than something that makes them possible in the first place. Put another way, meaning is the *upshot* of various communicative interchanges, not their *determinant*. My suggestion – and this is second of my tentative observations – is that something like this might well be true of the notion of context.

In the hands of theoreticians, context can seem to be one of the things which, even if only implicitly, speakers and hearers exploit to make sure that their communicative

interchanges work; context, on this understanding, counts as a determinant of those interchanges. But, following the suggestion above, mightn't it be better to think of context instead as the upshot of communicative interchange? This would fit better with the perfectly ordinary employment of this notion. It certainly seems to be something we find it natural to attribute to successful (or unsuccessful) interchanges, rather than something which we take ourselves to have access to independently of any such interchange.

8. Underlying my observations about truth conditions and context is a certain conception of the semantic project shared by many writers on both sides in the contextualist debate. My observations in the previous two sections were meant to register doubts that might be traced back to that conception, and in this section I should like to confront it more directly.

Central to that project is the demand that the materials with which speakers and hearers are credited suffice for explaining the success of their linguistic interchanges. And, even without worrying too much about the niceties of this contested notion, it is clear enough that the idea of explanation here is broadly causal/explanatory: the materials the theorist credits to speakers are thought of as bringing about, or being antecedents to, any such success. Using our earlier example, the idea is that those who have mastered the predicate expression 'playing baseball' can deploy it so as to achieve communicative success amongst those similarly endowed. (Of course, there must also be mastery of other words and constructions to provide a setting for 'playing baseball, but for the present point we can assume that this is in place.) When the mother in Bezuidenhout's example hears her son say: 'I've been playing baseball', then, assuming that the son has mastered the materials – the package – that goes with 'playing baseball', his use of this predicate will result in (or at least constrain) his mother's understanding.

Of course, it is Bezuidenhout's view that traditional semantic accounts of this package will not work. As she sees it, such accounts understand the package that goes with 'playing baseball' as supposedly captured by its contribution to the truth conditions of sentences in which it is used: in the familiar idiom, some activity satisfies 'playing baseball' iff that activity is playing baseball. And given that this contribution is a truth conditional one, any hearer also in possession of the relevant package, will be enabled to say whether the son's claim is true or false. However, as we saw, Bezuidenhout's worry is that the standard truth conditional characterisation of the package will do no such thing. For, in a different context, one might well perfectly well possess the package characterised by the biconditional satisfaction condition, while being unable to judge, or judge correctly, the claim's truth or

falsity. What this failure shows, or so say the invasionists, is that the traditional picture of truth conditional semantics cannot be depended upon to give us an adequate characterisation of the package that explains successful communication. For that, we need to tell a much more complex story that takes context into account, hence Bezuidenout's view of her project as 'truth conditional pragmatics'.

Defending the traditional conception from contextual invasion, C&L argue first of all that the biconditional characterisation does suffice to determine the truth values of the relevant sentence, and, secondly, that trying to extend the project in the way suggested by talk of truth conditional pragmatics, will actually make impossible any explanation of communicative success.

It should be clear how my earlier observations link to the underlying conception that figures in both sides of the debate. First, this conception makes it possible to understand why one would think of a truth condition for a sentence as something which would lead those who use or grasp the sentence to be in a position to judge it actually true or false. Treated as a way of characterising the package that enables speakers and hearers to deploy the sentence (and its parts), it is a natural assumption to make. Thus, the thought is that mastery of the package governing 'playing baseball' must surely equip someone with what it takes to frame or judge sentences in which it occurs in this or that context as true or false.

Second, having argued that traditional, semantically generated, truth conditions cannot cope with contextual variability, one can understand why truth conditional pragmatists draft context itself in to help with the job. In so doing, context becomes part of the apparatus that speakers and hearers have at their disposal; it becomes a determining element in communicative success, rather than – as was suggested by my observation – something which is the upshot of it.

There is, however, an alternative conception of the overall project, one which does not have these consequences. Instead of trying to attribute theoretical resources – packages – which enable speakers and hearers to achieve communicative success, one begins by assuming, what is in fact the case, that we do successfully communicate. Then the aim of the project becomes, not providing a (roughly) causal explanation of that success, so much as a description of what constitutes it. Let me explain.

Think first about how we ordinarily understand some stretch of human activity when language is not in question. Though the details can be controversial, the basic outline of the enterprise is not: we attribute attitudes – desires, beliefs, knowledge, intentions, needs, interests, etc. – to the agents involved in the relevant activity, and these attributions are

governed (even if only implicitly) by a scheme or framework of what it is rational to believe, know, intend, desire, need or have an interest in, etc.²⁰ Moreover, while the framework of rationality – the network of concepts and their inter-relationships – is something that, on specific occasions, we bring to bear on human activity, it is not something we manage from outside that framework. The very idea of our own agency is bound up with the ability to deploy the framework, and deploying it presupposes agency.²¹

With language, a new range of actions enters the picture, one that fits into, but also requires some expansion of, the framework of rationality. And partly because linguistic actions have a kind of systematicity not present in stretches of non-linguistic activity, the expansion of that framework will have to reflect that systematicity. Here is McDowell on this very topic:

The adequacy of the total theory [of sense or meaning] would turn on its acceptably imposing descriptions, reporting behaviour as performance of speech acts of specified kinds with specified contents, on a range of potential actions – those that would constitute speech in the language – describable, antecedently, only as so much patterned emission of noise. For that systematic imposing of descriptions to be acceptable, it would have to be the case that speakers' performances of the actions thus ascribed to them were, for the most part, intelligible under those descriptions, in the light of propositional attitudes; their possession of which, in turn, would have to be intelligible, in the light of their behaviour – including, of course, their linguistic behaviour – and their environment. The point of the notion of sense – what the content-specifying component of a total theory of that sort would be a theory of – is thus tied to our interest in understanding – fathoming – people. We have not properly

²⁰ Many writers seem to misunderstand this familiar claim. Most importantly, 'rational' here is not some narrowly calculative notion. More in a Kantian (or Sellarsian) way, the framework of rationality is the structure which contains and links those notions (intention, belief, knowledge, desire, ...) and which thereby defines what it is to be a rational subject/agent. Any such subject/agent can do and think quite 'irrational' things, while still being rational in the relevant sense.

²¹ The whole of the scheme of rationality thus sketched is often described as 'folk psychology', and this label suggests, what many think anyway, that it is somehow optional. Though I have no room to argue it here, and though it is not needed for the point I shall go on to make, the claim in the text about the interdependency between the framework and the very possibility of agency is intended to make that kind of optionality seem, to put it plainly, bizarre.

made sense of forms of words in a language if we have not, thereby, got some way towards making sense of its speakers. If there is a pun here, it is an illuminating one.²²

How does this systematic imposing of descriptions work? Well, instead of trying to match contents directly to sentences, one tries to do this by generating the conditions of application of some predicate. That is, instead simply of looking for a systematic way to match each sentence s with its content p , we look for a systematic way to generate instances of:

s is Φ if and only if p ,

where ' Φ ' is a predicate of sentences of the language, and p is the content-specification for the relevant s . If s and p are as described, then there is nothing to prevent our understanding ' Φ ' as 'true', and thus understanding the systematic generation of contents as a generation of truth conditions. Finally – and this is part of the point of casting the account in this way – the actual business of generating these contents goes via further conditions that are put on the words and constructions are found in the sentences of the language.

I trust that the above is familiar enough, but, without distorting it, let me put what might be a less familiar gloss on it. The project of generating truth conditions for sentences in the above way can be thought of expanding the conceptual resources of the framework of rationality. Added to the usual list of such concepts as intention, belief, desire, etc., and its supplementation with general notions relevant to speech act types such as asserting, asking, ordering, etc., the project provides a whole panoply of concepts – those needed at both the sub-sentential and sentential levels – which we can then use to fit relevant linguistic actions into the larger framework of rationality.²³ In effect, it is the very point of a truth-conditional account that it makes systematically available a large repertory of concepts linked in appropriate ways to words, constructions and sentences in a language. One can think of these

²² McDowell 1998, p. 172.

²³ This way of putting it makes it sound as if the resources of the framework might just happen to include these systematically generated further elements. This is, however, merely an artefact of my exposition, for I regard language as in fact integral to that framework, and hence integral to the kind of agency that makes us, in McDowell's word, 'minded'. (See McDowell 1998, p. 105, where he insists on the centrality of language to the framework, and attributes the use of 'minded' to Jonathan Lear.)

as like the dots in a pointillist painting: each one is not anything much on its own, but together they constitute the picture itself.

He is one rough account of how we might use this repertory in dealing with a stretch of linguistic activity. In response to his mother's utterance: 'What have you been doing all morning?', a boy utters 'I've been playing baseball'. Taking these two bits of behaviour to count as successful linguistic interchange – as a case in which there has been what I like to think of as an 'attunement' between the two agents – we can, from our perspective, capture that attunement by, among other things, counting the son has having said or asserted that he is playing baseball.²⁴ In doing this – and again this is only a small part of the larger story – we are using a concept (that of 'playing baseball') from the range provided by the truth-conditional account described above. In effect, in taking ourselves to understand the interchange, we are taking ourselves also to be in attunement with the mother and son. And, as it happens, we mark that attunement by ourselves using the expression 'playing baseball'.

Nothing in this story involves attributing to the participants 'packages' of extension- or truth-value-determining information. Thus, the idea of one or other of the participants deploying such a package to achieve, perhaps impose, communicative success drops away. To be sure, we *mark* the attunement by using the predicate expression 'playing baseball', and one could imagine using this expression on another quite different occasion to mark what we take to be required for attunement in that circumstance. But this in no way undermines the fact that we can correctly characterise, by our lights, the linguistic interchange between the mother and son using this expression. It would undermine it, if we insisted that *any* use of this predicate expression had itself to be associated with a concept that applied determinately to this or that kind of baseball-related activity; that it is *either* used of the informal kind of game played in the backyard, *or* the kind that requires a stadium, a diamond, nine players and the rest, *or* something in between. But that requirement is one born of the package idea, and it ought to have no place in our understanding of the truth conditional account. Properly understood the truth conditional account is a systematic way of specifying *what it is* that constitutes the success (or, with suitable modifications, the failure) of linguistic interchange. It is not a psychological or cognitive scientific account of the capacities speakers and hearers deploy to achieve that success (or fail to deploy in cases of failure).

²⁴ I first used 'attunement' in Guttenplan 2005 (see pp. 122-28), and though the context was different – I was defending my account of metaphor – the basic aim of that discussion overlaps with the central theme of this paper.

This way of looking at the matter shows how there can be what I think is a salutary decoupling of truth conditions and assessments of actual truth value. The truth-conditional account supplies us with the *materials* we need to describe what goes on in a linguistic interchange, but it does not do this by putting some bit of reality in front of us, whether in the shape of ordered n-tuples of particulars-properties-relations, scenarios, or animated pictures, so the idea that we can directly move from a truth condition to a judgement about actual truth value is inappropriate. Instead, a truth-conditional account uses the words, constructions and sentences of a language to make available what I characterised above as a repertory of concepts. To be sure, in its most familiar guise, this is brought about by the systematic generation of conditions for the application of a predicate which, as it happens, turns out to be ‘true’. However, what this shows is simply that the materials yielded by the account ‘bear on reality’, and this is just what would one expect, given that the truth-conditional account stands in for the ordinary notion of meaning, a concept naturally understood to relate the relationship between words or actions and reality.²⁵

My suggested way of understanding the truth-conditional account also allows us to continue to think of context as we ordinarily do, as a feature we reconstruct in the attempt to describe and rationalise linguistic interchange, rather than as an input to the psychological component required for the production of such interchange. As noted, the truth-conditional account aims to describe communicative success, not only in general, but in specific cases. For this, in at least the homophonic case, it calls on the words, constructions and sentences of some language to serve as markers of that success, as markers of the concepts and truths shared in such communication. Of course, as also noted, this does not require us to think of each predicate marker (for example) as somehow permanently linked by the account to some extension-determining concept. Indeed, the very idea that there might be some such concept is problematic.²⁶ But this does not mean we have to think of each particular use of the predicate expression as merely schematic, as not really standing for a determinate concept. When we

²⁵ The useful and non-committing phrase ‘bear on reality’ comes from McDowell 1998, p.128, and it figures in his debate with Dummett about modesty in theories of meaning. However, the relevance of the Dummett/McDowell dispute to my concerns is only tangential, and a proper discussion of it would have made this paper much too long.

²⁶ I have in mind here the arguments that make up Wittgenstein’s so-called ‘rule-following considerations’. Properly understood, I believe that these fit rather nicely with the picture of the truth-conditional account in this paper. And this is especially interesting, given that Wittgenstein’s arguments are often cited as the inspiration for the invasionist position.

describe the mother as understanding what her son said – as accepting that he was ‘playing baseball’ – there is nothing merely schematic about it: we are, in that case, counting the mother and son – and us – as sharing a quite specific concept, one marked by ‘playing baseball’. The phrase ‘in that case’ indicates what is I think the proper place for context. As suggested in §7, context is attributed to a successful communicative interchange, and therefore works in much the same way as the other items we use in fitting behaviour into the framework of rationality.

9. So where does this leave us in respect of the invasionist war? Both sides assume it is reasonable to demand the broadly psychologistic account of communication that I have called the ‘package’ view, and then argue about whether the truth-conditional account does or does not satisfy that demand. I have presented a picture of the truth-conditional account which shows such a demand inappropriate: the account is simply not in the business of telling us what equipment is required to underwrite success in linguistic communication. If I am right, this war, like many others, is being fought for no good reason. Still, I can imagine someone responding as follows:

Alright, so there is a conception of meaning and its truth-conditional embodiment which doesn’t take itself to be characterising speaker-hearer resources. But speakers and hearers do manage successful communication, and surely there is something they must possess which makes this possible; it is not simply magic. Our concern is with this possession, and our war is being fought over how it is best understood.

A proper counter-response to this ecumenical suggestion is a task for another paper. But, rather satisfyingly, the very arguments that each side deploys suggest a shorter way of dealing with it. The point of those arguments was to show that the materials the ‘other side’ uses are not up to the task of describing the communication-enabling resources of speakers and hearers. And while I have argued in this paper that these arguments are not in fact required – that the basic premise of the invasionist war is misguided – I have not offered any argument against their cogency. However, if the invasionist is right in thinking that a truth-conditional, minimalist account of speaker-hearer competence is not viable, and if the invasionist’s opponent is right in thinking that the contextualist programme is doomed to inadequacy, or, even worse, incoherence, then they will have done my work for me. For

together these sets of arguments show the project of giving an account of speaker-hearer competence using resources like that of truth condition and context is hopeless.

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