

Truth-Conditional Semantics for Radical Contextualists

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1 Abstract

In recent years, pressure has been placed on truth-conditional semantics, the dominant approach to natural language semantics. Theorists from various theoretical perspectives¹ have argued that the central assumption of truth-conditional approaches, that natural language sentences have truth-conditions, is false. It is argued instead that the context-sensitivity observed in natural language far outstrips the resources of traditional approaches. One famous example involves colour predicates. Whether we are willing to apply a colour term, such as ‘green’, appears to depend on a wide and unpredictable range of factors, including our interests and conversational goals. It is argued that such phenomena indicate that a semantic theory based on *constraints* on what can be conveyed is likely to be more fruitful than a traditional theory.

Two standard responses to such an argument, in defense of truth-conditional semantics, are *minimalism*² and *moderate contextualism*³. The minimalist aims to re-locate the apparent context-sensitivity of natural language as a *pragmatic* phenomenon, enabling a simpler, invariant semantics. The moderate contextualist aims instead to show how traditional semantic theories are able to account for this context-sensitivity. Both approaches share the assumption that *if* there is a gap between the semantic properties of natural language and those proposed by semantic theory, *then* semantic theory must be re-shaped. They aim to rebut the argument against truth-conditional semantics by denying the antecedent and showing that there is no gap, either by making the target less, or the theory more, context-sensitive.

I defend a novel response to this argument, based on contemporary work in philosophy of science.⁴ I shall argue that the above conditional is false. A gap between theory and target does not necessitate a novel theory. Instead, I believe we should view semantic theories as *idealized models*. Instead of viewing the disparity between target and theory as an epistemic shortfall in need of solution, it is a deliberate simplification introduced in order to impose some order onto a complex and messy system.

¹Such as generative linguists ([Chomsky, 2000], [Hornstein, 1984, Hornstein, 1989], [McGilvray, 1998], [Pietroski, 2005, Pietroski, 2006]), relevance theorists ([Carston, 2013], [Sperber and Wilson, 1995]), contextualists of certain stripes ([Bach, 1994], [Recanati, 2010], [Searle, 1980] [Travis, 1985, Travis, 1996, Travis, 1997]), and various others.

²[Borg, 2004],[Cappelen and Lepore, 2008].

³[Stanley, 2007].

⁴E.g. [Cartwright, 1999], [Godfrey-Smith, 2006], [Weisberg, 2007], [Wimsatt, 2007].

From this perspective, we can also find an ecumenical solution to the debate between contextualists and minimalists. Once semantic theories are viewed as idealized abstractions, the possibility is raised that there can be multiple non-competing models incorporating different idealizations for different purposes. I shall present a picture of truth-conditional semantics in this image. For capturing high-level systematicities and generalizations, minimalist models are best suited. However, in cases where subtleties of context provide substantial influence, contextual parameters are called for. Semantics can then proceed by multiplying more or less contextually-sensitive models, each suited to serve some theoretical goal. I shall discuss some data about inference patterns suggesting that such a picture is independently plausible.

As the study of a complex, causally heterogeneous system, it would be unsurprising if semantics resembled other special sciences like biology and psychology. In these sciences, we see the use of multiple overlapping but non-competing models, making different assumptions and serving different functions. Such an approach enables theorists to capture both coarse-grained generalities and more specific idiosyncrasies. I believe that various issues in semantic theory can be resolved by moving towards such an approach.

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