

The Role of Minimal Propositions

Keywords: minimal proposition, explanatory role, compositionality, systematicity, productivity.

Abstract: The subject of this talk is the explanative role of minimal propositions according to the semantic minimalism. My aim in this talk is to present an objection to the responses presented by Borg (2017) and Cappelen & Lepore (2005) to the question of what the role of minimal propositions is. According to minimalism every well-formed sentence expresses a truth-evaluable content which is completely determined by the linguistic meaning of the syntactic elements of the sentence (and their order). These contents have been called “minimal propositions”. Cappelen & Lepore (2005) hold that minimal propositions are our shield against misunderstandings and confusions, since it is the least a competent speaker should understand when interpreting a sentence without context or whose context the speaker did not understand. Borg (2017), on the other hand, argues that there are several notions of what is said and one of them requires of minimal propositions. According to her, this notion of what is said distinguishes lies and not-lies in the following way: a speaker A is responsible of lying when A emits the sentence S believing that P_m is false, where P_m is the minimal proposition expressed by S.

My objection against both proposals is that the role they assign to minimal propositions is not enough to satisfy the theoretical commitments of minimalism, more specifically, with their commitment with the principle of compositionality. Minimalist hold a compositional view of language and their way to preserve compositionality is with the notion of minimal propositions. But the best reason we have to hold compositionality is that this principle is our best explanation of systematicity and productivity. I argue that systematicity and productivity are general phenomena of communication. Therefore, the role of minimal propositions should be to explain systematicity and productivity as general phenomena of communication, but neither Borg (2017) nor Cappelen & Lepore (2005) present such an explanation.

Bibliography

- Borg, E. (2012). *Pursuing Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Borg, E. (2017). Explanatory Roles for Minimal Content. *Nous*, 1-27.
- Cappelen, H., & Lepore, E. (2005). *Insensitive Semantics: a defence of semantic minimalism and speech act pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cappelen, H., & Lepore, E. (2013). A Tall Tale: In Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism. In M. Ezcurdia, & R. J. Stainton, *The Semantics-Pragmatics Boundary in Philosophy* (pp. 412-28). Broadview Press Ltd.
- Carston, R. (2004). Relevance Theory and the Saying/Implicating Distinction. In L. Horn, & G. Ward, *Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 633-656). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carston, R. (2008). Review of Minimal Semantics. *Mind & Language*, 359–367.
- Davies, M. (1987). Tacit Knowledge and Semantic Theory: Can Five per cent Difference Matter? *Mind*, 441 - 462.
- Evans, G. (1981). Reply: Semantic Theory and Tacit Knowledge. In S. H. Holtzman, & C. M. Leich, *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule* (pp. 118 - 140). Londres: Routledge y Keagan Paul.
- Kaplan, D. (1989). Demonstratives. In A. J., J. Perry, & H. Wettstein, *Themes from Kaplan* (pp. 481 - 564). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Quine, W. V. (1972). Methodological Reflections on Current Linguistic Theory. In D. Davidson, & G. Harman, *Semantics of Natural Language*. Reidel.
- Recanati, F. (2001). What is said. *Synthese*, 75-91.