

Polysemy, the Literalist Principle and a Brief Refutation of Semantic Minimalism

Being aware of the time limit, I focus on one objection to semantic minimalism that I take to be a refutation of it. I briefly argue that the only difference between Recanati's moderate contextualism and Borg's minimalism is an issue of linguistic processing. Philosophically, they are in agreement. This point should be uncontroversial (see Borg, 2012, p. 72).

The main difference with respect to processing is a commitment to what Falkum and Vicente (2015) call the literalist assumption and what I call *the literalist principle*. The literalist principle states, roughly, that in order to get to the intuitive truth conditions of a sentence we always need to retrieve a fully content bearing lexical concept (minimal meaning).

I argue that this principle is empirically implausible and conceptually confused. It is based on a wrong idea of how linguistic processing works. Lexical concepts are individuated by their content. However, whatever explains at least early linguistic processing (which is what the literalist principle is about), is not. Instead we can give a full account of early linguistic processing without any commitment to what the content of the uttered sentence or words is.

Instead, following Löhr (forthcoming), linguistic processing is based on a set of rules that determine how linguistic signs are applied in a given context. These rules can have all kinds of contents.

To illustrate this argument, I turn to abstract concepts that, unfortunately, play no role in the debate (which might be why the conceptual confusion just pointed out has been overlooked). Many abstract concepts and words are highly polysemous. The sentence "this is art" is, as an empirical fact (based on decades of research in psychology that all contributors to the debate are familiar with), is not comprehended by retrieving a set of properties that determine the content of the expression and the sentence. Instead, we use approximations, such as prototypes, that could be used to apply several different concepts and that can be associated with many different meanings. This is compatible with common sense. When you and I are talking about art we do not necessarily expect that any of us commits or is even able to specify what exactly we mean by these terms.

The literalist principle is thus false. Minimalism is committed to this principle and must therefore be rejected (along with Recanati's (2010) but not his (2017) moderate contextualism).

I hope that the reader appreciates the simplicity of this argument and that they agree that it is possible to present it within 15 minutes. I would be very curious as to what Prof. Borg has as a response.