Reply to Devitt

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With characteristic vigour, Devitt opposes the view I advocate in *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*, namely contextualism (which following Neale he calls 'linguistic pragmatism'); but the disagreement between us seems to me more apparent than real.

Let us start by considering the 'three methodological flaws of linguistic pragmatism' which Devitt identifies. One of them has to do with the appeal to Grice's 'Modified Occam's Razor'. Even though Grice's Razor is not totally useless, I tend to agree with Devitt's criticism of the way it's been used (and abused) in the literature, and I myself have criticized Grice's and Kripke's use of the Razor against Strawson and Donnellan respectively [Recanati (1994), (2004), pp. 155-58].[1] I will therefore put the Razor aside and focus on the other two 'flaws' : the systematic appeal to intuitions concerning what is said, theorized in my work under the banner of the 'availability principle', and the no less systematic confusion between metaphysical and epistemological issues.

Regarding the metaphysics/epistemology distinction, I am sure I have been careless in my formulations. Devitt, Bach and Neale can't all be wrong about that! Yet, at bottom, I plead non-guilty; for the mix of metaphysics and epistemology which they detect in my writings and complain about is deliberate — to some extent at least. It is a genuine metaphysical thesis (not just the result of confusion) that what is said by an utterance is constituted by epistemological facts about what counts as understanding that utterance. That is the view I sketched in *Literal Meaning*. I know that Devitt is skeptical of any such view and I apologize for not being able to address his challenge by providing detailed arguments. Detailed arguments are admittedly required, but I don't have enough space for such a discussion here.

Regarding intuitions, I think there is a misunderstanding. 'Pragmatists rest their theories ultimately on appeals to meta-linguistic intuitions', Devitt says. But, he points out, 'we should not proceed by simply consulting intuitions':

> Why should we care about these meta-linguistic intuitions in the scien-
> tific study of language and communication? We should be concerned
> with the application of a *theoretically motivated what-is-said*. And we
> should not expect any intuitions the folk may have about the application
> of any notion of *what-is-said* they may have to be a reliable guide to the
> application of the needed theoretical notion [this volume, p. 97].

I fully agree, and I said so myself many times, from my 1989 paper on 'The
Pragmatics of What is Said' (where the availability principle is introduced for
the first time) to *Literal Meaning* (2004). But I disagree with the claim that
contextualists like myself appeal to metalinguistic intuitions. We don't, or at
least, I don't.[2]

   The misunderstanding is two-fold. First, the intuitions about what is said I
say we *should* appeal to are not metalinguistic intuitions at all. They are direct
intuitions about truth-conditional content. As I say in *Literal Meaning*,

> I assume that whoever fully understands a declarative utterance knows (…) in
> what sort of circumstance it would be true. The ability to pair an utterance with
> a type of situation in this way is more basic than, and in any case does not pre-
> suppose, the ability to *report* what is said by using indirect speech; it does not
> even presuppose mastery of the notion of 'saying' [nor, for that matter, of the
> notion of 'truth']. Thus the proper way to elicit such intuitions is not to ask the
> subjects 'What do you think is said (as opposed to implied or whatever) by this
> sentence as uttered in that situation'? [Recanati (2004) p. 14]

The proper way to elicit such intuitions is to proceed as experimental psy-
chologists do when they set up so-called truth-value judgement tasks using
various paradigms. The intuitions such tasks are meant to reveal are first or-
der intuitions about the situation described by a given utterance. Such intui-
tions are prompted by the utterance, but they are not reflective, metalinguistic
intuitions *about* the utterance and what it 'says'.

   Second, the reason we care about such intuitions has nothing to do with
deference to the folk conception: they are *data* and our theory should account
for them. In 'The Pragmatics of What is Said' I addressed Devitt's worry by
anticipation:

> I agree that scientific theorizing is to be freed from, rather than impeded by, in-
> tuitions and common sense, which provide only a starting point. [But] human
> cognition is a very special field: in this field, our intuitions are not just a first
> shot at a theory (…) but also part of what the theory is about, and as such they
> cannot be neglected [Recanati (1989), p. 327].

So I agree with Devitt that the notion of 'what is said' that features in our se-
mantic theorizing is, and should be, a *theoretical* notion. My 'availability hy-

pothesis' regarding what is said is itself a theoretical hypothesis. That is the hypothesis that, in language processing, we have *conscious access to truth-conditional content*, but not, say, to lexical meanings or to composition rules. The truth-conditional content we are thus conscious of (if the hypothesis is correct) is what I call 'what is said in the intuitive sense'. It is *one* (theoretical) notion of what is said – I distinguish it from several others. My claim is that what is said, in *that* sense, does not obey the minimalist constraint which applies to semantic content in traditional theories. I also claim that that notion of what is said carves nature at the joints and should be the one we use in our theorizing (as opposed to the traditional one).

Devitt says there are two questions which the contextualist is unable to answer. They are:

(1) How can a sentential utterance have a linguistic meaning (a 'conventionally constituted constraining property') without that meaning fully determining a truth-condition?

(2) How can this property allow indefinitely many truth-conditions?

Unfortunately, in discussing these issues, Devitt does not distinguish between the two contextualist positions I characterize in the book, namely Truth-Conditional Pragmatics (TCP) and Radical Contextualism (RC). He mentions the distinction as helpful but keeps referring to 'RC/TCP' in his discussion. This is unfortunate because the above questions will be answered very differently depending on the framework one chooses. I start with TCP, the position officially defended in the book.

With respect to TCP, question 1 carries a false presupposition: for TCP does *not* deny that the linguistic meaning of an utterance may fully determine a truth-condition. TCP simply points out that the 'literal' truth-condition thus determined need not correspond to what is said in the intuitive sense. Thus in 'The ham sandwich left without paying', the truth-condition determined by linguistic meaning alone is very different from the intuitive truth-condition (involving the ham sandwich *orderer*). To get the intuitive truth-conditions the meaning of 'ham sandwich' must be pragmatically modulated. Indefinitely many truth-conditions can be generated because there are indefinitely many modulation functions that can apply to the meaning of a given expression such as 'ham sandwich'. Even if we consider a single modulation function, we can get an indefinite number of modulated meanings for a given expression through recursive iteration. Thus, as Jonathan Cohen once pointed out, an expression designating an object *o* can (through modulation) designate a representation of *o*, and that modulated meaning can serve as input to the same modulation function, yielding a new meaning (a representation of a representation of *o*), and so on indefinitely [Cohen (1985)].[3]

What about RC? RC does deny that linguistic meaning determines truth-conditions. On one prominent version of RC, linguistic meaning is representationally under-specified and needs a lot of pragmatic fleshing out before a truth-condition is actually determined.[4] Devitt wonders why this under-specification cannot be handled using the traditional notion of indexicality. In the book there is a discussion of the difference between semantic under-specification and indexicality [Recanati (2010), pp. 181ff]; but even if one is not convinced by that discussion and holds that under-specification is nothing but a form of indexicality (in a broad sense), that is fine with me: as Devitt points out, I hold that RC can be construed as a generalization of indexicality. Devitt wonders why this is still a form of contextualism: after all, the traditional approach can handle indexicality, so why is RC not just a version of the traditional approach? Well, the traditional approach, as Devitt puts it, is the view that 'a sentential utterance has its truth-conditional content simply in virtue of the conventional rules of the speaker's language'; in other words, linguistic meaning equals representational content. Indexicals are an obvious counterexample, and were presented as such by the early contextualists (Austin, Strawson, etc.). To handle them, the traditionalist needs to introduce one of the two 'qualifications' Devitt talks about at the beginning of his paper: if the sentence contains indexicals then we need a more complicated story with a distinction between character and content. But if *every* expression is indexical or under-specified, then we're no longer 'qualifying' the traditional view: we're giving it up. It is essential to the traditional view that indexicality is a limited, circumscribed phenomenon, for the goal of the traditional view in its successive guises has always been to *minimize* the gap between linguistic meaning and representational content [Recanati (2005)].

NOTES

    [1] As I show in these works, the Razor has typically been used to argue *against* Contextualism, so I think it is a mistake on Devitt's part to claim that Contextualism rests on the Razor.
    [2] In *Literal Meaning*, I criticize the appeal to metalinguistic intuitions by authors such as Gibbs and Moise, Bach, and Cappelen and Lepore.
    [3] Around the end of his paper Devitt accepts that enrichment, empoverishment and other modulation processes play a role in linguistic interpretation, as TCP claims. But, he says, what's enriched or impoverished is the *semantic content* of the expression, and that semantic content is fully determined by the rules of the language independent of pragmatic modulation. Fine: one can very well use 'semantic content' (or 'what is said') in conformity to the stipulation that semantic content must obey the minimalist constraint. TCP's claim is that *if* the notion we are after is *intuitive* truth-conditional content, *then* it must be acknowledged that it results in part from modulation operations and violates the minimalist constraint. (Devitt seems to accept that.)

TCP also claims that the intuitive notion of what is said has more work to do in our overall theory than the traditional, minimalist notion, whose main role is to preserve an old dogma. Devitt might respond that that intuitive notion already exists in the traditional framework: it corresponds to 'speaker's meaning' or 'what is communicated' (as opposed to what is literally said). But I deny this: what is said in the intuitive sense is not the same thing as what is communicated (which is a more encompassing notion covering, inter alia, things that are 'implied' without being part of intuitive truth-conditional content).

[4] If this is right, then, of course, there will be an indefinite number of possible truth-conditions for a given sentence, depending on how the fleshing out goes.

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