According to the dominant position among philosophers of language today, we can legitimately ascribe determinate contents (such as truth-conditions) to natural language sentences, independently of what the speaker actually means. This view contrasts with that held by ordinary language philosophers fifty years ago: according to them, speech acts, not sentences, are the primary bearers of content. François Recanati argues for the relevance of this controversy to the current debate about semantics and pragmatics. Is ‘what is said’ (as opposed to merely implied) determined by linguistic conventions, or is it an aspect of ‘speaker’s meaning’? Do we need pragmatics to fix truth-conditions? What is ‘literal meaning’? To what extent is semantic composition a creative process? How pervasive is context-sensitivity? Recanati provides an original and insightful defence of ‘Contextualism’, and offers an informed survey of the spectrum of positions held by linguists and philosophers working at the semantics/pragmatics interface.

François Recanati is a Research Director at the Institut Jean-Nicod (CNRS, Paris). He has published many papers and several books on the philosophy of language and mind, including Meaning and Force (Cambridge, 1987), Direct Reference (Blackwell, 1993), and Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta (MIT Press, 2000). He is also co-founder and past President of the European Society for Analytic Philosophy.
Literal Meaning

François Recanati

Institut Jean-Nicod, Paris
Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

1 Two approaches to ‘what is said’
  1.1 The basic triad 5
  1.2 Minimalism 7
  1.3 Literal truth-conditions vs actual truth-conditions 8
  1.4 A problem for Minimalism 10
  1.5 The availability of what is said 13
  1.6 The availability based approach 16
  1.7 ‘Saying’ as a pragmatic notion 18
  1.8 Availability vs Minimalism 20

2 Primary pragmatic processes
  2.1 Enrichment, loosening and transfer 23
  2.2 Rejecting the Gricean picture 27
  2.3 Accessibility 30
  2.4 Objections and responses 32
  2.5 Interactive processing 34
  2.6 The role of schemata 36

3 Relevance-theoretic objections
  3.1 One or two systems? 38
  3.2 Personal and sub-personal inferences 40
  3.3 Implicature or enrichment? 44
  3.4 Mutual adjustment of explicature and implicature 46
  3.5 Implicated premisses 48
  3.6 Personal-level inferences: occurrent vs dispositional 49

4 The Syncretic View
  4.1 Four levels? 51
  4.2 Semantics and pragmatics: the literalist picture 54
  4.3 Semantic underdeterminacy 56
  4.4 The minimal proposition as ‘common denominator’ 58
  4.5 Interaction between saturation and optional pragmatic processes 61
  4.6 Do we need the minimal proposition? 64
  4.7 The reflexive proposition 65

v
## Contents

5 Non-literal uses 68
5.1 Non-literal uses as non-minimal departures from literal meaning 68
5.2 Non-literal uses and secondary meaning 70
5.3 Non-minimal departures without secondariness 72
5.4 The transparency condition 74
5.5 Varieties of non-literal meaning 75
5.6 Internal vs external duality 78
5.7 Conclusion 81

6 From Literalism to Contextualism 83
6.1 Five positions 83
6.2 Indexicalism 86
6.3 Contextualism 90
6.4 Literalist responses to the contextualist challenge 92
6.5 Where Indexicalism and Contextualism meet 95

7 Indexicalism and the Binding Fallacy 98
7.1 Mandatory vs optional 98
7.2 Two criteria 100
7.3 The indexicalist challenge 103
7.4 Is the Binding Criterion reliable? 105
7.5 Variadic functions 107
7.6 The Binding Fallacy 109
7.7 Conclusion: the failure of Indexicalism 111

8 Circumstances of evaluation 115
8.1 Modality 115
8.2 Time and tense 118
8.3 Situations 121
8.4 Saturation or enrichment? 124
8.5 Sub-sentential circumstances 125
8.6 Conclusion 127

9 Contextualism: how far can we go? 131
9.1 The modulation of sense 131
9.2 The semantic relevance of modulation 133
9.3 Four approaches 136
9.4 Truth-conditional unstability: from Waismann’s ‘open texture’ to Searle’s ‘background’ 141
9.5 Ostensive definitions 144
9.6 Meaning Eliminativism 146
9.7 Conclusion 151

Conclusion 154
10.1 Alleged arguments against Contextualism 154
10.2 Remnants of Literalism 159
10.3 Availability, Minimalism, and the dispositional/occurrent contrast 162

Bibliography 166
Index 175
Acknowledgments

This book started its life as a series of lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1994. Those who attended my graduate seminar in philosophy that year were so passionately involved in discussing the foundational issues I had raised that we all retain wonderful memories of those weeks of continuing debate. (Or at least, I do.) The most active debaters were, undoubtedly, Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever on the student side, and John Searle and Stephen Neale on the faculty side. I am greatly indebted to the four of them for those valuable and exciting discussions.

The second major step was taken when Professor Kunihiko Imai, of Gakushuin University, invited me to present my views on the semantics/pragmatics interface during a special workshop which took place in Tokyo on 30 September 2001. For that workshop I prepared a long talk which, I soon realized, could easily be expanded into a book. A couple of years earlier I had contracted with Cambridge University Press for a book on literal meaning. (The original title was ‘Context and Content’, but Robert Stalnaker published a collection of papers under that title in 1999, so I had to find something else.) I decided to use the Tokyo presentation as the nucleus for that book. I am grateful to Professor Imai for the invitation, and for the discussions which took place during the workshop. I also benefited from insightful comments by Yuji Nishiyama, Haruhiko Yamaguchi and Seiji Uchida.

When the book was well under way the department of philosophy of the University of Granada (Spain), in charge of the thirteenth Inter-University Workshop on Philosophy and Cognitive Science to be held in February 2003, decided to invite me as main speaker and to organize the workshop around my work. I was supposed to give three talks during the three days of the workshop. I chose to devote the three of them to the Literalism/Contextualism controversy, which is the topic of this book. This provided me with a welcome opportunity for testing my new ideas; an opportunity for which I wish to thank Maria José Frápolli, Esther Romero and Belén Soria, as well as the SEFA (Sociedad Española de Filosofía Analítica) in cooperation with which the inter-university workshops are organized.
Acknowledgments

During the past ten years, I have had many occasions for discussing those issues with the fifteen to twenty philosophers and linguists who regularly gather in conferences on the semantics/pragmatics distinction, contribute to the same issues of the same journals, and so on. For fear of forgetting someone, I will not list them individually here, but I thank them collectively; they know who they are. Two persons in that crowd deserve special thanks: Robyn Carston, who provided detailed, chapter-by-chapter comments on a first version of the book; and Jason Stanley, whose systematic defence of the positions I attack provided a helpful and timely challenge. I am also grateful to my students and colleagues in Paris for numerous discussions which shaped my thinking on those topics.