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REVIEW

François Recanati, *Literal Meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004): viii + 179.

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Contrary to a certain traditional conception dating back at least to Locke, everyday linguistic communication is not a simple matter of putting one's thoughts into words for one's audience to put back into thoughts. This naive "code model" misses the fact that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence can be distinct in various ways from what the sentence means. She might not mean what she says (mainly determined by what the sentence means) but mean something else instead; or, she might mean that but mean something else as well. This is old news. In recent years philosophers and linguists have become increasingly aware of more subtle ways in which speaker meaning can depart from sentence meaning and are dubious about how well these diverse phenomena fit into familiar categories. François Recanati for one has forcefully argued that these categories need overhauling. *Literal Meaning* integrates his extensive earlier work into a systematic challenge to the very idea of literal meaning, at least as traditionally conceived, and the result is a vigorous manifesto for semantic contextualism.

Recanati is particularly impressed by two pervasive facts about everyday communication. First, the linguistic meanings of sentences, at least those short enough to be suitable for casual conversation, are impoverished relative to what speakers mean in using them. For example, you might utter "I've had nothing to drink" but mean (and be taken to mean) that you've had nothing to drink that evening. What you mean is an expanded version of the sentence's semantic content and is identified by a process of "free enrichment," free (or "optional") because the sentence already expresses a proposition, not the one you mean but merely a "minimal" proposition. Indeed, a sentence may fail to express a proposition at all, even modulo indexicality. Thanks to a missing argument, polysemy, or lexical or phrasal underdetermination, many sentences are not truth-evaluable as they stand, and what the speaker means *can't* be just what the sentence means. So, for example, if you utter "I haven't finished dessert," you could mean that you haven't finished eating it or that you haven't finished preparing it, but not that you haven't finished it, period. When a sentence is semantically incomplete in this way, what the speaker means is identified by a "mandatory" process of "saturation."

Recanati is also impressed by the apparent fact that when we hear a sentence of either sort (one that expresses a minimal proposition or one that is semantically incomplete), we don't seem to calculate its semantic content and entertain the proposition, if any, it literally expresses. Rather, we seem to proceed directly to what the speaker means, even though this involves enrichment, loosening, modulation, or even figuration of the literal meaning. We reconstrue particular words and phrases in the sentence on the fly rather than first interpret the entire sentence literally. There's ongoing interaction between "top-down" and "bottom-up" processing. Here Recanati rejects what he takes to be the "Gricean" picture (actually, Grice offered a rational reconstruction, not a processing model, of utterance understanding), that an algorithmic process of semantic interpretation yielding what is said must be completed before the more holistic and intuitive process of pragmatic interpretation can take place, when the listener tries to figure out what the speaker means given what she said, the circumstances in which she said it, and perhaps even how she put it. Indeed, mandatory processes can depend on optional ones (62).

With these considerations in mind, Recanati proceeds to define what is said (as opposed to what is implicated or otherwise indirectly conveyed) as this primary communicated content, even though it is not predictable from linguistic meaning alone and may involve nonce uses of particular expressions and even include elements that do not correspond to any constituents of the sentence. Recognition of what is said is the result of "primary" processes, and implicatures are recognized by means of "secondary" processes. Relying more on intuition and introspection than on psychological findings, Recanati supposes that primary processes, both mandatory and optional, are modular, associative, and not conscious, whereas secondary processes are not modular but inferential and conscious.

Recanati insists that "what is said should be individuated according to the intuitions of normal interpreters," which he thinks can be elicited by presenting subjects with descriptions or depictions of situations and "ask[ing] them to evaluate the target utterance as true or false with respect to the situations in question" (15). Even if he actually did this, rather than treat his own intuitions as representative of normal interpreters', his method begs the question in favor of his view that what is said is the first proposition that comes to mind even if it departs from the semantic content of the sentence and from what is said in the strict locutionary sense.¹ Recanati seems to think that people's untutored judgments about what is said, understood liberally enough to include more than what is determined by linguistic meaning, even relative to contextual parameters, are somehow dispositive. However, it seems likely that subjects would make stereotypical assumptions about the situations in which target sentences are uttered and that their intuitions would be colored accordingly (likewise for semantically anomalous sentences that would be taken metaphorically). Also, there is more to

¹ For a defense of this strict notion, see my "You Don't Say?", *Synthese* 128 (2001): 15-44.

test for, such as whether what is said (à la Recanati) is cancelable (in Grice's sense), and whether people's judgments would change if they were asked to compare the target sentences with ones that made what the speaker meant more explicit. So, for example, one could ask people whether, if someone uttered "John has three children," she'd be speaking falsely or just misleadingly if John had more than three children, and whether uttering "John has exactly three children" would be to say something different.

With his psychological distinctions in mind, Recanati distinguishes a "minimalist" and an "availability-based" approach to what is said. As he characterizes it, the minimalist approach respects the intuition that the constituents of what is said correspond to constituents of the sentence used to say it, except that when the sentence is semantically incomplete, what is said includes whatever is needed to complete the proposition. However, by allowing a mandatory pragmatic process to play a role here, this sort of minimalism already mixes pragmatics into semantics. A truly minimalist approach would *not* assume a priori that the semantic content of every sentence, even relative to a context, is truth-conditional. It would let the semantic chips fall where they may, allowing what is said to be less than fully propositional when the sentence is semantically incomplete.

As for Recanati's preferred availability-based approach, what is said is determined by the "intuitive truth condition" of the utterance, even if that departs dramatically from what is predictable from the semantics of the uttered sentence. He takes this intuitive truth-conditional content to be the first proposition that comes to mind (the output of the primary process involved in understanding the utterance). Indeed, he thinks that even though a normal interpreter "knows the meaning of [the uttered] sentence" (19) and even though the sentence may have a minimal proposition as its semantic content, the minimal proposition "plays no role in the actual process of communication" and, at best, resides in "semantic heaven" (96). By parity of reasoning he should draw an analogous conclusion about a sentence's grammatical structure and its pronunciation and consign these to syntactic and phonological heaven.

Recanati lays out a spectrum of views from "literalism" to "contextualism" (he devotes an entire chapter each to Jason Stanley's hidden variables theory on the literalist side and to Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory on the contextualist side). Literalism supposes that "we may legitimately ascribe truth-conditions to natural language *sentences*, quite independently of what the speaker ... means," whereas contextualism is the view, "reminiscent of that held by ordinary language philosophers half a century ago, ... that *speech acts* are the primary bearers of content. Only in the context of a speech act does a sentence express a determinate content" (3). Recanati assesses the pros and cons of various views on the literalist-contextualist spectrum (space limitations preclude detailed discussion here), but it's no surprise that he endorses contextualism. On an *extreme* contextualist view, there is no context-independent core of standing linguistic

meaning that is provided by knowledge of the language and is available to speaker and hearer alike. Rather, speakers regularly improvise semantically and yet manage somehow to make themselves understood anyway. Recanati flirts with this extreme view but does not endorse it.

What's his complaint with literalism? For one thing, he sticks it with an inessential assumption, that the process of understanding an utterance can be sensitive to a sentence's semantic interpretation only if that interpretation is represented at some stage of this process. Indeed, he goes so far as to reject the literalist (and minimalist) "assumption that semantic interpretation can deliver something as determinate as a proposition. On my view, semantic interpretation, characterized by its deductive [he must mean algorithmic] character, does not deliver complete propositions: it delivers only semantic schemata" (56). This is a very extreme view, which overgeneralizes from the fact that much is left implicit in ordinary speech. It implies that the things we mean are ineffable, since it says that no proposition is semantically expressible, even by a sentence too verbose to use in casual conversation. However, the most Recanati has shown is that the propositions people convey when using short, idiomatic sentences are not semantically expressed by *those* sentences. He hasn't shown that there aren't other, less semantically impoverished sentences that speakers could have used to make what they meant fully explicit.

In any case, for his purposes Recanati need not suppose that all, or even most, sentences are semantically incomplete or underdeterminate. After all, in his view there is no psychologically relevant difference between semantically incomplete sentences and sentences that express minimal propositions. In either case, the semantic content (what is said in the strict sense) is not calculated and plays no role in utterance understanding, and the first proposition that comes to the mind of a speaker in uttering or hearing the sentence transcends that semantic content. However, there is a different problem with his pragmatically enriched conception of what is said. It seems very likely that there are individual differences among normal hearers, so that with any given utterance the minimal proposition is "available" to some hearers but not to others. Say you utter "I have had nothing to drink" to two people at once. Suppose that one but not the other calculates the minimal proposition, that you have had nothing to drink, before figuring out that you mean that you have had nothing to drink that evening. Meanwhile, your other listener entertains the enriched proposition directly. What you've conveyed implicitly to one you've conveyed explicitly to the other. So, by Recanati's lights, you have said two different things, one to the person who doesn't calculate the minimal proposition and one to the person who does. But surely you have said the same thing to both. The problem, then, is that on Recanati's conception in uttering a given sentence with a particular communicative intention, what one says depends on who one is talking to.

This problem is symptomatic of Recanati tendency to psychologize semantics and to semanticize psychology. Equally symptomatic is his persistent equivocation on the terms 'determination' and 'interpretation' (see p. 55, for example), each of which can be read either

psychologically or more abstractly. It is one thing for a hearer to determine, in the sense of figuring out, what a sentence or speaker means, but determining meaning in that sense does not determine, in the sense of making it the case, that a sentence or a speaker in fact means such-and-such. Neither the hearer nor the context is capable of doing that. Determination of something *in* context should not be equated with determination of anything *by* context. Facts about the context may bear upon what a speaker might plausibly be taken to mean in uttering a given sentence, but they do not determine what he actually does mean.²

Recanati uses the term ‘interpretation’ to mean the psychological process whereby listeners figure out what speakers are trying to communicate, while also using it as if it meant something more abstract, something akin to what a formal semantic theory does (determine a sentence’s semantic content as a function of the contents of its constituents and its syntactic structure). That is, he tends to treat utterance interpretation as if it were a mapping from syntactic structure to utterance contents, except that the mapping is sensitive to broadly contextual factors. However, his bottom up/top down distinction is applicable to interpretation only in the psychological sense, not in the formal sense. In the latter sense, the (semantic) interpretation of a sentence is presumably a projection of its syntax, a function of the semantic values of its constituents in accordance with its syntactic structure (this may or may not be complete and determinate enough to be truth-conditional). But does this mean that the psychological process involved in understanding a sentence is bottom up? Not necessarily. When you hear (or read) a sentence, sometimes you miss part of it and have to interpolate, by finding a plausible candidate for what you missed. In that case, the process is partly top-down, as is evident from the kinds of errors that can occur. The same sort of thing happens when you’re confronted with an unfamiliar word. Again, a bit of top-down interpolation is needed to figure out what it means, by way of figuring out what the speaker is likely to have meant, something for which you have insufficient bottom-up information.

Literal Meaning is a bold book. I have registered my concerns about drawing semantic conclusions from psychological speculations and about treating what is done in context as if it is done by context. Even so, I strongly recommend this book for its in-depth coverage of contemporary debates on the nature and even viability of the semantics/pragmatics distinction.³ Any reader curious about these debates will receive a crash course on the rationales and drawbacks of a wide range of positions, as well as an energetic defense of contextualism.

² For a fuller critique of contextualism, see my “Context ex Machina,” in Zoltán Szabó (ed.), *Semantic versus Pragmatics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005), pp. 15-44, and references there.

³ Space limitations have precluded delineating all the twists and turns of Recanati’s intricate dialectic. For that see the review article by Robert M. Harnish in *Pragmatics and Cognition* 13 (2005): 383–399.