

This is a prepublication draft of a paper that appears in its final and official form in *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*, edited by G. Preyer and G. Peter, (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 278-302.

Minimal Propositions, Cognitive Safety Mechanisms, and Psychological Reality

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Abstract: This chapter, which consists of two parts, focuses on Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore's claim in *Insensitive Semantics* that minimal propositions are psychologically real. In the first part, I present their notion of a minimal proposition and discuss what they call "The Psychological Objection": minimal propositions play no substantive role in linguistic communication and are thus explanatorily superfluous. I conclude the section with their response: minimal propositions (and only minimal propositions) are the things that speakers and their audiences can at least agree on in epistemically impoverished contexts. In the second part, I argue that their reply is unsuccessful because minimal propositions do not always serve that role and are not needed to play that role. Thus, Cappelen and Lepore have not shown that linguistic communication is impossible without minimal propositions. I conclude the chapter with an argument to show that they have no choice but to concede The Psychological Objection if they are to maintain their form of Semantic Minimalism.

Introduction

This chapter will focus on Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore's important but controversial claim that minimal propositions are psychologically real.¹ In Part One, I briefly present their notion of a minimal proposition and then move on to a somewhat detailed presentation of The Psychological Objection according to which minimal propositions play no substantive role in linguistic communication. I then present their reply that minimal propositions (and only minimal propositions) serve as cognitive safety-mechanisms, which is essential to linguistic communication. In Part Two, I argue that minimal propositions don't always serve that role and aren't needed to play that role. Cappelen and Lepore have thus not shown that linguistic communication is impossible without minimal propositions. I conclude with a brief remark about why they have no choice but to admit that minimal propositions are inessential to a theoretical account of linguistic communication.

¹ (Cappelen and Lepore 2005). All page references to *Insensitive Semantics* (henceforth, 'IS') will be made in the text.

Part One

§1. Minimal Propositions

Cappelen and Lepore's Semantic Minimalism is based on the familiar idea that natural language is semantically compositional: the meaning of every sentence of a natural language \underline{L} is compositionally fixed solely by the meanings of its syntactic constituents, and its syntactic structure (*IS*, 144-45).² The meaning assigned to a sentence of \underline{L} is the output of a finite, recursively definable, computational procedure defined over a finite stock of semantic primitives. The procedure is a bottom-up, semantically interpretative, process extending from a sentence's lexical parts, through its phrasal parts, and onto its clausal parts, which includes the sentence itself.³ Cappelen and Lepore add something else to this familiar picture: the semantic content of a non-indexical sentence is a complete, truth-evaluable, proposition that has no semantically unarticulated constituent: every constituent of the proposition expressed corresponds to some formal bit in the sentence's syntax (*IS*: 3-4).^{4,5} Call these propositions, "minimal propositions".

So far, this picture of natural language semantics is shared by others with whom

2 Throughout *IS*, Cappelen and Lepore speak of an expression's "semantic value" (relative to an interpretation of the language) rather than its meaning. Nothing of importance turns on this as far as this paper is concerned. By "semantic value", they mean the extension of an expression, which could be an object, an ordered n-tuple of objects, a function, a truth-value, etc., depending on the expression's semantic type.

3 Semantic compositionality doesn't require that primitive syntactic constituents have only one semantic value or even a precise extension. The mapping of (possibly imprecise) semantic inputs at the lexical level into (possibly imprecise) semantic outputs at the sentential level can be many-to-many – that would just be a case of semantic ambiguity (assuming that the sentence in question has one single syntactic analysis). On the other hand, if one also holds that the semantic content of a sentence must always be some single, truth-evaluable, non-vague proposition (again, assuming that the sentence has only one syntactic analysis), then lexical ambiguity and vagueness will have to be resolved at the level of primitive syntactic constituents. But that requirement comes from the belief that every meaningful sentence must express a complete, truth-evaluable, proposition, and not from the grammatical properties of language *per se*.

4 Semantic Minimalists need not hold that propositions are structured entities. For instance, they could hold that propositions are sets of possible worlds. I use the notion of 'propositions-as-structured-wholes' in this section for expository reasons and because some Minimalists do hold that view, e.g., (Borg 2005) and (Salmon 2005). For their part, Cappelen and Lepore are neutral about the metaphysics of propositions.

5 In a recent reply to (Bach, typescript), Cappelen and Lepore claim that they are not committed to the view that the semantic content of every meaningful sentence is a proposition or truth conditions (see (Cappelen and Lepore, typescript)). They say as much in a footnote on page 3 of *IS*. However, it's hard to see how their arguments against Moderate and Radical Contextualism can succeed since those arguments presuppose that the semantic content of a non-indexical sentence really is a complete proposition. By the same token, Radical Contextualists can grant, without inconsistency, that if a sentence has semantic content, then its semantic content isn't a proposition, not even an incomplete one. Talk about "the semantic content of a sentence" is just another way, and a misleading way at that, of talking about the use of a sentence in public discourse, and there isn't anything proposition-like about linguistic use. I doubt, however, that Cappelen and Lepore would find that construal of "semantic content" acceptable, despite their professed neutrality on the matter.

Cappelen and Lepore disagree, most notably, (Stanley 2000) and (Stanley and Szabó 2000). The difference is that Cappelen and Lepore deny what the others hold, namely, that many linguistic expressions are implicitly context-sensitive.⁶ In particular, they deny that common nouns, adjectives, and verbs have hidden, unvoiced, indexicals or variable-slots in their form. By Cappelen and Lepore's lights, natural languages like English have only a few context-sensitive expressions and those are just the "obvious" ones, such as indexicals, bare demonstratives, temporal adverbs, and spatial locatives. They comprise what Cappelen and Lepore call "the Basic Set of Context Sensitive Expressions" (*IS*: 1-2).⁷

To sum up: on Cappelen and Lepore's view, the semantic content of a sentence, relative to a context (and interpretation of the language), is the minimal proposition that it expresses given its semantic compositional structure and the meanings of its component parts.^{8,9} Utterances in turn are said to inherit their semantic contents from the uttered sentences (taking into account any explicit, sub-sentential, context-sensitive elements). And so, the semantic content of an utterance is, relative to a context, always a minimal proposition. The question of whether this view is tenable will be taken up in the next two sections.

6 By "context sensitivity", Cappelen and Lepore mean the property of an (unambiguous) expression's shifting in extension from context to context without a corresponding shift in intension.

7 What makes Cappelen and Lepore's Semantic Minimalism *minimalist*, as they use their label, is that they restrict 'context-sensitivity' only to what is triggered by members of the Basic Set. Emma Borg, who is sympathetic to Cappelen and Lepore's general program, argues that their 'context-sensitivity-by-enumeration-of-the-Basic-Set' approach is not a fruitful way of characterizing the minimalist position in semantics and does not help clarify the real dispute between Minimalists and Contextualists. She offers an alternative approach in her paper for this volume.

8 The qualifier, 'relative to a context', is needed to handle sentences that contain explicit indexicals, demonstratives, temporal and spatial adverbs, and grammatically marked tensed expressions.

9 This view of semantic content begs the question against those, like Kent Bach and Scott Soames, who hold that the semantic contents of some index-free sentences are propositional matrices, and not because the sentences contain some explicit or implicit context-sensitive element but because their semantically significant parts, plus their syntactic structure, don't add up to anything that is a proposition or that has truth-conditions. See (Bach 1994), (Bach 2001), (Bach 2005), and (Soames 2005). Cappelen and Lepore reject the standard arguments for incomplete propositions on the grounds that they depend on unreliable, verificationist, semantic intuitions about context-sensitivity and because the arguments are "unstable" (*IS*: 59-68). In (Bach, typescript), Kent Bach replies that the arguments for incomplete propositions are not arguments for context-sensitivity and don't rely on any such notion. Resolving this particular dispute is beyond the scope of the paper. For pro-arguments for semantic incompleteness, see (Searle 1978), (Searle 1980), and (Travis 1985).

§2. The “Incredulous Stare” Objection

Consider sentences [1]-[3]:

[1] Dumbo is big

[2] There is beer in the refrigerator

[3] Every philosopher wears glasses

According to Cappelen and Lepore, an utterance of [1] semantically expresses the minimal proposition that Dumbo is (plain) big. For any utterance of [1] to be true, it matters not whether Dumbo is big for a baby elephant, big for a mammal, or big for a circus animal. The predicate, ‘is big’, doesn’t implicitly contain a free variable that takes, for each context of use, a different contextually salient comparison class as its semantic value. It is instead a complete predicate that expresses the property of being big and its extension is the set of all and only (plain old) big things. Thus, all that matters for any utterance of [1] to be true is that Dumbo be (plain old) big. An utterance of [2], regardless of the context, expresses the minimal proposition that there is beer in the refrigerator. Whether the utterance is true doesn’t depend on whether the speaker is referring to a contextually salient refrigerator; and, even if he is, it doesn’t matter whether the refrigerator in question contains a bottle of beer (as opposed to a droplet of beer on the inside panel). Rather, the truth of any utterance of [2] depends only on whether there is exactly one refrigerator in existence and, if there is, whether it contains some (non-zero) quantity of beer. An utterance of [3], irrespective of the context, expresses the proposition that every philosopher wears glasses. It has the truth-value it has regardless of whether the speaker is referring to a certain group of philosophers; and, even if he is, his utterance is true (or false) independently of whether everyone in the said group wears bifocals, sunglasses, etc. Its truth depends only on whether every philosopher, whomever and wherever, wears glasses (regardless of the type of glasses). If that condition is met, then every utterance of [3] is true; if not, then every utterance of [3] is false.

Now many will dismiss the above claims as being utterly implausible. Here’s an “intuition pump” to back up this reaction. Suppose I uttered [1] to you in a context in which it is clear to both of us that I am referring to a certain baby elephant named ‘Dumbo’. I then ask, ‘Okay, tell me, did I say something true? Or did I say something false?’. You probably will reply, ‘Well, that depends. Do you mean whether Dumbo is

big for an elephant, or whether he is big for a mammal, or what?’ I reply, ‘Neither. I am simply asking whether Dumbo is big. Either he is or he isn’t. Which is it?’ Most likely, you will stare at me incredulously, and protest that my question makes no sense. ‘It assumes’, you’ll argue, ‘that there is a correct answer quite apart from any standard one might use for counting things as big’. I reply that whether there is a standard for counting things as big is irrelevant: ‘I am not asking whether there is a way of deciding or a way of telling whether Dumbo is big. I am asking instead whether Dumbo is big. Period. If he is big, then every utterance of the sentence, ‘Dumbo is big’, is true regardless of the context, provided that the speaker is referring to our Dumbo. But if Dumbo isn’t big, then every utterance of that same sentence is false regardless of the context, provided that the speaker is referring to Dumbo by ‘Dumbo’. I just want you to tell me which of the two is the case. Is he big or is he not big? Answer!’ At this point, you will stare at me incredulously once again. And so would most competent speakers of English. The same “intuition pump” can be used for sentences [2] and [3].

Cappelen and Lepore attempt to deflect The “Incredulous Stare” Objection by distinguishing *what a sentence says* (in the language), which is the proposition that the sentence semantically expresses in the language, from *what is said* by the speaker (*IS*: 150). The latter – the ‘what is said’ by a speaker in the act of uttering a sentence – is the content of an *illocutionary* speech-act, which may be something that the speaker asserted or conversationally implied.¹⁰ By contrast, what a non-indexical sentence says is its semantic content, which in turn is the minimal proposition that any utterance of the sentence encodes irrespective of the context of use. What a sentence says can also be the content of a *locutionary* act of uttering the sentence.¹¹ With this distinction in place,

¹⁰ I will follow Cappelen and Lepore in using ‘speech-act content’ to refer to the propositional content of an illocutionary speech-act, i.e., any proposition that the speaker asserts, implicitly conveys, or otherwise implicates by her utterance (*IS*: 204). Bear in mind that, according to them, no context-insensitive sentence semantically expresses an incomplete proposition. If no incomplete proposition is expressed by a context-insensitive sentence, then there are no pragmatically enriched propositions either (beyond what is grammatically required, e.g., saturation of indexical slots). But others strongly disagree. I propose, then, that we take ‘speech-act content’ to also include what Bach, Robyn Carston, and others call “pragmatically enriched propositions”, “completed propositions”, “propositional expansions”, etc.. These are not all the same thing but they are all said to be the outputs of some optional, top-down, pragmatic process. I will also follow Cappelen and Lepore in using ‘semantic content’ to refer just to the minimal content of a locutionary speech-act.

¹¹ Cappelen and Lepore can use this distinction to save their Minimalism and, at the same time, concede a major criticism raised in (Carston 2002), (Carston 2004), (Recanati 2004), (Sperber and Wilson 1986), and (Soames 2005). The criticism is that minimal propositions cannot be the semantic contents of linguistic

Cappelen and Lepore's reply to the aforementioned objection is that a speaker can assert any or all of the things (and more) mentioned above about Dumbo, e.g., that Dumbo is small for an elephant but big for most animals kept in the zoo¹² – it's just that, given Semantic Minimalism, none of those things is semantically encoded in her utterance. The same applies in the case of sentences [2] and [3].

Cappelen and Lepore's distinction between what a sentence says and what a speaker says is important. Ignoring it can lead to some unnecessary confusion about what an indirect speech-report is a report of – the content of an illocutionary act? the content of locutionary act? – given that 'to say' can be used to cover both types of linguistic acts when it takes a clausal complement as its object. However, their distinction also forms the backdrop to a more objection to their Semantic Minimalism.

§3. The Psychological Objection

As previously noted, Cappelen and Lepore sharply distinguish what a sentence says from what a speaker says. It is therefore unsurprising to find them saying things like the following:

Our semantic content (the proposition semantically expressed) *is not identical* to what the speaker said. *It cannot, and is not meant to, play the roles that what the speaker said can play. It is not meant to serve*

utterances and, at the same time, the contents of illocutionary speech-acts. The reason often given is that semantics cannot deliver a pragmatic-free, context-independent, notion of what is asserted in an utterance of an indexical-free sentence. On my reading of *IS*, Cappelen and Lepore can and should concede all that since they distinguish the proposition that an *utterance* semantically expresses from the proposition that *the speaker* asserts, states, or conveys – only the latter can be (for Cappelen and Lepore) the thing said ("what is said"), which in turn is never (for them) *just* the semantic content of the utterance (*IS*: 200). On the other hand, in (*IS*: 150) and (*IS*: 181), which I quote below, they maintain that the thing said or asserted is never the semantic content of the utterance, and they also appear to be saying in these passages that an utterance's minimal semantic content is not even a part of what is said or asserted. One wonders, though, how we could produce true, inter-contextual, disquotational speech-reports about what the *speaker* said in an utterance of the component clause used in our report if the report is only about what was semantically expressed in the reported *utterance*.

¹² This is, in effect, Cappelen and Lepore's **Speech-Act Pluralism** according to which speakers perform, in a single utterance, multiple speech-acts that differ in content (*IS*: 199-206). The determinants of what a speaker said are pragmatic, highly variable, and context-dependent. What a speaker said depends on the speaker's communicative intentions and on what the speaker and hearer mutually know, believe, or assume about each other and about their shared context. It will also depend on the psychological states of other speakers who are not participants in the original context of utterance, e.g., speech-reporters, (*IS*: 201). No algorithm can fix in advance the contents of what a speaker said (*IS*: 197-199). Different propositions can thus be equally good candidates of the things said depending on how the aforementioned factors are weighted and sorted. Therefore, there can be no uniquely correct answer to the question about what a speaker said since indefinitely many propositions can be asserted in a single utterance. The same holds in the case of indirect speech-reports: there can be no uniquely correct answer to the question about what is said in an indirect speech report about the reported utterance.

functions (cognitive or otherwise) that the speech act content can serve.
(IS.181, cf..150; italics added)

The same theme occurs in this next passage:

We should point out that even though much about our view is Gricean in perspective, our way of classifying contents (i.e., to contrast the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance u of a sentence S with the speech act content of u) distinguishes us (at least terminologically) from Grice. For Grice, there's an important distinction between what a speaker says with an utterance and what she conversationally implicates with that utterance. He thinks of the former more or less along the lines of what we have been calling the proposition semantically expressed. *It is important for us (a) not to identify the proposition semantically expressed with the proposition asserted (or said), and (b) for that reason not to reserve the label 'what is said' for the proposition semantically expressed.* (IS, 150 fn.; italics added)

Thus, for Cappelen and Lepore, *what is said* and *what a speaker said* come to the same thing: they are assertions, which in turn are distinct from the minimal semantic content of an utterance. Now utterance content is (for Cappelen and Lepore) the minimal proposition expressed. Therefore, no one ever asserts a minimal proposition, strictly speaking. Given the two passages above, it follows that no minimal proposition can serve, nor is meant to serve, the role of an assertion in linguistic communication. When we factor in Speech-Act Pluralism, we get the result that, among all the many things that a speaker asserts or states in a single utterance, not one is the minimal proposition semantically expressed by the speaker's utterance.

Now it is very tempting to conclude, on the basis of these passages and on what has just been said, that minimal propositions play no substantive role in linguistic communication.¹³ Robyn Carston and François Recanati are two major critics who defend that viewpoint. In the passage that follows, Recanati denies that minimal propositions are the things that sentences say (since “the rules of language” cannot determine, on their own, any such proposition as the semantic content of a sentence); but

13 For purposes of discussion, let us stipulate that a proposition is psychologically real in linguistic communication only if the hearer must identify or represent it in the process of recovering speaker meaning or it is the thing that the hearer infers in working out the speaker's communicated message and implicatures. Despite its vagueness, this definition will do since some critics of Semantic Minimalism have something like it in mind when they deny the psychological reality of minimal propositions.

he agrees with Cappelen and Lepore that minimal propositions aren't speech-act contents and concludes that they serve no role in linguistic communication:

. . . the minimal proposition which the Syncretic View posits as the semantic content of the utterance, and which results from saturation alone, is not 'what the sentence says' . . . It is not autonomously determined by the rules of the language independent of speaker's meaning. At the same time, the minimal proposition does not correspond to an aspect of what the speaker asserts and cannot be abstracted from it . . . The minimal proposition is a hybrid which goes beyond what is determined by the rules of the language yet has no psychological reality and need not be entertained or represented at any point in the process of understanding the utterance . . . (Recanati 2004: 64)

The unstated premise in Recanati's argument is that a proposition has a cognitive role in linguistic communication only if it is the semantic content of a sentence or it is the speech-act content of some illocutionary act (assuming those exhaust all the possibilities).

Carston also argues that minimal propositions are psychologically unreal, but she thinks that another role that propositions can play in communication is that of a premise "in the derivation of implicatures", a role she thinks that no minimal proposition plays because they are often "uninformative, irrelevant, and sometimes truistic or patently false":

It is the enriched propositions that are communicated as explicatures and which function as premises in the derivation of implicatures; the uninformative, irrelevant, and sometimes truistic or patently false minimal propositions appear to play no role in the process of utterance understanding, which is geared to the recovery of just those propositional forms which the speaker intends to communicate. (Carston 2004: 8)

The following example, taken from (Carston 2004), captures Carston's and Recanati's concerns.

Tom and Sue

Sue: How is Mary feeling after her first year at university?
Tom: She didn't get enough units and can't continue.

Being intelligent and linguistically competent, Sue interprets Tom's utterance as implicitly meaning [4] and takes him to be conversationally implicating [5]:

[4] Mary did not pass enough *university course* units to qualify for admission to second

year study and, *as a result*, Mary cannot continue *with university study*.
[5] Mary is not feeling very happy.

Given their shared assumptions and background knowledge, Tom expected Sue to understand him as asserting [4] and as implying [5]. For her part, Sue arrived at [4] by assigning Mary as the referent of ‘she’ and by freely enriching Tom’s utterance with some general background information she has about universities, course credits, and university admission standards – in particular, her knowledge that one’s failure to pass a certain number of university course units can be a causal factor in one’s disqualification from further university study.

Now according to Semantic Minimalists, [6] rather than [4] is the minimal content of Tom’s utterance, assuming that the semantic meaning of ‘and’ is simply that of logical conjunction – the “causal consequence” meaning that Tom conveyed with his use of ‘and’ is screened off:

[6] Mary did not get enough units and Mary cannot continue.

However, Sue didn’t recover [6] – she did not take Tom to be saying anything that is truth-conditionally equivalent to [7], such as [6]:

[7] Mary cannot continue and Mary did not get enough credits.

Thus, the minimal content of Tom’s utterance is not the proposition that Sue cognitively grasped. Nor did [6] serve as a premise in her derivation of Tom’s implicature. She would had to have added [6] to a large set of rather extraneous assumptions and beliefs in order to derive [5] – assumptions and beliefs that bear no obvious inferential links to a claim about Mary’s current state of mind. By contrast, the enriched proposition [4], in conjunction with beliefs about Mary’s valuations, her desires, and her plans, makes the derivation of [5] more “cost-efficient”, cognitively speaking.

Cappelen and Lepore can grant many of these points. They admit that there is “a sharp distinction between how we think about what utterances say and what the real content of those utterances is” (*IS*: 98). Given that [6] is “the real content” of Tom’s utterance and bears little connection to Sue’s question about Mary’s current state of mind, [6] is not the salient proposition that Tom communicated to Sue, as Cappelen and Lepore will agree (*IS*: 180-181).¹⁴ It is simply not “how we think about” the content of

¹⁴ Contextualists offer different reasons for denying the minimal proposition (allegedly) expressed in [6] is what Tom’s utterance semantically expressed. Relevance Theorists would rule out [6] because it isn’t the

utterances. Still, they will say, it doesn't follow that no minimal proposition is psychologically real. Just the opposite is true: "One of the many propositions asserted by an utterance is the semantic content of that utterance (the proposition semantically expressed)" (*IS*: 200). How that squares with the two passages that we began this section with remains to be seen. Suffice it to say that, on Cappelen and Lepore's view, *part* of what Tom asserted in his response to Sue's question is [6], even though she didn't hear him as asserting [6] and even though he really didn't assert [6] – he asserted [4] instead.

I will present Cappelen and Lepore's reasons for thinking that minimal propositions are always part of what is asserted. But, for now, let's conclude with their summary of The Psychological Objection:

What communicators actually care about in a discourse exchange is the speech act content and only the speech act content. What they care about is what the speaker said, asserted, claimed, stated, suggested, asked, etc. If the semantic content is, so to speak, always hidden, if it never surfaces, than what purposes does it serve? Isn't it just an idle wheel? This objection might seem particularly worrisome given what we ourselves said about the propositions semantically expressed . . . they are peculiar, to say the least. (*IS*: 176-177)

Ockham's Razor kicks in at this point: we should reject Semantic Minimalism because it posits "peculiar" entities that play "no role in the actual process of communication" and, at best, resides in "semantic heaven" (Recanati 2004: 96).

Cappelen and Lepore dismiss The Psychological Objection on the grounds that linguistic communication *without* minimal propositions is *impossible*. I will now turn to their defense of this rather strong claim, a claim that will be examined in Part Two.

most "optimally relevant" interpretation of Tom's utterance – it's not worth the cognitive effort (*vis-à-vis* generating lots of new and informative cognitive states with the least amount of cognitive cost) to interpret him as meaning [6]; see (Carston 2002) and (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Recanati would rule out [6] because hearers are not consciously aware of it as being the proposition that Tom stated or asserted in his response to Sue's query. In other words, [6] fails Recanati's Availability Principle, (Recanati 2004). Cappelen and Lepore criticize the Relevance Theorist's view (*IS*: 176-186) and Recanati's view (*IS*, 186-189 and 196-199) in their book.

§3. The Psychological Reality Thesis

Cappelen and Lepore defend three theses that make up what I will call “The Psychological Reality Thesis”:

- (i) “any coherent account of linguistic communication” must recognize minimal propositions as having a cognitive role in communication. (*IS*: 144)
- (ii) “. . . this minimal semantic content is an essential part of all communicative interactions. The minimal semantic content has a function in the cognitive life of communicators that no other content can serve.” (*IS*: 181)
- (iii) “. . . minimal semantic content has a psychological role that no other ‘level of content’ can fill.” (*IS*: 181)¹⁵

(i) and (ii) entail that an empirically adequate empirical theory of linguistic communication *must* posit minimal propositions. By the same token, minimal propositions are “not meant to serve functions (cognitive or otherwise) that the speech act content can serve” – they serve an entirely different role in linguistic communication (*IS*: 181). They serve instead as cognitive safety-mechanisms in situations in which speakers/hearers are mistaken, misinformed, ignorant of, or lack communication-relevant information about the context of utterance (*IS*: 183,185). Despite partial or even massive ignorance, speakers can agree on what was said (in the locutionary sense of ‘to say’). They can even correctly report, in one context, what a speaker said in another context to another audience.¹⁶ The best explanation of this phenomenon, say Cappelen and Lepore, is that participants in a conversation can grasp the context-invariant minimal propositions of another speaker’s utterances. Hearers can fall back on these meanings when they are ignorant of or mistaken about certain features of the context. Communication across different contexts would surely be impossible if there were no “fall-back” propositions.

Here is an example of the kind of thing that Cappelen and Lepore have in mind:

15 One might reasonably think that (iii) actually says nothing more than what (ii) already says. I take ‘psychological role’ in (iii) to be encompassing more than just the kind of cognitive role that (ii) says is “an essential part of all communicative interactions”. (iii) is compatible with the claim that minimal propositions serve other non-communicative psychological roles that no other “level of content” can serve. I consider a few possibilities at the end of this chapter.

16 Actually, that won’t be the case if the uttered sentence contains an indexical or a demonstrative the contextual referents of which are unknown to reporters in other contexts. (See Montminy 2006.) Some Minimalists are aware of this problem and have tried to address it. See (Borg 2005).

Cheney and Rumsfeld

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld is in his office reviewing the latest casualty reports from Iraq. He has lost track of time and has forgotten that he has an important briefing with President Bush and Vice-President Cheney at the White House. The meeting was scheduled for 3:00pm – it is now 3:30pm. Cheney suddenly walks into Rumsfeld’s office and utters [8] with some consternation:

[8] The President is waiting!

Surprised by Cheney’s unexpected visit, Rumsfeld responds with [9] mistakenly thinking that Cheney meant that Bush is ready to meet them for dinner:

[9] I’ll just be a minute – by the way, which room in the White House did the President say we will be dining in?

Suppose that [8] contains no covert context-sensitive element in its logical form (see *IS*, 69-83). Also, suppose that no utterance of [8] expresses a proposition that has unarticulated constituents. We shall assume that, in this example, ‘the President’ refers to George W. Bush and that ‘is waiting’ is unambiguous and expresses *readiness*. Then, Cheney’s utterance encodes the minimal proposition, *George W. Bush is waiting*, and is true just in case George W. Bush is waiting.

The minimal proposition that Cheney’s utterance semantically encodes is a “starting point” for discourse understanding: it serves to pare down what Cheney was talking about (*IS*, 185). Knowledge that Cheney’s utterance simply means *George W. Bush is waiting* also provides Rumsfeld “with the *best possible* access to” Cheney’s mind, given “the restricted knowledge” that he has of Cheney in their shared context (*IS*:185). For instance, Rumsfeld knows that Cheney was talking *about George W. Bush* (and not about anyone else), and he knows that Cheney was *saying of* Bush that he is *waiting* (as opposed to running, eating, etc.). So, even though Cheney didn’t assert that George W. Bush is waiting, it is part of what he asserted. Cheney presumably expected Rumsfeld to take him as saying at least that much. So, even though Rumsfeld has some false beliefs about their shared context, he can make use of what he knows about the content of Cheney’s remark to figure out what Cheney meant. Serving as a “starting point” is a cognitive function in linguistic communication if anything is.

In light of these sorts of considerations, Cappelen and Lepore conclude that the following is true only of minimal propositions:

[F1] “The proposition semantically expressed is that content the speaker can expect the audience to grasp (and expect the audience to expect the speaker to expect them to grasp) even if they have mistaken or incomplete communication-relevant information.” (*IS*: 184)

[F2] “The proposition semantically expressed is that content the audience can expect the speaker to grasp, etc. even if she has such mistaken or incomplete information.” (*IS*:184-85)

[F3] “The proposition semantically expressed is that content which can be grasped and expressed by someone who isn’t even a participant in the context of utterance.” (*IS*: 185)

[F4] “The proposition semantically expressed is that content which speakers and audiences know can be transmitted through indirect quotation or reproduction (in the form of tapes, video, recordings, etc.) to those who find themselves in contexts radically different from the original context of utterance.” (*IS*: 185).

Minimal propositions are, then, psychologically real entities that do some important explanatory work if Cappelen and Lepore are right. However, as I will try to show, [F1]-[F4] are not true of minimal propositions in all cases. If they are not, then the debate about the cognitive role of minimal propositions in linguistic communication remains unresolved.

Part Two

§1. A Critique of The Psychological Reality Thesis

The general structure of my argument is this. First, I will describe cases in which a speaker and/or addressee has some mistaken assumption, misinformation, or little information about the original context of utterance. Then, I will argue that in some of these cases the content that the speaker/addressee *could expect* the other to grasp, despite these epistemic limitations, is speech-act content and not a minimal proposition. In the other cases, the minimal proposition that is expressed isn’t one that the speaker/addressee could expect the other to grasp without attributing irrationality or incompetence to the person. If I can show both things, then minimal propositions don’t always serve the cognitive role that Cappelen and Lepore assign to them; in some cases, only speech-act

contents play the role in question. The cases that I will be describing involve intra-sentential reference-shifts, conversational snippets, solecism, and sub-sentential speech-acts. This may seem like overkill, but it is important to see that all four cases are ubiquitous and, thus, pose a genuine problem for Cappelen and Lepore's view.

§2. Intra-Sentential Reference-Shift: The Case Against Theses [F1] and [F2]

Consider sentence [10] (from Nunberg 1979):

[10] Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read him aloud.

[10] is ambiguous since the pronominal can be interpreted as having an indexical occurrence or an anaphoric occurrence. Let's consider a case in which the pronominal is being used as an indexical. Two mutual acquaintances of William Butler Yeats are discussing Yeats's disdain for Ezra Pound, who just happens to be standing nearby. One speaker informs the other that Yeats encountered another mutual friend, Maude, reading some of Pound's poems aloud at a local recital. In recounting the story, the speaker utters [10] and points to Pound when she utters 'him'. Given the lexical content of 'him' and the context in which [10] is uttered, the speaker referred to Pound. Relative to that context, the minimal proposition expressed is therefore the weird proposition that Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read (in the sense of reading a poem) Ezra Pound (the man) aloud.

Our speaker asserted no such thing since she did not intend to say something that entails the rather strange false claim that Maude read Pound (the man, not his writings). Nor could she expect her friend to take her as asserting anything of the sort unless she thinks her friend is incompetent. In which case, [F1] is dubious: the minimal content of an utterance isn't always the thing that a speaker can expect her audience to grasp as the thing said or as part of what is asserted. Nor, in our example, could the speaker's friend expect her to grasp that strange proposition unless the friend has some doubts about the speaker's rationality. In which case, [F2] is also suspect. Instead our speaker asserted, and her addressee took her to be asserting, among other things, that Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read Pound's *poems* aloud. That is not, however, the minimal semantic content of the utterance since 'poems' is not derivable from the meanings of the constituents of [10] and its structure – it is instead a speech-act content of the speaker's illocutionary act of assertion.

We can run the same argument in the case where the pronominal in [10] is interpreted as being anaphorically linked to ‘Yeats’. Imagine a case similar to the one described above, except that this time Maude is reading Yeats’ poems aloud and the conversational topic is Yeats’ modesty and his shyness. By hypothesis, ‘him’ in [10] is co-indexed with its referential antecedent and thus subject to a C-command rule. Semantically, ‘him’ in [10] is strictly co-referential with ‘Yeats’, if the standard “rule-by-rule” picture of compositionality that Cappelen and Lepore assume applies. Thus, Yeats is the semantic value of ‘him’ in [10] since he is the semantic value of ‘Yeats’. On this interpretation, the sentence semantically expresses the bizarre proposition that William Butler Yeats did not enjoy hearing Maude read William Butler Yeats (the man) aloud.

Once again, our speaker asserted no such thing given that she is competent, intelligent, and cooperative. Nor, as I argued earlier, could she expect her friend to interpret her utterance in that way even if the friend were utterly in the dark about the referent of ‘Yeats’. Thus, [F1] is false. Conversely, no intelligent person who lacks information about the original context of utterance could expect a speaker of [10] to be trying to convey this absurd proposition unless he thought the speaker was punning on ‘read’ or was really incoherent, neither of which is the case. Thus, [F2] fails in this instance too.

Now Cappelen and Lepore could make two replies. The first is that [10] expresses no context-independent minimal proposition if ‘him’ is functioning as an indexical. If [10] doesn’t express a minimal proposition, then the example fails. The second is that, if ‘him’ is anaphoric on ‘Yeats’, then [10] really expresses two distinct propositions assuming that ‘read’ is understood univocally. In that case, the speaker would be asserting only one of them and not the bizarre proposition. If that is how it should go, then my second example also fails because [F1] and [F2] would then still hold.

The first reply can be granted without too much damage. After all, once a semantic value is contextually assigned to the indexical pronoun, then the speaker’s utterance of [10] does express an absurd minimal proposition. My argument should still go through if that is the only proposition that is semantically expressed. But it might not be, which takes us to the second reply.

If [10] is really semantically ambiguous, then ‘Yeats’ must be more than just a

Millian marker – it would also have to encode some additional lexical material, such as ‘writer/poet’.¹⁷ Now Cappelen and Lepore take no position in their book on whether proper names have connotation. So, for the sake of argument, I will assume that they can adopt this view. Assume, then, that [10] really is ambiguous between its most natural reading and the strict but bizarre reading mentioned above. To arrive at the intended interpretation given the standing conventional meaning of ‘read’, we assign the *poet* sense of ‘Yeats’ to the pronominal. Then, on that sense-assignment, the predicate, ‘x read him (=Yeats) aloud’, expresses the property of being an individual who read some of Yeats’ poems aloud. The semantic value of ‘him’ in [10] will then be different from the semantic value of its antecedent, ‘Yeats’, as desired – it refers parasitically or deferentially to Yeats’ poems rather than to Yeats himself.

Notice, though, that the semantic value of ‘him’, on this second reading, is determined in part by the semantic value of the complex expression, ‘Maude read him (=Yeats) aloud’, of which it is a constituent. The natural intuitive meaning of [10] isn’t fixed by a bottom-up, compositional, process.¹⁸ But, according to Cappelen and Lepore, minimal propositions are the semantic outputs of a bottom-up compositional analysis on sentences. Consequently, the intuitively natural reading of [10] is not a minimal proposition. The “semantic ambiguity” gambit won’t help block the negative implications of the Yeats example – and of intra-sentential, polysemous, reference-shifts in general – for Cappelen and Lepore’s view.

§3. Conversational Snippets: The Case Against Thesis [F3]

Thesis [F3] says that speakers who are not participants in the original context of utterance can express the proposition that is semantically expressed in an utterance made in that context, even in situations of ignorance, and that the proposition will always be a minimal proposition. I shall argue that [F3] isn’t true in all cases primarily because conversations are often patchworks of snippets, pauses, and ungrammatical short-cuts. Here is one such

17 This may not be true since you could get the same ambiguous readings using ‘He did not enjoy hearing Maude read him aloud’ or ‘That man did not enjoy hearing Maude read him aloud’, if you tell the story about Yeats, Pound, and Maude right. It is not part of the lexical meaning of ‘he’ in English, nor is it a semantic constraint on the extension of ‘that man’, that their contextually determined referents be a writer or a poet. The same might be true in the case of a proper name like ‘Yeats’.

18 By that I mean that the semantic value assigned to the terminal node of a daughter branch of a semantic tree for [10] is determined, in part, by the semantic value assigned to its mother branch and other branches, rather than the converse.

case.

Bernie, Harry, and Joe

It is July, 1947. Two friends, Bernie and Harry, are having a few beers at their favorite local sports tavern in Brooklyn, New York. Harry notices that Bernie is reading the sports pages of the *New York Daily News*. The following conversation then ensues:

H: How did – what’s-his-face? – do yesterday against the Giants at Ebbets?

B: Who?

H: You know who!

B: Well, [Turns to the page containing the baseball box scores from the day before] hmmm, . . . two doubles, a homerun, and a walk in five at bats, 4 rbi’s, two stolen bases, no errors.

H: He done good!

Joe the bartender, who was eavesdropping, knows what Bernie said in response to Harry’s question. For, he had attended the game in question and thus was able to deduce the player’s name, based on the information that Bernie relayed and on memory: it was Jackie Robinson, the famous baseball player for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Given the relevant background information, and the conversational exchange between Harry and Bernie, Joe was able to identify Robinson as Harry’s intended referent of ‘he’ and the dummy singular term, ‘what’s-his-face’. And even though he wasn’t a participant in the speech-exchange, Joe was able to correctly infer that Bernie also recognized who Harry meant. He correctly understood Bernie to have said that Jackie Robinson got two doubles, a homerun, etc. And yet, there is no minimal proposition on the basis of which Joe was able to arrive at this speech-act content. Keep in mind that Joe initially had no information about who Harry meant by his utterance of ‘what’s-his-face’ and he also forgot, momentarily, when Harry and Bernie’s conversation took place.

Bernie, Harry, and Joe is a case, then, in which a non-minimal propositional content satisfies condition [F3] but no minimal proposition did because none was semantically encoded in Bernie’s last utterance. He instead produced a string of quantificational noun phrases none of which semantically expressed a proposition. The string wasn’t elliptical for a previously uttered sentence that expressed a proposition. Bernie was transmitting, in serial form, information from a baseball boxscore and, in doing so, he was answering Harry’s question, but he wasn’t uttering a sentence, making a

statement, or expressing a proposition by his last utterance.

If we have ellipsis here, then the deleted material (italicized below) would be something like [11]:

[11] *What's-his-face* got two doubles, a homerun, a walk in five at bats, *had* 4 rbi's, and *committed* no errors.

On some theories of syntactic ellipsis, the italicized linguistic material would have had to have been explicitly available at some earlier part of the discourse and implicitly contained, but not pronounced, in the uttered string of quantificational noun phrases. However, the appropriate inflected forms of the verbs 'to get', 'to have', and 'to commit', were not explicitly tokened prior to Bernie's utterance. This then doesn't look like a case of syntactic ellipsis, at least not on certain theories anyway, and it certainly doesn't seem to be like VP-ellipsis, sluicing, etc.¹⁹ Still, Joe was able to work out the communicated proposition that Jackie Robinson got two doubles, a homerun, etc., without having to start with a minimal proposition. There could be, then, cases in which no minimal proposition is cognitively accessible (because none was expressed) to an epistemically disadvantaged agent but who still manages to recover a communicated speech-act content.

§4. Solecism and Context Constructions: The Case Against Thesis [F4] (and [F1] again)

Cappelen and Lepore contend that people in epistemically impoverished situations cannot understand what a speaker said by an utterance unless they grasp, or can be expected to grasp, the minimal semantic content of the utterance. If the sentence uttered contains no indexical or other context-sensitive expressions, then grasping the minimal semantic content is a matter of understanding the meaning of the sentence uttered. However, as I shall argue, even in bad situations, people can understand an utterance even though they couldn't have understood – and thus, couldn't be expected to have understood – the uttered sentence simply because it is semantically anomalous or incoherent.

In a famous study, (Wason and Reich 1979) reports that a sign posted on the wall

¹⁹ On other theories of syntactic ellipsis, ellipses don't contain ordinary, unpronounced, linguistic material that is grammatically elided at some level of syntactic representation. Rather, they are maximal INFL projections that already contain empty categories in their syntactic form and which get contextually filled in with items from the appropriate lexical categories. It is debatable whether Bernie's last utterance meets the last part of this description of a syntactic ellipsis since there is no evidence that there is some available lexical item that context supplies and which yields something like [11]. For a detailed survey and discussion of syntactic theories of ellipsis, see (Merchant 2001) and (Stainton 2006).

of a London hospital casualty department read as follows:

[12] No head injury is too trivial to ignore

People generally took [12] to mean:

[13] However trivial a head injury might appear, it should not be ignored.

Strictly speaking, [12] doesn't mean [13] but means [14], which conflicts with [13]:

[14] However trivial a head injury might be, it should be ignored

For years, the hospital staff and patients interpreted [12] to mean [13] (as the original sign-makers had probably intended) rather than [14] but never discovered their error – they erred in interpreting the quantifier scope of ‘no head injury’. Most likely, they related the words in [13] “to the *situation* being depicted, where the actions demanded are clear, and so interpret the message as a reminder of what should be done”, namely, treat head injuries (Sanford 2002: 191). The hospital staff members and patients created, in effect, a plausible but mistaken interpretation of [12] without first fully determining its semantic meaning. If that is what actually happened, then we have a case in which “pragmatics, in the form of situation-specific knowledge, overrides full local semantic interpretation” (Sanford 2002: 191). More importantly, short of attributing irrationality to the hospital attendants, they *couldn't be expected* to grasp [14] as the literal meaning of [12] given that they interpret the latter as meaning [13]. [F1] is therefore false in this case as well, assuming that the proposition semantically expressed in [12] is a minimal proposition.

Turning our attention to [F4], notice that it implies that the literal content of an utterance can be known to be *transmitted* to others by indirect quotation even if they don't know that the speaker in question was being ironic or sarcastic at the time. By “known to be transmitted”, Cappelen and Lepore mean that a participant in a speech-exchange knows that an indirect quotation of a fellow participant's utterance conveys the literal content of that utterance (adjusting for deictic elements). The question, as mentioned earlier, is whether an indirect quotation reports the content of an illocutionary speech-act or the semantic content of a locutionary speech-act. Cappelen and Lepore can't mean the latter in their formulation of [F4] since they deny that the content of an indirect quotation and the literal semantic content of the reported utterance can be strictly correlated one-to-one, (Cappelen and Lepore, 1997) and (Cappelen and Lepore, 1998).

For example, suppose that Lepore utters, ‘All the students in my logic class failed the final exam’, in a conversation with Cappelen. Cappelen then later reports to a student who is in Lepore’s logic class, ‘Professor Lepore said that you failed the final logic examination’. Intuitively speaking, Cappelen’s indirect speech report is true, but the complement clause he used in reporting what Lepore said is not semantically equivalent to the sentence that Lepore actually used. Thus, an indirect quotation can be true in one context even though it semantically fails to convey the literal content of the reported utterance made in another context. So, if the correlation is that loose, then one can’t know in advance that the literal content of an utterance is conveyed by an indirect quotation. In that case, [F4] is false.

On the other hand, if an indirect quotation reports the content of an illocutionary speech-act, then [F4] fails again but for a different reason: linguistic creativity. (Clark and Gerrig 1983) and (Clark 1997) present just such a case. It is an extract from a newspaper column on roommates, written by Erma Bombeck, the famous satirist:

[15] Stereos are a dime a dozen

On its own, [15] makes perfectly good sense given the idiomatic expression “a dime a dozen”:

[16] Stereo systems are very common.

Imagine, however, that you and I don’t know the particulars of Bombeck’s context of utterance (=that particular newspaper column in which she used [15]). I just know that she used [15] in one of her columns. Suppose that I report to you what Bombeck said (in the illocutionary sense of ‘to say’) by indirectly quoting her with [17]:

[17] Bombeck said that stereos are a dime a dozen.

Readers of that particular column would know that I would be mistaken in reporting, with [17], that Bombeck said [16] or that she asserted what [15] literally means non-idiomatically. Bombeck did not say (in the illocutionary sense of ‘to say’), by her use of [15] in her column, that stereos are (literally) a dime a dozen although she did token those words. Nor did she say by her utterance of [15] that stereos are very common. In order to arrive at Bombeck’s meaning, namely [18], one would have to know that she was using ‘stereo’ as a metonym for *roommates who own stereo systems*, which is what Bombeck expected her readers to do when they read [15]:

[18] Roommates who own stereo systems are very common.

The moral here is that indirect speech-reports that ascribe the minimal proposition expressed can fail to transmit what the speaker actually said (in the illocutionary sense of ‘to say’) in contexts in which the speaker is using language creatively and expects his audience to recognize that he is. Hence, [F4] is false in certain cases if the semantically expressed proposition is a minimal proposition.

§5. Sub-Sentential Speech-Acts: The Case Against the Joint Sufficiency of [F1]-[F4]

The last case that I will present is admittedly controversial since it involves the notion of a sub-sentential speech-act.²⁰

Mario and Sal

Mario is having dinner with his friend, Sal, and pours him a glass of white wine. He notices that Sal is trying to read the wine bottle label. Mario raises the bottle, points to it, and utters:

[19] from France.

Later that evening, at a local grocery store, Sal tells Gina about his dinner with Mario. When she asks where the bottle of wine that Mario served him was imported from, Sal replies:

[20] Mario said that the bottle of wine was imported from France.

The next day, Gina reports to her husband, Tony:

[21] Mario said that the bottle of wine he served Sal at dinner yesterday was a French import.

In uttering [19], Mario asserted of the bottle of wine that it is from France. One reason for thinking that he did perform a genuine speech-act is that, if contrary to fact, the bottle of wine had been from Spain, Mario would then have been mistaken in what he said about the bottle of wine. If Mario knew that it was from Spain but uttered [19] anyway, he can be rightly accused of having told a lie, which is evidence that he asserted something. Furthermore, Sal can easily infer from what Mario said by his utterance of [19] that there is at least one thing that is from France. He couldn’t make that inference unless Mario

²⁰ Some philosophers hold that such cases are either not genuine speech-acts or not genuinely sub-sentential but elliptical (Stanley 2000). But see (Elugardo and Stainton 2004) and (Stainton 2005) for a reply.

said something that could be used as a premise in an argument, which is further evidence that Mario asserted a proposition. Given the contexts in which they are used, [20] and [21] are thus true indirect speech reports of what Mario said.

Now what Mario uttered was a prepositional phrase, not a sentence, not even an ellipsis (Stainton 1995). He didn't utter an elliptical sentence since no prior linguistic material was available for syntactic deletion, given that he began the conversation by uttering [19]. Furthermore, the context didn't make salient a particular English expression that is a candidate for syntactic deletion.

Prepositional phrases don't semantically express propositions – at best, they express functions from objects to relations involving those objects (Elugardo and Stainton 2001). Consequently, Mario's utterance didn't semantically encode a minimal proposition. But then, the proposition that he expected Sal to grasp couldn't be the semantic content of his utterance since no such proposition was semantically expressed – the semantic content expressed is instead a function. The proposition that Mario expected or could have expected Sal to grasp is one that Mario communicated by uttering [19] and by making the wine bottle perceptually salient in the original context (Elugardo and Stainton 2003). What plays the cognitive role implicitly defined in [F1]-[F4] in this example is a speech-act content and not any minimal proposition. Notice, also, that since Mario's utterance is discourse-initial, the proposition he asserted serves as “starting point” for Sal: Sal knew that Mario was referring to his wine bottle, even though he did not use a linguistic device to refer to it, and that Mario was saying of it that it was from France. Speech-act contents can sometimes serve as cognitive-safety mechanisms.

§6. A Brief Recap

I've presented four examples that collectively provide *prima facie* strong counterevidence to Cappelen and Lepore's claim that minimal propositions serve as cognitive safety-mechanisms. All four exhibit at least one of the following two patterns. Pattern 1: no minimal proposition is semantically expressed but speakers and hearers figure out what was said despite that; in which case, neither could reasonably be expected to grasp any minimal proposition since none was expressed. Pattern 2: a minimal proposition is semantically expressed but it fails to play some or all of the roles that Cappelen and Lepore described, even in situations of ignorance and misinformation. Communicated

speech-act contents play those roles instead. Let's turn now to some objections.

§7. Objections and Replies

Objection [1]. My examples are based on the mistaken assumption that grasping a minimal proposition is always a necessary first step for recovering speech-act content. The Psychological Reality Thesis implies no such thing.

Reply: This objection in effect concedes my point. Suppose that grasping a minimal proposition is unnecessary for recovering, in situations of ignorance and misinformation, what a speaker said. If hearers can recover the speech-act content anyway in those cases, as expected by the speaker or the hearer (or both), then that shows that minimal propositions aren't essential for fulfilling those roles in linguistic communication. They are cognitively idle, at least in those sorts of cases.

Objection [2]. Cappelen and Lepore never claimed that every time things go awry, speakers and interpreters invoke minimal propositions to fall back on – their claim is only that minimal propositions are invoked sometimes and that sometimes they are the only contents that will do the trick. Thus, they can grant that sometimes minimal propositions won't do as cognitive safety-mechanisms and that speech-act contents can serve as well or even better than minimal propositions in some instances. What hasn't been shown, and what probably can't be shown, is that minimal propositions *never* do the work that Cappelen and Lepore say they do.

Reply: I grant the very last point, but if my arguments work, then minimal propositions are *never* the *only* things that will serve as “fall-back” interpretations in epistemically impoverished contexts. That contradicts the conjunction of the Psychological Reality Thesis and [F1]-[F4].

Rejoinder: Perhaps, though, as Objection [2] suggests, Cappelen and Lepore could give up their strong claim that minimal propositions are essential in linguistic communication but still preserve the heart of their view by insisting that minimal propositions serve an important cognitive role in some communicative exchanges.

Reply: True, but as the Emma Bombeck example shows, without having additional information about the original context of utterance and the speaker's communicative intentions, one is in no position to grasp what the speaker said based solely on an indirect, disquotational, speech-report. Information about whether the

speaker was speaking ironically, sarcastically, etc., is also required. Knowledge of the minimal proposition expressed won't be enough to ensure that one has grasped even a part of what the speaker in another context asserted.

Objection [3]. Even if minimal propositions never serve as cognitive safety-mechanisms, and even if speech-act contents can sometimes serve that role in those situations, minimal propositions may serve other psychological roles, ones that only they can have. Here are two:

- a) Minimal propositions are the outputs of a semantic compositional process that speakers and hearers implicitly know in virtue of being semantically competent in their language.
- b) Minimal propositions are the denotations of complement clauses in indirect speech-reports made in situations of ignorance or misinformation about the context of utterance.

First Reply: I grant (a) since it is close to being a definitional truth. Still, minimal propositions are not the only things that can be the final outputs of a semantic compositional analysis of a novel utterance. Consider a slight variation on *Mario and Sal*. Mario utters, 'from France and I bought it on wholesale', as he points to his bottle of wine. His utterance is novel under the circumstances. Presumably, Sal understood what Mario said in that context. He did so, in part, by computing the coordinating phrase that Mario uttered. Hence, Sal did some linguistic processing: he determined the semantic value of the entire phrase by assigning the proper semantic values to its constituents given its form. (Notice that Sal didn't interpret 'it', in Mario's utterance, as being co-indexed with 'France'; rather, he interpreted it as an indexical whose semantic value is the demonstrated wine bottle.) The output is a proposition, all right. But it's not a minimal proposition since it has an unarticulated constituent, namely, Mario's bottle of wine.

Second Reply: Proposal (b), which says that only minimal propositions are the denotations of complement clauses used in indirect speech-reports, won't work because speech-act contents can also be the denotations of such clauses too when used in situations of ignorance or misinformation. To use a famous example from (Donnellan 1966), imagine that Jones uttered, 'Smith's murderer is insane', referring to Brown, a

famous serial murderer. Jones doesn't know who Brown is and is mistaken in thinking that Smith was murdered. I can still report truthfully what Jones said by his utterance with 'Jones said that Brown is insane' to someone who knows Jones, knows of Brown, but who is ignorant of Jones' mistaken belief about Smith and who doesn't know that Jones is ignorant of Brown's identity. In the reporting context, the that-clause I used refers to a speech-act content and not to the minimal proposition expressed by Jones' utterance since, by hypothesis, the minimal proposition expressed is a general proposition rather than a singular proposition about Brown. This is yet another case where speech-act contents are cognitively no different from minimal propositions – both can be designated by the that-clause of an indirect speech report. What is needed to defeat The Psychological Objection is an account of the cognitive role(s) that *only* minimal propositions have and that are also required in linguistic communication.

I've argued in this chapter that Cappelen and Lepore have not shown that minimal propositions, and only minimal propositions, always play the kind of cognitive role they attribute to them. They are right to point out that speech-participants often have incomplete communication-relevant information or mistaken beliefs about the shared context or about the original context. However, in both cases, grasping the minimal propositions expressed won't always help in figuring out the speaker's communicative intentions. The reason is that, in some cases, participants don't expect speakers to be communicating the literal meanings of their utterances. So, The Psychological Objection still stands.

Conclusion

I will close with a brief comment. Conceding The Psychological Objection isn't necessarily such a bad thing for Cappelen and Lepore – they would just have to give up The Psychological Reality Thesis. Giving up The Psychological Reality Thesis is consistent with, and in the spirit of, another view they defend in other published writings, namely, the view that semantics should not be methodologically constrained by pragmatics, in particular by considerations about the psychology of linguistic communication or by considerations about the psychological roles of our indirect speech reporting practice (Cappelen and Lepore 1997, Cappelen and Lepore 1998, cf. Chapter 4 of *IS*).

In fact, they really have no choice but to give up The Psychological Reality Thesis.²¹ First, let's assume along with Cappelen and Lepore that, at the very least, an adequate semantics for a language \underline{L} must assign a minimal proposition \underline{P} as the semantic content of a context-insensitive sentence \underline{S} of \underline{L} if and only if every literal utterance of \underline{S} in \underline{L} expresses \underline{P} .²² What does it mean to say that a literal utterance of \underline{S} in \underline{L} expresses \underline{P} ? If it is just another way of saying that \underline{P} is the minimal content of \underline{S} , regardless of our best judgments about what is said, then the aforementioned adequacy constraint on semantics is vacuous if Semantic Minimalism is true. But then, minimal propositions aren't entities that *must* serve some essential and distinctive role in communication that no enriched proposition could serve. We don't have to view them as such if we abide by Cappelen and Lepore's methodological dictum. We thus have no reason to accept The Psychological Reality Thesis, and the goal of rebutting the Psychological Objection becomes completely unmotivated. So, granting The Psychological Objection isn't a concession – but it certainly widens the gap between pragmatics and semantics considerably.²³

On the other hand, suppose that what it means to say that a literal utterance of \underline{S} expresses \underline{P} is that \underline{P} is always one of the many things that any competent speaker would be asserting by her utterance of \underline{S} , as Cappelen and Lepore sometimes claim in *IS*. In that case, the aforementioned adequacy condition on semantics is non-vacuous. For, what makes \underline{P} the minimal semantic content of \underline{S} is certain psychological facts about how speakers and hearers use \underline{S} to communicate information. Seen in this light, it would make sense for Cappelen and Lepore to defend The Psychological Reality Thesis and to try to rebut The Psychological Objection, but at the cost of giving up Semantic Minimalism. After all, the minimal proposition, *Steel is strong enough* (full-stop), is never one of the many things that competent speakers are trying to convey or assert by their utterances of

²¹ I am indebted to Lenny Clapp for the line of argument developed in this paragraph and in the next, and for pressing me on some of the points made in this section.

²² One who agrees with Cappelen and Lepore that no free pragmatic processes intrude in the combinatorial semantic interpretation of sentences can reject this general constraint on semantics. Kent Bach, who identifies himself as a “Radical Semantic Minimalist”, rejects it on the grounds that, because some context-insensitive sentences are semantically incomplete, not every grammatically well-formed, indexical free, declarative sentence must semantically express a complete proposition. See (Bach, typescript).

²³ Emma Borg is a Semantic Minimalist who embraces the idea that the gap between the gap between semantics and pragmatics is very wide and that nothing having to do with speaker's intentions should be allowed to contaminate our semantic theorizing, which is completely “bottom-up”. See (Borg 2007).

‘Steel is strong enough’. It can’t then be the semantic content of the sentence. Cappelen and Lepore would also have to give up their methodological dictum that semantics should be unconstrained by pragmatics.

We’ve reached the proverbial fork in the road: either concede The Psychological Objection but hold on to Semantic Minimalism, thereby widening the gap between semantics and pragmatics ever more so, or give up Semantic Minimalism and Cappelen and Lepore’s methodological dictum. Since they want to hold on to Semantic Minimalism and reject the idea of a pragmatically enriched truth-conditional semantics, it is clear what they should choose.²⁴

²⁴ I am indebted to Kent Bach, Emma Borg, Lenny Clapp, Shannon Finnegan, Martin Montminy, Jeff Pelletier, and Rob Stainton for their helpful comments. An earlier version was presented at a book symposium on *Insensitive Semantics*, which was held at the 2005 Canadian Philosophical Association Meeting, in London, Ontario. Herman Cappelen was the commentator and delivered an excellent set of comments for which I am very grateful. I would also like to thank the two Oxford University Press referees for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

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