A Little Sensitivity Goes a Long Way.
Comments on Cappelen and Lepore
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I. Introduction

In *Insensitive Semantics*, Lepore and Cappelen do several things and they do them with rhetorical flourish. They distinguish two forms of what they call contextualism – radical and moderate. They argue that moderate contextualism is an unstable doctrine that collapses into radical contextualism. They claim that radical contextualism is a crazy and inconsistent doctrine. Finally, they defend the combination of what they call semantic minimalism and speech act pluralism. Just to lay my cards clearly on the table, in my estimation, hardly any of it succeeds. They’ve shown neither that moderate contextualism collapses into radical contextualism nor that radical contextualism is inconsistent. Their defense of semantic minimalism is unsuccessful. And what they call speech act pluralism is either old news or false. But truth is not the sole virtue and falsity not the sole vice. There are interesting ways of being mistaken and uninteresting ways of being right. Cappelen and Lepore have the virtue of being mistaken in quite interesting ways, ways that help us see what is really at stake in a sometimes difficult to untangle thicket of argument. So despite the fact that I mostly disagree with their premises, their conclusions and their arguments, I found myself considerably provoked by their book.

Although my disagreements with Cappelen and Lepore are pretty thoroughgoing, they aren’t utter and complete. Indeed, they have glimpsed part of the truth -- albeit through a glass darkly -- about the under-appreciated phenomenon of what I call modificalional neutrality. A predicate, for example, is modificalionally neutral when it expresses a property or relation that is neutral with respect to the class of possible modifications of that property or relation. For example, there are many ways for a thing to be red. A thing can be red by being a particular shade of red. Or it can be red by having some salient part or surface that is colored partly, mostly or wholly red. Moreover, standards of redness vary with the type of object in question. Red dirt must be *through and though* red, but it suffices for the redness of a table that its upward facing surface is red enough. Being scarlet, being cardinal, being through and through red and having an upward facing surface that is predominately red might be thought of as four different ways of being red. We might quite naturally ask what determinate way of being red is required for the truth of an instance of the scheme:

(1) x is red.
Since standards of redness apparently vary from object to object, one might be tempted to think that what proposition an instance of scheme (1) expresses will depend partly on exactly what noun phrase we replace the ‘x’ with. Perhaps we typically express something different about the table when we call it red from what we express about dirt when we call it red. Even if we hold the object fixed but vary the context, it still seems that standards of redness vary as a function of our purposes and intentions. An object with a surface that is not red enough to count as red taken in isolation may count as the red one when it is redder than any of the alternatives. It may be tempting to conclude that ‘red’ is a semantically incomplete predicate, that we must supply standards of redness in “context,” that different standards may be operative in different contexts. Though I do not doubt that there are many semantically incomplete predicates, I doubt that ‘red’ is one of them. ‘Red’ is not semantically incomplete but what I call modificationally neutral. Though there are many ways of being red, many modifications of redness, the predicate ‘red’ expresses a property that is neutral with respect to all such modifications. More generally, a modificationally neutral assertion to the effect that x is P expresses the weakest possible positive proposition about the P’ness of x. If ‘red’ really is modificationally neutral, then an instance of scheme (1) typically will not be strictly equivalent to any instance of scheme (2):

(2) x is m’ly red.

Since modificationally neutral assertions express the weakest positive propositions about the P’ness of x, they are typically minimally informative and of minimal conversational relevance. Because speakers who make modificationally neutral assertions typically do convey something more informative and less neutral by their words, many have mistakenly seen semantic incompleteness where there is only modificational neutrality. One who infers from data that support only a conclusion of modificational neutrality to semantic incompleteness has committed a fallacy of misplaced modification. Those who fall prey to fallacies of misplaced modification are liable to believe that sentences with perfectly determinate, though modificationally neutral semantic contents stand in need of semantic supplementation. All forms of so-called radical contextualism are, I suspect, founded on fallacies of misplaced modification. Even some forms of moderate contextualism succumb locally to such fallacies. On this score, Cappelen and Lepore and I are in broad agreement. Indeed, their book is really a sustained polemic against fallacies of misplaced modification. Unfortunately, they vastly overestimate the prevalence of modificational neutrality. And that fact leads them astray in their arguments against moderate contextualism.

**II. Lepore and Cappelen Against Moderate Contextualism.**

Lepore and Cappelen characterize moderate contextualism by a commitment to the following three theses:
MC1. The expressions in the Basic Set do not exhaust all the sources of semantic context sensitivity [where the basic set is the set of indisputably context-sensitive expressions].

MC2. Many [syntactically well-formed] sentences … fail to have [complete] truth conditions or to semantically express a [complete] proposition

MC3. For the cases in question, only their utterances semantically express a proposition, and have (interpretive) truth conditions, and so, take a truth value.

Against moderate contextualism, Cappelen and Lepore offer a collapsing argument. The moderate contextualist already accepts the falsity of Radical Contextualism. So if they can show that moderate contextualism collapses into radical contextualism, they will be home free.

There is, of course, a facial difference between moderate and radical contextualism. The moderate contextualist claims that only some expressions outside the basic set are context-sensitive and/or semantically incomplete, while the radical contextualists claims that every expression or construction outside the basic set is context sensitive. So if the moderate contextualist is to resist the collapsing argument, he owes us a principled way of augmenting the store of context-sensitive linguistic expressions and/or linguistic contexts by some but not all the expressions that fall outside the basic set. But Cappelen and Lepore seem to hold that the moderate contextualist can’t have that principled basis and the contextualist’s own semantic methodology prevents her from doing so.

Consider what Cappelen and Lepore take to be the two currently extant forms of argument on offer on behalf of contextualism – what they call arguments from incompleteness and what they call context-shifting arguments. Context shifting arguments purport to show that what is (strictly, literally) said by an utterance $u$ of some target sentence $S$ need not be identical to what is (strictly literally) said by a distinct utterance $u'$ of $S$. Arguments from incompleteness purport to show that some sentences are such that although they are syntactically well-formed and contain no expressions from the basic list, only utterances of the relevant sentence express complete propositions. Such a sentence, taken on its own, expresses no complete proposition, independently of context. Moderate contextualism is an attempt to explain the source of incompleteness and variability.

Now Cappelen and Lepore claim that as the arguments of the moderate contextualist actually go, they would suffice to show that some expression or construction not on the basic set is context-sensitive, only if they sufficed to show that every expression or construction not in the basic set is context-sensitive. All that prevents the moderate contextualist from seeing this, they claim, is a simple failure of imagination. As they put it, “Moderate contextualists are unimaginative radical contextualists.”
Let’s look more closely at the details of this claim. As construed by Cappelen and Lepore, the contextualist’s context-shifting arguments are breathtaking in their simplicity. A theorist imagines, perhaps in the company of some audience, uttering a sentence $S$ in a certain context (more or less fulsomely described). She then imagines uttering $S$ in some different context (also more or less fulsomely described.) She produces in herself the “feeling” that the two imagined utterances say or express different propositions. The theorist concludes, apparently solely on the basis of this feeling, that the sentence is contextually variable. So, for example, I might imagine myself standing on a corner in San Francisco, sometime in late March. I might imagine myself producing $u$ “It’s raining rather heavily.” I might also imagine myself attending a conference in St Louis in late April and producing $u’$ “It’s raining rather heavily.” Now I have the intuition that the first utterance and the second utterance say different things, express different propositions. I intuit that $u’$ expresses a proposition about the weather in St Louis (at the time of the utterance), and I intuit that $u$ expresses a proposition about the weather in San Francisco (at the time of the utterance. And now I ask myself how these utterance manage to express propositions about entirely different places. Cappelen and Lepore admit that contextualists are not of a single mind. Some, like Jason Stanley, posit unpronounced constituents present in the “logical form” of the sentence that take on different values in different contexts. Some, like John Perry, posit unarticulated constituents that somehow get introduced into the expressed proposition without being the value of any either explicit or suppressed constituent of the relevant sentence. Some, like myself, appeal to facts about lexical meanings and what I have called the subsyntactic basement. There are perhaps deep methodological issues that divide these moderate contextualists one from another, but Cappelen and Lepore aren’t at all interested in such internecine debates, since they reject an assumption common to all forms of moderate contextualism --- viz. that what I below call narrowly semantic content varies from context to context.

To see why context-shifting arguments are supposed to prove too much, provided they prove anything at all, we are asked to consider cases in which the moderate contextualist denies, but the radical contextualist asserts the presence of contextual variability. By the moderate contextualist’s own standards of evidence, claim Cappelen and Lepore, the radical contextualist wins in every case. Of course, the victory turns out to be pyrrhic, since radical contextualism collapses of its own weight. Consider two different utterances of:

(3) Smith weighs 80kg

and consider two different scenarios:

Scenario 1. Smith has been dieting for the last eight weeks. He steps on the scale one morning, naked, before breakfast (but after having gone to the bathroom) and it registers 80kg.

Scenario 2. Smith is exactly as above. But (2) is uttered just as Smith is about to enter an elevator with a capacity of no more than an extra 80kg.
Moreover, Smith is wearing a heavy overcoat and carrying a briefcase full of books.

Now we are supposed to have the intuition that as uttered in scenario 1, (3) expresses a proposition about the weight of Smith’s naked body, but as uttered in the second scenario, it expresses some proposition about the combined weights of Smith’s body, his clothing and his briefcase.

Or consider a case of a slightly different kind. What it takes for someone to count as having gone to the gym also turns out to be a variable matter. For consider an utterance of:

(4) John went to the gym

as it occurs in three different speech situations:

1. It is common ground that John walks nightly for exercise and that he typically does so only after the gym has closed.

2. You are discussing John’s exercise and diet routines with his trainer, who asks you about John’s exercise today.

3. You are at a meeting of a construction company planning on putting down some hardwood floor at the local gym. The boss asks who went over to the gym to supervise the construction of a bathroom in its basement.

Again, Cappelen and Lepore claim that an utterance of (4) expresses something different in each of these speech situations. In the first scenario, it expresses a proposition that can be true even if John never entered the gym. In the second it expresses a proposition that is false if John merely arrived in the vicinity of the gym, but never entered it. And in the third, it expresses a proposition that is false if John failed to engage in supervisory activities while inside of the gym.

Now Cappelen and Lepore seem to believe that with enough imagination an intuition of shiftiness of the sort prompted by scenarios like these can be produced for just about any sentence. And they apparently think that the methodology employed by the moderate contextualist commits him to conceding on the basis of such examples that if context-sensitivity is anywhere (outside the basic set) then it’s everywhere (outside the basic set). They enshrine this conviction as a principle:

(GEN) With sufficient ingenuity, a Context Shifting Argument can be provided for any sentence whatsoever, and consequently for any expression.

3. Speech Situational Sensitivity vs Context Sensitivity
Before responding to these last claims, I stop to distinguish two different flavors of sensitivity. I distinguish what I call speech situational sensitivity from context-sensitivity. By a context, I mean more or less what David Kaplan means. We may take a context to be some collection of more or less objective features of a speech situation. Following Kaplan again, let us allow that context-sensitive expressions have “characters,” understood as functions from Kaplanian contexts to contents. But there is another class sensitive expressions that exhibit not Kaplanian context-sensitivity but sensitivity of another kind, viz., what I call speech situational sensitivity. An expression is speech situationally sensitive, roughly, when its semantic contribution to the (narrowly) semantic content of the utterance in which it occurs is determined by the speech situation in which that utterance is produced. A speech situation may contain a Kaplanian context as a proper part, but speech situations contain much more than is countenanced in a Kaplanian context. Though speech situations have many objective features – they happen at a place, over a span of time, in a possible world, and involve various participants – a speech situation should not be thought of primarily as bundles of such features. A speech situation is primarily a locus of action. As such, it falls less to logic and more to the theory of action to study their affects on meaning. Moreover, it is important to stress that speech situationally sensitive expressions should not be construed as indexicals of any sort. They are, rather, expressions of an entirely different semantic nature from the indexicals and demonstratives made prominent by Kaplan.

My talk of the theory of action rather than logic will immediately suggest to some that speech situational sensitivity lives not on the pristine pastures of semantics but in the untamed wilderness of pragmatics. But that reaction betrays a misunderstanding of both the reach of pragmatics and the nature of the so-called semantic-pragmatics interface. There is no such interface. For there is no one place where the work of semantics ends and that of pragmatics begins. Pragmatics and semantics are everywhere intertwined because pragmatics happens everywhere. To say this is not say that the semantic collapses into the pragmatic. It is not to deny that there is a distinction in both concept and principle to be had between the semantic and the pragmatic. It is, however, meant to suggest that some of what falls squarely within the domain of the semantic is enmeshed with the pragmatic from the very start. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that the lexicon itself often directly “licenses” the “intrusion” of the pragmatic into the determination of narrowly semantic content. Indeed, this is precisely what happens with expressions that exhibit speech-situational sensitivity.

I illustrate with an example. Consider:

(5) The cat is on the couch again.

I take (5) to be syntactically complete in the sense that it is a perfectly well-formed sentence, missing no syntactically mandatory elements. Despite its syntactic completeness (5), just taken on its own, independently of speech situation, appears to be semantically incomplete. Taken on its own it fails to express any fully determinate proposition. It no more expresses the proposition that the one and only one cat in the universe is once again on the one and only couch in the universe than it expresses the proposition that the one and one cat owned by Ken Taylor is on the one and only one couch on Ken Taylor’s Patio. That is because neither the quantifier phrase ‘the cat’ nor
the quantifier phrase ‘the couch’ has a fully determinate quantificational significance on its own, independently of speech situation. But once (5) is uttered in an appropriate speech situation, more or less determinate domains of quantification for the quantifier phrases ‘the cat’ and ‘the couch’ may be determined.

It is an interesting and significant question just how speech situational determination works. I cannot tell a detailed story about that here. I have argued elsewhere that quantifier phrases, and some limited array of other expressions, are associated with “suppressed” parameters of various sorts. I have conjectured that such parameters hang out in what I call the subsyntactic basement of the lexicon and are present more as what I call subconstituents of certain words of phrases rather than constituents of the sentences in the relevant words of phrases go. On this approach, an adequate lexical representation of an expression may need to specify certain sententially suppressed parameters such that:

1. The values of those parameters are to be speech situationally determined.
2. The lexicon constrains the kind of value the relevant parameter can take and determines what contribution the value will make, once determined, to the proposition expressed by an utterance of any sentence in which the “master” expression will occur, typically by assigning the value of the suppressed parameter an theta-like role in the “argument structure” of the relevant expression.
3. The values of such parameters are typically not straightforwardly determined by objective features of the context, but by speaker’s intentions.
4. The speaker is, in effect, free to “load” a speech situationally appropriate value onto the relevant parameter.
5. The relevant “parameter” need not be expressed as a sentence level constituent of any sentence in which the relevant expression occurs, though it may show up as a separable constituent of the expressed proposition.
6. As subconstituents rather than constituents, such parameters will, in the general case, be “below” the reach of sentence level quantifiers and so should not be thought of as bindable positions in LF.

1-6 need substantial further spelling out and defense than I can afford to give them here. For present purposes, 3 and 4 are the important points. They capture the thought that a speaker who chooses an expression with a suppressed parameter of the sort outlined above takes on certain semantic and communicative burdens. In particular, she takes on the semantic burden of loading a value of the requisite kind onto the suppressed parameter. And she takes on the communicative burden of making it mutually manifest to her communicative partners what value she intends to load. A speaker typically cannot rely on any merely objective feature of the surrounding context to do the value loading for her. Value loading is something that she must do. That is why the kind of sensitivity that such parameters display is not a form of context sensitivity but a form of speech situational sensitivity. When expressions are speech situationally sensitive, the content determining role falls not to “objective” features of the context, but to agents, the
semantic and communicative burdens they undertake, and the actions they performing in the discharging those burdens. It is right to think of the discharging of semantic and communicative burdens as a bit of pragmatics. It is what I call pre-propositional pragmatics. Pre-propositional pragmatics plays a decisive role in generating and making manifest the narrowly or purely semantic content of an utterance in a speech situation.

To illustrate further the theoretical significance of the distinction between speech situational and context sensitivity let us consider one the three test Cappelen and Lepore propose for detecting "genuine" context-sensitivity. They claim that context sensitive expressions typically block what they call inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports. Suppose that Smith makes the following utterance on Tuesday:

(6) Jones will come home tomorrow.

And suppose that on Wednesday, Black wants to report what Smith said on Tuesday. She can’t do so simply by disquoting, as in;

(7) Smith said that Jones will come home tomorrow.

Rather, if Black wants to stick with an indexical, she has to switch indexicals as in:

(8) Smith said that Jones would come home today.

Sentences like (6) are supposed to stand in sharp contrast with sentences like:

(9) John is ready.

Consider two different speech situations:

S1. In a conversation about exam preparation, someone raises the question of whether John is well prepared [for the exam]. Nina utters (9).

S2. Three people are about to leave the apartment; they are getting dressed for heavy rain. Nina utters (1).

Cappelen and Lepore intuit that (9) does not block inter-contextual disquotational indirect report. For a speaker in a third context, they claim, can straightforwardly and truly assert each of the following:

10. Nina said that John is ready. [with respect to (9) as uttered in S1.]
11. Nina said that John is ready. [with respect to (9) as uttered in S2.]
12. In S1 and S2, Nina said that John is ready.

However, if we keep the distinction between context-sensitivity and speech-situational sensitivity squarely in mind, we should find Cappelen and Lepore’s “test” thoroughly irrelevant. Both this test and the others they propose are really test for context-sensitivity and not test for speech situational sensitivity at all. Explicit indexicals
block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports just because they are context-sensitive in the sense that their semantic values are more or less automatically determined by facts about the context of utterance. A speaker has no freedom to refer by an utterance of ‘I’ to anything other than speaker herself and no power to refer by her utterance of ‘now’ to any time other than the time of her uttering. The semantic values of speech situational sensitive expressions are not constrained in this way by, as it were, local and objective features of the context. Within limits set by the lexicon itself, a speaker is free to load any appropriate value she chooses. But this is just a way of saying that speech situational sensitivity is not a form of indexicality, not a form of Kaplanian context-sensitivity at all.

Now it seems obvious that any speaker who utters (10) – (12) above by way of indirectly reporting an utterance of (9) above takes on the semantic burden of semantically “completing” her use of ‘ready’ by loading a semantic value onto a parameter. Never mind for the moment where in syntax or subsyntax such a parameter might sit. And never mind the exact semantic function of the parameter. A speaker who selects a speech situational sensitive expression takes on not only a semantic burden but also the communicative burden of making it mutually manifest what value she intends to load onto the relevant parameter. Though such burdens are not difficult to discharge, they are not discharged automatically, merely through the device of disquotation. Nothing in the thought experiments described by Cappelen and Lepore is sufficient to show otherwise. Indeed, it seems clear that a speaker who utters either (10) or (11) as a way of reporting (9) without loading a value onto the parameter for ‘ready’ has failed to ascribed a fully determinate propositional content to Nina.

4. Total Utterance Content vs Narrowly Semantic Content

Earlier I claimed that there is no such thing as the semantics/pragmatics interface because there is no one place where semantics ends and pragmatics begins. Nonetheless, I grant that there is a distinction between what is strictly, literally said by an utterance and what is merely pragmatically conveyed, somehow or other, by that utterance. This distinction in fact turns out to be highly relevant to Cappelen and Lepore’s collapsing arguments against moderate contextualism. If what is really happening in the imagined scenarios is that what is pragmatically implicated by an utterance varies from scenario to scenario while what is strictly literally asserted does not, then their collapsing arguments themselves collapse. Cappelen and Lepore seem tacitly to concede as much, since they allow that their intuitions pumps are effective against moderate contextualism only if the pumped intuitions can be shown not to be due to “ambiguity, syntactic ellipsis, polysemy, non-literality, or vagueness.” To that list, they might have added Gricean conversational implicatures, Searlean indirect speech acts, or what I have elsewhere called pseudo-assertion rather than assertion. Curiously, they claim that the range of cases they have chosen is “obviously not explicable by any of these irrelevant factors.” And they add that “As far as we know, no one has suggested the examples we will now utilize can be so explained.” Consequently, they apparently feel no need to even try out alternative explanations. This is a puzzling argumentative strategy. Either their examples will be contested by moderate contextualists or they will not be. If they are not, they can’t be
used to make any point against moderate contextualism and in favor of radical contextualism. There might still be dividing issues about the source and nature of the alleged context-sensitivity in such cases. But such issues are irrelevant to any argument of Cappelen and Lepore’s. On the other hand, if the cases are contested by the moderate contextualist, Cappelen and Lepore must be accusing the moderate contextualist of missing the obvious. But is it really “obvious” that no alternative explanation of the pumped intuitions is available?

Cappelen and Lepore think that it’s obvious that the speaker asserts something different, something non-minimal, in each of the imagined alternative speech situations. In this, I think, they side with the radical contextualist against the moderate contextualist. Of course, against the radical contextualist, Cappelen and Lepore claim that there is also something constant, but minimal asserted in the two scenarios. By contrast, a moderate contextualist who would deny the presence of any surprise sensitivity in (3) might say that by an utterance of (3) at a speaker strictly, literally asserts the non-minimal proposition that Smith’s body weighs 80kg at t. And he might insist that truth or falsity of this proposition depends, in each scenario, entirely on how things are by Smith’s body. He might say, moreover, that if we hold time fixed, then we get the very same non-minimal proposition expressed in both scenario one and scenario two. When it comes to explaining the felt communicative difference between the two scenarios, the moderate contextualist need simply distinguish the total utterance content of an utterance from the purely or narrowly semantic content of an utterance. The purely or narrowly semantic content of an utterance will be the proposition or propositions, if any, that are determined by a sentence’s syntactic structure and the combination of lexically, contextually, and speech situationally determined semantic values of its semantically valued constituents. The total utterance content of an utterance is the totality of contents conveyed in the uttering of the relevant sentence in the relevant speech situation. That which is part of total utterance content, but not part of the narrow semantic content of the utterance, I call pragmatic externalities of the relevant utterance. Now, on just about anybody’s theory, the act of uttering a sentence will almost always produce some pragmatic externality or other, sometimes many such externalities. To this extent we are all descendants of Grice. But there are many proposals about just what sorts of propositions count as pragmatic externalities of an utterance. Curiously, Cappelen and Lepore canvass none of them. I am thinking not just of Gricean conversational implicatures, but of Perryesque reflexive propositions, of propositions made inferentially salient by the explicit adding of some proposition or other to the ever developing common ground, of propositions generated by accommodation, and of propositions generated by what I have called one and half stage pragmatics.

Let me focus briefly on the latter, since it may be the least familiar. Start by recalling my earlier claims about the semantics of:

(5) The cat is on the couch again.

I suggested, admittedly without argument, that a speaker who utters (5) in a speech situation takes on the semantic burden of loading a domain of quantification onto a suppressed parameter and the communicative burden of making the loaded value mutually manifest. But taking on semantic and communicative burdens in a speech
situation does not ipso facto entail successfully and openly discharging them. A speaker may fail to have a determinate domain of quantification in mind when she uses a phrase like ‘the cat’ or ‘the couch.’ Even if she does have a determinate domain in mind, she may fail to make it mutually manifest. But such failures are often the stuff of which further communication can be made. Suppose, for example, that Cottaintail, the cat, and the green couch on Ken Taylor’s patio are highly salient in a speech situation in which I utter (5) to my wife, Claire. Suppose that it is common ground between Claire and Ken that Cottontail frequently sleeps on that very couch and common ground that she is not allowed to do so. In that speech situation, my utterance of (5) may convey to my wife the pragmatically external singular proposition that Cottaintail is on that very couch. And it may do so, I have argued elsewhere, even if I never discharge my semantic burden of loading a value onto the suppressed domain of quantification parameters associated with ‘the cat’ and ‘the couch’. Indeed, we may say that it is by failing to discharge my burdens and by doing so openly that I generate the relevant pragmatic externality. I call externalities generated in this way one and half stage externalities to indicate that they are generated along the journey from sentence meaning to narrowly semantic utterance content, whether that journey is blocked or completed.

I have belabored this matter to stress again that pragmatics happens everywhere. Pragmatics takes us from sentence meaning to narrowly semantic utterance content. Before we get there, however, pragmatics can generate one and half stage externalities. Nor is pragmatics done when the journey from sentence meaning to utterance content is complete. Suppose, for example, that I say to my son, who is in the kitchen as I enter and start preparing breakfast for myself “Have you had much breakfast?” I have done several things. I have presupposed that he has already had some breakfast. If he accommodates that presupposition, I have added a proposition to our common ground. I have directly asked him whether he has had much breakfast and have indirectly offered to make more if he wants it. The fact that I can offer by asking depends partly on the content of my question and partly on the Searlean “background. Consider a parallel question asked in a therapist’s session with a couple experiencing marital difficulties. The couple has had an initial consultation. They are back for a follow up visit. The therapist asks the couple. “Have you had much sex?” Whatever else she is doing, she is clearly not offering them sex. She is not even inviting them to engage in sex together.

We do lots of things, many of them content generating, in making an utterance. One way to say this is to say that we are liable to perform many speech acts in any one act of uttering. The diverse speech acts we perform in a single uttering may have many different contents. If this sounds like a version of what Cappelen and Lepore call speech act pluralism, perhaps it is. But if so, then speech act pluralism is an unremarkable doctrine, one that is endorsed by just about everybody who has ever been concerned with the semantics and pragmatics of communication. But if that is right, it’s hard to see why Cappelen and Lepore are convinced that their collapsing argument does any work at all against moderate contextualism. My guess is that they think such strategies as I have just outlined are legitimate only if they are accompanied by a solution to the demarcation problem. By the demarcation problem, I mean the problem of demarcating, in a principled way, that which belongs to narrow or purely semantic content of an utterance “neat” from that which is merely a pragmatic externality of the utterance. In addition to the demarcation problem, there is also what I call the generation problem. That is the
problem of explaining how the externalities of an utterance are generated by facts about the speech situation. The demarcation and the generation problems may be conceptually distinct, but they are likely to be methodologically intertwined. It may be, for example, that the best way to demarcate the pragmatic externalities of an utterance from the narrow semantic content of the utterance is to show how each is generated. And it is arguable that any purported solution to the demarcation problem that left it entirely mysterious how the demarcated externalities were generated would, for that reason alone, be unsatisfying.

Though theorist of various stripes have offered up solutions to both the demarcation problem and the generation problem, Cappelen and Lepore seem to believe that the very methodology employed by the moderate contextualist makes it impossible for him to provide any principled solution to the demarcation problem. Such desperate and forlorn attempts as have been attempted amount to either stubbornly digging in the heels in denial or unrealistically insisting that introspectable qualities decisively settle what belongs to semantic content and what counts as a pragmatic externality or working piecemeal on clever local fix after clever local fix, while missing the global shape of the problem. What underlies these desperate attempts to draw a boundary that apparently cannot be drawn -- at least not by any methods plausibly available to the moderate contextualist – is supposed to be the “blind adherence” to the mistaken assumption that:

A theory of semantic content is adequate just in case it accounts for all or most of the intuitions speakers have about speech act content, i.e. intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, and state by uttering sentences.

The key to semantic progress, Cappelen and Lepore claim, is to abandon this blind adherence and to recognize that “there is no close and immediate connection between speech act content and semantic content.”

But I have to admit to finding this claim rather startling. The very distinction introduced above between narrow semantic content and total communicated content already takes something rather like Cappelen and Lepore’s proposed corrective more or less fully on board. Moreover, I have stressed only a few of the myriad ways in which pragmatic externalities may be generated and how greatly those externalities may diverge from the narrow semantic content of the utterance. Cappelen and Lepore may mean by “speech act content” something different from what I mean by “total communicated content.” It is plausible, though not undeniable, that for every sentence \( s \), there is at least one speech act \( a \) performed in the uttering of \( s \) such that \( a \) more or less directly “inherits” its content from \( s \), as \( s \) occurs in the relevant context and speech situation. Call any such \( a \), an immediate speech act performed in the uttering of \( s \) and say that the immediate speech act content(s) of an utterance is (are) the contents of the immediate speech act(s) performed in the uttering of \( s \). Immediate speech act contents are, by definition, identical to narrowly semantic contents. Radical contextualists deny that there are immediate speech acts. But Cappelen and Lepore do not. They are quite explicit that one of the things that gets asserted in a pluralistic speech act is a minimal proposition.

My guess is that Cappelen and Lepore think that the moderate contextualist is committed to thinking that only immediate speech acts count as assertings, claimings, and
the like and that no merely pragmatically external proposition generated in the uttering of a sentence can be the content of any such speech act. That, I think, is the source of the accusation that the moderate contextualist wants to load the totality of what is asserted into semantic content. But it seems clear that it is open to the moderate contextualist to allow that not all speech acts performed in the uttering of a sentence are immediate speech acts and not all speech act contents are immediate speech act contents. She may or may not want to reserve titles like ‘assertion’ or ‘claim’ for immediate speech acts as opposed to mediate speech acts. But as far as I can tell nothing deep hangs on this bit of linguistic legislation.

5. Semantics Vs Metaphysics

Finally, I turn to another charge leveled by Cappelen and Lepore against contextualists – both of the radical variety and of the moderate variety, viz., that contextualists of all stripes have confused semantics and metaphysics. Now charging the contextualist with conflation of metaphysics and semantics is, in large measure, a defensive move. It is designed to ward off the charge that their minimal propositions are metaphysically incoherent. They have ample reason to be defensive. They claim, for example, that the proposition that \( x \text{ is tall} \) can be true or false simpliciter, without any relativization to a standard of height or any reference class of heights. They claim, moreover, that there is nothing more to say about the truth conditions of this proposition than is expressed by the T-sentence ‘\( x \text{ is tall} \)’ is true if and only if \( x \text{ is tall} \). They don’t even attempt to say just what is it takes to be tall simpliciter. And when pressed, they protest that it’s the business of metaphysics and not the business of semantics to answer such questions. Crucially, they seem to believe that incompleteness arguments for moderate contextualism rests on an illegitimate conflation between semantics and metaphysics. The moderate contextualist who insist that a sentence like ‘John is tall’ is semantically incomplete, on the basis of the felt intuition that nothing can be tall simpliciter, is really asking the semanticist for something that he has no obligation to provide -- at least not qua semanticist. He is demanding a metaphysical analysis of what all tall things share.

Now I confess to having deep sympathy for the project of keeping semantics as disentangled from metaphysics as possible. Moreover, some arguments for contextualism do seem to me to conflate metaphysics and semantics. For example, in defense of the claim the utterances of sentences like:

\[
\text{(13) It is raining.}
\]

express propositions containing unarticulated constituents, John Perry likes to say things like the following:

In this case, I say that the place is an unarticulated constituent of the proposition expressed by the utterance. It is a constituent because, since rain occurs at a time in place, there is no truth evaluable proposition unless a place is supplied. (emphasis added) It is unarticulated, because there is no morpheme that designates that place.
But it simply does not follow from the fact that rain occurs at a time and in a place that an utterance of ‘it is raining’ fails to express a complete proposition unless a place is supplied. Consider, for example, certain other apparently necessary properties of rainings. Whenever it rains, it rains a certain amount and for a certain duration. But we can express a fully determinate proposition by an utterance of ‘it rained’ without having to specify how much rain fell or over what span of time the rain fell.

Let me hasten to add that I agree with Perry, and disagree with Cappelen and Lepore, that unless a place is supplied we don’t yet have a truth evaluable proposition. So the question naturally arises just why we must specify where it is raining in the case of the present tense ‘it is raining’ if we are to express a complete proposition, but we need not specify how much it rained or for how long it rained in the case of the past tense ‘rained’ in order to express a complete proposition. A confused semanticist, of the sort against which Cappelen and Lepore rail, might be tempted by another distinction of Perry’s – that between the argument roles of relations and the argument places of predicates. Let us stipulate, for the space of the argument, that the verb ‘rain’ has fewer argument places than the raining relation has argument roles. I claim that a bare mismatch between the adicity of the predicate and the adicity of the expressed relation does not directly entail the semantic incompleteness of the relevant predicate. Moreover, there need be no deep metaphysical difference between those argument roles that are associated with some argument place and those that are not.

If one were antecedently convinced of the need to import deep metaphysical distinctions into one’s semantics, one might attempt to enforce something like the adjunct/argument distinction, not at the level of verbs and predicates, but at the level of relations themselves to explain why some roles are realized as argument places and other roles are not. This strategy is, however, unpromising in the extreme and really would bog semantics down in the metaphysical muck. For any relation in \( n \) arguments with a claim to be the unmodified raining relation, there will be other relations in \( m \) arguments, for \( m \) distinct from \( n \), that appear to have no less of a claim to being the or at least a raining relation. There is a relation that holds between a place, a time, and a velocity just in case it is raining at the time, at that place, with that velocity. There is another, less “articulated” relation that holds between a time and a place just in case it is raining at that time at that place. Does one or the other of these relations have more of a claim to being the raining relation? Is the former relation merely a modification of the latter? If these questions are supposed to be purely metaphysical questions about relations rather semantic questions about verbs and predicates, then I confess to not having the foggiest clue how to answer them.

If incompleteness arguments for moderate contextualism rested squarely on such metaphysical questions, Cappelen and Lepore would have a point. But incompleteness arguments shouldn’t be construed as arguments about the metaphysics of relation. They are really arguments about the semantics of verbs and other argument taking expressions. I claim it is a fact about the verb ‘to rain,’ and not a fact about the metaphysics of the raining relation, that it demands contextual provision of a place, but not contextual provision of an intensity, amount or duration. In particular, I have argued elsewhere that the verb ‘to rain’ has a lexically specified, but syntactically suppressed parameter that is theta-marked \textit{THEME}, that takes places as values. I will not elaborate on this proposal.
further here except to say that the fact that the verb demands a location as its theme endows location with a semantic privilege, but not metaphysical one.

We may contrast ‘to rain’ with ‘to dance’ in order to illustrate that some verbs fail to semantically privilege the place where the relevant goings-on happen. There can’t be a dancing that doesn’t happen somewhere or other. For all the semanticist has to say, it may be that the place where a dancing happens is metaphysically on a par with the place where a raining happens. But they are clearly not on a par semantically speaking.

Suppose a speaker utters:

(14) Laura danced the tango until she could dance no more.

without saying where Laura danced. The speaker has left nothing out required for the semantic completeness and full truth-evaluability of her utterance. One can say something fully determinate, something fully truth evaluable, by uttering (14) even if the speech situation makes manifest no place as the place where the dancing happens. I have hypothesized that difference between (13) and (14) depends entirely on the differences in the way ‘to dance’ and ‘to rain’ relate to the places where rainings and dancings happen. Unlike ‘to rain’, ‘to dance’ does not mark the place where a dance happens as the theme or undergoer of the dance. The theme or undergoer of a dancing is the dancer herself. The place where a dancing “takes place” is merely the place where the dancer dances. When Laura is dancing in a place, it is not the place that undergoes the dancing. This fact about the verb ‘to dance’ explains why, despite the fact that one cannot dance without dancing somewhere or other, a sentence containing ‘to dance’ can be semantically complete, even if the place where dancing happens is not situationally provided. That a dancing must take place somewhere or other is a (mutually known) metaphysical fact about the universe -- a fact that supervenes on the nature of dancing and the structure of space-time. But that metaphysical fact is not explicitly reflected in argument structure of the verb ‘to dance’.

These remarks are intended to show only that contrary to Cappelen and Lepore arguments from semantic incompleteness need not conflate semantics and metaphysics. But if that point is granted, it follows directly that their defensive maneuvers are entirely unavailing. They make the highly counter-intuitive claim, supported by no evidence that I have seen, that objects can be barely tall, that is, tall without relativization to any reference class or standard of tallness. They admit this to be an incredible claim, endorsed as far as I can tell, by exactly two philosophers. About the best that they can do by way of defending this claim is to insist that qua semanticists they have no burden of explaining what all barely tall objects share. And to insist that semantics does bear such a burden, they claim, is to conflate semantics with metaphysics. We don’t have to take any stand on whether there is or is not such a property as bare tallness in the order of things to show that no expression of our own language expresses such a property. It is a better bet that the lexical meaning of ‘tall’ determines that ‘tall’ applies not to heights directly but only to heights as measured by some variable standard or as compared to some variable reference class. It is also a good bet that the lexicon explicitly represents that standards of tallness are to be speech-situationally determined and not fixed once and for all by the lexicon itself. If that is right, the lexicon itself licenses pragmatic intrusion into the business of semantics from the very start.
This isn’t quite fair. The radical contextualist typically think that there are content generating processes of a pragmatic nature. It’s not a fact about expressions taken one by one.

2 Cappelen and Lepore do distinguish what they call the inadequate context shifting arguments of the contextualists from real context shifting arguments. I discuss one of their three tests below.

Cappelen and Lepore’s speech act pluralism does allow them to say that the total set of speech acts performed by distinct utterances of the same sentence may vary from context to context even if the narrowly semantic contents of distinct utterances remain the same.

4 Cappelen and Lepore would, I suspect, agree with the claim that (5) does not express either the proposition that the one and only one cat in the universe is on the one and only one couch in the universe or the proposition that the one and only one cat owned by Ken Taylor is on the one and only one couch on Ken Taylor’s patio. But they would explain this not by appeal to semantic incompleteness but by appeal to what I – but not they – call modificational neutrality. They would say that (5) express the proposition that the cat is on the couch again. Full stop. And asked for a further characterization of just what proposition that proposition is and when it is true, they would refuse to offer any such thing. Their minimal propositions are, in short, only pleonastically specifiable, it seems.

5 I am setting to one side here delicate issues raised by the fact that we now know that weight (as opposed to mass) is relative to gravitational field. It is worth noting, though, that the discovery that weight, as opposed to mass, is relative to a gravitational field, even though the relation expressed by the verb ‘weighs’ in our language has no explicit argument place for gravitational field raises interesting semantic and pragmatic issues not at all addressed by Cappelen and Lepore. Theories that posit such things as unarticulated constituents or processes like free enrichment are in part motivated by cases like these. On such approaches, there is no claim that the verb ‘weighs’ is itself a context-sensitive expression. Nor is the any claim that sentences containing this verb have hidden indexical elements or suppressed argument places or anything of that sort. Perry claims, for example, that speakers may introduce unarticulated constituents into a proposition even when that constituent turns out not to be the value of any constituent of the relevant sentence – though he does sometimes say that an expression or construction may “call for” the introduction of an unarticulated sentences. His approach is not entirely dissimilar to Recanati’s appeal to “free enrichment.” Though free enrichment is viewed by Recanati as a primary and therefore mandatory pragmatic process, it does not require that some either explicit or hidden constituent take the enriched content as its own value. It is fair to wonder for both Perry and Recanati what a sentence is doing semantically expressing a proposition some of whose constituents are not values of any constituent of the relevant sentence. But that is a question for another setting. I make this point because there is a quite natural seeming way of reading Cappelen and Lepore in which their view is more or less a notational variant on views like Perry’s and/or Recanati’s, despite rhetorical abuse to which they subject such views. After all, Cappelen and Lepore claim that what we strictly literally say in making an utterance goes beyond – and
typically far beyond -- the “narrow” semantic content of the utterance. Like Perry and like Recanati they agree, in particular, that once you’ve fixed the meanings of all the words and have provided values for all the explicit indexicals, you still need not have the full content in the sense of “what is said” of the speech act performed in making an utterance. Moreover, they agree with Perry and with Recanati that the additional ingredients of what is said that are somehow generated in a speech situation need not and typically are not the semantic values of any either suppressed or explicit constituents of the uttered sentence. So far then it looks as though Cappelen and Lepore may have simply rediscovered the radical contextualism against which they so intently rail. As far as I can tell all that is supposed to save them from this charge is their quite implausible claim that an expression like ‘tall’ expresses on its own, independently of context, a determinate (but apparently only pleonastically specifiable) property had by all tall things and no non-tall things. But this claim is quite frankly incredible, so much so, that one wonder if it’s only job is to prevent their view from collapsing into radical contextualism. And I say this as one who believes that they have dimly glimpsed a part of the truth about what I call the modificational neutrality of some predicates.