

Literal Meaning, by Francois Recanati. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 179. H/b £40.00, \$55.00 P/b £14.99, \$20.00.

The ‘Homeric debate’ between advocates of some kind of formal semantics and advocates of some kind of use-based semantics is once more to the fore again in philosophy of language. In the current context, the former side tend to call themselves ‘minimalists’, indicating that they adhere to the existence of a *minimal proposition*, resulting from little or no contextual input. It is this proposition which specifies literal meaning. Different minimalists say different things about the precise amount of contextual information they will allow to permeate the minimal proposition (e.g., to use Recanati’s terminology, ‘literalists’ claim there is no contextual input at all, ‘syncretists’ allow contextual infiltration but only to provide values for overt context-sensitive terms, while ‘indexicalists’ allow context to provide values both for overt context-sensitive terms and for a potentially wide range of covert context-sensitive items). However all minimalists share a common ethos: the contribution of context to literal meaning should be maximally constrained. It is this common ethos that Recanati wants us to reject. Instead he presents a compelling case for the ‘contextualist’ side of the debate. Contextualists hold that contexts of utterance, and specifically speaker intentions, provide an ineliminable and thorough-going contribution to literal meaning. There is, as Recanati puts it, ‘no level of meaning which is both (i) propositional (truth-evaluable) and (ii) minimalist, that is, unaffected by top-down factors’ (p. 90). Linguistic content is thoroughly pragmatically saturated.

There is a great deal which deserves comment in this excellent book, however, I want to focus on just two issues: the nature of pragmatic processes and the nature of unarticulated constituents. For these issues, while compelling in themselves, also serve to highlight points of difference between Recanati and other contemporary contextualists. Furthermore, for a minimalist like myself, it may be that these issues provide points at which to resist the contextualist turn.

Unlike some other contextualists (e.g. relevance theorists, like Sperber and Wilson, who advocate a single, unified pragmatic process; see their *Relevance*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), Recanati envisages two very different pragmatic processes as contributing to linguistic comprehension. Primary pragmatic processes contribute to the determination of *what is said* (the literal meaning or semantic content of the speaker’s utterance), while secondary pragmatic processes contribute to what is implicated (p. 17). Primary pragmatic processes operate at the sub-personal or tacit level; that is to say, the agent is not conscious of the input to these processes nor that the proposition they consciously grasp as yielding what is said is the result of inferential processing. On the other hand, secondary pragmatic processes are consciously accessible, in that the agent could consciously recognise the inferential path from the input proposition to the output. So, for instance, if A is inquiring about B’s suicidal tendencies and C responds ‘One day he went to the edge of a cliff and jumped’

both kinds of pragmatic process may be operative in A's interpretation of C's utterance. First, primary pragmatic processes kick in and assign a referent to 'he' (via saturation—'the contextual assignment of values to indexicals and free variables in the logical form of the utterance', p. 21). They also act (via free enrichment, pp. 23–7) to supply the information that C jumped off the cliff rather than hopping about on the edge. So the first proposition that A consciously accesses on hearing C's utterance (the proposition that gives us literal meaning) is that *One day B went to the edge of a cliff and jumped off that cliff*. A may then consciously derive implicatures from what is said via secondary pragmatic processes, for example, inferring that B has not yet recovered from his suicidal urges.

Recanati holds that primary pragmatic processes are 'unreflective', that is to say, they are akin to basic perceptual judgements and are not dependent on inferential moves concerning speaker intentions (pp. 38–9). This is in contrast to the propositions recovered via secondary pragmatic processes, which are 'arrived at by answering questions such as, "Why is the speaker saying what he says?" Instead of merely retrieving what is said through the operation of unconscious, primary pragmatic processes, we reflect on the fact that the speaker says what he says and use that fact, together with background knowledge, to infer what the speaker means without saying it' (p. 39). Now one question we might ask here is whether this distinction between primary and secondary processes can be maintained in practice. For instance, as we have seen, a paradigm primary pragmatic process is saturation. However, as Recanati himself stresses (pp. 57–8), saturation almost always requires consideration of speaker intentions. Furthermore, the kinds of elements which an agent needs to take into consideration to ascertain a speaker's referential intentions are potentially pretty complex (cf. pp. 61–4). Thus it is not clear that the kind of pragmatic reasoning required for saturation to take place can or should, in general, be characterised as unreflective in the way Recanati suggests. Nor, on the other hand, is it clear that secondary pragmatic processes should always be viewed as reflective or consciously accessible. At least sometimes a hearer comes to grasp an implicature immediately, without consciously inferring it from what has been said. Recanati recognises this last point and does allow that an implicature may not always be the result of a conscious inference on the hearer's behalf. What is important, he suggests, is that the hearer *could* reconstruct the relevant inferential moves if asked; thus it satisfies his *availability condition* (pp. 48–50). But again, this seems to blur the distinction between primary and secondary processes, since it seems likely that, on many occasions, a hearer could also, if asked, reconstruct the reasoning which led them to take, say, the dog rather than the cat, or the dog's collar, or the dog's colour, etc, as the referent of a speaker's utterance of 'That'. That is to say, with both primary and secondary processes it seems that they may, at least sometimes, be unconscious initially, yet in both cases an agent may be able to reconstruct their reasoning if asked. Thus we might wonder whether the evidence con-

cerning linguistic comprehension really supports the two different kinds of pragmatic processes Recanati posits.

Furthermore, even if we grant the distinction between primary and secondary pragmatic processes, it seems as if there are further questions to be asked. One important point to note is that the category of primary pragmatic processes includes, for Recanati, *optional* pragmatic processes. These are processes, like free enrichment, which take a proposition (rather than a propositional-fragment) as input and yield a contextually more suitable proposition as output. Yet given this, it is not always clear how we are to preserve the boundary between literal meaning and implication. For instance, imagine that Jack asks Jill if she wants to go and eat and Jill responds 'I've had breakfast'. We might ask: will both primary and secondary pragmatic processes be operative in Jack's interpretation (or only primary ones)?² Once again primary processes act to assign a reference to 'I' via saturation and they also act to constrain the timescale within which Jill has had breakfast (either via the provision of an unarticulated constituent or via refining the concept of having breakfast itself, pp. 24–6). Yet, given this, what is the contextually refined proposition which gives us what is said (or literal meaning) here? If it is something like *Jill has had breakfast today* then a further inference will be required to answer Jack's original question. Jack will have to use secondary pragmatic processes to arrive at the implicature that *Jill does not want to go and eat*. However, if the contextually refined proposition yielded by the primary pragmatic process is that *Jill has had breakfast recently enough to make eating currently undesirable* then it seems at least plausible to suppose that no further inference is required to answer Jack's question. Yet, if both interpretations are possible, then it looks as if something which counts as an implicature to one hearer might count simply as what is said to another, in which case we don't seem to have anything like a determinate notion of the literal meaning of an utterance. Recanati does stress that his notion of 'what is said' is tied to what a normal interpreter would take to have been said (pp. 19–20), but it's not obvious that appeals to normality will tell our two interpreters apart in this case.

Finally, given the distinction between primary and secondary pragmatic processes, and his inclusion of free enrichment on the primary side of the divide, it seems that Recanati will part company with many of his contextualist brethren in a range of specific cases. Furthermore, in these cases, it seems that the kinds of claims Recanati makes are the kinds of claims which could be endorsed by minimalists. So, for instance, take the sentence 'The table is covered with books', which on a particular occasion of utterance gets expanded (via free enrichment) to *The table in the living room is covered with books* (p. 25). Since the contextual expansion is part of an optional pragmatic process, it seems that Recanati must allow that the original sentence does express a proposition prior to contextual input (since this is what is required for the process to count as optional). It is just that any such context-free, minimal proposition does not count as what is said. Now, many other contextualists

would, I think, disagree with the claim that sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions can express complete propositions prior to contextual enriching. While, conversely, it seems that many minimalists would be quite happy with Recanati's stance here, since they are happy to relinquish the claim that minimal propositions limit what is said (i.e. they reject any semantically relevant, Gricean notion of what is said by a sentence, taking all notions of saying as pragmatic, see Borg, *Minimal Semantics*, Oxford: OUP, 2004; Cappelen and Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

This idea, that Recanati is further removed from some other contextualists than we might initially have realised (and perhaps that he is, in certain ways, closer to some minimalists than we might initially have envisaged) is reinforced by considering the kind of contextualism to which Recanati is committed. Recanati distinguishes at one point between quasi-contextualism (which 'considers the minimal proposition as a theoretically useless entity which plays no role in communication', p. 86) and full-fledged contextualism (which holds minimal propositions to be non-existent). Although he doesn't explicitly commit himself one way or the other at this point, there is, I think, some reason to see Recanati as holding the weaker, quasi-contextualist view.

One such reason comes from his discussion of unarticulated constituents. As is well-rehearsed in the literature now, a key argument for contextualism is 'semantic underdetermination': if we look at the information recoverable from the syntax of a sentence and compare it to the proposition an utterance of that sentence expresses, it seems that in most, perhaps all, cases the former underdetermines the latter. Standard examples here include sentences like 'Jill is ready' and 'It's raining', which respectively might convey the richer propositions that *Jill is ready to go to the cinema* and *It's raining in London*. Most contextualists thus argue that these sentences contain unarticulated constituents (semantically relevant but syntactically unrepresented elements, whose value is provided by the context of utterance); thus, contra the claims of formal semantics, meaning cannot be syntactically determined. However, Recanati holds that a contextual contribution is only unarticulated if it is *optional*. That is to say, if 'the aspects of meaning they generate are dispensable; the utterance would still express a complete proposition without them' (p. 8). So, for Recanati, neither of the above sentences yield arguments for contextualism, since *without* such a contextual input there would be no proposition expressed. Instead, then these are cases where there must be a hidden context-sensitive element in the syntax of the sentence. For Recanati, the cases which support contextualism are sentences like 'You won't die', 'Holland is flat', or 'The apple is green'. These sentences could express minimal, context-free propositions, but in most conversational contexts they do not, instead they express enriched propositions like *You won't die from that cut*, *Holland is flat for a country*, *The apple is green on its skin*.

Given his definition of unarticulated constituents, then, it seems that Recanati must be endorsing quasi-contextualism (the view that minimal proposi-

tions exist but are explanatorily redundant): the sentences in question could yield minimal, context-free propositions in some contexts of utterance (rather than just yielding, say, propositional fragments), but any such minimal propositions are almost never what is said by the speaker of the sentence. Yet, if it is right to see Recanati as arguing for quasi-contextualism, then it seems as if *Literal Meaning* may, in fact, provide some succour to the would-be minimalist after all. For quasi-contextualism does not yield a knock-out blow to minimalism—it is at least left open to the formal semanticist to find work for minimal propositions to do, even if they withdraw from the arena of explaining communication. Furthermore, since both Recanati's definition of unarticulated constituents and his distinction between mandatory and optional pragmatic processes rely on the idea of a context-free, minimal proposition, an opportunist minimalist might go so far as to suggest that Recanati himself has helped to characterise the kind of role minimal propositions can play, even if they do not capture what a speaker says when they utter a sentence.

Whether a minimalist response of this kind is ultimately possible or not, it is clear that *Literal Meaning* gives us a state-of-the-art overview of a currently compelling issue in philosophy of language. Not only does Recanati help to map the landscape here, he also does much to further the cause of contextualism. This book constitutes a major contribution to the debate.

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