Semantic minimalism and the "miracle of communication"

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Abstract   According to semantic minimalism, context-invariant minimal semantic propositions play an essential role in linguistic communication. This claim is key to minimalists' argument against semantic contextualism: if there were no such minimal semantic propositions, and semantic content varied widely with shifts in context, then it would be "miraculous" if communication were ever to occur. This paper offers a critical examination of the minimalist account of communication, focusing on a series of examples where communication occurs without a minimal semantic proposition shared between speaker and hearer. The only way for minimalists to respond to these examples is by restricting the scope of their account to intra-lingual communication. It can then be shown (1) that the minimalist's notion of a language shrinks to a point, such that practically no instances of communication will fall under that account, and (2) that the retreat to intra-lingual communication is in any case self-defeating, since the only way for minimalists to account for the individuation of languages is by resort to precisely the kinds of contextual considerations they abjured in the first place. In short, if, as minimalists allege, contextualism founders because it renders communication contingent on speaker and hearer sharing a context, it can now be seen that minimalism faces a parallel problem because it renders communication contingent on speaker and hearer sharing a language. I end by arguing that the possibility of communication cannot, as minimalists assume, be grounded in shared semantic conventions; rather, successful communication must precede the establishment of any particular set of semantic conventions.

Keywords   Semantic minimalism · Semantic contextualism · Communication · Language · Semantic conventions

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1. Perhaps the weightiest objection to any comprehensive form of semantic contextualism is that it would be incompatible with our best (or only) account of how linguistic communication is so much as possible. By comparison, we should hardly expect contextualists to be deeply moved, for instance, by calls to save semantics as a "subject matter that lends itself to any kind of serious, or rigorous, theorizing" (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, p. 146). What sort of theory we should seek to develop ought to be determined by the phenomena under investigation. And if semantic phenomena turn out to evince a high degree of context-sensitivity, there is presumably nothing wrong with a theory that reflects this fact.

By contrast, concerns about the possibility of communication strike much closer to home. According to Cappelen and Lepore (2005, pp. 123–124), if contextualism were true, communication would have to be counted a miracle every time it succeeds. But since successful communication occurs all the time and miracles do not, it follows that contextualism is false. This failure of semantic contextualism motivates a turn to semantic minimalism, which is initially defined simply as the negation of contextualism, i.e., as the denial of the claim that natural language semantics displays any context-sensitivity beyond what Cappelen and Lepore call the "basic set" of context-sensitive terms.[1]

However, and as this paper will show, this form of argument can be turned back on minimalism itself. Minimalists rely heavily on semantic conventions to secure their account of the possibility of communication.[2] But they fail to ask the necessary questions about how such conventions arise and how they are maintained. My argument will show, by example and reflection, that semantic conventions are just the wrong sort of thing to ground an account of communication in this way. Nor should this surprise us: if the possibility of communication did not precede the establishment of particular semantic conventions, then the existence of those conventions would be every bit as miracle-dependent as the view that minimalists ascribe to contextualists.

2. In what follows, "contextualism" will serve as a blanket term for any position according to which the meanings of our words are partly determined by the context in which they are uttered, in such a way that these meanings can change from context to context.[3] As suggested above, this thumbnail description requires further

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[1] The idea of a "basic set" is drawn from Kaplan (1989). The precise extension of this set remains a matter of contention even among minimalists. It will certainly include indexicals and demonstratives, but might or might not, for instance, also include terms like "foreigner" and "native." Be that as it may, Cappelen and Lepore's major point is that however widely we construe the basic set, context-sensitivity in natural language will only ever be "grammatically (i.e., syntactically or morphologically) triggered" (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, p. 2; see also Borg 2004, p. 20). In other words, no genuine context-sensitivity will arise from factors like "unarticulated constituents" (Perry and Crimmins 1989) or "phonetically null elements" of sentences (Stanley 2007).

[2] See, for instance, Borg (2004, pp. 18–19, 58), Cappelen and Lepore (2005, pp. 134–135).

[3] Cappelen and Lepore (2005, pp. 39–40) operate with a distinction between Moderate and Radical Contextualism, and one of their more controversial claims is that Moderate Contextualism is an inherently unstable position which must eventually collapse into Radical Contextualism. I will refrain from taking a stance on this particular contention. Contributors whom Cappelen and Lepore (less contentiously) identify as Radical Contextualists include Austin (1962), Searle (1980), Sperber and Wilson (1986), Travis (1996), Carston (2002), and Recanati (2004).

specification right away, for there are classes of words that everyone—including semantic minimalists—will concede to be context-sensitive in precisely this way, e.g., indexicals and demonstratives. Following Cappelen and Lepore, my discussion will largely look away from these classes of words and the sentences that contain them. Thus, when in the following I employ locutions like "for any arbitrary sentence S," I ask to be understood as having said "for any arbitrary sentence S, which does not include an indexical or a demonstrative." The question at stake between minimalists and contextualists, then, is simply whether there are any other (non-obvious, non-syntactically-triggered) cases of semantic context-sensitivity in natural language. Semantic minimalism, in the first instance, is known by its emphatically negative answer to this question. More dramatically, any affirmative answer would be inconsistent with the possibility of communication, according to the minimalist.

But, of course, minimalists take on further substantive philosophical commitments beyond this negative claim. In particular, isolating three such commitments will help pin down what is distinctive about the minimalist position.

Uniqueness: Minimalists concede that any number of things can be communicated—or conveyed—with any given utterance. But they insist that only one of these things will be the semantic content of the utterance. This semantic content is revealed by simple disquotation: the semantic content of "snow is white" is *snow is white*, and so on. Following Cappelen and Lepore, I will call this the *minimal semantic proposition* expressed by the utterance.[4] The claim of uniqueness, then, is that there is one and only one minimal semantic proposition expressed by an arbitrary utterance of a sentence type, even as there may be any number of other non-semantic contents which that utterance can also be used to convey.[5]

Context-invariance: This minimal semantic proposition is context-invariant (or -insensitive). While non-semantic content ("pragmatic content," "speech-act content") is context- and utterance-specific and can vary seemingly without constraint from one occasion of utterance to another, the semantic content attaches invariably to every token utterance of that sentence type.[6] That is, every time a speaker utters a token of a particular sentence type, he will have expressed the unique semantic content that attaches to that type, although he may or may not also have expressed a wide range of context-specific non-semantic contents.

Essential role in communication: The primary focus of this paper, however, is on a third claim, namely that this minimal semantic proposition plays an essential role in communication: were it not for the fact that every token utterance of some

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[4] Borg's term (e.g., 2004, p. 18) is "literal-conventional sentence meaning."

[5] This is the contrast that Cappelen and Lepore seek to capture in terms of a distinction between semantic *minimalism* and speech-act *pluralism*. This distinction also underlies minimalism's characteristically two-sided approach communication. On the one hand, there is the modest claim that minimalism in no way seeks to account for *all* or even most of what might transpire in a particular communicative encounter (see, e.g., Cappelen and Lepore 2005, pp. 53–58; Borg 2004, pp. 2–3, 259–272). On the other hand, there is the strikingly immodest claim that minimalism nonetheless captures or explains that without which no linguistic communication could transpire at all, namely the core semantic transaction involving a minimal semantic proposition. Literal-conventional meaning, then, grounds the possibility of all linguistic communication, even in cases where communicated content goes well beyond the literal-conventional meaning.

[6] See, e.g., Cappelen and Lepore (2005, p. 143), Borg (2004, p. 20).

sentence type invariably expresses a unique semantic content—the minimal semantic proposition—then communication would be practically impossible, a matter of miracle every time it occurs. This strong claim on behalf of minimal semantic propositions is required to deflect a certain kind of "why should we care?"-attitude to semantic minimalism: if minimalists are right that the semantic transaction is only one of many things going on in a given communicative encounter, and need in no way be the most important thing going on, why should semantic content be given pride of place in a theory of communication?[7] The minimalist response is that the minimal semantic proposition is essential to linguistic communication; it would be a miracle if communication could occur without it.

3. A precise definition of what communication requires will presumably remain a matter of contention.[8] But I take the following three criteria to be relatively uncontroversial elements of any theory of linguistic communication. Linguistic communication minimally involves (1) a speaker and a hearer tokening the same proposition (or in Fregean language, sharing the same thought), and (2) that this sharing of a thought is the result of linguistic interaction, where, finally, (3) the content of the shared thought is relevantly related to the semantic content of the words uttered. Briefly, then, we have successfully communicated if I get you to believe (or at least consider) a particular proposition by way of uttering words which express that very proposition.[9]

Against the background of this bare-bones picture of communication, we may ask what precisely the essential role of minimal semantic propositions is supposed to be. A useful way to approach this question is via Cappelen and Lepore's (2005, p. 97) notion of *disquotational same-saying*, which they argue is "the cornerstone of our communicative practices" and "the most fundamental feature of linguistic communication" (2005, p. 91).

As we saw, minimalists hold that the semantic content of a sentence is revealed by simple disquotation: "snow is white" minimally expresses the proposition *snow is white*. Disquotational same-saying is what I do when I remove the quotation marks around my report of what you were saying, and so assert the same sentence as you asserted. Thus, in a first instance I might report your utterance in the following way: "Jeremy said 'push-pin is as good as poetry'." In the next step, I remove the attribution and the quotation marks and say: "Push-pin is as good as poetry." It now seems that I will have said the same thing—expressed the same minimal semantic proposition—as Jeremy did when he uttered these words.

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[7] For variations on this kind of objection, see Korta and Perry (2007, p. 109), Leslie (2007, p. 161). Cappelen and Lepore (2005, pp. 176–177) attempt to address such worries.

[8] See Pagin (2008) for a recent overview.

[9] These conditions invoke what Heck (2002) calls the "naïve view of communication." Heck asks whether communication of thoughts involving indexicals and demonstratives can serve as counterexamples (see also McDowell 1984, pp. 289–291). But since indexicals and demonstratives fall outside the scope of the present study, we can leave these complications aside for now. The guiding idea here is precisely to seek an irenic (and in this sense perhaps "naïve") conception of communication to serve as our starting point.

Cappelen and Lepore hold that any theory of communication must account for this intuition that *different speakers can say the same thing—express the same thought or proposition—by using the same words*. Yet this ability is precisely what contextualism would appear to undermine. According to contextualists, the meanings of words and sentences can change dramatically from context to context. What, then, would happen if hearer and speaker are situated in different contexts? It would seem that their ability to say the same thing using the same words is dramatically impaired. Given the number and complexity of the contextual parameters that might be in play, it would be nothing short of a miracle for all these contextual parameters to align in the right kind of way so as to allow us to assert the same proposition using the same words. Yet this ability of disquotational same-saying is, if Cappelen and Lepore are right, "the most fundamental feature of linguistic communication" and the "cornerstone of our communicative practices." And so it would seem that contextualism would render *cross-contextual communication* practically impossible.

But it gets worse. So far, we have said nothing about the principles which determine *context-individuation*. Little reflection is required to recognize that contexts can be cut to any arbitrary degree of fineness, and, accordingly, that every communicative scenario could be construed as taking place across a contextual divide. With every minute change in background information, we may have a new context. Speaker and hearer will never be situated in exactly the same context, and context may even change as we speak. Therefore it would follow that practically no instance of communication could be accounted for without resort to such context-insensitive minimal semantic propositions. By contrast, if semantic contextualism were true, and there were no such minimal semantic propositions, it would be miraculous if any would-be communicants were able to hit upon the same proposition in the way communication requires. But such communication occurs routinely, with no intervening miracles. Therefore, the minimalist concludes, contextualism is false.[10]

In brief, linguistic communication is possible only in virtue of the fact that every token utterance of a particular sentence type uniquely and invariably expresses a minimal semantic proposition. Minimal semantic propositions fulfill the role of grounding the possibility of communication in virtue of guaranteeing a level of content available to communicative parties situated—as all communicative parties will be—in different contexts. "Minimal propositions," says Borg (2007, pp. 353–354), "are (and are known to be) the content any competent language user is guaranteed to be able to recover merely through exposure to the sentence uttered."[11] Disquotational same-saying provides "direct cognitive access" to this minimal semantic content (Cappelen and Lepore 2006, p. 1051).

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[10] I derive this argument sketch from Cappelen and Lepore (see, e.g., 2005, pp. 123–125). Borg does not put the matter in quite these terms, but repeatedly emphasizes how (context-insensitive) literal sentence meaning is a "non-cancellable feature" of any linguistic exchange, and that knowledge of such meanings is a "crucial element in" communication, without which communication would be "impossible" (Borg 2004, pp. 58, 61, 263).

[11] See also Borg (2004, p. 88).

Thus, contextualists are right that what actually goes on in a given communicative encounter might go significantly beyond this minimal semantic content. But the minimal semantic content is nonetheless a "necessary precursor" to any analysis of these richer levels of meaning (Borg 2004, pp. 18–19), that without which such further communicative intentions could get no purchase at all. According to Cappelen and Lepore (2005, p. 181), "this minimal semantic content is an essential part of all communicative interactions", serving as a necessary "starting point" as well as a "shared fallback content" guarding "against confusion and misunderstandings" (2005, p. 185).

4. These, then, will be the claims that I will target in the following. As Borg says:

> if communication can be shown to proceed without hearers processing the literal meaning of the sentence, i.e., without grasping minimal propositions, then it seems that the claim that minimal propositions have a unique role to play in actual communicative exchanges is undermined. (Borg 2007, p. 353)

This is precisely what I aim to do. To this end, I will present a series of examples in which communication flows smoothly and reliably without the benefit of a minimal semantic proposition shared between speaker and hearer. We can know this simply because there is no such proposition for them to share; no literal-conventional sentence meaning that speaker and hearer alike can turn to.

For a first sort of example, we can turn to inter-lingual communication—communication across languages. To see this how this might work, we can adapt a schema for a thought experiment familiar from Tyler Burge (Burge 1979). Imagine two languages, English and English*, differing only in the extension of a single term, say, "cousin." "Cousin" in English denotes any child of parents' siblings, whereas "cousin" in English* denotes female children of parents' siblings only. It follows that when a speaker of English and a speaker of English* each utters a token of the same *syntactical–lexical* type[12] involving "cousin," they will have expressed different *semantic* propositions.

Consider, then, a fragment of a conversation between E and E*. E has just introduced E* to his friends John and Mary, and says:

[Ex. 1]   E to E*: "John is Mary's cousin."

Would E* be capable of understanding what E just said? It would certainly seem that he is; at any rate, no mere facts about semantic conventions should persuade us otherwise. Such communication, after all, occurs in many border regions between countries all the time.[13] As a result of this linguistic interaction, E* comes to believe that John and Mary are related as children of sibling parents. If this is true, then E is able to communicate to E* his belief that "John is Mary's cousin." But there is no shared minimal proposition expressible in the conventional language of each communicant that would capture the content of their communication, since E* quite simply lacks the

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[12] Borrowing terminology from Kaplan (1990, pp. 93–94).

[13] For instance, we can think of it as a highly idealized version of the relation between Swedish and Danish. Swedes and Danes are able to communicate smoothly and effortlessly despite much greater lexico-semantic divergences than are involved in the current example.

semantic resources to express in his own language the proposition *John is Mary's cousin*. Specifically, E* cannot assert his comprehension by way of disquotational same-saying, by saying "John is Mary's cousin." Nonetheless, E* need have no problems understanding what E said, and accordingly, their successful communication cannot be explained by appeal to a shared minimal semantic proposition, since there is no such proposition for them to share.[14]

It is worth taking a moment to note how this example satisfies conditions (1)–(3) above. The end state is that E and E* share the thought that John is Mary's cousin, thus satisfying condition (1). E* comes to believe this as a result of his verbal interaction with E, thus satisfying condition (2). Finally, the content of the belief that E* ends up holding corresponds to the semantic content of the sentence uttered by E, thus satisfying condition (3). The only difference lies in the mechanism of comprehension: E* cannot, contrary to semantic minimalism, have relied on disquotational same-saying to retrieve the content of E's utterance, since in his language, the sentence type uttered by E would have encoded a different proposition. The linguistic situation between E and E* thus illustrates the problem of cross-contextual communication as minimalists describe it. Yet linguistic communication is both possible and quite evidently non-miraculous in the situation described.

Such examples are legion in inter-lingual communication. The mere fact that such communication is so much as possible poses significant problems for the minimalist. Speakers of different languages are capable of understanding each other even in areas where the lexical structures of their respective languages are not completely isomorphic. And whenever they succeed in this, it would appear that they have successfully communicated without the aid of a minimal semantic proposition shared between them.

A possible but highly unattractive line for minimalists to take with these examples would be to insist that, appearances to the contrary, communication is simply not possible in such cases.[15] A more plausible response would seek to restrict the scope of the theory to *intra*-lingual communication—communication within a language. On this approach, the minimalist would not be committed to the implausible view that what goes on in such inter-lingual cases does not qualify as communication. Rather, this approach would dictate that such cases must be counted as involving a special case of communication, where communicants are forced to draw on skills that are not narrowly semantic in the relevant kind of way, and so fall outside the scope of the theory. So what the minimalist is looking to do is

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[14] It is important to note that the example *could* involve E* being locally bilingual, i.e., as knowing that the extension of the English term "cousin" differs in such-and-such a way from that of its English* homophone. But this certainly need not be the case. E* may be unaware of the precise extension of "cousin" in his own language and think that E's usage is a legitimate one. Or he may think that "cousin" in E's language means the same as "cousin" in his own, but that E is simply confused about its meaning. In neither case will he have any problem understanding what E has communicated to him.

[15] This line would be unattractive not just because it would force us to deny the appearance of successful communication in a whole range of cases, but also for more general, theoretical reasons. In particular, this line would entail that a speaker would have to become bilingual *before* such time as he could successfully communicate with a speaker of a different language. This is surely not a sustainable view. For more on this, see Begby (2011).

to provide a theory of what is arguably the normal or predominant case of communication, namely communication between speakers of the same language.

Reflection suggests that this scope restriction was implicit in the theoretical design of minimalism from the start, even though it was never explicitly stated.[16] The minimal semantic proposition expressed by a sentence is the literal-conventional meaning of that sentence.[17] It is plausible to assume, then, that minimal semantic propositions can only moderate communication between speakers and hearers who are bound by the same semantic conventions, i.e., between speakers of the same language. If speakers of different languages are also able to communicate, it will presumably not be in virtue of shared semantic conventions.

Here is a different way to think about it: throughout their book, Cappelen and Lepore employ variables like "expression e," "utterance U," and "sentence S." For instance: "The semantic content of a sentence S is the content that all utterances of S share" (2005, p. 143). As we saw with [Ex. 1] above, this statement suffers from a familiar kind of ambiguity. These variables could naturally be read as ranging either (a) over items individuated on the basis of their syntactical–lexical form, or (b) over items individuated on the basis of their semantic content. If read in terms of form, there may just be no content that all utterances of S share. For instance, let sentence S = "John is Mary's cousin." Now ask, what is the content shared by the respective utterances of S from E and E*?[18] Presumably, then, Cappelen and Lepore intend these variables to range over syntactic entities to which semantic values have already been assigned. But if this is the correct interpretation, then they must clearly be presupposing a background of assignment of semantic values to lexical primitives, if they are not to beg every question at hand. But this is just to say that their theory only applies to intra-lingual communication.

5. We have arrived, then, at the idea that the minimalist theory applies to intra-lingual communication only. Further reflection will reveal that this is not a sustainable point of retreat for semantic minimalism. For what notion of a language (and of speakers sharing a language) is this? What is its relation to the vernacular concept of a language? Minimalists give no firm answer. To determine this, we may consider another series of examples, all structurally similar to [Ex. 1], yet now involving communication *within* what the vernacular concept would count as a single language. Again, we will conclude that communication in these examples can proceed without the benefit of shared minimal semantic propositions.

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[16] It is, however, explicitly stated in Fodor and Lepore (2007). Drawing a contrast between an account of communication (such as they aim to provide) and an account of interpretation (such as one might associate with Donald Davidson), they write: "An account of communication takes for granted a speaker and hearer who *share* a language; the issue is how they can use the shared language to exchange information between them" (Fodor and Lepore 2007, p. 686). However, they offer no account of what it is to share a language in this sense.

[17] See, e.g., Borg (2004, pp. 18–19), Cappelen and Lepore (2005, pp. 134–135).

[18] We can see this and the ensuing examples, then, as giving further substance to Nellie Wieland's suspicion (2010, p. 41) that "Cappelen and Lepore confuse indirect semantic reports with indirect phonetic reports, thereby failing to explain how it is that speakers achieve the former most of the time and only rarely aspire to achieve the latter." Similar motivations may also underlie Cappelen and Hawthorne's move (2009, Chap. 2) from a 'say-based' to an 'agree-based' platform for diagnosing shared content.

Cases of regional variation (*dialects*) Dialect studies often focus on grammatical or phonological variation. But it is obvious that dialectical variation can involve a significant semantic dimension as well. Let us assume that the vernacular counts British English and American English as one language. Now consider the following example:

[Ex. 2]   AmE to BrE: "The chairman recommends that the proposal under consideration be tabled pending further investigation."

Can BrE understand what AmE just said? Winston Churchill (1950, p. 609) famously recorded how Anglo-American differences on the verb "to table" led to momentary confusion during World War II.[19] But in the current example, no such confusion would likely arise, and BrE would easily apprehend that the Chairman recommends postponing further discussion of the current proposal. However, and as in [Ex. 1], AmE's ability to communicate this to BrE this cannot be explained by appeal to a minimal semantic proposition shared between the two. As uttered by BrE, "The chairman recommends that the proposal under consideration be tabled pending further investigation" expresses a different proposition than it does when uttered by AmE. Nonetheless, BrE is clearly capable of grasping the proposition it expresses when uttered by AmE.

Cases of semantic drift Let us assume that the vernacular counts, say, English (c. 1830) and English (c. 2012) as one language. Yet as is well-known, the semantic properties of our words are in slow but continuous change. Consider, then, the following example, which we can imagine to be culled from a typically hagiographic biography of the era:

[Ex. 3]   English (c. 1830) to English (c. 2012): "Washington rose to notoriety during the Seven Years War."

Can we, speakers of English (c. 2012), understand this sentence? Yes, but again it will not be because of a shared minimal semantic proposition. As with the case of regional variation in [Ex. 2], the sentence "Washington rose to notoriety during the Seven Years War" as uttered by us expresses a different proposition than it does when uttered by English (c. 1830).

Cases of widespread aberrant use Semantic drift is an ongoing and pervasive phenomenon. A major factor contributing to such drift is developments in usage. From the standpoint of semantic minimalism, much of such usage will simply be aberrant.[20]

Some aberrant usages are one-offs, some gain currency but then die out, whereas others may reach the critical mass required for us to recognize the emergence of a new semantic convention. Two important points can be made right away: (1) the recognition of a new semantic convention necessarily occurs after the fact, i.e., after the usage has reached critical mass. (2) The new usage does not spread evenly

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[19] In British English, "to table" means to put forward for consideration, whereas in American English it means to remove from consideration.

[20] See, e.g., Nathan Salmon (2005, p. 343): "An expression is used correctly *from the point of view of pure semantics* if and only if it is used with its literal meaning" (italics in original).

throughout a population; many will resist (or remain ignorant of) the new convention, and so will continue to speak according to the old conventions.

Consider, for example, the following kind of usage:

[Ex. 4]   Student to professor: "I am feeling nauseous and will not be attending class today."

Is this use of "nauseous" to mean "nauseated" simply aberrant, or does its wide currency testify to a new convention in the making? This is not, of course, for philosophers to decide. Nonetheless, two points seem clear: (a) if a new convention is emerging or has emerged, many of us are not party to it, and continue to insist on the old convention. (b) Whether I subscribe to the new convention or not makes no difference to whether I *understand* what is being said, and so makes no difference to whether the student and I have engaged in successful communication.[21] Once again, we seem to have a case of intra-lingual communication occurring without a shared minimal semantic proposition.

Semantic minimalists might want to take issue with this particular example, for something like the following reason: [Ex. 1–3] involve different bodies of conventions; this example involves merely one convention, but differing degrees of mastery of this convention. What we should say about the student in [Ex. 4] is not that his words have a different meaning when he uttered them from when I would utter them, but rather that he does not know what his words mean. I am capable of grasping what he intended to say by way of drawing on skills that go far beyond my semantic skills, narrowly and properly construed. This is a noteworthy fact, but not one that would threaten the minimalist picture of communication. The mere fact that I call the problematic usage "aberrant" testifies to the fact that it violates the convention governing that term in a way that cannot be said of the terms and phrases that figure in our previous examples.

This reasoning is adequate as far as it goes, but only because it stops far short of where it needs to go. To see how, we may instead return to [Ex. 3]. The semantic change undergone by the term "notoriety" (and cognates like "notorious") is the result of a process linguists call pejoration.[22] (Other textbook examples include "villain" and "demagogue.") Part of a standard story of how this process of pejoration unfolds will be that more and more people came to use the term with pejorative intent. We note that the *OED* lists pejorative usages of "notoriety" that far antedate 1830. For the sake of argument, let us assume that at this point the distinctively pejorative use of the word would have remained an aberration (or at any rate, that any pejorative implication must have been part of an utterance-specific speech-act content, quite independent of the word's semantic content).[23] However, little by little this usage must have gained momentum, eventually eclipsing the standard usage, and thereby giving rise to a new convention. *When* did the convention change? I doubt that anyone would want to try to date its emergence

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[21] See, e.g., Richard Heck's (2006, pp. 73–77, 80–81) analysis of aberrant uses of the term "livid".

[22] Compare "Stravinsky rose to notoriety with *The Rite of Spring*," uttered in 1950.

[23] See Williamson (2003, 2009) for attempts to account for pejoratives in general in terms of Gricean implicature.

with any degree of precision. In the interim, what would have been the minimal semantic proposition expressed by an arbitrary utterance of "Washington rose to notoriety during the Seven Years War"? To this, the semantic minimalist has no good answer. Yet, as I have just argued, communication can flow smoothly and effortlessly also in these cases. And when it does, it will not be because of a minimal semantic proposition shared between speaker and hearer.

In this sense, the case of widespread aberrant use reveals that the problems minimalists face along a *diachronic* dimension as a result of semantic drift will also manifest themselves along a *synchronic* dimension, simply because different speakers absorb the new conventions at different speeds, or not at all.

6. What do these examples show? Recall that we started by using a case of inter-lingual communication as a counterexample to the minimalist theory. This prompted the specification from the minimalist that the theory was only ever intended to apply to intra-lingual communication. We then proceeded to ask how the minimalist proposes to individuate languages. So the first problem we note is this: unless minimalists concede right away that they are counterexamples to their account of communication, then these examples serve to push the minimalist's notion of a (shared) language back to a point where practically no instances of communication will qualify as intra-lingual in the relevant sense and so as falling under the theory. On this view, speakers of different dialects will be speakers of different languages, as will speakers separated by any kind of temporal gulf, as indeed will contemporaneous speakers subscribing to different semantic conventions. In a nutshell, where conventions differ, so do languages. This leaves very little for the theory to be a theory of, and the claim that shared minimal semantic propositions are essential to communication is beginning to look increasingly futile. Taking minimalists at their word will land us with the consequence that linguistic communication may no longer be the primary mechanism by which people exchange information and co-ordinate their actions.

Even if this were a theoretically viable retreat-point, it is clear that it would offer little respite for minimalists in their battle against "pragmatic intrusion" (Borg 2004, pp. 141, 209, 259) on the domain of semantics. This brings us to the second problem: once we start individuating languages in this way, then not only should we not expect any two speakers to share a language; we must also recognize that any one speaker may have multiple languages at his disposal, even as the syntactical–lexical base of each language is the same.[24] Which language someone is speaking on a given occasion may depend on factors like audience, location, communicative intentions, and much else besides. But these are precisely among the sorts of contextual factors that the minimalist abjured in the first place.

Briefly, then, I argue that the minimalist must concede that these are bona fide counterexamples, or face the following double bind: semantic minimalism covers hardly any cases *and* it turns out that the kinds of contextual factors that minimalists deny at the first junction must be wheeled in again at the next junction in order to account for the individuation of languages on which their argument depends.

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[24] See, e.g., Heck (2006, p. 74), Ludlow (2006). The reader would also be correct to note an echo of Davidson (1986), to which I will return shortly.

Thus, it seems that we have turned the tables on the minimalist's no-miracles argument. For if minimalism were correct, it would be a miracle if speakers of different languages (in the minimalist's technical sense) could hit upon the same proposition in the way that communication requires. But such communication occurs routinely, with no intervening miracles. Therefore, minimalism is false.

In more detail, if contextualism founders, as minimalists argue, because it renders communication contingent on speaker and hearer *sharing a context*, it now appears that minimalism similarly renders communication contingent on speaker and hearer *sharing a language*. This raises two problems: (1) languages can be individuated as finely as contexts, thereby rendering minimalists vulnerable to the very same kind of argument they deployed against contextualism, and (2) minimalists cannot hope to account for the individuation of languages except by resort to the kinds of contextual considerations they abjured in the first place. In order to determine whether a given utterance belongs to this or that language, the minimalist will have no choice but to consult facts like who uttered the sentence, when, to what audience, with what communicative intentions, and so on.

Cappelen and Lepore do not even consider this problem.[25] Borg (2004, pp. 140–141) addresses the matter briefly, only to argue that a hearer can always decide to which language a given utterance belongs on the basis of merely phonological or orthographic clues prior to semantic processing proper. On her view, then, this leaves semantic minimalism as a doctrine about specifically *semantic* abilities untainted. The problem with this argument is evident: its conclusion may hold good for languages in the vernacular sense, where we may assume that there will always be orthographic or phonological tip-offs to differences in language.[26] But it will not hold good for languages in the technical sense under consideration here. For as we have seen, these languages may share all their phonological and orthographic properties. Two languages in this technical sense may be lexically and syntactically identical, yet differ widely in their semantics. And so, to determine which language is spoken on a given occasion, we must consider a potentially wide range of contextual factors.

There remains to deal with one objection. Above, I quoted Borg (2007, p. 353) to the effect that "if communication can be shown to proceed without hearers processing the literal meaning of the sentence, i.e., without grasping minimal propositions, then it seems that the claim that minimal propositions have a unique role to play in actual communicative exchanges is undermined". I presented [Ex. 1–4] as showing just that. But an argument could be made that what these examples show is merely that communication could proceed in cases where *disquotational same-saying* is impossible. This would indeed defeat Cappelen and Lepore's argument against contextualism. But it would still leave room for a more cautious claim, according to which the hearer's comprehension in all these cases proceeds by way of processing literal sentence meanings even though the hearer lacks the

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[25] Lepore and Sennet (2010, p. 583n1) acknowledge that "[c]ontext helps determine which language is spoken." Unfortunately, they decline to offer further elaboration.

[26] Strictly speaking, even this weaker claim may be false. For instance, many Norwegian and Swedish speakers will be unable to tell whether particular border region dialects are dialects of the one language or the other.

conventional semantic resources to express in his own language what he thus comprehends. On this construal, a hearer need not (antecedently) master the semantic conventions in order for it to be the case that what is first understood, when anything is understood, is, as a matter of fact, the literal-conventional meaning of the sentence. Semantic conventions need not be *shared* between speaker and hearer in order for them nonetheless to play an essential role in communication.

In one respect, this modified proposal is certainly on the right track: it trades on a possible discrepancy between what a speaker is capable of grasping, on the one hand, and what he himself is capable of expressing in conventional language, on the other. *Pace* Cappelen and Lepore, disquotational same-saying was never a plausible mechanism in which to ground an account of communication. If what I can semantically express with my own words is limited by their literal-conventional meanings in the way that minimalists assume,[27] then it should be *obvious* that what I am able to comprehend far outstrips what I am able to semantically express in words.

Nonetheless, the current proposal invokes in an extreme way concerns that some have voiced over the "psychological reality" of minimal semantic propositions in language comprehension.[28] It might be that what a hearer first grasps in decoding a sentence happens to be, as a matter of fact, the literal meaning of that sentence. But it will not be *qua* literal sentence meaning that he grasps it, if he does not know the semantic conventions. In such a case, it could hardly be argued that it is semantic knowledge, conceived in the manner that minimalists wish to conceive it, that the hearer applies in comprehension, even in cases where it happens to be the literal sentence meaning that he arrives at by applying it.

I think the following will serve as a counterexample to this modified proposal.

[Ex. 5] Aid agencies have only themselves to blame for elision between humanitarianism and military intervention.[29]

I immediately comprehend this to mean that aid agencies are responsible for eroding the distinction between humanitarianism and military intervention. This is but one example of a widening tendency of using the term "elision" (and cognates) with the sense of something like "conflation" rather than with its literal-conventional

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[27] See the claim concerning Uniqueness in Sect. 2.

[28] See, in particular Carston (2002, pp. 170–183), Recanati (2004, pp. 64–64); and for further exploration, Elugardo (2007), Jackman (2007). By contrast, Scott Soames, whose account of semantic content bears a strong resemblance to minimalism, explicitly disavows any such concern with psychological reality. On his view, what is semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence *S* is "determined by rational reconstruction, not psycholinguistic research" (Soames 2010, p. 172). However, Soames (2010, p. 173) has little to say about how such rational reconstruction might proceed, except as he relies on notions such as "literal uses of S," "normal contexts," and "what an ideally rational agent would have to master […] in order to communicate". But these notions can hardly be treated as explanatory primitives in the current dialectical context. Even on Soames' (2010, p. 172) account, it is an open question whether there *is*, for any sentence *S*, a "least common denominator" that we can rationally reconstruct from all uses of *S* even in "normal contexts" (unless, of course, we beg the question by defining the "normal context" as the set of all those contexts in which *S* expresses *this* particular semantic content).

[29] "Does Humanitarian Aid Prolong Wars?" *The Observer*, Sunday (25 April 2010).

sense of "omission." Does my comprehension of [Ex. 5] proceed by way of processing the literal-conventional meaning of that sentence? Arguably, there is no rendering of [Ex. 5] which would preserve both grammatical and literal-conventional semantic sense. Pertinently, "elision" on its literal-conventional meaning takes one argument (like "omission"), whereas in its current use it requires two arguments (like "conflation").

A minimalist might argue that this would still constitute a "special case" of communication, in that the hearer would first cast about for a literal reading of the sentence, and opt for an idiosyncratic reading only once the literal reading has come up short. In this sense, comprehension might still be said to proceed "by way of" an (attempted) literal reading. But this need not be the case. I may be one of the growing number of English speakers who believe that "elision" simply means "conflation." Or I may have no settled views on what "elision" means, and rather let this be one of the contexts from which I presume to learn its meaning. In this case, the speaker would not know the semantic convention governing the word "elision," the hearer would not know that semantic convention, and what is said and understood would not comport with that semantic convention. There is no grounds, I conclude, for maintaining that processing of literal-conventional sentence meanings—minimal semantic propositions—have an essential or unique role to play in communication.[30]

7. This paper has been focused on developing a series of examples which bring to light problems with semantic minimalism's conception of meaning and communication, and not on providing positive arguments for any particular competing position. But in light of how semantic minimalism figures in the dialectic, it will be natural to ask what sort of support—if any—the above arguments provide for semantic contextualism. And to be sure, it would seem that the examples I have developed do pivot on a certain form of context-sensitivity: sentence meanings are observed to vary with context of utterance, and, as importantly, interlocutors are shown to be able to retrieve these meanings by drawing precisely in part on knowledge of such context. In one sense, then, the aim of the paper has been to show how interactions between semantic content and context of utterance can serve as an *aid* rather than an *obstacle* in linguistic communication.

But in another sense, the thinking that underlies these examples departs quite strikingly from positions that often figure in the dialectic of minimalism and contextualism. These positions (e.g., Relevance Theory)[31] appear to take for granted a particular characterization of the domain of semantics and, correspondingly, of the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, which bears a striking resemblance to that which we find in semantic minimalism.[32] Where these positions differ is

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[30] An alternative approach would have it that the aberrant use of "elision" is now so widespread that there is, in effect, a secondary semantic convention according to which "elision" has the sense of "conflation." This might be correct, but provides no consolation for semantic minimalists, since it would take us right back to the argument made at the end of Sect. 5.

[31] E.g., Sperber and Wilson (1986), Carston (2002).

[32] For an exposition of similarities between semantic minimalism and Relevance Theory, see Wedgwood (2007).

primarily on the question of the extent to which, in particular cases, the semantic component of an utterance succeeds in determining its truth-conditional content. In this debate, it becomes a crucial question whether, for instance, an utterance such as "Annika is tall" expresses a complete, truth-evaluable proposition in its own right, or whether it yields such a proposition only when supplemented with a particular parameter of evaluation, a parameter which is not specified in the sentence uttered but which must be provided by the hearer through the exercise of distinctive pragmatic abilities (thus, "Annika is tall [for a 3-year old]").

On my view, these debates are relevant and interesting, but fail to get to the heart of the matter. Indeed, the assumption of a sharp distinction between semantic and pragmatic determinants of truth-conditional content around which these debates are organized itself comes to be seen as part of the problem. In this, my view draws inspiration from the work of Donald Davidson (e.g., 1984, 1986, 1994).

Most obviously, this Davidsonian view departs both from minimalism and from many forms of contextualism in holding that conventions are an imperfect proxy for determining the semantic values of linguistic expressions, and accordingly, that semantic competence cannot be modeled in terms of knowledge of such conventions plus rules for assigning referents to indexical and demonstrative expressions.

Further, it would seem that the position is Davidsonian in that the mode of argument employed in Sects. 5–6 mimics that of Davidson (1986), where analysis of the semantic properties of conventional public languages gives way to analysis of idiolects, i.e., the linguistic behavior of individual speakers. Thus, Davidson's (1986, p. 107) provocative conclusion that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed". However, this point needs to be handled with caution: if Davidson's argument purports to show that public conventional languages cannot serve as a stable anchoring point for semantic theory (or for a theory of semantic competence),[33] it would be a mistake to read it as singling out idiolects as intrinsically better fit to serve that role. On the contrary, an idiolect need be no more synchronically or diachronically stable than a public conventional language. Idiolects change over time. But even at a time, an individual speaker will have several communicative repertoires at her disposal and may switch among these according to interlocutor, overhearers, subject matter, and many other factors.[34]

Rather, the deeper point that my view draws from Davidson, and which is often overlooked in debates about whether there "really are" such things as languages, concerns rather Davidson's (1986, p. 107) claim that his argument entails "eras[ing] the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally". My examples join with Davidson in suggesting is that there is no useful and theoretically sound way of specifying *knowledge of language*—distinct from worldly or "encyclopedic" knowledge—such as interlocutors could jointly implement in conversation and thereby succeed in communicating. Nor would it be

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[33] By contrast, recall Fodor and Lepore (2007, p. 686): "An account of communication takes for granted a speaker and hearer who *share* a language; the issue is how they can use the shared language to exchange information between them."

[34] I am here inspired by Derek Bickerton's exploration of the creole continuum. See, e.g., Bickerton (1975).

correct to say, as Relevance Theory appears to say, that communicative competence is the joint product of two quite distinct cognitive competencies, one semantic (or "coded") and one pragmatic (or "ostensive-inferential"). Rather, in the study of actual communicative interactions, this distinction loses its sharpness. Coping with language variation requires the seamless integration of linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge. No merely algorithmic procedure such as disquotational same-saying will suffice to reliably retrieve even the minimal semantic content of an arbitrary sentence of one's own language. Contextualists are right to point out that what would be yielded by such a procedure would only in rare instances constitute the truth-conditional content of the utterance. They thereby mark their disagreement with semantic minimalists concerning the division of labor between semantic and pragmatic competencies. But in so doing, contextualists also tend to retain minimalism's assumption that there is a sharp distinction over which the relevant labor can be neatly divided. At the end of the day, it is this assumption which my paper seeks to show untenable.

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