

Emma Borg, *Minimal semantics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. Pp. x + 288.

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Minimal semantics fulfils the promise delivered in its title: it offers a view of semantic theory that is unaffected by the intrusion of those aspects of communicated content that come from anything other than the sentence. The semantic content is arrived at by means of the derivation of the truth conditions of *sentences* alone. Semantic theory is understood here as a 'theory of literal linguistic meaning' (1) and it is argued that the task of semantics does not extend beyond providing such pure, pragmatically uncontaminated, sentence meaning. Borg strongly favours such a formal approach to meaning, where the object of the theory of meaning is the sentence, and the methods are formal: the syntactic description is the only guide to sentence content. This is contrasted with use-based accounts that have been gathering many more followers lately and according to which the task of semantic theory is to provide a representation of utterance meaning in which the output of syntactic processing interacts with the output of pragmatic inference. These pragmatics-rich, contextualist approaches (see e.g. Recanati 2002, 2004) she dubs 'dual pragmatic' theories: they start the analysis of meaning with an utterance as the basic unit and provide the truth conditions that pertain to the utterance and thereby to the *intended* content. Pragmatics is 'dual' because the output of pragmatic processing contributes

both to the proposition expressed and, post-propositionally, to implicatures. Chapter 1 is devoted to the presentation of a minimal, formal account, and, after an exposition of various arguments in support of semantic minimalism in Chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 4 carries on with rebutting the arguments from the contextualist camp.

Borg provides a series of arguments in favour of the minimal semantics, starting with the assumption that '[t]he truth-conditional semantic theory is governed, not by rich non-demonstrative inferential processes, but rather by formally triggered, deductive operations' (8). Her strongest argument relies on modularity. As she says, 'formal semantics and modularity about linguistic understanding seem to be a match made in heaven' (8): semantic understanding is modular and should be kept apart from the understanding of speaker's intentions and from non-deductive inference (see also Borg 2004). Borg argues that modularity of semantic processing is to be assumed, and once it is assumed, speakers' intentions fall out of the picture as irreconcilable with this modularity. In Chapter 2, she upholds Fodor-style modularity and argues that the understanding of meaning should be viewed as an encapsulated and computational language module. On the other hand, the understanding of acts of communication, she says, 'is about as informationally unencapsulated as you can get' (90). The discussion of modularity is a difficult one in that it has to rely on ample hypotheses and a degree of speculation. The availability of the following

alternative, however, is certain: either we are willing to admit different modules in semantics or we are not. Borg sides with the latter disjunct, while contextualists side with the first, albeit the granularity of the contextualists' multimodularity is not resolved: pragmatics may, or may not, prove to be a module. Borg discusses two issues there that may potentially weaken the modularity view. One is the need for the recognition of the speaker's intentions in learning a language, and the other is the need for global, not module-specific, inferential reasoning in resolving ambiguities. She argues that both potential objections fail: the grasp of intentions becomes unnecessary once the language has been acquired, and the role of global processes in ambiguity resolution can be allowed also in a modular theory. There is nothing wrong with this reasoning in principle. However, it seems that one might consider building a contextualist argument using the same premises from intentionality and ambiguity.

To conclude: whether one adopts Borg's assumption that semantics is better off as a modular enterprise is still a matter of preference and free choice. As she says, her claim is conditional: if the understanding of literal linguistic meaning is best viewed as modular, then a formal, minimal semantics is best for the task at hand. What is still left in the air is strong support for the antecedent, although Borg certainly succeeded in raising it to the status of a plausible, convincing option. Her strong defence of minimalist semantics with the tool of modularity deserves to be appreciated in that she

demonstrates that it is indeed not unreasonable to follow this option.

For the readers already well versed in the semantics/pragmatics debate, Chapter 3 is particularly interesting. It provides, in my view, the strongest, best developed, argument for minimal semantics. Borg demonstrates there how one can preserve semantic minimalism in spite of the obvious need for contextual information in the case of indexical expressions. One of its strengths lies in its being an 'in-house' argument: it does not appeal to grand properties such as modularity or compositionality, but instead shows, step by step, how to give a semantics of expressions which, to use Kaplan's terms, do not have content just in virtue of having a character, but instead have content because the character, such as 'she' or 'there', leads to the content in the particular situation of discourse. She combines seemingly irreconcilable ideas that (i) formal operations on a syntactic form suffice in providing truth conditions of a sentence, and that (ii) the semantic content of indexicals, demonstratives and other deictic expressions such as 'I', 'he' or 'there' comes from the context of utterance. In other words, the problem is that the speaker's or the addressee's knowledge of who 'he' or 'they' refer to cannot figure in the semantics proper. Borg's resistance to incorporating epistemically given content of indexicals is well supported by her earlier argument from modularity: if semantics is modular, then we cannot introduce the agents' knowledge of referents in the semantic description. She offers the following suggestion:

...what is special about demonstrative and indexical content resides not with the kind of epistemic contact between speaker and referent, but simply with the mode of expression of our thoughts (186-187).

In practice, the sentence such as 'That is red' has the following meaning of 'that' in her semantics: 'that' is a singular term that introduces a singular concept into the truth conditions. The content of 'that' is an object, whatever it might be, that is referred to on this occasion. There is no room here to assess this proposal in the light of its predecessors such as Perry's and Kaplan's views. Suffice it to say that Borg's solution is certainly worth attention. The chapter can also be profitably read as a self-contained proposal, not merely as an argument in favour of semantic minimalism.

Next, the question of compositionality addressed in this book requires a closer scrutiny. Borg emphasizes that the issue of the delimitation of semantics is not merely a terminological debate and supports this claim by saying that compositionality is a (welcome) constraint on the formal minimal theories, whereas use-based approaches (contextualists) find compositionality less of a constraint. This is an issue that merits a much more detailed treatment. First, compositionality tends to be understood in semantics as a methodological requirement rather than a feature of semantic content (see e.g. Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991) and thus one can

understand it to be a task of semantic theory to show how this *assumed compositionality* can be formally described. Dynamic semantic approaches achieved this to a great extent in incorporating context-change. A compositional treatment of utterances within a pragmatics-rich semantics has also been attempted (see Jaszczolt 2005). Indeed, Borg appropriately distances herself from criticizing contextualists on the issue of compositionality but perhaps not using compositionality as an argument in favour of semantic minimalism would be more in keeping with the current achievements of the mildly and strongly contextualist orientations.

All in all, the choice to compare and contrast semantic minimalism with extreme contextualism has its merits as well as its hidden dangers. While it is good to polarise the discussion in this way, at the same time one misses the opportunity to assess the in-between views such as those represented in dynamic semantics where either the interpretation of the metalanguage (predicate logic) is altered to account for context-change like in Dynamic Predicate Logic, or the representations of discourse meaning are sensitive to more than just the logical form of the input sentences, as in Discourse Representation Theory. While Borg's argument from modularity still holds for these mid-way perspectives, the one form compositionality does not. Moreover, while DRT enjoys a brief analysis in Chapter 1, I believe it appears there somewhat too 'pragmaticised', thrown into the same basket as true dual pragmaticists. One has to remember that the role of

intentions is very limited in DRT. For example, speakers' intentions are not a guide to external anchors.

The contextualist view is clearly introduced and engagingly discussed. To mention some small infelicities, however, Borg does not make it sufficiently clear that for relevance theorists 'semantics' has two meanings: the linguistic semantics, which comes as the output of the syntactic processing, and, more interestingly, truth-conditional semantics, which makes use of pragmatic enrichment. While commenting on Sperber and Wilson's 'somewhat non-standard ... use of the term "semantics" ', reserved '*just* for the output of the formal decoding process' (43), she focuses on the minimal, linguistic semantics, although it is the other concept, that of truth-conditional, pragmatics-rich semantics that plays an important role in relevance theory and other contextualist approaches.

In the climate of the recent surge in the debate on the semantics/pragmatics boundary, Borg's book is a welcome contribution that brings into this debate a new, rather extreme, but also refreshing view. We have all been used by now to debating issues within the contextualist camp, such as whether all pragmatic contributions to the propositional representation have to be traced to the constituents of the sentence or rather such additions are 'truly' unarticulated constituents that enrich the logical form freely, in a 'top-down' manner (discussed by Borg in Chapter 4; see e.g. Stanley 2002; Recanati 2002). We have also been used to the debates on the cognitive status of such pragmatic enrichment, namely whether it is

conscious or subdoxastic. However, the defence of the 'uncontaminated' semantics is rather scarce on the market. Perhaps one of the reasons is that two aims have been frequently conflated in theorizing on these issues: providing a psychologically plausible theory of utterance processing, and providing a formal, compositional theory of the meaning of sentence types *only*. The latter is what Borg sets out to do and she does it with a distinct, new voice that merits attention – even the attention of entrenched contextualists.

Borg also addresses the issue of truth conditions of semantically underdetermined sentences and proposes truth conditions that allow for their satisfaction by a variety of different states of affairs. For example, 'If u is an utterance of "Steel isn't strong enough" in a context c then u is true iff steel isn't strong enough **for something in c** ' (230, my emphasis). This is an interesting move, albeit it seems that it would be more in keeping with the principles of minimal semantics to go all the way and restrict the talk of truth conditions to the truth conditions of the *sentence* rather than the *utterance*. Then, we would obtain the following: 'A sentence "Steel isn't strong enough" is true iff steel isn't strong enough for something, where "something" is restricted by the context of the utterance of this sentence' — to keep the solution on a par with that for indexicals. This, however, is merely a matter of polishing terminological distinctions rather than a matter of a principal revision. A more principal objection can be levelled at Borg's judgement that contextualists confuse the understanding of meaning as

truth-conditionality with meaning as knowing whether the truth conditions are satisfied. It seems misguided to argue that since plausible verifications trigger the search for intended meaning, they also enter into the pragmatics-rich semantics. In other words, on a contextualist account, 'Steel isn't strong enough' becomes completed to read, say, 'Steel isn't strong enough to support the roof of the house', but it is the truth condition that pertains to the unit so enriched that gives the appropriate semantics. The truth value figures only as a restriction on the plausible interpretations. Moreover, another argument levelled at contextualists is that a single unambiguous sentence would have to 'possess an indefinite number of distinct semantic contents, depending on the range of acceptable ways in which it may be reported' (252). This is at the very least puzzling. Advocates of pragmatics-rich semantics (and truth-conditional pragmatics) have gone to great lengths in discussing the adequate criteria for delimiting the proposition expressed, to mention only relevance theory or Recanati's availability principle. None of these achievements are acknowledged in Borg's essay.

All in all, if one accepts, even for the sake of an intellectual exercise, Borg's initial assumption that 'we should *not* expect our semantic theory to tell us very much about successful communication, nor about our epistemic or metaphysical contact with the world, nor indeed about the kind of thing which *meaning per se* is' (11), then the arguments provided to follow it

through are admirably precise and wide-ranging, from a general argument from compositionality to a detailed argument from indexicals. This is not to say that the book settles the issues at hand: the debate is still open. It will take much stronger theoretical and empirical evidence to settle the issue of what semantics is supposed to do. The task of demonstrating advantages of construing semantics in a minimal way is even harder than that of the advocates of pragmatics-rich truth conditions in that contextualists have multiple evidence from experimental work that minimally construed propositions don't play a part in the recovery in utterance meaning (but see also Cappelen and Lepore's 2005 arguments in defence of a version of semantic minimalism). Borg would respond that utterance meaning is an entirely different kind of species to talk about, but if it indeed is different, then one had better invent a strong rationale for having a theory of meaning that keeps out of this species. Finally, in spite of Borg's conciliatory efforts in Chapter 5, it is difficult to see how one can uphold both positions, namely to claim that from a purely theoretical perspective, it is good to have a formal theory of meaning of sentence-types, while from a more practical angle, it is good to have a theory how utterance processing works in which semantics has to be given a clear role to play.

To sum up, Borg's defence of semantic minimalism is a welcome contribution to the debate in that it helps shift the balance away from the widely accepted contextualist assumptions, providing a fresh voice in the

discussion, and making us revisit the basic question of what is a theory of meaning a theory of. Her discussion focuses on the pertinent problem of semantic theory and, in view of the fact that many will disagree with her assumptions, it promotes pluralism in the field, which is always a welcome prerequisite for honest, in-depth theorizing.

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