

Can One Sincerely Say What One Doesn't Believe?

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In *Insensitive Semantics*, Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore (C&L) defend Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism. Semantic Minimalism concerns the effect of utterance context on *semantic* content. It holds, in contrast to the views of a wide variety of linguists and philosophers of language, that this effect is limited to fixing the semantic value of the small number of expressions they argue are genuinely context-sensitive: uncontroversial indexicals, demonstratives, tense markers, and perhaps a few others. What's more, according to C&L, once this context-sensitivity has been accounted for, a (disambiguated) sentence expresses a truth-evaluable proposition. Speech Act Pluralism concerns *speech act* content: what a speaker says (asserts, claims, etc.) by a particular utterance of a sentence. Among its central claims are: first, that speech act content typically includes an indefinite range of propositions, as evidenced by the indefinite range of accurate indirect speech reports concerning a particular utterance (call this Basic Pluralism); and, second, that speakers do not have privileged access to what they say, nor must they believe what they sincerely say (call this the Controversial Aspect).¹

Insensitive Semantics' primary goal is to defend Semantic Minimalism. But a "great deal of that defense focuses on the relationship between speech act content and semantic content, and in that respect Speech Act Pluralism plays a central role." (4) In this comment, I focus on C&L's argument for the Controversial Aspect of Speech Act Pluralism. I argue that their argument fails, ironically, because it doesn't give adequate attention to the distinction between semantic content and speech act content. (I close by briefly suggesting that their defense of Semantic Minimalism doesn't require the Controversial Aspect anyway.)

C&L arrive at their version of Speech Act Pluralism by taking "nontheoretic beliefs and intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, etc. at face value (unless given overwhelming reason to do otherwise)." (191) Such beliefs and intuitions are

¹ Cappelen and Lepore (2005a). Unless otherwise indicated, page references are to this book. C&L intend to remain neutral among competing semantic frameworks: I cast my discussion in terms of propositions for ease of exposition. I follow C&L in speaking of "what a speaker says (asserts, claims, etc.)." I assume they hold that what they say about saying holds as well for asserting and claiming. In discussing examples below, I follow C&L in bracketing context-sensitivity arising from tense markers. Finally, in so using the label 'Controversial Aspect,' I don't mean to imply that no other aspect of their views is controversial. (For example, C&L maintain (200) that semantic content is always part of speech act content.) It's just that this is the controversial aspect I focus on here.

revealed by the indirect speech reports that we would sincerely give or judge accurate. They thus argue for Speech Act Pluralism by presenting what they consider clear cases of accurate indirect speech reports, observing that, for any utterance, we accept as accurate a wide variety of reports that differ in content, including many that report the speaker as having said something she herself does not know she said and does not believe.

Suppose, for example, that A utters ‘Julia went to the Whole Foods.’ C&L would claim that, at least if the right (easily-supplied) background conditions are in place, one can accurately report what A said in various ways—for instance, by uttering ‘A said that Julia went to the Whole Foods,’ ‘A said that Julia went to the supermarket,’ ‘A said that Julia’s getting the chips,’ ‘A said that Julia will be gone for a bit.’ Insofar as each report places a different proposition within speech act content, one has Basic Pluralism. Now suppose further that you and I both know of Julia that she is Ann’s younger daughter, though A doesn’t, and that I know that you don’t know that this girl’s name is ‘Julia.’ C&L claim about such cases that I can accurately report what A sincerely said by uttering ‘A said that Ann’s younger daughter went to the Whole Foods.’ Insofar as the report places into speech act content a proposition that A doesn’t know she said and doesn’t believe, one has the Controversial Aspect. *Insensitive Semantics* and C&L’s previous papers cited therein develop a variety of such cases.²

The Controversial Aspect is indeed controversial. (C&L acknowledge (4-5) that it runs contrary to the views of most theorists and that, since they introduced it in (1997), it has attracted few, if any, further adherents.) It requires that one deny a variety of claims that are elements of a *prima facie* plausible conception of assertion and its relation to belief and intention. Consider in particular C&L’s claim that one can sincerely say (or assert) what one doesn’t believe. If they are right, one must deny, given the cases they use to support the claim, that what one sincerely asserts, even when one relevantly knows one’s mind and does not misspeak, accurately expresses what one thinks.³ One must deny as well that an action can be sincere only if it’s performed intentionally; for in C&L’s cases one says what one does not believe without knowing that one is doing so and thus

² For example:

... suppose you uttered (1) several weeks ago:

(1) The table is covered with books.

Suppose that whatever table is under discussion currently sits comfortably in your father’s office (though it did not sit there when you uttered (1)). Haven’t you said with your utterance of (1) that the table in your father’s office is covered with books? (201)

C&L (202) also argue that, in addition to lacking privileged access to whether they assert that P, speakers also lack privileged access to some properties of the contents they assert, such as what they are metaphysically equivalent to. My challenge does not concern this claim.

³ Let “relevantly knowing one’s mind” stand in for not being self-deceived, ambivalent, confused, etc. about one’s own attitudes, so far as they bear on the assertion at issue.

not intentionally. They might be willing to concede that such sayings, being non-intentional, are neither sincere nor insincere. (What matters to their point seems more that the speaker not be insincere than that she be sincere. The interest stems from putting liars and the like to one side.) One might thus reformulate their claim as follows: one can say (assert) what one does not believe, even when one relevantly knows one's own mind, without intentionally misrepresenting oneself and without misspeaking. Still, one must deny that assertions that are not misspeakings must be intentional. In addition, one must deny that one can always be held responsible—epistemically or otherwise—for what one asserts (assuming that not all of C&L's cases are one's in which one *should* have known that one was asserting P). C&L, moreover, would have us deny these claims not just on the basis of a few *recherché* cases, but because *every* utterance provides an indefinite number of such assertions. These results may be surprising, but C&L might maintain that the denied claims are “theoretical” and so, forced to choose between such claims and our intuitions concerning their cases, we should favor the latter, as this is in part what taking these intuitions at face value requires. It is in fact unclear, however, that we have the intuitions needed to establish the Controversial Aspect.

Implicit in C&L's presentation of cases is something like the following principle: if (1) A utters 'P,' (2) B utters about A's utterance 'A said that Q,' and (3) speakers judge B's report accurate, then the proposition semantically expressed by 'Q' is part of the speech act content of A's utterance.⁴ As I have stated it, however, condition (3) is unclear. Does 'B's report' refer to the uttered *sentence* 'A said that Q,' so that it's the accuracy of the sentence's *semantic* content that's being judged? Or does it refer to the act of utterance, so that it's the utterance's *speech act* content—or some salient aspect thereof that's not necessarily the semantic content—that's being judged?

If what matters is the accuracy of some salient aspect (not necessarily the semantic content) of the speech act content of B's report, then the principle is far from obvious. From the fact that B expressed *something* true in uttering 'A said that Q,' it does not follow that the semantically expressed proposition is true. But then it is far from obvious why it should follow from the accuracy of B's report that the proposition semantically expressed by 'Q' was among the propositions A said. Further, the principle thus construed has unattractive consequences by C&L's lights. Suppose Professor A utters 'Everyone in the one intro class I taught this term received a passing grade in that class,' and student B reports this to some fellow class members by uttering 'A said everyone passed.' This report would seem accurate, since among the salient propositions its utterance expresses is that A said that everyone in the one intro class A taught that term received a passing grade in that class. But, by C&L's lights, it's implausible that the semantic content of 'everyone passed' is among the propositions A's utterance expressed. For C&L hold that, bracketing tense, this sentence is context-insensitive—in particular, the quantifier's domain is not contextually restricted. There is thus a single proposition any utterance of it semantically expresses no matter the context—viz., that everyone

⁴ 'P' is not necessarily a complete or single sentence. 'Q' may be 'P,' if 'P' is a complete, single sentence. We may assume that the speakers in condition (3) meet whatever conditions are relevant for having epistemic authority to judge in the case at issue. C&L speak often of reports being *accurate*; I assume one could just as well speak of their being *true*.

passed. Whatever else is true of it, it would seem most likely that this proposition entails claims concerning people that had nothing to do with A's class—for example, that X [someone on the other side of the world] passed. But nothing A said entails such claims.⁵

One can thus reject the principle if condition (3) concerns the accuracy of some salient aspect (not necessarily the semantic content) of the speech act content of B's report. Intuitions of this sort wouldn't establish the Controversial Aspect. If condition (3) concerns rather the accuracy of the proposition *semantically* expressed by B's report, the principle seems to gain in plausibility. *Modulo* differences in format and detail, many accounts of the semantics of indirect discourse will affirm some version of the claim that, if the proposition *semantically* expressed by an utterance of 'A said that Q' is true, then what A said includes the proposition *semantically* expressed by 'Q'. The principle then asks only that we grant that speakers are pretty good judges of the *accuracy* of the proposition *semantically* expressed by an indirect report—that we, in this sense, take their beliefs and intuitions about what people say at face value. When condition (3) is understood this way, however, it is much less obvious when condition (3) is satisfied and whether speakers are in fact sufficiently good judges in the sense required. In particular, C&L do not provide us with reason for confidence in the cases used to support the Controversial Aspect (CA-cases).

Consider first whether condition (3) is satisfied in any CA-cases. According to C&L, the proposition *semantically* expressed by an utterance is just one among the many propositions it expresses. Indeed, they point out that the semantic content of most utterances is “not even the most important proposition the speaker intended to communicate to her audience.” (205, punctuation adjusted) Similarly from the audience's perspective: in “most regular-life contexts, the semantic content is not what is focused upon.” (207) If indirect speech reports are no exception to these claims (C&L provide no reason to think otherwise),⁶ then “nontheoretic beliefs and intuitions about what people say,” as expressed in indirect speech reports and judgments thereof, are more likely keyed to some aspect of the reports' speech act content other than its semantic content. We need some reason to think otherwise in a specific case. If we don't have reason to think our judgments of accuracy in CA-cases concern the reports' *semantic* content, we don't yet have reason to think condition (3) satisfied.

⁵ I take it that the intuition here has at least as much face-value appeal as the intuitions of C&L I question. To challenge it would run the risk of weakening their dialectical position. Also, I say “most likely” to accommodate such far out possibilities as metaphysical investigation revealing that everyone passed iff everyone in the one intro class A taught that term received a passing grade in that class (so that, no matter the context, an utterance of 'Everyone passed' *semantically* expresses a proposition that entails that everyone in the one intro class A taught that term received a passing grade in that class). In the unlikely event, one could switch to a case in which Professor B (distinct from A) utters the sentence, which is then reported by one of *her* students.

⁶ C&L emphasize (199) that Basic Pluralism applies as much to indirect speech reports as to other utterances. The Professor A example above arguably supplies a case in which speaker and audience focus on an aspect of an indirect speech report's non-semantic speech act content. I return presently to whether the reason C&L offer in support of their face-value methodology relevantly distinguishes indirect reports.

C&L discuss this sort of challenge as raised generally to the various tests and cases they present throughout their book.⁷ They respond that theirs is not a “regular-life” context. Their recognized goal is to focus the audience’s attention on semantic content, and they are “fairly confident” (207) that their stage-setting accomplishes this. Certainly merely sharing the goal is not sufficient: the bulk of C&L’s book is an argument that philosophers of language and linguists, despite no doubt their good intentions, persistently conflate semantic content and speech act content. But does their presentation of CA-cases indeed sufficiently stage-set for one to be confident that it’s the semantic content of the indirect reports that elicits one’s intuitions?⁸

Compare their presentation of CA-cases to their discussion of gradable adjectives such as ‘tall.’ Most linguists and philosophers of language consider sentences containing ‘tall’ context-sensitive: roughly, an utterance of ‘a is tall’ is true iff a is taller than the contextually salient degree of height. One strategy for supporting this conclusion deploys what C&L label ‘Context Shifting Arguments’. Speakers judge, for example, that an utterance of ‘Timmy is tall’ is true in a context where typical (male, American) 4th graders are under discussion, but false (said of the same person at the same time) in a context where guarding-assignments are being made in a family basketball game. C&L argue—contrary to their opponents—that it doesn’t follow that ‘Timmy is tall’ is context-sensitive, since the judgments of truth and falsity are sensitive, not to semantic content, but to speech act content: that Timmy is taller than most American males his age, and that Timmy is among the taller participants in this basketball game, respectively. That our intuitions are *not* sensitive to semantic content follows, they claim, from a battery of tests and arguments aimed at showing that ‘tall’ is not context-sensitive. The important point here is that, even in the context of a study of semantics and pragmatics, it is not considered *easy* to distinguish what aspect of content triggers one’s (often rapid and automatic) judgments of accuracy. It’s the tests and arguments, developed and defended at great length, that are intended to enable us to tease them apart.⁹ The presentation of

⁷ They write:

In this book we have talked repeatedly about the semantic content of utterances (the proposition semantically expressed). We have presented tests for how to find the semantic content of utterances. We have done that by uttering sentences, by making claims, and assertions. But in doing so we assert an indefinite number of propositions, only one of which is the proposition semantically expressed. Doesn’t that undermine our tests? Doesn’t it make the very project of the book impossible? (207)

⁸ Again, for C&L to establish the Controversial Aspect by cases, it would also not be sufficient for C&L to succeed in focusing our attention on semantic content. Speakers must also be adequate judges in those cases of the semantic content’s truth. We return to this in a moment.

⁹ As C&L note (207), assessing their arguments and tests in turn requires that one respond to the semantic content of what they say and the sample utterances they present.

CA-cases, however, are not accompanied by any such aids. We are simply asked to gauge our intuitions concerning the accuracy of the indirect speech reports.¹⁰

It might be objected that this comparison neglects a crucial difference. In their discussion of ‘tall,’ C&L are arguing that certain intuitions are *not* triggered by semantic content; in the CA-cases, C&L are presuming that they *are*. Perhaps in general our *default* should be that intuitions are semantically triggered—at least in a context where semantics and pragmatics are explicitly at issue. This is a substantial claim, however, in need of defense. An alternative objection would point to another difference. There is with ‘says’, as opposed to ‘tall’, a *specific* methodological injunction that we take our intuitions at face value (unless given sufficient reason to do otherwise). Perhaps this implies that, at least in the case of indirect speech reports, there is a presumption that our intuitions track semantic content, not other aspects of speech act content. But I don’t see that there’s anything special about indirect speech reports that would support this understanding of C&L’s “face value” methodology. C&L defend their methodology as follows:

Speech act content isn’t deeply hidden somewhere, where only a theorist can excavate it. That would undermine its purpose. What speakers say, claim, assert, etc. is what we hear when we listen to them. It is what we respond to, question, laugh at, take seriously, ignore, agree or disagree with. (191)

But it doesn’t follow from this that our assessments of indirect speech reports tend to focus on the proposition semantically expressed. What’s required is only that speakers be appropriately sensitive to salient speech act content whatever the utterance—including when the utterance is an indirect speech report.

Let me turn now to speakers’ accuracy in assessing the truth of the propositions semantically expressed by the CA-cases’ indirect reports. One complication here is that C&L do not take an official stand on what that content is—in part because they neither endorse nor deny the claim that ‘says’ is context-sensitive. It seems to me that their tests are no more or less effective in denying ‘says’ entry into the set of genuinely context-sensitive expressions than they are in many of the other cases they discuss.¹¹ I will thus assume that, by C&L’s lights, any utterance of, for example, ‘A said that Ann’s younger daughter is going to the Whole Foods’ semantically expresses the proposition that A said that Ann’s younger daughter is going to the Whole Foods. I argued above that knowing that we’re interested in whether the semantic content of the report is accurate doesn’t help

¹⁰ C&L also reply (196-9) to two objections aimed more generally at their Speech Act Pluralism. But these question whether our reactions to (unqualified) ‘says that’ reports are what matter to determining what is said, not whether our reactions concern the semantic content of the report.

¹¹ C&L explicitly reject (e.g., 94-5) the claim that propositional attitude verbs are context-sensitive. The context-sensitivity of ‘says’ might be taken to follow from this, if one holds—as many do—that ‘says’ is or is relevantly akin to a propositional attitude verb. But C&L might reject this assimilation, in part on account of the Controversial Aspect of Speech Act Pluralism.

me sort out whether my intuition concerning the report's accuracy is responsive to the semantic content. This already calls into question my ability to judge the accuracy of the report's semantic content. I now offer a further ground.

Return to 'tall.' Suppose in the contexts sketched above, the first person utters 'Timmy is tall' and the second 'Timmy is not tall.' If one accepts that 'tall' is not context-sensitive, the question arises *which* utterance's semantically expressed proposition is true. The answer is far from obvious.¹² That one has eliminated a pragmatic source of interference does not in itself ensure that one can now judge accuracy with confidence. In fact, in this case, accepting that the sentence is not context-sensitive renders such judgments more difficult. C&L argue (Chapter 11) that a semantic theory need not answer such questions: its business is to state semantic properties, not to settle truth-values. But speakers had better be able to answer such questions if the argument for some thesis depends on their judgments.

C&L's argument for the Controversial Aspect is just such an argument. But we can also construct contexts that shift our intuitions concerning the CA-cases. I will assume that C&L are right that one can supply background conditions for an utterance of 'A said that Ann's younger daughter is going to the Whole Foods' such that one will agree that A said that and thus will judge the report accurate. But now suppose that Ann, having overheard the report, confronts A: "You promised never to reveal that I have had children. You know how ashamed I am of having given them up for adoption. How could you?!" It seems that A could truly say that the report was inaccurate: she had said no such thing.¹³ Of course, one could try to explain away this intuition. But one can also try to explain away the intuitions on which C&L rely. One first needs to know whether the

¹² C&L (171) mention several analyses of being tall. These analyses issue different verdicts on this case. (They also differ on whether being tall is closed under 'shorter than' and on whether everything that's tall is not short.) C&L hold that clarifying what it is to be tall is a difficult metaphysical question. In (2005b, 208), they admit that they "are not sure even how to determine an answer to this question." The lack of an informative necessary and sufficient conditions analysis doesn't mean, though, that one can have *no* confidence in particular judgments. One can be very confident that something without height is not tall; and C&L (170-1) seem very confident that Mount Everest, the Empire State Building, and Osama bin Laden are tall (though it's unclear whether the fourth analysis they mention would support this).

¹³ That Ann, let's assume, doesn't realize that you and I—the report's intended recipient and the reporter—already knew the secret doesn't seem to affect the intuition.

A similarly structured case: A government official utters in the presence of a reporter 'John Smith's wife is Jane Doe.' Unlike the government official (who, incidentally, had no ill intentions whatsoever in the case I'm describing), the reporter and her editor both happen to know some secrets concerning Jane Doe's profession. The reporter reports to the editor that the official said that John Smith's wife is the undercover CIA agent working on Project X. (Perhaps she puts it that way because the editor often forgets or confuses women's names.) Is the report accurate? Later, when the government official is under investigation for having broken the law by leaking Jane Doe's undercover status, the editor's secretary plays a tape of the reporter's report. Is the report accurate?

semantically expressed proposition is true. My point is that, given that the uttered sentence is not context-sensitive, this is not obvious. Nor do C&L provide (or claim to provide) arguments for a “metaphysical” analysis of saying that might help settle such hard cases.¹⁴ Further, there is again nothing in the “face-value” methodology that would reasonably tilt the presumption in favor of one intuition over the other.

I have claimed only that C&L have not established their case. I have not argued that the semantically expressed propositions of the reports they present in CA-cases are false—and I certainly have not provided an analysis of saying from which this would follow. But there’s no reason this burden should fall on me, especially in light of the surprising nature of the Controversial Aspect. Nor would C&L be on firm ground if they were to press for details concerning how their intuitions should be explained away. To see this, consider the following objection to the Controversial Aspect:

In all of the cases in which C&L claim that we would regard as accurate a report that A said that P, we would accept as well a report that A thinks (believes, knows, etc.) that P. If it’s judged that what I report by uttering ‘A said that Ann’s younger daughter went to the Whole Foods’ is accurate, wouldn’t there have been a parallel reaction to what I would have ascribed had I uttered ‘A thinks that Ann’s younger daughter went to the Whole Foods—she just told me so’ or (if we already knew who went) ‘A knows that Ann’s younger daughter went to the Whole Foods—she just said as much’? So, there aren’t any cases of sincerely saying without believing after all!

I can feel these intuitions, but my point is not to endorse the objection. I mean only to bring out a consequence of rejecting it. C&L would presumably respond that differences

¹⁴ In previous work, Lepore has defended a neo-Davidsonian account of the semantics of indirect discourse. (See Lepore and Loewer 1989.) Roughly, on such a view, the report, semantically speaking, is true iff an utterance of the sentence displayed in the complement clause would same-say what A uttered. In these terms, my point is that I at least am not sufficiently confident in my ability to judge same-saying, absent further argument, to feel confident in assessing the CA-cases.

I note in passing an independent objection someone might raise to the Controversial Aspect, one suggesting that the Controversial Aspect is *inconsistent* with an accurate analysis of saying. Someone might demand an explanation of why various reports are judged to be *inaccurate*. For example, if I utter ‘And now I shall light this match’ not knowing there is flammable gas present, it seems inaccurate for you to report that I said that I’m now going to blow up the room (even if both you and your audience know that the gas is present). If this report is not inaccurate, C&L run the risk of landing themselves with a position according to which everyone says everything that can be inferred from something they say (and relevant background facts). But, the objection continues, by denying that sincere saying entails belief, C&L deprive themselves of a necessary condition on saying that would explain why these reports are inaccurate. C&L would have the burden of proposing an alternative analysis of saying (or at least parts of one) that would otherwise explain such judgments.

between saying and believing allow us to override or deny the face-value intuitions expressed in such ascriptions and judgments concerning what we believe. But then they will need to explain those intuitions away. The details of their story would seem equally available to someone attempting to explain away C&L's intuitions concerning indirect speech reports in CA-cases.¹⁵

I have also not objected to Basic Pluralism. To be sure, one could direct against C&L's presentation of cases in support of Basic Pluralism some of the points I have offered in resistance to the CA-cases. But Basic Pluralism does not challenge plausible elements of our conception of saying and its relation to belief, and our intuitions concerning the reports presented in its favor are not as pliable. Having questioned whether speakers can sincerely say what they don't believe, one can still maintain that, what a speaker says, even in uttering a single sentence, comprises many propositions. Certainly speakers will themselves accept a wide range of characterizations of what they said (and of what they intended to say)—for example, those that readily follow by their own lights from other propositions they would acknowledge they said. This is significant because, as far as I can see (though I lack space to detail it here), while C&L's defense of Semantic Minimalism calls upon Basic Pluralism, it does not call upon the Controversial Aspect. Only Basic Pluralism is required by C&L's claim that they can accommodate what's right in Context Shifting Arguments—viz., that two speakers in different contexts, but speaking of the same person at the same time, can express different propositions in uttering (for example) 'Timmy's tall'. Moreover, their tests for context-sensitivity do not advert to the Controversial Aspect. Nor does their argument that Moderate Contextualism (which recognizes some more context-sensitive terms) collapses into Radical Contextualism (according to which *all* terms are), or their arguments that Radical Contextualism renders communication impossible and is internally inconsistent. If that's right, then their claim that Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism fit "hand in glove" (204) might require modification: a smaller glove might fit better.¹⁶

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¹⁵ One natural suggestion is that such ascriptions (reports) strike one as accurate because their speech act content contains accurate *de re* ascriptions (reports).

¹⁶ I am very grateful to Adam Leite for comments on a previous draft.