

**The Gap Between Meaning and Assertion:
Why what we literally say often differs from what our
words literally mean**

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To Appear in

Asserting, Meaning, and Implying

Edited by

Martin Hackl and Robert Thornton

The Traditional Picture

What do we want from a semantic theory? A plausible, and widely accepted answer is that we want it to tell us what sentences say. More precisely, we want it to tell us what sentences say in different contexts of utterance. This leads to the view that the meaning of *S* is a function from contexts of utterance to what is said by *S* in those contexts. One might, of course, object that this way of putting things, though convenient, can't be quite right. After all, sentences don't literally *say* anything; speakers who utter them do. However, this observation, though correct, doesn't really detract from the attractiveness of the overall picture. For it is part of the picture that there is an intimate connection between what a sentence "says" (in the semantic theorist's slightly extended use of that term) and what speakers who utter it say, in the ordinary sense. This connection is expressed by the following rough and ready principle.

The Traditional Connection Between Meaning and Assertion

A sincere, reflective, competent speaker who assertively utters *S* (speaking literally, nonironically, nonmetaphorically, and without conversational implicatures canceling the normal force of the remark) in a context *C* says (or asserts), perhaps among other things, what *S* "says" in *C* (also known as *the semantic content of S in C*).

In this way, the deliverances of semantic theory are made relevant to assertions made by speakers.

Since each assertion represents the world as being a certain way, it implicitly imposes conditions that the world must satisfy if it is to be the way it is represented to be. Semantic theories capture this by giving truth conditions of the things asserted (which are also things believed when one accepts that what is asserted). What these things are is a matter of dispute. Some say utterances, some say interpreted logical forms, some say structured propositions, and some say sets of possible world-states, or other truth-supporting circumstances. Although I, myself, favor structured propositions (hierarchical arrangements of objects, properties, and

relations) most of what I say today can, I think, be accommodated by those who make a different choice. The important point, for our purposes, is that whatever these things are, they are widely taken to have three important properties: they are asserted and believed, they are bearers of truth conditions, and they are semantic contents of sentences. In what follows, I will call things with these properties by their traditional name, *propositions*, without insisting on any specific analysis of what propositions are.

According to the traditional way of looking at things, pragmatics enters at the next stage, taking as input the semantic contents of sentences uttered in contexts. When S is uttered, what is asserted is assumed to be S's semantic content -- except when reinterpretation of the speaker's remark is forced, either by the speaker's obvious intention to be taken nonliterally, or by apparent violations of pragmatic principles (like those against asserting what is presupposed to be true, or presupposed to be false). After identifying what the speaker has said, conversational maxims and other principles are used to generate further implicatures, presuppositions, or suggestions carried by the utterance.

An Alternative Picture

That, in a nutshell, is the traditional conception of semantics and pragmatics that has guided much philosophically inspired work on natural language in the last forty years. Although the framework has been fruitful, there is a growing recognition among those working on the border between semantics and pragmatics that it needs to be modified. One sign of this is the expanding literature on new kinds of pragmatic enrichment -- going by such names as *explicature* and *implicature* -- which stand somewhere between the traditional semantic notion of *what is said* and the familiar pragmatic notion of *implicature*.¹ I share the emerging view that this old dichotomy

¹ A representative sample of this literature includes: Kent Bach, "Conversational Implicature," *Mind and Language* 9, 1994, 124-62, and "You don't Say?," *Synthese*, 127, 2001, 11-31; Anne Bezuidenhout, "Pragmatics, Semantic Underdetermination and the Referential / Attributive Distinction," *Mind*, 106, 1997; Robyn Carston, *Thoughts*

needs to be updated. However, I have come to this position by a route quite different from those whose starting point has been more squarely in pragmatics.² My concern has been with well-known semantic chestnuts involving names, descriptions, natural kind terms, and propositional attitude ascriptions. I have come to believe that the apparent intractability of some of the most important problems in these areas can be traced to the overly tight connection between semantic content and assertion presupposed by the traditional picture. I will, therefore, sketch a different picture in which the relationship between semantic content and assertion is substantially looser and more indirect than it has often been thought to be. On the picture I will present, the semantic content of S in a context *constrains* what S is used to assert, without always *determining* what is asserted, even when S is used with its normal literal meaning.

Central to the picture is a conception of meaning, or semantic content, as *least common denominator*. In explaining this, I will simplify matters by limiting attention mostly to indexical-free sentences the semantic contents of which do not vary from context to context. If S is such a sentence, its meaning and semantic content can be identified. This meaning is what is common to what is asserted by utterances of S in all normal contexts in which it is used literally, without conversational implicatures canceling its normal force. Although the meaning, or content, of S is

and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication, (Oxford, Blackwell), 2002; Gennaro Chierchia, "Scalar Implicatures, Polarity Phenomena, and the Syntax/Pragmatics Interface," in A. Belletti, ed., Structures and Beyond (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 2004; Laurence R. Horn, "The Border Wars: a neo-Gricean Perspective," in K. Turner & K. von Stechow, eds., Where Semantics Meets Pragmatics, (Elsevier), 2005; Francois Recanati, Direct Reference, (Oxford: Blackwell), 1993; Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, Relevance, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1986; and Kenneth Taylor, "Sex, Breakfast, and Descriptus Interruptus," Synthese, 128, 45-61.

² See my Beyond Rigidity, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2002, and my "Naming and Asserting," in Z. Szabo, ed., Semantics vs. Pragmatics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2004.

often a complete proposition, and, hence, a proper candidate for being asserted and believed, in certain cases – for example, those containing genitive constructions, like ‘John’s car’ -- it may be only a skeleton, or partial specification, of such a proposition.³ In many contexts, the semantic content of S -- whether it is a complete proposition or not -- interacts with an expanded conception of pragmatics to generate a *pragmatically enriched proposition* that it is the speaker’s primary intention to assert. Other propositions count as asserted only when they are relevant, unmistakable, necessary and apriori consequences of the speaker’s primary assertions, together with salient presuppositions of the conversational background.

³ There are two ways of thinking about the kind of contextual supplementation required by expressions like ‘John’s car’. (i) They might be treated, along with demonstrative pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’, as indexicals the semantic contents of which are simply listed as contextual parameters. In the case of genitives, the designated parameter will include a contextually supplied relation satisfying the constraints semantically encoded by the genitive expression. In the case of ‘he’ or ‘she’, the designated parameter will be a contextually supplied male or female. On this view, sentences containing these expressions semantically express complete propositions, relative to contexts. As a result, this conception of indexical semantics is useful in codifying logics for indexicals. However, in this sense of ‘indexical semantics’, contexts themselves are very abstract, and to find out what context (in this sense of ‘context’) is relevant to understanding a speaker’s remark, one often must *first* find out what the speaker is saying. As a result, one can’t *explain* how speaker-hearers use their knowledge of meaning to interpret what is said by claiming that they apply their knowledge of semantics (in this sense) to the contexts given to them in conversation (since *these* contexts don’t come with labels specifying the contents of expressions). (ii) Alternatively, genitives, along with ‘he’ and ‘she’, could be thought of as semantically *constraining* (without determining) the contents that *occurrences* of them are used, as a result of pragmatic supplementation, to express. On this picture, sentences containing these expressions do *not* semantically express complete propositions relative to contexts. However, speakers’ knowledge of semantics in this sense plays a straightforward role in explaining their ability to interpret utterances. To me, this suggests that the second view is the most useful in constructing semantic theories of natural languages.

On this picture, the Traditional Connection Between Meaning and Assertion is replaced by the following principle.

Meaning, Assertion, and Pragmatic Enrichment

If M is the meaning (or semantic content) of an indexical-free sentence S, then normal, literal uses of S (without conversational implicatures that force reinterpretation of the utterance) result in assertions of propositions that are proper pragmatic enrichments of M. When M is a complete proposition, it counts as asserted only if M is an obvious, relevant, necessary and apriori consequence of enriched propositions asserted in uttering S, together with salient shared presuppositions in the conversation.⁴

A notable consequence of this principle is that often the semantic content of the sentence uttered is *not* itself asserted by the speaker's utterance – even when that content is itself a complete proposition, and the agent is speaking literally and unmetaphorically. These are the cases I will concentrate on today.

But first, a word of caution. Much about the conception of linguistic meaning and language use to be sketched remains incomplete, including the development of precise theories of how pragmatic enrichment takes place, and the formulation of constraints on what constitutes a *proper* pragmatic enrichment of the semantic content of a sentence. Although these matters are critical, at this point, I have no general theory of them. Instead, I will offer a collection of illustrative examples, plus suggestions that I hope will put us on road to formulating such a theory. The guiding idea is that semantic contents are rather austere. Although the semantic rules of the language *constrain* assertions made by utterances in normal contexts, they *determine* only a least common denominator that facilitates communication while allowing speakers wide latitude to exploit the features of particular contexts to shape the information asserted and conveyed by their utterances.

⁴ It is not ruled out that sometimes there is no pragmatic enrichment. For these cases, we let semantic contents count as proper pragmatic enrichments of themselves.

Names

I begin with the interesting, but neglected, class of partially descriptive names, such as ‘Lake Washington’.⁵ What conditions do you have to satisfy to count as a competent user of this name? You have to know that its referent is a lake; you have to know that to assertively utter ‘[Lake Washington is F]’ is to say of the referent that it is a lake with the property expressed by F; and you have to have acquired a referential intention that picks out the right body of water. The easiest way of doing this is by picking up the name from others, and intending to use it in the same way they do. Often, competent users associate the name with additional information, as well. However, this information is idiosyncratic, and varies from speaker to speaker. Thus, although most speakers who are familiar enough with the name to be able to use it can be expected to have extra descriptive information about the lake, little, if any, of this information is common to all such users. As a result, the conception of meaning as least common denominator characterizes the meaning, or content, of the name as being roughly the same as that of the description ‘the x : x is a lake & $x = y$ ’ relative to an assignment to the variable ‘ y ’ of the body of water standing at the end of a chain of uses of the name. On this view, the semantic content of ‘[Lake Washington is F]’ is a singular proposition that predicates the complex property of being a lake that “is F” to the lake itself.

Next consider the linguistically simple proper name, ‘Carl Hempel’, which many know as the name of a famous philosopher of science. When we use a name like this, its content is often pragmatically enriched. When you ask, “Were any of your neighbors in Princeton philosophers?”, and I answer, “Yes, Carl Hempel, was my neighbor”, what I assert is that the philosopher, Carl Hempel, was my neighbor. What *I* mean by *this use* of the name is roughly the same as what the phrase, “the philosopher, Carl Hempel” means. However, this is not what the name itself means. Different speakers who use the name to refer to the same man may, and standardly will, associate

widely different descriptive information with it. Because of this, different uses of the sentence [Carl Hempel was F] will result in somewhat different assertions, due to different pragmatic enrichments. Since there is *no* substantial descriptive information common to all these different enrichments, the meaning of the name (i.e. the common assertive content it carries in all relevant contexts) is simply its referent. The same is true of ‘Peter Hempel’, which is what Mr. Hempel’s friends and colleagues used to call him. Because of this, the two names mean the same thing. Hence, (1a) and (1b) have the same linguistic meaning, even though utterances of the two will nearly always assert and convey different information.⁶

- 1a. Carl Hempel is Peter Hempel
- b. Carl Hempel is Carl Hempel

If this seems counterintuitive, it is, I think, because one is not clear about what one’s intuitions are tracking. Properly understood, the claim that S means, or semantically expresses, p is a *theoretical* claim about the common informational content contained in what is asserted and conveyed by utterances of S in different contexts. When ordinary speakers are asked whether two sentences mean the same thing, they standardly do *not* focus on the question of whether *what is common* to that which is asserted and conveyed in all contexts involving competent speakers by utterances of one of the sentences is the same as *what is common* to that which is asserted and conveyed by utterances of the other sentence. Instead they often focus on what *they* typically would use the sentences to assert and convey in various contexts, or what information *they* typically would gather from assertive utterances of them. In short, they often focus on whether *they* would typically mean the same thing by the two sentences in particular cases, rather than on whether *the two sentences* mean the same thing in the common language of their community. The

⁵ For a fuller discussion, see chapter 5 of Beyond Rigidity.

⁶ See chapter 3 of Beyond Rigidity.

latter is, I suggest, the sense of meaning relevant to semantic theories of natural language. This is the sense in which (1a) and (1b) have the same meaning; the information *invariantly* contributed by one to what is asserted and conveyed in different normal contexts by uses of it is the same as the information *invariantly* contributed to what is asserted and conveyed by uses of the other. This is compatible with the fact that in virtually all contexts in which the sentences might be assertively uttered, speakers in those contexts would use them to assert and convey *different* information.

This is a good example of how a proper conception of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics can contribute to the solution of what have seemed to be intractable problems. If I am right, then linguistically simple names have a Millian semantics, and a partially descriptive pragmatics of assertion. Although Kripke was right that the *meanings* of these names are thoroughly nondescriptive, Frege was right that we often *use* sentences containing them to make assertions, and express beliefs, that are, in part, descriptive. The impasse created by the former's unanswerable objections to descriptivism about meaning, and the latter's refutation of pure referentialism about "cognitive significance" is broken by noting that each was largely right, but about different things.

Failing to Assert the Proposition Expressed by the Sentence one Utters

So far, I have talked about asserting *more* than the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence one utters. However, I have yet to provide a clear case in which the proposition semantically expressed is *not* among the propositions asserted by one's utterance.⁷ I will remedy this by appealing to certain propositional attitude ascriptions. To illustrate the point, I use a variation of Kripke's well-known case of Peter, and the famous Polish composer and statesman, Paderewski.⁸ Although Peter admires Paderewski's music, and also knows of Paderewski's political career, he is under the misimpression that the musician and the statesman are different men

⁷ Several such cases, and the rationale behind them, are given in "Naming and Asserting."

⁸ Saul Kripke, "A Puzzle about Belief," in A. Margalit, ed., Meaning and Use, (Dordrecht: Reidel), 1979.

with the same name. This doesn't prevent him from successfully using the name to refer to Paderewski, both when talking politics and when discussing music. However, in some cases it leads Peter to accept and reject the same sentence. For example, when talking to fellow musicians about composers, he sincerely assents to the sentence 'Paderewski has great musical talent', while when talking to his friends about politics he suspends judgment on this sentence, and so refuses to assertively utter or deny it, on the grounds that he has never heard of statesmen having unusual musical talent. How should we describe Peter's beliefs?

It is clear how he would report them. When speaking about composers to musician friends, he would sincerely report (2a).

2a. I believe that Paderewski has great musical talent. (said by Peter to fellow musicians)

When speaking about statesmen to his political friends he would sincerely utter (2b) and (2c).

2b. I don't believe that Paderewski has great musical talent. (said by Peter to his political friends)

2c. I also don't believe that Paderewski doesn't have great musical talent. I have no opinion. (Said in the same context)

Since the name 'Paderewski' is not ambiguous, and since nothing else here seems to be ambiguous or indexical, the propositions semantically expressed by these examples can't all be true. Nevertheless, it is natural to understand each of Peter's utterances as saying something true, and nothing false.

Pragmatic enrichment explains how this can be. The propositions Peter both primarily intended to assert, and succeeded in asserting, are those literally expressed by (3a-c).

3a. Peter believes that Paderewski, the musician, has great musical talent.

b. Peter does not believe that Paderewski, the statesman, has great musical talent.

c. Peter does not believe that Paderewski, the statesman, doesn't have great musical talent.

The first of these is clearly true. The second is also true, since no proposition believed by Peter ascribes to Paderewski the property of being *both* a statesman and one possessing great musical talent; similarly for the third proposition. Although these are not the propositions *semantically*

expressed by the sentences Peter uttered, they are proper pragmatic enrichments of those propositions, and so are asserted.

But why, in addition to asserting these truths, didn't Peter also say something false? He would have if, in addition to asserting the pragmatically enriched propositions, he had also asserted the propositions semantically expressed by the sentences he uttered. But this is true only of (2a). It is an obvious necessary and apriori consequence of the fact that one believes of a man that he has the property of being *both* A and B, that one believes, of him, that he has the property of being B. Since the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence, (2a), that Peter uttered, is an obvious consequence of the proposition (3a) that he successfully asserted, it, too, counts as asserted. However it is neither a necessary, nor an apriori, consequence of the fact that one does *not* believe of a man that he has the property of being *both* A and B that one doesn't believe, of him, that he has the property of being B. Since the semantic content of (2b) is *not* a consequence of the proposition (3b) asserted by Peter's utterance (or of (3b) plus shared presuppositions of the conversation), it does *not* count as asserted.⁹ In this case, what one's words literally mean does not count as something one literally says.

⁹ It is important to note that the semantic content of (2b) --which states that Peter does not believe of Paderewski that he has great musical talent -- is *not* a consequence of proposition (3b) together with the singular proposition, assumed by all in the conversation, that Peter believes of Paderewski that he is a statesman. To think otherwise is to miss a subtle fact about belief in singular propositions (a.k.a. *de re belief*, or *belief of*): one can believe of an individual x that he has the property expressed by A (by virtue of accepting $\lceil t_x \text{ is } A \rceil$) and believe of x that he has the property expressed by B (by virtue of accepting $\lceil t^*_x \text{ is } B \rceil$, while *not* believing (or being in a position to believe) of x that that he has the property expressed by $\lceil \lambda x (Ax \ \& \ Bx) \rceil$ (because there is no relevant term $t\#_x$ denoting x such that one accepts $\lceil t\#_x \text{ is both } A \text{ and } B \rceil$). Were it not for this fact, the background assumption that Peter believes of Paderewski that he is a statesman would entail that if the negation of the semantic content of (2b) were true, then the negation of (3b) would true, which in turn would mean that the background assumption together with (3b) would entail the semantic content of (2b) – which it does

How can the semantic content of a sentence make a contribution to what is asserted without itself being asserted? On the structured proposition account, the semantic content of (2b) is represented by something like (S2b), while the proposition Peter asserted by uttering it is represented by something like (A2b).

S2b. <Neg, <the Belief Relation, <Peter, <the property of having enormous musical talent, Paderewski>>>>

A2b. <Neg, <the Belief Relation, <Peter, <the property of having enormous musical talent, <Paderewski, the property of being a statesman>>>>>>

The crucial point is that the proposition asserted arises from the semantic content of the sentence uttered by adding contextually determined pragmatic content to one of its constituents. This is the sense in which what is asserted is a proper enrichment of the proposition semantically expressed. The same point could be expressed in other frameworks, so long as the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence is determined by its syntax plus the semantic contents of its constituents. In any such framework, pragmatic enrichment of the sort here illustrated can be thought of as enriching the semantic contents of one or more of the sentence's constituents. The proposition asserted is taken to be the one determined after such enrichment.¹⁰

Referential Uses of Names and Descriptions

Having illustrated the new conception of the relationship between semantic content and assertion, I now turn to other applications of the idea. The first involves so-called referential

not. For discussion, see, Nathan Salmon, *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 27, 1986, 401-29; and Scott Soames, "Direct Reference, Propositional Attitudes, and Semantic Content," *Philosophical Topics*, 15, 1987, 47-87 – both reprinted in Salmon and Soames, *Propositions and Attitudes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1988.

¹⁰ The relationship between the semantic content of S and proper pragmatic enrichments of it is discussed in more detail in "Naming and Asserting."

uses of names and definite descriptions. We start with Donnellan's famous example, (4), the semantic content of which is expressed by something along the lines of (S4).¹¹

4. The man in the corner drinking champagne is a famous philosopher.

S4. [the x: x is a man & x is in the corner & x is drinking champagne] x is a famous philosopher

When the description in (4) is used referentially, the speaker uses it to focus attention on a particular man m, about whom the speaker wishes to say that he is a famous philosopher. In this context, the fact that it is evident to all that m is the intended denotation results in the pragmatic enrichment of the speaker's remark represented by (PE4).

PE4. [the x: x is a man & x is in the corner & x is drinking champagne & x = m] x is a famous philosopher (where the content of 'm' is the man it designates)

This is the primary proposition asserted by the speaker. Since the propositions expressed by (PE4a) and (PE4b), are obvious necessary and apriori consequences of it, they, too, count as asserted.

PE4a. m is a famous philosopher (with 'm' as before)

PE4b. m is a man & m is in the corner & m is drinking champagne (with 'm' as before)

What about the proposition (S4) semantically expressed by the sentence uttered? Although *not* a necessary consequence of the enriched proposition (PE4), it *is* an obvious, necessary and apriori consequence of (PE4), plus the proposition (BP4), identifying m as the man in the corner drinking champagne.

BP4. [the x: x is a man & x is in the corner & x is drinking champagne] x = m ('m' as before)

Since, in most cases, this proposition will be a background presupposition of the conversation, the semantic content of the sentence uttered will also count as asserted.

In these cases, the speaker's referential use of the description results in the assertion of the propositions represented by (PE4), (PE4a), (PE4b) and (S4). In situations in which m is the man in

¹¹ Keith Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions," Philosophical Review 75, 1966, 281-304

the corner drinking champagne, all of these will be true, provided that *m* is also a famous philosopher. When there are *two* men in the corner drinking champagne, but it is, nevertheless, obvious that the speaker is talking only about (the new guy) *m*, the propositions -- (PE4), (PE4a), and (PE4b) – arising from pragmatic enrichment will all be true, but the semantic content (S4) will not be. However, this need not count as a black mark against the speaker, since in cases like this the description will be obviously incomplete, (BP4) will *not* be a background presupposition, and so (S4) will *not* count as asserted.¹²

The speaker is open to the charge of error in cases of misdescription – in which *m* is not a man in the corner drinking champagne. In these cases (PE4), (PE4b), and sometimes (S4), will be false. However, these culpable errors are mitigated by the fact that the asserted proposition (PE4a) remains true. Since in most cases this will be more important to the conversation than whether *m* is in fact drinking champagne, or really in the corner, the fact that the speaker has, strictly speaking, asserted one or more falsehoods will matter less than his having asserted an important truth. These seem to be the right results.

A further virtue of the account is the way it generalizes to parallel cases of referential misdescription involving proper names of the sort pointed out by Kripke.¹³ In Kripke's example, two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. The speaker says "Look, Jones is raking leaves" thereby saying something true about Smith, and something false about Jones. These results fall out of the present approach. The speaker's utterance of (5), accompanied by the

¹² This will be the key idea applied to standard cases involving incomplete descriptions. For a more extended discussion, see my "Why Incomplete Definite Descriptions do not Defeat Russell's Theory of Descriptions," forthcoming in Teorema.

¹³ Saul Kripke, "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference," in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein, eds., Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1979.

background presupposition (BP5), results in the assertion of several pragmatically enriched propositions, including (PE5).

5. Jones is raking leaves.

BP5. The man, *s*, seen in the distance = Jones (where the content of ‘*s*’ is the man Smith)

PE5 [the *x*: *x* = Jones & *x* = *s*] *x* is raking leaves (with ‘*s*’ as before)

Because (S5) and (PE5a) are obvious, necessary, apriori consequences of (PE5), both are asserted.¹⁴ Since one is true and one false, these are the right results.

S5. *j* is raking leaves (where the content of ‘*j*’ is the man Jones)

PE5a *s* is raking leaves (where ‘*s*’ is as before)

This example is important because it shows that the facts about referential uses of expressions – which are common to names and descriptions – are *not* to be explained by positing a semantic ambiguity.¹⁵ The new conception of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics that I have sketched avoids this error by exploiting the role of pragmatic enrichment in determining what a speaker says, or asserts -- taking careful note of cases in which this includes the semantic content of the sentence uttered, and cases in which it doesn’t. I next turn to a related case in which the ability to use a sentence to assert a pragmatically enriched proposition without asserting the content of the sentence uttered is even more important.

Incomplete Definite Descriptions

By an *incomplete definite description* I mean an expression [the *F*], where more than one thing satisfies *F*, rendering the description semantically nondenoting. Familiar examples are: ‘the

¹⁴ Although BP5 is metaphysically impossible (and so has everything as a necessary consequence), it is epistemically possible (not knowable apriori not to be the case). So the obvious apriori consequences of it plus PE5 are, as desired, highly restricted.

¹⁵ The conclusion that the referential / attributive distinction is not semantic, but rather is to be understood in terms of pragmatic enrichment, is one I share with writers like Bezuidenhout and Recanati. We differ in our routes to this conclusion, the details of our accounts, and our overall theoretical frameworks relating semantics to pragmatics.

book', 'the table', 'the car', 'the man', and 'the murderer'. The chief problem they pose is that they are routinely used in sentences like (6) by speakers who succeed not only in asserting truths, but also in avoiding saying anything false – despite the fact that the literal readings of these sentences are often false, in the contexts in which they are used.

- 6a. The book is on the table.
- b. I drove the car to work.
- c. The student got into an argument with a student from another school.
- d. The murderer must be insane.

In dealing with these examples, I will assume that treating definite descriptions as quantifiers the domains of which vary from one conversational context to the next is *not* sufficient to solve the problem – since each of these sentences can be used to state truths in contexts in which more than one thing under discussion satisfies the description. Thus, something over and above semantically determined domain restriction must be at work.

In saying this, I am implicitly *rejecting* a quite different way of thinking about these matters. On the rejected picture, each occurrence of a quantifier phrase in a sentence is taken to contain a hidden domain variable which is contextually interpreted to range over a specially designated subset of the entire domain that is added the context as a separate parameter. In this way, each quantifier occurrence is assigned a contextually determined range as all, or part, of its semantic content relative to the context. A fatal flaw in this approach is that although contextually provided subsets of the domain may be relevant to the *extensions* of quantifiers, they are *not* parts of their *semantic* contents. If I assertively utter (7a) in a conversation about students at Princeton University, the statement I make is one that is true when evaluated at any possible circumstance of evaluation w iff something like (7b) is true at w . By contrast, the statement (7c) – which would be the semantic content of (7a) in my context, if contexts provided *sets* as the semantic contents of quantifiers – gives the wrong (modal) truth conditions of my remark.

- 7a. Everyone writes a senior thesis.
- b. Everyone who is a Princeton student writes a senior thesis.
- c. Everyone who is a member of S writes a senior thesis. (where S is a set containing all and only those individuals who are students at Princeton in the actual world-state)

Since sentences containing quantifiers are *not* standardly used to express *de re* beliefs, or make *de re* assertions, about the sets that happen to be their ranges, these sets are *not* their semantic contents, and this proposal for semanticizing contextually determined domain restrictions fails.

One could, of course, avoid this objection by stipulating that the semantic contents provided by contexts for occurrences of quantifier phrases be properties rather than sets. However, there is reason to avoid this. In the clearest cases of indexical semantics – like those involving ‘I’, ‘now’, ‘today’, and ‘yesterday’ – contextually provided semantic contents are objective features of the circumstances of utterance. This will not be so if properties of arbitrary complexity are added to contexts as separate stipulations – property A as the stipulated content of this quantifier occurrence, property B as the content of that occurrence, and so on. With such additions, contexts become very abstract, and to find out what context (in this sense of ‘context’) is relevant to understanding a speaker’s remark, a hearer would often *first* have to find out what the speaker is saying. Because of this, one adopting this extension of contextual semantics can’t *explain* how speaker-hearers interpret what is said by claiming that they apply their knowledge of semantics (in this sense) to the contexts given to them in conversation (since *these* contexts don’t come with labels specifying the contents of designated expressions). Since I am after a conception of meaning in which knowledge of meaning *does* play a central role in interpreting utterances, this leads me to a different conception of semantics – one in which contexts are real, conversationally given, circumstances of utterance, and the meanings of expressions *constrain*, but do not always *determine*, the contributions made by occurrences of them to assertions made

in these contexts. On this picture, it is *not* presumed that the semantic content of a sentence is always part of what is asserted by a normal utterance of it.¹⁶

With this I return to incomplete definite descriptions, and to the presumption that the speakers can use the sentences in (6) to assert truths, while avoiding the assertion of anything false, even in contexts in which the sentences themselves are literally false. The problem is to explain how this can be. One traditional strategy for solving the problem takes incomplete descriptions to be elliptical for complete descriptive phrases speakers have in mind. When [The F is G] expresses a truth, even though [the F] is incomplete, the context is thought to provide *descriptive* material completing it. For example, when (6d) is uttered upon coming across the victim of a cruel and senseless murder, the incomplete description ‘the murderer’ might be taken to be elliptical for one of the larger descriptions in (8).

- 8a. The murderer of *the mayor of L.A.* must be insane.
- b. The murderer of *the man lying on the bed in front of me* must be insane.
- c. The murderer of *your boss* must be insane.

The chief problem with this approach is that, in some cases, there is no way of extracting *determinate* descriptive content from the context.¹⁷ For example, the speaker may believe that the victim satisfies each of the italicized descriptions, without his intention in uttering (6d) favoring any one (or combination) of them over the others. In cases like this, it seems wrong to take any of the candidates in (8) as giving either the semantic content of (6d) relative to the context, or the content of the speaker’s assertion. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that, in certain cases, the speaker’s remark may be true, even though substituting the completing description uppermost in his mind would result in an untruth. For these reasons, the strategy of treating incomplete

¹⁶ See note 3.

¹⁷ See Howard Wettstein, “Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *Philosophical Studies* 40, 1981, 241-57.

descriptions as elliptical is inadequate. At the very least, some further type of contextual supplementation, beyond the addition of more descriptive information, must be allowed, and, once allowed, must be related to semantic content in an acceptable way.

A different strategy for solving the problem is to treat an incomplete description [the F] as *semantically referential* – i.e. as having a demonstrative, or referential, reading (analogous to that of [this F]) in which it semantically refers to an object *o* in a context *C* iff in *C*, *o* both satisfies *F* and is the object to which the speaker intends to refer. On this view, the semantic content of [The F is G] in *C* is the singular proposition that *o* “is G”. The attractiveness of this strategy is easy to see. If [The F is G] has a referential *reading* in which its *semantic content* in a context is simply the singular proposition the speaker intends to assert, then, of course, the speaker says something true, and nothing false, when that proposition is true – since what he asserts is simply the semantic content of the sentence uttered. For this reason, the thesis that at least some descriptions have special, semantically referential readings has been quite popular.¹⁸

Despite this, there are intractable difficulties facing this approach. The first arises from the fact that the distinction between complete and incomplete definite descriptions is not a linguistic one. Since, in most cases, the question of whether more than one thing satisfies *F* is a nonlinguistic one about what exists in the world, there is no way, within linguistic theory, to identify which descriptions are incomplete. So, if linguistic theory is to assign semantically referential readings to incomplete definite descriptions, it must assign such readings to all definite descriptions – which makes sense only if descriptions are universally ambiguous. This seems extreme.

¹⁸ See, for example, Howard Wettstein, “The Semantic Significance of the Referential-Attributive Distinction,” Philosophical Studies, 44, 1984, and Jon Barwise and John Perry, Situations and Attitudes, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 1983. For a critique of Barwise and Perry, see my “Incomplete Definite Descriptions,” Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic, 27, 1986, 349-75.

The second difficulty is that the semantically referential account of incomplete descriptions mischaracterizes the truth-conditional content speakers' assertions. If a speaker assertively utters (6c) in a context in which 'the student' is used to pick out a particular student *s*, then the semantic proposal identifies (SA6c) as both the semantic content of the sentence uttered, and the proposition asserted by the utterance.

SA6c. *s* got into an argument with a student from another school (where the content of 's' is the student *s* being talked about)

However, this proposition does *not* exhaust the assertive content of the speaker's assertion, since it leaves out the characterization of *s* as a student.¹⁹ That this *is* part of what the speaker asserts is indicated by the obvious truth of the reports, (R₁6c) and (R₂6c) .

R₁6c. The speaker said that: a student got into an argument with a student from another school (where the indefinite descriptions are understood as taking small scope relative to 'said')

R₂6c. The speaker said that two students got into an argument.

Thus, the semantic proposal fails to capture all of the relevant data about assertion that motivates it.

The third problem is that the strategy doesn't generalize properly to cases involving misdescription. When I say, "The man in the corner drinking champagne is a famous philosopher", intending to single out what I take to be one particular, contextually salient, man *m* from a group including several men in the corner drinking champagne, I am using an incomplete description. If, in fact, *m* happens to be drinking Riesling, then we have a standard, Donnellan-type case of misdescription. As before, this doesn't prevent me from truly asserting, of *m*, that he is a famous philosopher. My ability to do this is *not* captured by the semantically referential reading under consideration – since, according to that reading, *m* is the semantic content of the

¹⁹Nathan Salmon makes a version of this point in "Assertion and Incomplete Descriptions," Philosophical Studies, 42, 1982, 37-45, in the course of criticizing Howard Wettstein's semantically referential analysis.

description only if *m* is both a man in the corner drinking *champagne*, and the man to whom I intended to refer. This result is unacceptable. We don't want one explanation for the assertion of the contextually determined singular proposition when the incomplete description, \lceil the *F* \rceil , is a misdescription, and a different explanation when the description is accurate. If one insists that the explanation must be semantic in both cases, then one must change the posited semantically referential interpretation of the description, so that *F* makes *no* contribution to the determination of the referent of the description in the context.

But this is implausible. It is hard to see why a normally compositional semantic theory should ignore the content clause of a description, on one of its readings. Moreover, we have already seen that *F* standardly *does* make a contribution to what is asserted by a speaker who uses the description in \lceil The *F* is *G* \rceil referentially. The defender of semantically referential readings would have no hope of explaining this, if he were to modify them so that *F* makes *no* contribution. In fact, the situation is worse. Even with the proposed modification, we still would have no unified explanation tying together Kripke-type cases of contextually successful uses of *names* to refer to individuals they do not name and Donnellan-type cases of contextually successful uses of incomplete *descriptions* to refer to individuals they do not describe. Since the name-cases must be explained pragmatically, the description cases should also be.

The final nail in the coffin comes from utterances of (6d) -- 'The murderer is insane' -- in which the incomplete description 'the murderer' is used *attributively* to refer to whoever turns out to be the murderer of *v*, where *v* is the victim. In this case, the actual murderer of *v* may be unknown, and the speaker doesn't assert any singular proposition about him. Since incomplete

descriptions are not always used referentially, no semantically referential interpretation is capable of explaining all the data.²⁰

So what is the answer? As previously mentioned, the cause of the problem posed by incomplete definite descriptions is implicit reliance on the old, incorrect conception of the relationship between semantic content and assertion. Once that conception is replaced by the conception I have sketched, the data about incomplete definite descriptions fall into place. First consider an attributive use of (6d), after coming across the body of the victim *v*. Whereas the semantic content of (6d) has the truth conditions of (S6d), the speaker's utterance in this context results in the assertion of the pragmatically enriched proposition (PE6d_A).

S6d. [the *x*: *x* is a murderer] *x* must be insane

PE6d_A. [the *x*: *x* is a murderer of *v*] *x* must be insane (where the content of 'v' is the victim *v*)

Since the semantic content represented by (S6d) is *not* a necessary, or an apriori, consequence of the pragmatically enriched proposition asserted, it is not asserted. Hence, if the murderer of *v* really is insane, then the speaker has said something true, and nothing false – exactly as it should be.

Of course (6d) can also be used referentially to say, of the murderer of *v*, that he must be insane. Thus, if (6d) is assertively uttered in a conversational context in which *m* has been correctly identified as the murderer of *v*, and the speaker intends to make a statement about *m*, then the pragmatically enriched proposition asserted is either (PE6d_{R1}) or (PE6d_{R2}), depending on whether the victim also has been identified.

²⁰ Note, the semantic content of the description is here enriched not with the content of a description denoting the victim (as in (8)), but with the victim himself. Such completion is often determinate even when completion by descriptive content is not. Of course, this does *not* mean that extra descriptive content is *never* included, or that completion by the addition of a contextually determined object or individual is *always* determinate.

PE6d_{R1} [the x: x is a murderer & x = m] x must be insane (where the content of ‘m’ is the man m who has been identified as the murderer)

PE6d_{R2} [the x: x is a murderer of v & x = m] x must be insane (where ‘m’ and ‘v’ are as before)

Since the semantic content (S6d) of the sentence uttered is *not* a consequence of these assertions, it does not count as asserted – just as before. By contrast, the simple singular proposition represented by (PE6d_{R+}) *does* count as asserted both cases, since in each case it is an obvious necessary and apriori consequence of the primary, pragmatically enriched, proposition asserted.

PE6d_{R+} m must be insane (where ‘m’ is as before)

Thus, when the murderer m is really insane, the speaker is characterized as asserting truths, while saying nothing false – exactly as we wanted.

The same points are illustrated by a case in which (6c) is used to say something about a particular student s. Here the semantic content has the truth conditions of (S6c).

S6c. [the x: x is a student] x got into an argument with a student from another school

Since the truth of (S6c) requires that there be exactly one student (in the relevant domain), and that that student got into an argument with another student (also in the domain), (S6c) must be false.

However, this is of no concern to the speaker. Since (S6c) is *not* a consequence of the pragmatically enriched proposition (PE6c) that is asserted, the false semantic content is not something the speaker asserts.

PE6c. [the x: x is a student & x = s] x got into an argument with a student from another school (where the content of ‘s’ is the student s being talked about)

Hence, we get the correct result that the speaker succeeded in speaking the truth, while saying nothing false. In this way, the problem of incomplete descriptions be solved.

The Broader Picture

These results provide what, I hope, will prove to be only a glimpse of what there is to be gained by revising the traditional picture of the relationship between the semantic content of a sentence and what is asserted by utterances of it. If I am right, more problems about linguistic meaning and language use will become tractable as we learn more about the complex mutual dependency between semantic and assertive content. One final illustration of this involves the interaction of descriptions with tense and time designation.

The sentences I have in mind include (9a) and (9b).

- 9a. The philosopher, David Lewis, is dead.
- b. The deceased philosopher, David Lewis, was a metaphysician.

In discussing these sentences I will assume that ‘dead’ and ‘deceased’ apply to an individual at *t* only if the individual existed before *t*, but no longer does, and that ‘philosopher’ and ‘metaphysician’ apply to an individual at *t* only if the individual does philosophy and metaphysics at *t* – both of which require existence at *t*. Given these assumptions, one can construct an argument that the propositions asserted by utterances of sentences (9a,b) arise from their semantic contents by contextually inserting, inside the contents of the descriptions, some sort of time indicators (which, for simplicity, I will take to be tense operators) – even though these indicators are *not* grammatically represented in the sentences themselves.

The argument takes the descriptions in these sentences to be quantifiers that range over a domain which includes individuals that existed in the past, but no longer do. Since the only linguistically represented indication of time or tense in (9a,b) is the form of the copula, we may take the semantic contents of these sentences to be something like those of (S9a,b).

- S9a. [the *x*: *x* be a philosopher & *x* be David Lewis] *is* dead
- S9b. [the *x*: *x* be deceased & *x* be a philosopher & *x* be David Lewis] *was* a metaphysician.

When it comes to tenses governing predicates inside the descriptions, the grammatical structures of (9a) and (9b) are silent. However, if we ask ourselves what is asserted by utterances of these sentences, it is clear what needs to be added. Assertive utterances of (9a) and (9b) assert the contents roughly indicated by (A9a) and (A9b).

A9a. [the x: x *was* a philosopher & x was / is David Lewis] *is* dead

A9b. [the x: x *is* deceased & x *was* a philosopher & x was / is David Lewis] *was* a metaphysician

In these cases, the semantic content of the sentence lacks a specification of time or tense, which must be added pragmatically, before one has a reasonable candidate for assertion.

Although, in principle, speaker-hearers have a choice regarding which time or tense operator is contextually appropriate, with (9a,b) the meanings ‘dead’ and ‘deceased’ leave few options.

However, with other sentences, different choices for the relevant time specifiers are possible in different contexts. For example, if

10. The owner of the Harrison St. house is temporarily away on business

is assertively uttered just after the house has been destroyed by fire, what is asserted is that the person who, in the past, owned the Harrison St. house is temporarily away on business. In other contexts, what is asserted is that the person who presently owns the house is temporarily away.

Thus, even though the semantic content of (10) is something like the temporally incomplete (S10), it can be used to assert either the completed proposition (A10a) or the proposition (A10b).

S10. [the x: x own the house on Harrison St.] temporarily x is away on business

A10a. [the x: *in the past* (x own the house on Harrison St.)] temporarily x is away on business

A10b. [the x: x *owns* the house on Harrison St.] temporarily x is away on business

This is not, I think, a matter either of ambiguity or ordinary indexicality.

I hasten to add that the contextual determination of time and tense is notoriously difficult and complex. My only conclusion is that the proper framework within which to study it is the one I have sketched. In this, as in the other cases, there is a gap between *the semantic*

content of a sentence in a context – and *what speakers mean and assert* when they utter it in that context with its normal literal meaning (without conversational implicatures canceling its normal force and requiring reinterpretation). The gap arises from a *least common denominator* conception of meaning and semantic content, substantial mechanisms of pragmatic enrichment, and a crucial constraint requiring normal assertions to be *proper* pragmatic enrichments of semantic contents. The challenge is to articulate a precise theoretical framework incorporating these ideas, and to use it to solve recalcitrant problems in the theory of linguistic meaning and language use.²¹

²¹ Thanks to my colleague, Jeff King, for comments on an earlier draft.