

WHAT IS SAID AND INDIRECT SPEECH REPORTS

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Abstract

In their *Insensitive Semantics* (2005) Cappelen and Lepore argue for the Controversial Aspect (CA) which is a part of their Speech Act Pluralism and which says that speakers don't have privileged access to what they say. Gross (2006) criticizes C&L's argument for CA and urges them to abandon that claim. I argue that on C&L's broad understanding of the notion of what is said, CA (and whole SAP) is trivial, whereas on a more restricted understanding CA is indeed controversial and plausibly false. Moreover, the broad reading of what is said is incompatible with one of C&L's tests for context-sensitivity.

1. Introduction

In their *Insensitive Semantics* (2005) Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore argue for semantic minimalism and against both moderate and radical contextualism. They argue that radical contextualism is internally inconsistent and moderate contextualism is not much better since it leads directly to the radical version. Their semantic minimalism is the view that the semantic content of the sentence *S* is the content that all utterances of *S* share (the so-called *minimal proposition*). Minimal proposition depends on context only when the sentence contains indexical expressions, which are – according to them – very few and far between (roughly those from Kaplan's list¹). Otherwise it is context-insensitive.² The sentence "Rudolf has a red nose" expresses the minimal proposition *that Rudolf has a red nose* independently of the context in which it is uttered; the sentence "Rudolf has had breakfast" expresses the minimal proposition *that Rudolf has had breakfast*, the sentence "Rudolf is ready" expresses the minimal proposition *that Rudolf is ready*, and so on.³ Cappelen and Lepore admit that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance *u* of a sentence *S* does not exhaust the speech act content of *u* (2005: 145). Hence, with semantic minimalism comes *speech act pluralism*. Stephen Gross (2006) distinguishes two central claims in speech act pluralism: Basic Pluralism, which says that speech act content includes an indefinite number of propositions and the Controversial Aspect which is the claim that speakers do not have privileged access to what they say and do not even have to believe what they sincerely say. The evidence for the truth of both these claims is indefinite range of true and accurate indirect speech reports concerning a particular utterance. Gross argues that the Controversial Aspect is very controversial indeed and that Cappelen and Lepore would be better off without it.

¹ See Kaplan 1989: 489.

² Hence all context-dependence is grammatically triggered (see 2005: 144).

³ Cf. Cappelen & Lepore 2005: 3.

Gross considers the following situation (2006: 12). *A* utters “*Julia* went to the Whole Foods”. According to Cappelen and Lepore *A*’s utterance may be reported in many various ways (depending on contexts). For instance, *B* might say

- (i) “*A* said that *Julia* went to the Whole Foods”,
- (ii) “*A* said that *Julia* went to the supermarket”,
- (iii) “*A* said that *Julia*’s getting the chips”,
- (iv) “*A* said that *Julia* will be gone for a bit”.

If *B* and *C* know of *Julia* that she is *Ann*’s younger daughter and *B* knows that *C* doesn’t know that that girl’s name is “*Julia*” *B* may report *A*’s utterance to *C* by saying

- (v) “*A* said that *Ann*’s younger daughter went to the supermarket”,

even though *A* knows nothing of *Julia*’s ancestry. If we accept (i) – (iv) as accurate, we get Basic Pluralism, and if we accept (v) as well – we have the Controversial Aspect. If *A*’s utterance may accurately be reported as (v), *A* doesn’t know and doesn’t believe what she said. Gross (2006: 12-13) points out that the Controversial Aspect results in rejecting many plausible claims:

- “one must deny (...) that what one sincerely asserts, even when one relevantly knows one’s mind and does not misspeak, accurately expresses what one thinks”,
- “[o]ne must deny as well that an action can be sincere only if it’s performed intentionally”,
- “one must deny that assertions that are not misspeakings must be intentional”,
- “[i]n addition, one must deny that one can always be held responsible – epistemically or otherwise – for what one asserts”.

Gross argues that Cappelen and Lepore’s implicit argument for the Controversial Aspect is “something like the following principle” (Gross 2006: 13): if (1) *A* utters ‘*P*’, (2) *B* utters about *A*’s utterance ‘*A* said that *Q*’, and (3) speakers judge what *B* said accurate, then the proposition semantically expressed by ‘*Q*’ is part of the speech act content of *A*’s utterance.

Gross argues further that (3) – as stated – is ambiguous, because it is unclear whether what the speakers judge is the accuracy of the semantic content or the speech act content of *B*’s report. If this argument is to be an argument for the Controversial Aspect it must be the semantic content that is relevant (for if the speakers judge the speech act content then this has no direct bearing on the proposition semantically expressed by ‘*Q*’ being or not being part of the speech act content of *A*’s utterance). However, Gross notices that there is no reason to expect – and certainly Cappelen and Lepore should not expect⁴ – that speakers are good judges of the accuracy of the proposition semantically expressed by an indirect report.

⁴ Since Cappelen and Lepore point out that “[i]n most regular-life contexts, the semantic content is not what is focused upon” (2005: 207). See also Gross 2006: 14.

Cappelen and Lepore in their reply to Gross offer another version of the principle:

If (1) *A* utters ‘*P*’, (2) *B* utters about *A*’s utterance ‘*A* said that *Q*’, and (3) speakers judge what *B* said accurate, then we have evidence that the proposition saliently asserted by the complement clause of that report is part of the speech act content of *A*’s utterance (2006: 72).

In this version it is unproblematic that “what *B* said” in (3) refers to the speech act content of *B*’s report.

It has to be noted that this version of the principle is very weak. First of all, it concerns the relation between contents of two speech acts and amounts to the claim that *A*’s speech act and *B*’s speech act share part of their content. Since according to Basic Pluralism speech act content includes an indefinite number of propositions the principle is not very revealing. Moreover, it does not deal with semantic content any more, so it does not say anything about “saying” as distinct from e.g. “implying”, “implicating”, etc. Therefore, in this version the principle cannot be used as an argument for the Controversial Aspect. The notion of saying to which it appeals is so broad that the Controversial Aspect based on it would not be controversial anymore. If we assume that by *saying that p* I also *say*, e.g., all logical consequences of *p*, then obviously I do not have a privileged access to what I *say*. It is equally obvious however that we do not use “say that” in that way. Moreover, the principle in its new version still does not allow us to treat cases such as the following (see Gross 2006: 17). Imagine that *B* has reported *A*’s utterance as (v). In such a situation Ann may complain to *A* that she betrayed her, because she revealed that Ann has a daughter (whom she had given up for adoption).

Thus, instead of clarifying the relation between saying and accurate indirect speech reports, the principle muddles things up. Cappelen and Lepore argue against distinguishing different meanings of “saying that” and claim that they

don’t see how to elicit intuitions about what-is-said by an utterance of a sentence without appealing to intuitions about the accuracy of indirect reports of the form ‘He said that ...’ ‘What he said is that ...’ (1998: 280).

It seems to me that we have two options here:

1. Interpret “what is said” pragmatically and identify it with the speech act content. Then it will be the case that accurate indirect reports are good guides to speech act content. However, on such an interpretation of “what is said” the controversial aspect (together with Basic Pluralism and whole Speech Act Pluralism) turns out to be trivial.
2. Interpret “what is said” semantically and identify it with the semantic content. But then even accurate indirect reports are bad guides to what is said. The Controversial Aspect is very controversial indeed (not to say false).

2. Pragmatic and semantic “what is said”

Let us consider the pragmatic option first.

In his 2004 paper Lepore writes (p. 65): „our reporting practices clarify that semantics should not *a priori* constrain what can and cannot be said by an utterance.” He and Cappelen provide the following examples of the situations with indirect speech reports:

1. “A: At around 11 p.m., I put on a white shirt, a blue suit, dark socks and my brown Bruno Magli shoes. I then got into a waiting limousine and drove off into heavy traffic to the airport, where I just made my midnight flight to Chicago.
A said that he dressed around 11 p.m., went to the airport and took the midnight flight to Chicago.” (1997: 283)
2. François: Chartreuse is Maria’s favourite colour.
François said that *the* colour of *that* dress is Maria’s favourite colour. (cf. 2004: 63)
3. Professor H, when asked whether Alice passed her exam, answers with: I failed no one.
Professor H said Alice passed her exam. (ibid.)
4. A: ‘I saw John wearing his blue jacket this morning’.
John owns exactly one jacket and it’s definitely not blue. “If asked by someone else whether John was wearing his jacket this morning, [B] can correctly report [A] as having said that he was wearing *his jacket*.” (2004: 64-65).

As we can see the first report considerably shortens the original utterance, the second replaces the name of the colour with a demonstrative description, the third reporter reports conversational implicature as what was said while the fourth changes the original utterance in such a way as to make it true. Lepore argues that all of these reports are, at least in some contexts, accurate indirect reports. Thus, it may be the case that although it is correct to say that the speaker said that *p*, *p* is not the semantic content of his utterance.⁵ Since according to Cappelen and Lepore the accurate indirect reports from the utterance *U* establish what was said by *U*, they are forced to reject ‘Original Utterance Centrism’ as a result. They claim that “said that” is a four-place relation between the utterance, its context, the report and its context. Thus, in some contexts, the reporter and his context are as important for determining what was said as the original utterer and his context. If so, then it becomes obvious that the speaker may not know what he said: the hearer is as much of an authority on what was said as the speaker is.

⁵ Cappelen and Lepore argue that the reverse correlation also doesn’t hold. It is not always the case that if *p* is the semantic content of N’s utterance, then one can say that N said that *p*. Let’s assume that N said “12 is a dozen”. “12 is a dozen” expresses the same proposition as “12 is 12”. One cannot say however, that N said that “12 is 12” (cf. Cappelen and Lepore 2005: 286). It seems that the only way to reject this is to argue that sentences which differ only in purely referential expressions may express different propositions (i.e. may have different semantic content).

Let us turn to the second – semantic – option now. There is no denying that the notion of what is said is unclear. In particular it is controversial whether it is a part of the literal meaning or a part of the speaker meaning. However, it seems to me that we gain nothing by abandoning the distinction between what was said and what was communicated altogether. Broadening the notion of what is said in such a way that it encompasses what was implicated does not solve anything. On the contrary, it makes things worse, for it makes impossible for speakers to deny that they have said something. If hearers judge the indirect speech report as accurate the original speaker has no way to object. For instance, in the situation (v) envisaged above *A* cannot defend herself against Anne’s charge that she’s revealed Ann’s long hidden secret. In addition, speakers’ intuitions concerning accuracy of the report are not always a reliable guide. We may imagine that speakers who first judged *B*’s report (v) accurate, later – i.e. after Anne’s accusation – would agree with *A* that she didn’t say that Anne’s younger daughter went to the supermarket. There is no denying that ‘said that’ is vague and ambiguous in natural language.

It seems to me that there are at least four distinct ways in which one may attempt to report someone else’s speech indirectly. In the situation described above:

- (1) *B* may try to report as closely as possible what *A* (literally) said (i.e. to report the semantic meaning of *A*’s utterance).
- (2) *B* may try to report *A*’s utterance in such a way that it captures what *B* takes *A* to be communicating (i.e. to report the speaker meaning of *A*’s utterance).
- (3) *B* may attempt to report *A*’s utterance in such a way that it will allow *B*’s audience to understand what *A* (literally) said. Finally,
- (4) *B* may report what *A* said in such a way that *B*’s audience understands what *B* has taken *A* to be communicating.⁶

In the last three cases *B*’s utterance is not a mere report; he makes his own contribution. In (2) *B* reports how he understood *A*. In (3) and (4) *B* tries to facilitate the understanding of what *A* said/communicated. In all three cases *A* may object to *B*’s report even though the audience judges the report accurate. In the first case *B*’s utterance “*A* said that *Q*” means precisely “*A* said that *Q*”. In the second case it means roughly “from what *A* said I (i.e. *B*) understood that *Q*”. In the third case *B* means “what *A* said can be best conveyed to you as *Q*”. In the fourth case *B* says in fact: “what *A* meant can be best conveyed to you as *Q*”. In the cases (2) – (4) *B*’s report is not so much a report on what *A* said but rather it is a self-report on how *B* understood what *A* said and/or how he think it is best to convey it to others. In this sense what *A* actually said only partially determines what *B* may accurately report. The other part is *B*’s own contribution, for which *he* may be held responsible.

If we keep all these different meanings of “said that” separate, then it is easier to deal with the tricky cases. In particular it allows *A* to reject the charge that she revealed something that was merely implicated by what she said but was fully revealed by *B*’s

⁶ If *A* implies something conversationally by his utterance then one might distinguish two further ways of reporting: *B* may try to report (v) in a way that captures best what *A* conversationally implicated or else in such a way that *B*’s audience is able to understand best what *A* conversationally implicated. However in my opinion in this two cases *B* does not report what *A* said.

report. Moreover, it becomes clear that the Controversial Aspect is not only controversial but false for some of the meanings of “what is said”.

3. Conclusion

The question “What did *A* say?” is often a question concerning not the exact words uttered by *A*, but implicatures, intended meaning of *A*’s utterance, etc. Equally often it might be a question of clarification. From this observation Cappelen and Lepore derive the conclusion that indirect speech reports have to take into account certain non-semantic features of the reported utterance and features of the context of the report itself (see 1997: 291). Lepore (2004: 67) concludes: “what happens to our words with their fixed meanings once they leave our mouths is often beyond our control”.

It seems, however, that a different conclusion might be drawn from this observation: indirect speech reports are not, contrary to what Cappelen and Lepore assume, good evidence of *what was said* in an utterance. Such reports are not focused on what was said as opposed to what was communicated and as such are worthless as indications of the former, unless it is interpreted very broadly *à la* Cappelen and Lepore. However, the notion of what is said understood so broadly is philosophically uninteresting. Moreover broad “what is said” may contradict what was said literally.

If we assume the broadest interpretation of “what is said” that the Controversial Aspect is trivial rather than controversial. In particular on this interpretation what is said is different from what is asserted and the undesired consequences mentioned by Gross won’t follow. We don’t have to reject intuitive claims concerning the relation between what is asserted and what is believed by the speaker because the Controversial Aspect doesn’t concern what is asserted. The thesis that we are not responsible for what we say in the broad sense is controversial at the first glance, but once we realize that what is said is constituted by the hearer as well as by the speaker, then it will become obvious that the speaker is not always responsible for what he said. Moreover, sometimes the responsible one will be the reportee. The title of Gross’s paper is phrased as a question „Can one sincerely say what one doesn’t believe?”. If we assume the broad understanding, then this question cannot even be asked, because one cannot sensibly ask whether what *A* said in the broad sense was sincere.

In addition, the whole Speech Act Pluralism becomes evident for its second component – basic pluralism – is also, just like the Controversial Aspect, a trivial thesis.

It is also worth mentioning that broad understanding of “what is said” is incompatible with a “says-that” test for context-sensitivity invented by Cappelen and Lepore. As it was mentioned at the beginning Cappelen and Lepore think that there are only few indexical expressions in natural language. “Now”, “here”, “I”, “he” and the like are context-sensitive, but the rest do not depend on context. They have invented three

tests⁷ which are supposed to determine⁸ which expressions are context sensitive. One of those tests concerns intercontextual disquotational indirect reports. It is argued that context-sensitive expressions block such reports: they cannot be correctly reported disquotationally across contexts. Imagine that *A* says “I’m hungry now”. *B* reports *A*’s utterance by saying immediately after: *A* said that I’m hungry now. Clearly such a report is incorrect. This is supposed to indicate that “I” is context-sensitive. Now take the example of “ready”, which is an expression that is thought by contextualists to be context-sensitive. In the context in which preparations for an exam are being discussed *A* says “John is ready”. In another context, in which preparations for going on holiday are discussed, *B* reports *A*’s utterance by saying: *A* said that John is ready. Cappelen and Lepore claim that such report is correct and hence “ready” is not context-sensitive. It is clear however that their claim is plausible only if we assume minimal understanding of what is said. Only then can we claim that *B* is right in saying that *A* said that John is ready. If “what is said” is understood in a broader way, then *B* won’t be entitled to report *A*’s utterance just by saying “*A* said that John is ready”, for in *B*’s context – on a broad understanding of “what is said” – such a report would mean “*A* said that John is ready to go for holiday”.

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⁷ The tests are: the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test, the Collective Description Test and the Inter-Contextual Disquotation Test. See Cappelen and Lepore 2005: 88-106. In his recent book (coauthored with John Hawthorne) Cappelen criticizes those tests and offers new disagreement-based tests which are supposed to be better. See Cappelen & Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth*, Oxford University Press 2010.

⁸ In *Insensitive Semantics* Cappelen and Hawthorne write as if passing the tests was a necessary condition for being context-sensitive (cf. e.g. 2005: 88: “an expression is context-sensitive *only if* it typically blocks inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports” – emphasis mine). However, later in their reply to the critics they claim that the tests are only “evidence” for context-sensitivity.

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