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## The Problem of Incompleteness and Some Solutions

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Semantic minimalism as a theory claims that all well-formed sentences of a natural language are capable of expressing a proposition (i.e. a truth-evaluable content) relative to a context of utterance. However, there is a well-known problem for this claim, stressed particularly in the work of Kent Bach, concerning sentences which seem to fail to express complete propositions prior to contextual enrichment. So, for instance, consider ‘Flintoff is ready’ or ‘Steel is strong enough’ or ‘Paracetamol is better’: in each of these cases, it seems that we need to look to a context of utterance in order to determine a complete proposition (i.e. by finding out what Flintoff is ready for, what steel is strong enough to do, and what Paracetamol is better than).

In this paper I want to start by assessing the responses to this kind of problem which can be given by certain non-minimalist approaches (namely, indexicalism, contextualism, and relativism). I will argue that cases of putative incompleteness cause a serious problem for relativism, and that, while the accounts offered by indexicalism and contextualism are more consistent than that offered by relativism, nevertheless concerns remain with the motivation on offer for these accounts.

I will then turn to the minimalist response to sentences like ‘Flintoff is ready’ and argue that the minimalist has more explanatory resources available to her in dealing with the challenge posed by this kind of sentence than is sometimes allowed. I will argue that there are three distinct explanatory routes the minimalist might pursue:

- (i) that some cases of putative incompleteness involve genuine indexicality
- (ii) that some cases of putative incompleteness involve hidden syntactic structure
- (iii) that some cases of putative incompleteness are the results of misplaced judgments (i.e. sensitivity to the triviality of the proposition expressed, not to the lack of complete semantic content).

Clearly, stating the options in this way, there may seem to be an obvious concern, namely that the proposals outlined will result in a collapse of the minimalist picture into one of its opponents (e.g. into indexicalism or contextualism), however I will argue that this is not the case. A collapse is avoided in (i) by paying proper attention to the facts which might motivate an analysis in terms of genuine indexicality, while a collapse is avoided in (ii) by paying proper attention to the correct lexical analysis of the expressions of a natural language.

Defending this second response to the challenge of incompleteness will involve looking more closely at the nature of lexical content and the assumptions minimalism makes about the meanings of words. I will suggest that the minimalist approach (often tacitly) assumes that word meanings have two essential features: first, that words in general make a stable contribution to the meanings of larger linguistic units in which they appear and, second, that word meanings at some point involve genuine word-world connections (i.e. minimalism assumes some kind of weak externalism about meaning, see Rey 2006). Meeting these two requirements points us perhaps most naturally in the direction of a broadly referential, atomic account of the meanings of (at least some) non-complex words (e.g. holding that ‘Barack Obama’ refers to Barack Obama, that ‘red’ is true of or is satisfied by red things). However, as we will see, Chomsky and others have argued that there are insuperable problems with the idea that word meanings are simple and broadly referential. Thus I will turn to examine the challenges which Chomsky and others have given voice to. These arguments take two forms: on the one hand, there are arguments which seek to show that referential lexical axioms are impossible, while on the other there are arguments which seek to show that externalist

content is explanatorily redundant within a semantic theory. I will reject both these lines of argument but will note that there is a significant explanatory burden on a successful semantic theory which is ‘internalist’ or intra-linguistic in nature. For instance, it seems that a successful semantic theory should be required to explain the possible and impossible readings of sentences (cf. Pietroski 2005), the apparently non-arbitrary patterns of syntactic distribution which we witness for natural language expressions (cf. Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005) and, perhaps, relations such as analyticity, synonymy and polysemy.

So I will then turn to the question of how this intra-linguistic explanatory burden might be carried. One suggestion, endorsed by Chomsky and his followers, is that carrying this burden requires moving away from atomic lexical axioms and towards some kind of lexical complexity, such as that found in theories of inferential semantics or in so-called ‘lexical semantics’. However, as is well-known, Fodor and Lepore have raised significant objections to any approach which claims that the meaning of a simple term is given by a bundle of simpler features. I will sketch their objections but stress that they all attack a specific *decompositional* version of lexical complexity and I will argue that not all varieties of lexical complexity need take this form. For instance, the meaning postulates posited by Carnap and others arguably embody lexical complexity without lexical decomposition, and I will outline a second approach, which I will call ‘organisational lexical complexity’, which specifically posits lexical complexity without decomposition.

On this approach, word meanings are treated as simple and, at least on some occasions, as broadly referential, but additional information about words is held to be encoded within the lexicon itself. According to this kind of organisational lexical semantics words come replete with complex instructions about how to construct the logical forms of larger linguistic units in which they appear, yet *without* this undermining the minimalist assumption that words make a stable, context-independent and world-involving contribution to the meanings of larger linguistic units. So, for instance, it might be the case that ‘dog’ simply means *dog*, or that ‘hit’ simply means *hit*, though facts about how these expressions are embedded in the lexicon provide further

information about how the terms behave in relation to other expressions (e.g. the kind of argument structures the terms take).

Finally, I conclude by arguing that adopting this kind of organisational lexical semantics could serve two functions for the minimalist. First, it would allow a minimalist semantic theory to capture what I called the ‘internalist burden’ on semantics. Second, it could open the door to a possible explanation for certain cases of incompleteness (e.g. by making it possible to analyse ‘Flintoff is ready’ as having an underlying logical form which marks two arguments, akin to ‘Flintoff is ready for something’). I will explore the motivation for any such explanation of incompleteness and discuss the relationship between organisational lexical semantics and minimal semantics, arguing that the two approaches share the same fundamental aims and motivations, aims and motivations not shared by competitor accounts like indexicalism and contextualism.

My overarching conclusion, then, will be that by adopting an independently attractive account of lexical content (organisational lexical semantics), all three of the above explanatory routes are open to the minimalist in the face of the challenge from incompleteness. Finally, these three solutions in tandem serve to resolve the putative problem of incompleteness for minimalism.

