5

Come Rain or Come Shine
How to Stop Worrying About Unarticulated Constituents

Stefano Predelli

If, in a 'typical' conversational setting, I tell you 'it is raining', it seems natural for you to assess my utterance for truth-value by looking out of the window. In this sense, so the story goes, the truth-conditions for my utterance depend on the weather where we are: truth is obtainable only as long as it rains there. Yet, so we are told, no expression occurring in (the logical form for) the sentence I employed plays the semantic role of contributing any location: the place remains a fundamentally unarticulated constituent of truth-conditional content. And this much, so the story ends, is a momentous result, one that spells trouble for the traditional understanding of the relationships between meaning and truth, and of the aims and scope of context within a theory of interpretation.

Suppose I say 'it is raining' in Genova. Why should Genova, rather than Rome, end up being truth-conditionally relevant? According to the unarticulationist tale, of course, it need not be. But it is in what I called a 'typical setting', one involving no long-distance telephone calls, no conversations focused on how things happen to be in the capital, no fictional pretence, and no other fancy business of that sort. Genova ends up mattering, in other words, because of certain straightforward features of our setting, probably (though not necessarily) involving my communicative intentions. In what follows, I'll thus settle for the speaker's intentions as the presumably determinant parameter in this respect, though any other account of contextual relevance the unarticulationist may want to take on board would suit my purpose as well.

The unarticulationist idea is thus that the truth-conditions for my utterance depend on Genova because Genova, though not addressed by any expression I uttered, is suitably targeted by my intentions. Why the truth-conditions for my utterance, rather than, say, the truth-conditions for some sort of merely imparted, pragmatically conveyed, suggested content? I shall not bother to wait for the unarticulationist answer to this question, because, as far as my strategy is concerned, this much may be granted without further ado for the sake of the argument (and, mind you, *only* for the sake of the argument).

What remains to be addressed is the reason for all the excitement: no expression I uttered refers to Genova, Genova is nevertheless contextually well placed, and my utterance's truth-conditions depend on the weather in Genova. So what? A lot, according to the unarticulationist: meaning fails to determine truth conditions, there's more to context than anyone previously thought, and the end of semantics is nigh.

So, how does context figure in a standard understanding of semantics? Let me count the ways. (i) It provides the parameters needed by the meaning of indexical expressions. (ii) It provides the circumstance required for a definition of truth. (iii) It figures at the 'pre-semantic' level responsible for the choice of logical form (for instance, for ambiguity resolution, ellipsis unpacking, and the like). Elsewhere, I argued that (ii) provides the traditional tools for an eminently traditional analysis of the rain example, and I am still happy with that solution. Here, for the sake of variety, I am interested in an alternative approach, along the lines of (iii). (There are *so* many replies one can give to the unarticulationist tale, it is a mystery how that story has managed to gain any popularity at all).

Suppose that, instead of saying simply 'it is raining', I say (in Genova):

(1)   It is raining. If it is raining in Genova then it is raining in Rome. Thus, it is raining in Rome.

At least under certain conditions (more about them below), it seems reasonable for you to interpret me as having put forth a logically valid argument. I *need* not, of course, be

making a valid argument, just as, in the case of a simple utterance of 'it is raining' in Genova, I need not be talking about Genova. But I may, and, at least in a suitable setting, you may do worse than being impressed by my conclusion, as long as you agree with my premises (never mind why we should both be victims of a rather peculiar view about the meteorological relations between Genova and Rome).

The unarticulationist story gives no clue for the intuition of validity. For, on that story, what enters the picture is a place (say, Genova), not an expression for that place. Equivalently: unarticulationism is a view of truth-conditional content, but content is not the right bearer for logical relations. So, for instance, the following are on a par when it comes to content, but only the former is valid:

(2)   It is raining in Genova. If it is raining in Genova then it is raining in Rome. Thus, it is raining in Rome. (Uttered anywhere)

(3)   It is raining here. If it is raining in Genova then it is raining in Rome. Thus, it is raining in Rome. (Uttered in Genova).

If my addressee was at all inclined to assess my original argument as valid, then, she must have interpreted my contribution along the lines of (2), rather than (3). She must have chosen not a salient *object*, Genova, but a salient *expression*, 'Genova'.

Why that expression? Any factor the unarticulationist may take into account in her views of salience may do the job here. Presumably, the reason lies in the fact that I intended 'Genova' as relevant—a fact which my addressee could easily figure out, given the vicinity of the explicit 'Genova' in the second premise, and given a modicum of charity.

Nothing thus far is by itself particularly troublesome for the unarticulationist: what it shows, so she may happily concede, is that, although some times objects do the job, at other times what is needed is an expression for an object. That is fine. Note however that the contextual contribution now at issue plays a radically different role from the role Genova was supposed to play in the original example. What context now provides is 'Genova', an item that must undergo straightforward semantic interpretation in order to yield the right truth-conditions for my first premise—truth conditions that depend on

a city, not on a name. Which is to say that 'Genova' must occur at the level of logical form, that is, at the syntactic level supplied to the process of semantic interpretation.

How did it get there? Pretty much by definition, because of pre-semantic features of context. Some sentences get 'disambiguated' by appealing to intentions, interests, or what have you. Others get 'unpacked' that way. Others still get 'syntactically enriched' *for one reason or another*. What those reasons turn out to be is of course an independently interesting question. But it is not one that needs to be addressed here, because the need for such syntactic fattening up cuts across the divide between unarticulationists and traditionalists: we all need it.

What about 'it is raining', then? In the simple conversation about the local weather, what my intentions (interests, backgrounds, etc.) provide is, let us grant the unarticulationist, a city. But that does not give the truth-conditions for that *sentence*, given that 'it is raining' might occur in a different setting, say, as part of an argument such as (1), where its logical relations remain underdetermined in the absence of syntactic completion. What (at best) it gives are rather the truth-conditions for a *family* of sentences, those that semantically express a content to the effect that rain occurs in Genova: a family that includes the non truth-conditionally equivalent sentences 'it is raining here' and 'it is raining in Genova'.

Does it then make sense at all to speak of the truth-conditions for an *utterance*? Of course it does. These are coarse-grained truth-conditions, unable to provide an account of some truth-conditional properties such as entailment, but more than good enough for many purposes. I say 'it is raining'. Sometimes you may wonder: does that entail that it is raining in Rome, on the basis of my acceptance of 'if it is raining in Genova, it is raining in Rome'? But many times you could not care less: he said that it is raining here/in Genova/where we are/at this place or whatever, and that's good enough reason for looking for the umbrella. Many truth-conditionally distinct sentences do that job, and their truth-conditional peculiarities do not matter on that occasion.

Given an approach along these lines, then, what is the logical form for 'it is raining', uttered in isolation? Grant (for the argument's sake, and only ofr the argument's sake) all that I have granted to the unarticulationist cause. What follows is that, in typical settings, where no background consideration motivates the choice of one or another expression, there simply is no such thing as *the* logical form appropriate on that occasion. What is at our disposal is however a family of logical forms: any logical form will do the job, as long as it contains an expression referring to Genova. And this much is just what the traditional semantic picture expects. If what background supplies is merely a 'salient object', what is obtainable is at best a family of truth-conditions—or, if you prefer, truth-conditions in the eminently coarse sense appropriate for an utterance. In a nutshell: if unarticulated constituency is not a myth, it is a resounding confirmation of the traditional understanding of pre-semantic context, and of the relationships between interpretable syntactic structures and their semantic evaluation.