

Contextualist theories of semantics contend that in order to reach certain explanatory goals, it is either necessary to increase the number of contextually-sensitive expressions beyond those that are obviously context-sensitive or to allow for the literal semantic content of sentences to be “enriched” by context-driven processes.¹ However, semantic theorists of a more formal stripe, e.g. the minimalism of Cappelen & Lepore (2005) or Emma Borg (2004, 2012), have argued that the more context-sensitivity one introduces to semantics, the further away these explanatory goals become. In particular, the greater role context plays in determining the semantic content of sentences, the more implausible it is that language users are able to share this content across contexts. In support of this position, theorists of this variety put forward what is sometimes called “the Miracle of Communication” (MOC) argument:

If contextualism were true, then sharing literal semantic content (something that many would regard as necessary for linguistic communication) would be a miracle, especially when this sharing is purportedly done with someone who knows very little about the context. But, there are no miracles, sharing semantic content is something done quite regularly. Therefore, contextualism is false.

Recently, Nellie Wieland (2009, 2010) and Daniel Wedgwood (2007) have argued that the MOC argument misconstrues contextualism since it assumes that contextualism requires that contexts be *identical* for communication to occur. However, Wieland and Wedgwood contend that this assumption is too strong as contextualism is committed to the weaker thesis that makes communication depend upon language users knowing a sufficiently significant (or relevant) number of the same contextual factors. In other words, the cross-contextual sharing of content requires a *coarse-grained* knowledge of context rather than one that is *fine-grained*. This paper argues that the appeal to a coarse-grained knowledge of context is overly indeterminate and counter-intuitive. My critical response to this objection occurs in three sections. Section 1 articulates the MOC argument. Section 2 distinguishes two recent objections to the MOC argument and isolates the objection from Wieland and Wedgwood. Finally, section 3 articulates two criticisms of this objection.

1. The Miracle of Communication Argument

If knowing what content an utterance of a sentence literally means plays a fundamental role in communication, a striking blow to any semantic theory would be if it could not explain how we convey this kind of content across contexts (see Borg 2004:61, 263). Context-insensitive theories like semantic minimalism explain this phenomenon by positing some common content that cuts across diverse contexts. For barring the presence of any context-sensitive terms (which tend to be few and far between on the minimalist’s account) and supposing that the lexical items composing the

¹ Examples of contextualism include: discourse-representation theorists (Heim 1983; Kamp 1984/1985; Kamp and Reyle 1993), proponents of Situation Semantics (Barwise and Perry 1999 [1983]; Perry 1986, 1998), theorists advocating a non-standard parameters approach to semantics (MacFarlane 2009; Predelli 2005; Kompa 2002), and relevance theorists and a variety of neo-Wittgensteinians (see Travis 1989, 2000; Carston 1988, 2002; Recanati 1989, 1993, 2004; Searle 1978, 1980).

sentence offer up a constant contribution, each utterance of the sentence can be interpreted irrespective of the context in which it is used. In contrast, the more context-sensitive a semantic theory is, the more it makes knowing the meaning of a sentence depend upon knowing aspects of the context in which the sentence is used. On these accounts, we cannot convey the literal meaning of a sentence from one context to another without knowing those features of the context that contribute to its meaning. This is problematic especially since knowing the features of the context that have semantic relevance could include knowledge of (i) information that has been activated from prior discourse, (ii) where and when a speaker made a particular utterance, (iii) what objects are present to conversational participants in their mutual perceptual environment, (iv) the purposes and intentions of various conversational participants, and (v) various principles governing conversation, e.g. Grice's conversational maxims or other conversational norms, and other facts about the conversational setting (cf. Bezuidenhout 2002:117; Cappelen and Lepore 2005:123-124).

The most radical versions of contextualism (hereafter RC) make our knowledge of the semantic content of a sentence *always* depend upon its context of use and make the determination of semantic content potentially sensitive to any and every feature in that context. Given this commitment, RC is subject to the following objection:

The Miracle of Communication (MOC) Argument

- P1 If radical contextualism (RC) is true, then it would be a miracle if people succeeded in communicating across distinct contexts (for RC makes it extremely implausible that speakers know all of the contextual factors necessary to know the semantic content of the sentence).
- P2 There are no miracles for people succeed in communicating without knowing a great deal about context in which an utterance of a sentence is expressed.
- C Therefore, RC is not true (cf. Cappelen and Lepore 2005:123-125)

The MOC argument begins by pointing out that if RC were true, then the semantic content p expressed by an utterance of a sentence S in a context C partly depends upon the specific features in the context C . Second, knowing the context of an utterance means knowing a lot of specific things about the context for even small differences between contexts can have a semantic effect (see Travis). Next, we routinely encounter sentences where we know very little about the context in which they were used. Nevertheless, we communicate without knowledge of all the specific features composing a context. If, however, communication depends upon at least a tacit understanding of the semantic content of a sentence and this understanding depends upon a knowledge of the context that we do not have, then RC makes the conveyance of semantic content (and communication) a miracle rather than a banal, everyday occurrence. But, there are no miracles and so RC is not true.

To illustrate, suppose that Tek is a student of philosophy that is interested in the work of Martin Heidegger. Tek decides to start an internet blog to document his experience reading Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. In his first entry, Tek writes the following sentence:

(1) Philosophy is fun.

Now suppose that Vic (who doesn't know Tek) stumbles upon Tek's blog. What does Vic know about the context in which (1) was uttered? Vic probably knows the *date* and *time* when (1) was written (since blogs usually date stamp entries), and let's suppose he knows that it was written by someone competent enough to sign-up for a blog and someone who at least knows the basics of English. There is, however, a lot that Vic does not know. He doesn't know what knowledge has already been activated by prior discourse, e.g. he doesn't know if there are any previous blog entries

that have been deleted which spell out Tek's love (or dislike) of Heidegger. He doesn't know who uttered (1) nor where (1) was uttered, e.g. he doesn't know who Tek is, doesn't know Tek's nationality, where Tek lives, whether Tek is a philosophy student, a professor, or has even read one article on philosophy. Vic also doesn't have access to the perceptual environment in which (1) was uttered, and so he doesn't know if Tek is looking at Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Quine's *Word and Objects*, Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, or whether Tek is staring into space thinking about some deep (or superficial) question. Vic doesn't know the intended audience of (1), e.g. whether it is intended for students, for his friends, for a comedic audience, for his colleagues. Lastly, Vic doesn't know if (1) was meant seriously, ironically, as a prompt for comments, or as a threat to his practically-minded parents.

If RC were true, then in order for Vic to know what is expressed by (1), Vic would need to know a lot about the context in which (1) was expressed to determine what counts as philosophy and what counts as fun. But, as we have seen, since Vic fails to know most of this contextual information, it follows then that Vic does not know what (1) literally means. And, since there are countless other cases like this (as we read blog posts, Facebook updates, Twitter feeds, and books by people we have never met), RC makes content-sharing across contexts a miraculous rather than a commonplace event.

However, the sharing of semantic content is not a miracle. We intuitively regard Vic (and millions of other English speakers who visit blogs everyday) as knowing what (1) literally means even if he does not know what Tek meant to convey in uttering (1). Not only does Vic know that (1) literally means that *Philosophy is fun* and is true if and only if Philosophy is fun, but Vic can use this information in a variety of different yet legitimate ways in subsequent conversations. Vic can correctly report what Tek says by uttering 'Someone said that philosophy is fun.' If the content occurred in a Twitter feed, Vic could "retweet" this information or copy and paste the sentence into his own blog and then hyperlink his source. Further, Vic could communicate the literal meaning of (1) by uttering 'Philosophy is fun' to a friend, retyping it, or by copying and pasting the sentence into a chat with a friend. All of this is possible despite the fact that so little is known about the context in which (1) is uttered!

2. Two Contextualist Responses

One recent objection to MOC has been put forward by Daniel Wedgwood (2007) and Nellie Wieland (2009, 2010:404-405).² Let's call their objection (R1):

(R1) *Communication depends upon there being sufficiently similar context*: While communication requires that speaker and interpreter cognize a proposition with *identical content*, two utterances u_1 and u_2 of a sentence S in two different contexts C_1 and C_2 can express the same proposition p provided C_1 and C_2 are sufficiently similar. Sharing semantic content is possible on the condition that contexts are sufficiently similar and not only if contexts are identical. Thus, MOC arguments fail because RC does not imply that language users need to have fine-grained knowledge about the context in which S occurs.

² Some contextualists aim to block the slide from Minimalism to RC (Taylor 2001:60-61; MacFarlane 2009:246; in response, see Cappelen and Lepore 2005:48-52; 66-68), others are skeptical that we do communicate across contexts (in response, see Cappelen and Lepore 2005:126-127; cf. Wedgwood 2007:656-657), others deny that communication depends upon sharing semantic content across contexts (Davidson 2006), and finally others claim that minimalism is just as vulnerable to MOC arguments as RC (Begby unpublished m.s.; Travis 1985:202-203; Martínez-Manrique and Vicente 2009:23; Recanati 2010:6-7; Wieland 2009:47, 2010:404; Heck Jr. 2006:87).

According to (R1), MOC arguments misconstrue the role context plays in RC by falsely assuming that RC entails that our knowledge of what a sentence literally means requires we know *every* specific feature about the context in which a sentence is used. On this account, two language users share semantic content only when their knowledge of the context in which the sentence is embedded is identical. Wieland (2009:405) argues that this constraint on RC is too strong. According to Wieland, the MOC argument only works if contextualists are forced to accept the following proposition:

If context itself contributes to the meaning of any given utterance, then it will be impossible to mean the same thing in sufficiently diverse contexts.

While contextualists accept the antecedent of this proposition, Wieland argues that they need not accept the consequent. For provided contexts overlap in a sufficient number of relevant ways, then contextualists can plausibly assert that the contextual knowledge of language users can differ but they nevertheless can convey content across these contexts. The thrust of the objection then is that if the semantic content of S is not determined relative to *every* feature of context but *relative to what is relevant or salient in the context*, then it is no longer a miracle why language users are able to share content across contexts.

Similarly, Daniel Wedgwood (2007:652) objects to MOC arguments directed at relevance theory e.g., (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004). Relevance theory begins from the assumption that a linguistic utterance not only conveys the fact that a speaker intends to communicate thereby but that communication is made possible through (i) a process of decoding the literal (or encoded) meaning of the linguistic expression and (ii) determining the significance of the utterance by drawing upon the manifest extralinguistic information. Information (or an assumption) is *manifest* to a language user provided it is either roughly accessible or capable of being derived from the available evidence in context. The total amount of manifest information available to an individual is what relevance theorists call that individual's "cognitive environment" and the total amount of manifest information shared between individuals is labeled the "mutual cognitive environment" (see Sperber and Wilson 1995:38-46). According to Wedgwood, when minimalists like Cappelen and Lepore (see 2007) apply MOC arguments to relevance theory, they misconstrue the role that context (manifest extralinguistic information) plays in communication. It is not the case that communication depends upon *every* element of the context, but "interpretation is based on that [features of context] which interlocutors have good reason to believe that they share" (Wedgwood 2007:662). In short, proponents of RC contend that communication depends upon a particular type of *coarse-grained* knowledge of the context rather than a *fine-grained* one. And so, the force of the MOC argument is undercut if the possibility of communication depends upon whether language users know a *sufficiently similar number of relevant features in the context of use* and not *every single feature of the context of use*.

Before turning to a critique of (R1), it is instructive to contrast (R1) against another important response (R2) that has already been addressed by Cappelen and Lepore (2006):

(R2) *Communication depends upon having sufficiently similar content*: Since communication only requires that speaker and interpreter cognize a proposition with *sufficiently similar content*, contextualism does not imply that language users need to have fine-grained knowledge about the contexts in which an utterance occurs (Sperber and Wilson 1995:193; Bezuidenhout 1997:198; Recanati 2004; Carston 2002, 2004:822-823; Heck Jr. 2002; in response, see Cappelen and Lepore 2005:125-126; Cappelen and Lepore 2006:1034-1038, 2007; cf. Wedgwood 2007:654-659).

According to (R2), RC does not imply that language users need to know a great deal about the context in which an utterance occurs because communication only requires that speaker and interpreter cognize a proposition that has sufficiently similar *content*. Bezuidenhout (1997:198), for example, writes:

I argue that the *de re* thought a speaker expresses and the *de re* thought the listener understands are not the same. Thus there is a question as to the semantic content of the utterance which mediates the communicative exchange between the speaker and listener. What is *its* content? [...] I challenge the claim that we need some common content which allows a role for modes of presentation. I argue instead that we need recognize only speaker-relative content and listener-relative content and a relation of *similarity* holding between these two contents.

The idea is that while communication depends upon knowing the semantic content of an utterance, successfully conveying semantic content does not require that language users know *exactly* what a sentence literally means. Communication does *not* require *fine-grained content* to cut across contexts but only *sufficiently similar content* to do so. As Cappelen and Lepore (2006:1034), who call this response the ‘Similarity View’, put it “Sentences like ‘A said that p’, ‘A said what B said’, ‘I agree with what A said’, ‘I understand exactly what I said’, and other such locutions do *not* require for their truth content *identity* across contexts. All they require is *content similarity* across contexts” (see Cappelen and Lepore 2005:126; Sperber and Wilson 1995:193). By relaxing the demands on what language users must know in order to share content, contextualists can argue that it is quite possible for two language users to work from different assumptions about the context in which the sentence is used and reach two propositions that roughly correspond in semantic content (see Cappelen and Lepore 2006:1034-1038; 2005:125-126; cf. Wedgwood 2007:654-659). Such a view, so it is argued, takes into account the fact that communication in a natural language is never an exact enterprise but one that involves some amount of slippage.

In short, opponents of minimalism who pursue (R2) attack the MOC argument by claiming that sufficiently similar *content* is all we need for content-sharing. In contrast, advocates of (R1) like Wieland and Wedgwood contend that communication requires language users have a sufficiently similar knowledge of the *context*. For the latter, two utterances u_1 and u_2 of a sentence S in two different contexts C_1 and C_2 express the same proposition p provided C_1 and C_2 are sufficiently similar. For them, sharing content across contexts only requires knowledge of key chunks of context and not each and every grain.

3. Two Criticisms of the Appeal to Sufficiently Similar Context

There are two reasons to be critical of (R1). First, (R1) is *counterintuitive* in that it does not explain away the intuitions that we, in fact, convey content across significantly (even radically) different contexts. In making successful sharing of semantic content depend upon discourse participants sharing a sufficiently similar number of relevant contextual factors (Wieland) or a significantly similar cognitive environment (Wedgwood), (R1) has the effect of *reducing* the number of counterexamples that MOC arguments present but not *eliminating* them altogether. If language users find themselves in a situation where their knowledge of the context does not significantly overlap and this overlap is necessary for determining semantic content, then much of our everyday communication remains miraculous. Consider, for example, Vic’s cognitive situation (detailed in §1) when he reads Tek’s blog entry ‘Philosophy is fun.’ Vic knows next to *nothing* concerning the context in which Tek wrote the entry and so the contextualist would be hard-pressed to say that there is

sufficient overlap between Vic and Tek. Intuitively we think that Vic understands the content expressed by Tek's writing of 'Philosophy is fun', we think he can say the same thing by repeating this sentence in a different context, and we think that if he were to indirectly report this disquotationally as 'someone said that philosophy is fun,' he would have uttered something true. (R1) is thus counterintuitive for it entails that we don't understand what is being said by all of those internet blogs, newspapers, and books written by people we don't know, in places we aren't in, and whose intentions and purposes we have next to no access.

A counter to this reply might come from Wedgwood (2007:662), who would likely find this criticism to involve a misrepresentation of relevance theory as it assumes that contextual factors "are quite divorced from each other and subject to unconstrained, idiosyncratic variation; that there is no basis for relating one's own assumptions to those of another." According to Wedgwood, minimalists miss the important fact that there always exists *some* amount of contextual overlap between discourse participants (even if it be a hypothetical example involving some unidentified reader they have in mind) and this contextual overlap places an important constraint on how language users will interpret the literal meaning of a speaker's utterance. Such a constraint provides language users enough information to make the sharing of semantic content possible. Thus, proponents of (R1) and RC need not worry about radical cases where discourse participants lack *any* contextual overlap since *every* case of communication involves *some* amount of contextual overlap.

While the presence of some amount of contextual overlap that functions to constrain idiosyncratic interpretation may be enough to explain the *possibility* of communication, it is too weak to explain away the intuitions that cross-contextual content sharing is a *regular, everyday occurrence*. The MOC argument contends that since RC makes the sharing of semantic content depend upon knowledge of the context in which a sentence is used, it is extremely surprising that discourse participants are capable of successfully communicating although their contextual knowledge is so different. For when there are significant differences in the assumptions manifest to discourse participants, what explains why semantic content is *routinely* shared even in cases involving large differences in contextual knowledge? Simply pointing to *some* common features of the cognitive environments of Vic and Tek in the 'Philosophy is fun' case and saying these features keep semantic interpretation from going off the handle is not enough. That is, even if we grant that (i) communication never involves a case where language users have no shared contextual information and that (ii) the logical forms expressed by an utterance of a sentence are never subject to an unconstrained development, this still does not explain our intuitions that semantic content is routinely shared when there are radical differences in contextual knowledge.

A second possible reply is to say that when contexts sufficiently different, content sharing does not occur regularly. That is, in cases where contexts diverge in a radical way, content sharing occurs far less frequently than many language users are willing to admit. Such a response might take form of the blunt response that we do not share content when contexts sufficiently diverge (Cappelen and Lepore 2005:126-127; cf. Wedgwood 2007:656-657). Few theorists, however, are willing to bite this kind of bullet. On almost an everyday basis, billions of people are encountering sentences uttered by language users who they know little about, and to say that they fail to know what it being literally said in these linguistic interactions is a hard pill to swallow. So while this sort of response is available, its counter-intuitive nature requires considerable argumentative resources to support.

This takes us to our second criticism of (R1). (R1) seems to require the "shared context criterion":

Shared Context Criterion: A speaker A_1 shares semantic content with a hearer A_2 only if A_1 and A_2 share a sufficiently similar number of relevant contextual factors (Wieland) or a significantly similar cognitive environment (Wedgwood). For example, provided that A_1 and A_2 share a significant number of assumptions that are manifest to both of them, then A_1 and A_2 belong to mutual cognitive environment that allows for communication.

The above criterion does not specify when two cognitive environments are similar enough for A_2 to know what A_1 has literally said in uttering a sentence S . That is, in addition to being unable to account for the routine transmission of semantic content in cases where discourse participants do not share a sufficiently similar context, a further problem concerns what it means for two contexts to be “sufficiently similar.”

The problem with leaving this aspect of (R1) imprecise is that it blocks the possibility of citing legitimate counterexamples to RC (and R1) and so makes the theory unfalsifiable. For consider that a legitimate counterexample to (R1) is this: A_1 shares literal semantic content with A_2 but the mutual cognitive environments of A_1 and A_2 do not sufficiently overlap. However, if *sharing a sufficiently similar context* is left undefined, then contextualists have a way to evidence-proof their theory and fend off the most plausible of counterexamples. This is done by (i) pointing out how all discourse participants share some (albeit trivial) manifest assumption (e.g., belonging to the same physical universe) and then (ii) stipulating that every case where semantic content is shared is one where participants share a sufficiently similar context. But this kind of indeterminacy is pernicious as it allows for contextualists to beg the question against every counterexample. In short, with the notion undefined, contextualists can pick and choose which cases are those where discourse participants share a sufficiently similar context on the basis of whether or not they have successfully communicated.

4. Conclusion

The MOC argument is not a knock-down proof for a highly context-insensitive theory like a Carnapian context-independent semantics. Since Bar-Hillel’s criticisms of Carnap, very few think that we can get along with a context-free description of natural language for indexical terms like ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘here’, etc. resist just such an account. What the MOC argument instead illustrates is that semantic theorists cannot let variations in context run roughshod over the stable contributions made by certain lexical and syntactic features of a sentence. Putting too much stock in the contribution of context bankrupts the entire enterprise as it renders successful communication impossible. What I have argued is that in making the condition of successful content-sharing contingent upon two utterances of the same sentence being uttered in *sufficiently similar contexts*, (R1) does not provide a convincing response to the MOC argument against RC for two reasons. First, it runs counter to our intuitions that we fail to understand the literal meaning of a sentence in cases where the contextual knowledge of language users is radically divergent. Second, what it means for two contexts to be sufficiently similar is overly indeterminate, which allows radical contextualists to uncharitably block counterexamples that would show (R1) to be false.

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