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Reply to Romero and Soria

François Recanati

In ‘Optionality in Truth-Conditional Pragmatics’, Romero and Soria discuss various senses in which a pragmatic process may be said to be mandatory (vs optional), and they offer a detailed and most useful taxonomy. The issue is important because I use optionality as a criterion to distinguish, among the primary pragmatic processes (those which contribute to what is said), two main types: saturation processes, which are mandatory, and modulation processes, which are optional. R&S object that this distinction is not fine-grained enough. Modulation is sometimes mandatory: it is mandatory when, because of a semantic mismatch at the level of linguistic meaning, the sentence cannot express a determinate proposition unless the meaning of one of the constituent expressions is modulated so as to match the meaning of the other constituents.

I agree that there is a sense in which modulation is mandatory in such cases. R&S use my example of semantic mismatch: ‘The city is asleep’ [Recanati (2004), pp. 34-36]. There are several modulation options. ‘Asleep’ may be understood, via loosening, as contributing the property of being silent and displaying a low level of activity. Or, via semantic transfer, it can contribute another property predicated of the city, namely the property of being such that its inhabitants are asleep. It is also possible that some metonymic process operates in such a way that ‘the city’ itself is tantamount to ‘the inhabitants of the city’. (This is truth-conditionally equivalent to the previous interpretation.) There are many options, and it may be that what is communicated is vague and somewhat indeterminate. But if no modulation takes place, the interpretation crashes (as formal linguists like to say). So modulation is semantically mandatory, in such cases. R&S say it is *compositionally* mandatory.

I think this is a useful category indeed. When discussion of Minimalism started [Carston (1988), Recanati (1989)], various senses of ‘mandatory’ were already distinguished. In one sense, what is mandatory is what is linguistically triggered. Mandatoriness is a conventional property. In another sense, ‘mandatory’ means ‘necessary for a complete proposition to be expressed’.¹ Perry argued that, because there are ‘unarticulated constituents’, it

is possible for some pragmatic process to be mandatory in one sense but not the other [Perry (1986)]. Kent Bach also thought of ‘completion’ as a process that is mandatory in only one of the two senses [Bach (1987)]. I do not think we need unarticulated constituents, because everything can be done with modulation [Recanati (2010), pp. 22-24]; and I think completion reduces to (a variety of) saturation. But compositionally mandatory modulation shows that we do need the distinction R&S make between ‘mandatory_L’ and ‘mandatory_T’. We also need it, as they point out, because a pragmatic process which is linguistically triggered may be such that it does not contribute to truth-conditional content. Words like ‘but’ display a *non-truth-conditional* form of indexicality and require saturation at another level than that of truth-conditional content [Recanati (1993), p. 240].

I agree with most of R&S’s observations, but not with their criticism of my view, which is based on a presupposition I do not share (though I am open to reconsideration). The presupposition has to do with the status of compositional modulation. Some people [e.g. Pustejovsky (1995), Asher (2011)] take compositional modulation to be part of semantics; others take it to be a nonlinguistic, pragmatic phenomenon. For Hagit Borer (2005), a sentence like ‘The city is asleep’ does not display any *linguistic* anomaly; it is a perfectly fine, grammatical — and therefore meaningful — sentence of the language. Making sense of what an utterance of the sentence says is a different story: a story for pragmatics to tell. In some cases (e.g. ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’) it is hard to imagine a context in which the sentence might be used to say something, but that is never *impossible*. Again: a sentence that is fully grammatical automatically has the minimum degree of meaningfulness which makes it fit for expressing a proposition, provided, of course, the context is appropriate. Making sense of what an utterance says is a matter of pragmatics, on this view, so we have to distinguish between pragmatic meaningfulness and the minimal meaningfulness which comes with grammaticality. Putative semantic mismatches make pragmatic meaningfulness harder to attain, perhaps, but they do not affect the grammaticality of the sentence and its minimal meaningfulness.²

On the Pustejovsky-Asher view, compositional modulation is mandatory_L. On Borer’s view, it is mandatory_T but not mandatory_L. It is mandatory in order to make sense of what the speaker is saying, but not mandatory from a narrow linguistic point of view. I side with Borer in this debate, but R&S take the other position: they treat semantic mismatch as a linguistic property of the sentence, and argue that compositional modulation is mandatory_L. They put compositional modulation on a par with lexical and constructional context-sensitivity: in the three types of case, a primary pragmatic process has a properly linguistic basis.

R&S think that semantic mismatches and compositional modulation object to my claim that modulation is always optional. But the distinction between

optional_T and *optional_L* is all I need to dispose of the objection: I say that modulation is *optional_L*, and that is compatible with claiming that in cases of compositional modulation it is *mandatory_T*. The reason why R&S think they have a counterexample to my claim is because they assume that compositional modulation is *mandatory_L*. But that is an assumption I do not make, so I do not think my claim has been refuted.

A related issue concerns Radical Contextualism, a view I find congenial and close to that I ascribed to Borer. It is also, arguably, a view held by Chomsky, under the influence of ordinary language philosophers (the early advocates of Radical Contextualism). Radical Contextualism is the view that sentences express a determinate content only in the context of a speech act. Now, in cases of semantic mismatch, it can be argued that the sentence does not express a determinate content, indeed. What has content is the speech act performed by using that sentence (and involving sub-acts of modulation). Radical Contextualism generalizes this view to *all* sentences. Sentences in general do not, by themselves, express a determinate content. The pragmatics of communication always contributes something to the content that is expressed, and that means that without a speech act no determinate content is expressed.

The fact that there is compositionally mandatory modulation in *some* sentences (those involving semantic mismatch) is insufficient to establish Radical Contextualism. To establish Radical Contextualism, one needs to posit a gap between linguistic meaning and semantic content, such that a piece of linguistic meaning cannot directly contribute to semantic content without help from pragmatics. We have to construe linguistic meanings as either very thin or very thick, but in any case, as having the ‘wrong format’ to directly occupy a position in conceptual structure and be a thought constituent [Recanati (2004), pp. 140 ff]. But if we take this position, then, arguably, there no longer is any ‘semantic mismatch’ at the purely linguistic level. Match or mismatch is match or mismatch between conceptual ingredients. On the Wrong Format view, linguistic meanings are not conceptual ingredients. Pragmatics is required to map linguistic meanings to conceptual ingredients, and it is only when that is done that matches or mismatches can be observed.

NOTES

¹ In *Direct Reference* (1993), pp 240ff, following the earlier discussion in Carston (1988) and Recanati (1989), I distinguish three versions of the ‘minimalist’ principle, in terms of whether the notion they involve is (to use R&S’s classification) *mandatory_L*, *mandatory_T* or *mandatory_{LT}*.

² I am indebted to Vincent Richard’s dissertation here (*La signification linguistique entre effets de structure et effets de contexte*, University of Paris 1-Sorbonne, 2013).

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