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*Review Article*

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SEMANTIC CONTENT, TRUTH CONDITIONS AND  
CONTEXT

Cappelen, Herman and Ernie Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, 219 p.

In this ambitious and provocative book, Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore (hereafter C&L) assign themselves the task of putting out of business a growing industry in linguistics and philosophy of language. They put forward a number of sweeping arguments against all forms of Contextualism. They even hold that sentences of the form ‘A is tall’ and ‘A is ready’ have context-independent truth conditions. *Insensitive Semantics* raises discussion of context sensitivity to a new level: it forces anyone with Contextualist sympathies to consider the grounds for such sympathies more carefully, and to spell out precisely what a thesis about context sensitivity amounts to.

C&L’s strategy is to unite and conquer. First, they try to show that any argument in favor of Contextualism about sentences of the form ‘A is tall’ and ‘A is ready’ would, if successful, also entail Contextualism about all English sentences. In other words, they hold, *Moderate* Contextualism is an unstable view, since there is a slippery slide from it to *Radical* Contextualism. Thus, for C&L, the enemy is one. The second part of their strategy consists in attacking Contextualism directly. They devise three tests that, according to them, show that both Moderate and Radical Contextualism are incompatible with our actual linguistic practices, and mount two additional arguments against Contextualism. Before discussing these arguments, I will present C&L’s own positive view, which they call *Semantic Minimalism*, and contrast it with Contextualism.

## 1. SEMANTIC MINIMALISM

C&L call an expression *context-sensitive* if its semantic value varies from one context of utterance to another. According to C&L's Semantic Minimalism, there are very few context-sensitive expressions. The set of such expressions, which C&L call the *Basic Set*, consists of: "The personal pronouns 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it' in their various cases and number (e.g., singular, plural, nominative, accusative, genitive forms), the demonstrative pronouns 'this' and 'that' in their various cases and number, the adverbs 'here', 'there', 'now', 'today', 'yesterday', 'tomorrow', 'ago' (as in 'He left two days ago'), 'hence(forth)' (as in 'There will be no talking henceforth'), and the adjectives 'actual' and 'present'" (1).<sup>1</sup> What characterizes expressions from the Basic Set, C&L write, is that they are *obviously* context-sensitive. There may be context-sensitive expressions that are not obviously so, they concede, but there will be only a handful of them.<sup>2</sup> What is clear, C&L contend, is that expressions such as 'ready', 'tall' and 'rich' are *not* context-sensitive. Thus, for C&L, the sentence 'Tipper is ready' has the same truth conditions in every context: 'Tipper is ready' is true just in case Tipper is ready, full stop.<sup>3</sup> The same goes for sentences such as 'Beans are cheap', 'Giraffes are tall' and 'Rudolf is rich'.

The opponents of Semantic Minimalism are Moderate and Radical Contextualists. Moderate Contextualists hold that many English sentences that don't contain expressions from the Basic Set are not truth-evaluable independently of the context in which they are uttered. Radical Contextualists, on the other hand, hold that no English sentence ever expresses a complete proposition; only an utterance, whose content depends on features of the context, expresses a complete proposition, and so, has truth conditions.

The contrast between Semantic Minimalism and Contextualism may seem clear enough, but there is an important distinction between two components of Semantic Minimalism that C&L fail to spell out clearly. Consequently, as I will explain, many of their arguments miss their mark. For C&L, the conventional, or standing, meaning of any English sentence S determines a complete proposition, unless S

<sup>1</sup> Words and aspects of words that indicate tense also belong to the Basic Set, but for simplicity's sake, I will assume throughout this paper that we keep time fixed.

<sup>2</sup> Contextuals, that is, expressions such as 'alien' and 'local', are plausible candidates, but C&L have their doubts.

<sup>3</sup> Like C&L, I will make the simplifying assumption that every proper name refers to one and only one individual.

contains an expression from the Basic Set. For example, a sentence such as ‘Everyone has had enough’ has truth conditions that result from assigning a meaning to each of its expressions and specifying the relevant compositional rule. I will say that S has *invariant truth conditions* just in case S’s standing meaning determines a complete, truth-evaluable, proposition. The first component of C&L’s Semantic Minimalism can thus be stated as follows:

Truth-Conditional Invariantism: Every English sentence S has invariant truth conditions, unless S contains an expression from the Basic Set.<sup>4</sup>

Truth-Conditional Invariantism presupposes that S has a standing meaning, and thus rejects *Meaning Nihilism*, that is, the view that words and sentences do not have any meanings at all.<sup>5</sup> Although some extreme forms of Contextualism do endorse Meaning Nihilism, Contextualists are clearly not forced to take that route. I want to insist on this because, as we will see, some of C&L’s arguments support not Truth-Conditional Invariantism, but only the denial of Meaning Nihilism.

The second component of Semantic Minimalism concerns semantic content. C&L hold that the semantic content of a sentence never depends on the context, unless this sentence contains one or more expressions from the Basic Set. I will say that the semantic content of S is *insensitive* just in case S’s semantic content is not context-sensitive. The second component of C&L’s Semantic Minimalism is thus:

Insensitive Semantics: The semantic content of every English sentence S is insensitive, unless S contains an expression from the Basic Set.

Note that Insensitive Semantics does not require that the semantic content of S be a complete proposition. Hence, Insensitive Semantics does not entail Truth-Conditional Invariantism.

C&L’s Semantic Minimalism can thus be seen as the conjunction of Truth-Conditional Invariantism and Insensitive Semantics. Now, C&L point out that an utterance of a sentence S may convey propositions that differ from S’s standing meaning. One could utter

<sup>4</sup> This claim must of course be qualified to take into account syntactic ellipsis, ambiguity, polysemy, metaphor and vagueness. Following C&L, I will ignore these complications.

<sup>5</sup> Although Meaning Nihilism denies that sentences have meanings, it need not hold that particular utterances of sentences lack content. See Recanati (2004: 146–51) for a discussion of a version of Meaning Nihilism, which he calls ‘Meaning Eliminativism’. Recanati does not wholeheartedly endorse Meaning Eliminativism, but contends that it has ‘surprising viability’.

‘Rudolf is rich’ to convey that Rudolf is rich for a philosopher, or that Rudolf is rich for an American, or that Rudolf is rich for a resident of New York City, etc. C&L supplement their Semantic Minimalism with what they call *Speech Act Pluralism*, a view according to which an utterance of a sentence may convey many different propositions. They use the expression ‘speech act content’ to designate the set of propositions that are conveyed by an utterance in a given context. Speech act content, C&L write, is influenced by a number of factors such as the intentions and beliefs of the speaker and features of the conversational context, and includes not only the content of the utterance as the participants in the conversation would gloss it (or the “intuitive” truth conditions of the utterance), but also what is *conversationally implicated* by that utterance. C&L caution us against assimilating semantic content to speech act content: although one of the many propositions conveyed by an utterance of S is S’s semantic content, they write, we should not infer that the proposition semantically expressed by S relative to a context is P simply because the speaker is understood as asserting that P by uttering S. Regrettably, C&L often talk of the proposition *semantically* expressed by an *utterance*, or the *semantic* content of an *utterance*. Given their own insistence on keeping straight the distinction between semantic content and speech act content, it seems preferable to hold that semantics concerns sentences, and not utterances, which are acts of producing tokens of sentences. I will thus take semantic content to be a property of an uttered sentence, or a sentence relative to a context.<sup>6</sup> This begs no question against Semantic Minimalism or Contextualism, since it allows for, without entailing, context-sensitive semantic content.

## 2. CONTEXTUALISM AND RELATED THESES

Throughout their book, C&L take for granted that a sentence S has invariant truth conditions just in case S’s semantic content is insensitive. Many authors reject this biconditional. Kent Bach, for instance, an author that C&L rank among Moderate Contextualists, would agree with them that the semantic content of the sentence ‘Rebecca is ready’ is insensitive. Nevertheless, he would insist that ‘Rebecca is ready’ does not have invariant truth conditions, since this sentence is *semantically incomplete*: something must be added to

<sup>6</sup> See Bach (2005) for a useful discussion of this terminology.

the standing meaning of this sentence to produce a complete, truth-evaluable, proposition. About this sentence, and sentences such as ‘Steel isn’t strong enough’, ‘Pumpkins are big’, and ‘Gentlemen prefer cognac’, Bach writes: “In these cases the conventional meaning of the sentence determines not a full proposition but merely a proposition radical; a complete proposition would be expressed, a truth condition determined, only if the sentence were elaborated somehow” (1994: 127). However, Bach writes, these sentences do have insensitive semantic contents. For him, the only contextual information that is relevant to semantics bears on objective features of the context, or what he calls features of the *narrow* context, that is, features such as the identity of the speaker and the hearer(s), and the time and place of the utterance. Contextual information about the speakers’ communicative intentions, for instance, belongs to the *broad* context: such information must be taken into account to determine the speech act content of an utterance, but it does not contribute to the semantic content of the uttered sentence. Hence, for Bach, although sentences such as ‘Rebecca is ready’ and ‘Pumpkins are big’ do not have invariant truth conditions, they have insensitive semantic contents.

Therefore, one cannot without argument infer that S has invariant truth conditions from the fact that S’s semantic content is insensitive. As a matter of fact, this point has been urged by several Radical Contextualists as well. Charles Travis, for instance, defends what he calls the *pragmatic view*, according to which semantics has “little or nothing to do with truth conditions” (1997: 87). Travis holds that semantics is concerned with meaning, and that the meanings of sentences do not determine the conditions for their truth. This is because, he contends, truth conditions essentially depend on the circumstances and manners in which words are used, even when the sentence uttered contains no expression from the Basic Set. Hence, it is the business of pragmatics, which is the study of how words are used in various contexts, to account for truth conditions. Robyn Carston (1999) endorses Travis’s pragmatic view and also insists on the pragmatic contribution to truth conditions. She holds that semantic content is seldom, if ever, fully propositional, and requires pragmatic inference to produce the proposition the speaker intends to convey. She defends the thesis of *semantic underdeterminacy*, a thesis similar to Bach’s claim that many sentences are semantically incomplete, except that Carston extends it to all (or almost all) sentences. Carston equates semantic content with the “meaning or information which is encoded in linguistic form” (1999: 105), and

contends that “natural language sentences do not encode full propositions but merely schemes for the construction of (truth-evaluable) propositional forms” (*ibid.*). François Recanati also endorses the thesis of semantic underdeterminacy in its radical form: “Most sentences, perhaps all, are semantically underdeterminate” (2004: 58). John Searle holds a similar view about semantic content. For him, background assumptions are required to determine the truth conditions of (almost) every indicative sentence, and such assumptions “are not specifiable as part of the semantic content of the sentence” (1978: 214).<sup>7</sup>

Hence, most authors C&L call ‘Contextualists’ do not reject Insensitive Semantics. Some of them even hold a stricter version of this thesis. According to Bach (2001), for instance, the semantic content of ‘That is a tree’ relative to a context is not a singular proposition but an *open* one, that is, something like ‘*x* is a tree’. This is because the value of ‘that’ in an utterance of ‘That is a tree’ depends on the speaker’s communicative intentions, which do not belong to the narrow context. In other words, there is no function from objective contextual parameters to the value of ‘that’ in various contexts. Bach would thus deny that every expression from the Basic Set is context-sensitive in the sense that its *semantic* value varies from one context to another.

The real bone of contention between C&L and Contextualists thus concerns Truth-Conditional Invariantism. Unfortunately, as we shall see, C&L tend to conflate theses about semantic content with theses about invariant truth conditions. A claim against Truth-Conditional Invariantism is automatically seen by them as a claim against Insensitive Semantics, and vice versa. Nowhere do C&L explain why the fact that sentence *S*’s semantic content is insensitive should entail that *S* has invariant truth conditions. In considering their arguments, one must thus assess separately their relevance to semantic content and invariant truth conditions.

Now, I will not defend a particular view about semantic content here, and my contribution will be merely negative: I will show that C&L’s arguments do not support their brand of Insensitive Semantics. My discussion of Truth-Conditional Invariantism will be more polemical: I will argue that this thesis is false. I will limit my discussion to sentences of the form ‘*A* is ready’ and ‘*A* is *F*’, where ‘*F*’ is a comparative adjective such as ‘tall’, ‘rich’ or ‘cold’. I will present

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<sup>7</sup> See also Searle (1980: 227).

and defend arguments to the effect that these sentences do not have invariant truth conditions, and show that *pace* C&L, these arguments do not support the radical view that no English sentence has invariant truth conditions. This moderate rejection of Truth-Conditional Invariantism is widely held. However, examining the arguments that motivate this rejection can provide us with a kind of blueprint for assessing arguments in favor of more controversial theses about knowledge attributions, propositional attitude ascriptions, moral judgments, etc. I will not apply the blueprint to these controversial cases, though, since a discussion of any of these cases would represent too big a topic to take up in this paper.

Before I examine C&L's arguments, I need to discuss one more point. There are at least three ways to account for the fact that a sentence *S* lacks invariant truth conditions. On the *Indexical View*, *S* would lack invariant truth conditions because some of the expressions it contains are indexicals in the sense that their values vary from one context of utterance to another.<sup>8</sup> A radical form of this view would hold that every expression of the English language is an indexical. On the *Hidden Indexical View*, the fact that *S* lacks invariant truth conditions is traced to the presence of a structural position in logical form that is occupied by a hidden indexical, or covert variable. Many philosophers and linguists hold that comparative adjectives such as 'rich' and 'cold' are associated with unpronounced variables that refer to comparison classes. Thus, the logical form of 'Bill is rich' would be something like 'Bill is rich for an *F*', where the value of '*F*' varies from one context to another. Finally, the *Unarticulated Constituent View* holds that the standing meaning of *S* fails to determine a complete proposition, and that an utterance of *S* conveys a proposition that contains unarticulated constituents, which are propositional constituents that are not the values of any overt or covert expressions in *S*. In other words, what the speaker means is a proposition, but she does not fully articulate what she means, since the sentence she utters is semantically incomplete.<sup>9</sup> An utterance of

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that the proponent of the Indexical View is not committed to saying that the context-sensitive value of an indexical is its *semantic* value. (Recall Bach's position on indexicals such as 'this' and 'that'.) The three views presented in this paragraph are meant to be neutral regarding semantic content: their aim is to explain why a sentence lacks invariant truth conditions.

<sup>9</sup> The Unarticulated Constituent View, as I will understand it, takes no stand on semantic content. Hence, unarticulated constituents may or may not be part of the semantic content of a sentence relative to a context.

‘It’s raining’, it seems, cannot have a truth value unless the place where it is allegedly raining is supplied.<sup>10</sup> Proponents of the Unarticulated Constituent View claim that a location must be provided for the utterance to be evaluable, but that this location is not the value of any item in the logical form of the sentence ‘It’s raining’.

I will not try to adjudicate among these three views,<sup>11</sup> and most of what I will say is applicable to any of them.<sup>12</sup> But one should bear in mind that someone who rejects Truth-Conditional Invariantism is not forced to endorse the Indexical View, and can agree with C&L that only expressions from the Basic Set have context-sensitive values. Hence, the fact that comparative adjectives and expressions such as ‘ready’ and ‘enough’ do not behave in the same way as expressions from the Basic Set does not entail that Truth-Conditional Invariantism is true. As we shall see, this is something that C&L tend to overlook.

### 3. CONTEXT SHIFTING ARGUMENTS

*Context Shifting Arguments* (CSAs, for short) rely on the intuition that the truth conditions of a sentence vary depending on the context in which it is uttered. The sentence ‘Everyone is sick’, for instance, may be used in one context to mean that everyone who went to a certain party is sick; but the same sentence may be uttered to convey that everyone in the room is sick, that everyone who went on a certain cruise is sick, etc. This kind of consideration has been invoked to support the conclusions that (i) ‘Everyone is sick’ lacks invariant truth conditions and that (ii) the semantic content of this sentence is context-sensitive. (Let us keep these two conclusions separate.)

C&L contend that with sufficient ingenuity, CSAs could be provided for any sentence whatsoever. Thus, any Moderate Contextualist who invokes these arguments would unavoidably be led to endorse Radical Contextualism: Moderate Contextualism is thus an unstable view, since there is a slippery slide from it to

<sup>10</sup> The example is from Perry (1986).

<sup>11</sup> A Contextualist could very well hold that only a combination of two or more approaches can succeed in accounting for all the data.

<sup>12</sup> However, I will not examine so-called *Binding Arguments*, which appeal to syntactic evidence to support the Hidden Indexical View. See for instance Stanley (2000, 2002) and Stanley and Szabó (2000). C&L devote an entire chapter to this issue, and add their criticisms of Binding Arguments to those of Bach (2000), Carston (2002, Section 2.1) and Recanati (2002), among others.



Radical Contextualism. C&L invite us to consider the sentence ‘John went to the gym’: this sentence may be used to convey that John went to the gym to perform his exercise routine; but it may also be uttered to convey that John walked to the vicinity of the gym during his daily walk. Other possible uses of this sentence can easily be imagined, and, C&L add, similar considerations apply to any English sentence: for any sentence S, one can imagine scenarios in which different utterances of S are made to communicate different things.

I wholeheartedly agree with C&L’s slippery slide argument. As a matter of fact, their claim that for any sentence S, different utterances of S can be made to communicate different things is a platitude. Hence, if CSAs were any good, they would succeed in showing that *no* sentence has invariant truth conditions, or that the semantic content of *every* sentence is context-sensitive. C&L, of course, reject CSAs altogether. In their view, a crucial premise of CSAs is the assumption – mistaken, in their view – that the semantic content of a sentence relative to a context should be equated with how an utterance of that sentence is understood in that context. This assumption is indeed required if CSAs are meant to show that sentence S’s semantic content is context-sensitive.<sup>13</sup> But CSAs can also be meant to show that S lacks invariant truth conditions. Such CSAs rest on a different crucial assumption, namely that if S may be uttered to convey different propositions in different contexts, then S lacks invariant truth conditions. This assumption is, it seems to me, highly dubious.

There is, however, a variant of CSAs, which may be called *Context Shifting Arguments Involving Denials* (CSAIDs, for short), that apply only to a subset of sentences. CSAIDs hold that a good indication that a sentence S lacks invariant truth conditions is that in some conversational contexts, it seems correct to *assert* S, whereas in other contexts, a *denial* of S seems correct.<sup>14</sup>

Let us see how CSAIDs can be used against the idea that sentences of the form ‘A is ready’ have invariant truth conditions. Consider for instance the view that ‘A is ready’ is true just in case A is ready for

<sup>13</sup> As I stated in Section 2, I do not wish to defend any particular view about semantic content in this paper. I will thus take no stand on this assumption; however, I will argue that C&L’s objections to it are inadequate.

<sup>14</sup> Great care must be taken in applying these arguments: we must make sure that the data cannot be explained by appealing to polysemy, irony, metaphor, hyperbole, or metalinguistic negation.

something or other. On this view, ‘A is not ready’ is true just in case A is not ready for anything. These truth conditions seem incompatible with our use of ‘ready’. Suppose the facts about Tipper are as follows: Tipper, who is very hungry, is sitting at the dining table, and has indicated to her hosts that she would like to start eating very soon; the same Tipper has not studied for a particular exam she will take in a few hours and has no prior knowledge of the relevant material. Now, in a conversation about dinner, an utterance of ‘Tipper is ready’ would seem true to speakers who are aware of the above facts about Tipper, whereas in a conversation concerning exam preparation, the same speakers would assent to an utterance of ‘Tipper is not ready’. These data suggest that there is something wrong with the view that ‘Tipper is ready’ is true iff Tipper is ready for something or other. This view entails that ‘Tipper is ready’ is true, since Tipper is ready to eat, and is thus ready for something or other. Yet, the informed participants in the second conversation would assent not to ‘Tipper is ready’, but to ‘Tipper is not ready’.

There are, of course, other Truth-Conditional Invariantist views about the truth conditions of ‘A is ready’: ‘A is ready’ is true just in case A is ready for something that matters to A (and ‘A is not ready’ is true just in case A is not ready for anything that matters to A); ‘A is ready’ is true just in case A is ready for something that is contextually salient to A (and ‘A is not ready’ is true just in case A is not ready for anything that is contextually salient to A)<sup>15</sup>; etc. But it is easy to see that these views are just as vulnerable to CSAIDs as our first Truth-Conditional Invariantist view: in the conversation about the forthcoming exam, speakers would assent to ‘Tipper is not ready’ even though Tipper is ready for dinner, which we may suppose is something that matters to her and is contextually salient to her. Therefore, Truth-Conditional Invariantists cannot account for the data invoked by CSAIDs without holding the implausible idea that competent and informed speakers are mistaken in their evaluations of utterances of ‘Tipper is ready’ and ‘Tipper is not ready’.

CSAIDs strongly support the view that sentences of the form ‘A is ready’ lack invariant truth conditions: the best way to account for the data presented above is to hold that such sentences do not have

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<sup>15</sup> Note that on this view, the truth conditions of ‘A is ready’ are context-independent, since they depend not on the context of utterance, but on A’s circumstances. See C&L (167, n. 6) for a similar view about sentences of the form ‘A has had enough’.

invariant truth conditions, and that any utterance of 'A is ready' must be completed in context in order to convey a whole proposition. Now, although CSAIDs can also be applied to sentences of the form 'A is tall', 'A is rich', 'It's cold', and other similar sentences containing comparative adjectives, they do not generalize to all sentences. Consider again the sentence 'John went to the gym'. In a conversation about John's exercise routine, it may seem wrong or infelicitous to utter this sentence if John merely went to the gym to chat with his friends and did not perform any exercise. However, in this context, speakers would not go so far as to assent to 'John did not go to the gym'. CSAIDs thus don't entail that no English sentence has invariant truth conditions.

I should, however, insist that great care must be taken in applying CSAIDs to a sentence S. One needs to consider the possibility that the standing meaning of S does determine a complete proposition, but that speakers are assenting not to this proposition but to the speech act content of an utterance of S. Suppose a mother utters 'You are not going to die' to her son who is crying because of a minor cut on his finger. By that utterance, the mother means not that her son is immortal, but that he is not going to die from his cut. But surely, the mother's utterance does not threaten the view that 'A is going to die' has invariant truth conditions, that is, 'A is going to die' is true just in case A is going to die. Similarly, the fact that competent and informed speakers sometimes utter 'I haven't had breakfast' to mean that they haven't had breakfast that day, even though they have had breakfast in the past, does not undercut the view that the invariant truth conditions of 'A has had breakfast' are that this sentence is true just in case A has had breakfast.

These data should not lead us to jettison CSAIDs, though. We can challenge the mother's assertion by pointing out that her son *is* going to die. Upon reflection, she will recognize that she was speaking loosely and that 'really', 'strictly speaking', her son is going to die. Similarly, someone who utters 'I haven't had breakfast' to communicate that she hasn't had breakfast today can recognize that she *has* had breakfast. No such phenomenon can be observed in the case of sentences of the form 'A is ready'. In the conversation about exam preparation, a challenge that 'Tipper is not ready' is false since Tipper *is* ready would be greeted with puzzlement. Even after reflection, speakers would not be willing to concede that strictly speaking, Tipper is ready. In the case of utterances of 'I haven't had breakfast' and 'You are not going to die', interlocutors can easily be made

aware of the two relevant propositions: the one that is determined by standing meaning (and reference assignment to ‘I’ or ‘You’), and the one that the speaker means by her utterance. In the case of utterances of ‘Tipper is ready’ (or ‘Tipper is not ready’), speakers do not have access to two such propositions: what they grasp is simply the proposition meant by the speaker. CSAIDs should be understood as stating that a good indication that S does not have invariant truth conditions is that in some conversational contexts, it seems correct, even after reflection, to *assert* S, whereas in other contexts, a *denial* of S seems correct, even after reflection. Applied properly, CSAIDs support the view that ‘A is ready’ and ‘A is tall’ lack invariant truth conditions without entailing that no sentence has invariant truth conditions.

#### 4. INCOMPLETENESS ARGUMENTS

Incompleteness Arguments, which are closely related to CSAIDs, may also be invoked to support the idea that a sentence does not have invariant truth conditions. Consider the sentence

- (1) Gabriel is tall.

It seems that no matter what Gabriel’s height is, (1) cannot be assessed as true or false: for (1) to be truth-evaluable, a comparison group (or a standard) must be provided. Thus, all the standing meaning of (1) determines is an incomplete proposition, or a proposition radical as Bach puts it. It is important to note that Bach invokes this argument not to show that the semantic content of (1) is context-sensitive, but to show that (1) lacks invariant truth conditions. Incompleteness considerations thus support an argument not against Insensitive Semantics but only against Truth-Conditional Invariantism. Here are some other examples of incompleteness, with possible completion in brackets:

- (2) It’s warm. [by Nunavut standards]  
 (3) Michael Jordan was unsuccessful. [as a baseball player]  
 (4) Bert has had enough. [alcohol to drink]

C&L are unimpressed by Incompleteness Arguments. They hold that if these arguments show that (1)–(4) don't have invariant truth conditions, then they also show that no English sentence has invariant truth conditions. C&L write that the kind of intuitions invoked about (1)–(4) could be invoked for any English sentence. For instance, they argue, one could feel that the following sentence is not truth-evaluable:

(5) John went to the gym.

C&L ask, “Went to the gym how? Walked to the vicinity? Did something in the gym? Did what in the gym? For how long? What if he went into the gym but was sleepwalking? Etc. We don't know how to evaluate [5] without settling these questions, but nothing in [5]’s disquotational truth conditions would answer these questions. We hope it is obvious how to generalize this point” (64–65).<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, C&L’s treatment of Incompleteness Arguments conflates *lack of full specificity* with *incompleteness*: it conflates cases in which a sentence is not completely informative about the situation it is reporting with cases in which the standing meaning of a sentence does not determine a complete, truth-evaluable, proposition. Perhaps in some contexts, an utterance of (5) would be considered less than adequately informative for the purposes at hand: (5) does not specify how John went to the gym, for instance. But this shows that the speaker’s utterance was not specific enough; it does not show that (5) lacks invariant truth conditions.

I should point out that the proposition determined by the standing meaning of (5) may be made more specific in different ways in different contexts, thanks to some shared background information. Thus, in some contexts, speakers may reject an utterance of (5) if John went to the gym to renew his membership without exercising; and we can imagine other contexts in which, given the same facts about John, speakers would accept an utterance of (5). However, this means not that (5) has truth conditions only given contextual information, but that by uttering (5), a speaker may convey something that differs from (or is more specific than) the standing meaning of (5). C&L thus seem to miss Bach’s distinction between *completion*

<sup>16</sup> One may also feel that in order to evaluate (5), one needs to know what ‘John’ and ‘the gym’ refer to, and what the relevant time period is. But this is not C&L’s point: even once time and references are fixed, they contend, (5) seems not to be truth-evaluable.

and *expansion*. Sentences like (1)–(4) are semantically incomplete, and an utterance of one of these sentences requires a process of completion to produce a full proposition. (5), on the other hand, is not semantically incomplete. But in some contexts, an utterance of (5) may convey an expansion, or conceptually enriched version, of the proposition determined by the standing meaning of (5), say that John went to the gym *to work out*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in cases of both completion and expansion, the proposition conveyed by the speaker is an elaboration on the standing meaning of the sentence uttered; however, only in cases of completion does the standing meaning of the sentence fail to determine truth conditions.

C&L's remarks in the passage quoted above indicate another confusion. Perhaps the standing meaning of (5) does not determine in *exactly* what possible circumstances it is true. Suppose, to use C&L's examples, that John sleepwalked to the gym, or that he merely walked to the vicinity of the gym. Would (5) be true in such cases? Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that the standing meaning of (5) does not settle this question. This entails not that the standing meaning of (5) fails to determine truth conditions, but that it does not determine, for every possible situation, whether (5) is true or not in that situation. It may very well be that for *some* circumstances, the standing meaning of (5) determines whether (5) is true or false, but that for others, it does not.<sup>18</sup> In such a case, the standing meaning of (5) would determine a complete proposition, but would allow for borderline cases, that is, cases in which it is unclear whether or not the sentence would be true. Incompleteness does not follow from the mere existence of borderline cases. Compare: the standing meaning of 'Harry is bald' may not determine whether this sentence is true or false if Harry has, say, five thousand hairs on his head; but it can still determine that this sentence is true if Harry has no hair on his head, and false if Harry has fifty thousand hairs (appropriately distributed) on his head. Hence, sentences of the form 'A is bald' do have invariant truth conditions, even though there are cases in which it is not clear whether or not the predicate 'bald' applies.

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<sup>17</sup> Similarly, to take up examples from the previous section, one can utter 'I am not going to die' to convey the expanded proposition that one is not going to die *from that cut*, and 'I haven't had breakfast' to convey that one hasn't had breakfast *that day*.

<sup>18</sup> Note that 'circumstances' here designates the facts about John and his situation, not the context in which (5) is uttered.

C&L's response to Incompleteness Arguments highlights a confusion that is quite common among Radical Contextualists such as Searle, Travis and Recanati. These authors hold that for every word, we can imagine an extraordinary circumstance such that it would not be clear whether it is correct or not to apply the word in that circumstance. For instance, they argue, since the standing meaning of words like 'gold', 'tiger' and 'bachelor' does not anticipate and settle every possible question of usage, it is an illusion to think that any sentence containing these words has invariant truth conditions. Suppose Sam, born male, now changes sex. Assuming that Sam is unmarried, is the sentence 'Sam is a bachelor' true or false? Perhaps the meaning of 'bachelor' does not settle this question. From this, it is inferred that 'Sam is a bachelor' does not have invariant truth conditions.<sup>19</sup> This argument is clearly fallacious: the fact that the meaning of S does not determine whether or not S is true in some extraordinary *circumstances*, does not entail that it does not determine truth conditions. Actually, the fact that in the vast majority of cases the meaning of 'Sam is a bachelor' would be sufficient to determine whether this sentence is true or false (given the facts about Sam) clearly indicates that 'Sam is a bachelor' *does* have invariant truth conditions.

Now, to repeat, Incompleteness Arguments, properly construed, are to the effect that the standing meaning of a sentence S does not determine truth conditions. No matter what the facts about Gabriel are, it is impossible to determine whether the sentence 'Gabriel is tall' is true or not. It seems clear to me that this cannot be said of all English sentences: unlike sentences (1)–(4), sentences such as 'Gold is a metal', 'Tigers are mammals', and 'Ricky is a bachelor' are all truth-evaluable. Hence, both CSAIDs and Incompleteness Arguments apply only to a subset of English sentences, and do not support the extreme view that all English sentences lack invariant truth conditions, contrary to what C&L assert. Let us now turn to the three tests C&L invoke against Contextualism.

##### 5. TEST 1: INTER-CONTEXTUAL DISQUOTATIONAL INDIRECT REPORTS

C&L have devised three tests that, according to them, show that Contextualism is incompatible with our actual linguistic practices.

<sup>19</sup> See Travis (2000: 213). See Searle (1978, 1980) and Recanati (2004: Chap. 9) for other examples.

I will examine these three tests in this section and the following two. The first test is based on the notion of *Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report*. C&L write: “Take an utterance  $u$  of a sentence  $S$  by speaker  $A$  in context  $C$ . An Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report of  $u$  is an utterance  $u'$  in a context  $C'$  (where  $C' \neq C$ ) of ‘ $A$  said that  $S$ ’” (88). C&L propose to use such reports as a test for context sensitivity: “If the occurrence of an expression  $e$  in a sentence tends to block disquotational indirect reports (i.e., render such reports false), then you have evidence that  $e$  is context sensitive” (88).

Consider an utterance by Herman of ‘I am a Semantic Minimalist’. Suppose François tries to report what Herman said by uttering ‘Herman said that I am a Semantic Minimalist’. Clearly, François’s report is false, since the person ‘I’ picks out in his utterance is not the same as the person ‘I’ picked out in Herman’s utterance. One can easily see that utterances containing other expressions from the Basic Set such as ‘here’, ‘today’, and ‘that’ cannot be disquotationally indirectly reported. Following C&L, I will say that these expressions *pass* the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test.

C&L point out that every expression that doesn’t belong to the Basic Set fails the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test.<sup>20</sup> They imagine the following two contexts in which sentence (6) is uttered:

(6) John is ready.

In the first context  $C_1$ , the conversation is about examination preparation, and someone raises the question whether John is prepared. Nina answers this question by uttering (6). In the second context  $C_2$ , three people are about to leave the house, but since it is raining heavily, additional preparation is required. Nina utters (6) in response to a question about whether John has completed his preparation. In order to apply the test, C&L imagine a third context in which they themselves are both sitting in a café on 5th Street in New York (call this context  $5stC$ ), and are reminiscing about what happened in contexts  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ . They claim that it would be correct for them to report Nina’s utterance in  $C_1$  as (6.1) and to report her utterance in  $C_2$  as (6.2):

(6.1) Nina said that John is ready.

(6.2) Nina said that John is ready.

<sup>20</sup> Recall that for C&L, membership in the Basic Set is defined by enumeration, that is, by listing expressions that strike them as *obviously* context-sensitive.



It would also be correct, they write, to make the following report:

(6.3) In both C1 and C2, Nina said that John is ready.

C&L conjecture that since the three contexts (C1, C2 and 5stC) are radically different from each other, for any utterance of (6), one can utter ‘The speaker said that John is ready’ and utter something true. Therefore, ‘ready’ fails the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test. Furthermore, they write, these data indicate that a single proposition is expressed by Nina’s two utterances. C&L examine other examples of sentences containing expressions such as ‘know’, ‘tall’ and ‘morally wrong’, and argue that they all fail the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test. They hold that these data are inexplicable on the assumption that Contextualism is true: “Semantic Minimalism, and no other view, can account for how the same content can be expressed, claimed, asserted, questioned, investigated, etc., in radically different contexts” (152).

C&L draw two conclusions from their application of the test to (6): first, that the semantic content of (6) is insensitive; and second, that (6) has invariant truth conditions. Unfortunately, neither conclusion is warranted. Let me start with the first. As C&L themselves repeatedly point out, especially in their criticisms of CSAs (see Section 3), evidence about indirect reports is no evidence about semantic content. Throughout their book, C&L insist that intuitions about what speakers say in various contexts do not support conclusions about semantic content. These intuitions, they hold, are really intuitions about speech act content. Hence, the fact that we take the report ‘A said that P by uttering S’ to be correct does not entail that the semantic content of S is the proposition that P. This means that from the fact that (6.1)–(6.3) seem true, we cannot infer anything about the semantic content of (6) in C1 and C2.<sup>21</sup> Now, *perhaps* C&L’s claim that (6)’s semantic content is insensitive is correct, but the data they invoke do not support it.

Still, C&L would insist that their test shows that one can report an utterance of (6) even though one is ignorant about the features of the original context of utterance. Let us call this a *report under ignorance*.

<sup>21</sup> C&L (98) write that Contextualists cannot make this response without giving up all arguments for their view, since these are based on intuitions about indirect reports of utterances. But as we have seen in Sections 3 and 4, this is false: CSAIDs and Incompleteness Arguments do not rest on evidence about how we would report speakers’ utterances.

For instance, we can imagine that the speaker who produces report (6.1) heard only Nina's utterance of (6), and knows nothing else about C1. C&L write (93–94) that this contrasts radically with our attitude about utterances containing expressions from the Basic Set: someone who overheard an utterance of 'That's a Persian cat', but did not know what was demonstrated, would not say, 'The speaker said that that's a Persian cat'.

I don't disagree with C&L that reports under ignorance show that there is a contrast between expressions from the Basic Set and expressions such as 'ready', 'tall' and 'rich'; however, this contrast does not entail that sentences containing the latter expressions have the same semantic content in all contexts. One could argue that the content that is reported by an indirect report under ignorance of an utterance of one of these sentences is simply the standing meaning of that sentence. Holding that the semantic content of (6) is context-sensitive does not commit one to Meaning Nihilism. And one can quite plausibly hold that the standing meaning of (6) is accessible to any competent speaker, who can then report this standing meaning as having been expressed by an utterance of (6), even though this speaker knows nothing about the context of utterance, and thus fails to grasp the semantic content of the uttered sentence. Ignorance of the semantic content of an uttered sentence does not necessarily imply ignorance of the sentence's meaning. Thus, a reporter's ignorance *may* prevent him from knowing the semantic content (6) has, relative to a context, but it will not prevent him from understanding what sentence (6) means. Hence rejecting Insensitive Semantics does not prevent one from holding that a sentence can have the same meaning that can be grasped by different speakers in radically different contexts.

Does the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test support the claim that (6) has invariant truth conditions? Not at all. The fact that (6.1) and (6.2) seem correct does not entail that the standing meaning of 'John is ready' determines a complete proposition. In fact, there is no difficulty in indirectly reporting utterances of semantically incomplete sentences. Consider the following exchange:

- (7) a. Amy will eat the roasted ants.  
       b. Bill won't.

(7b) is a standard example of syntactic ellipsis, and thus has a standing meaning that does not determine a complete proposition. However, one can report an utterance of (7b) in the following way:

- (8) The speaker said that Bill won't.

Hence, the fact that one can produce what seems to be a correct disquotational indirect report of an utterance of *S* does not entail that the standing meaning of *S* determines a complete proposition, and that *S* has invariant truth conditions. Therefore, the data invoked by C&L do not imply that (6) has invariant truth conditions.

#### 6. TEST 2: COLLECTIVE DESCRIPTIONS

C&L claim that context-sensitive expressions block collective descriptions: if a singular term *N* is context-sensitive, then from the fact that utterances of '*N* is *F*' and '*N* is *G*' are true in their respective contexts, it doesn't follow that an utterance of '*N* is *F* and *G*' is true. For instance, from the fact that 'This is snow' and 'This is coffee' are true in their respective contexts, one cannot infer that there is a context in which 'This is snow and coffee' is true. Similarly, if the verb phrase *v* is context-sensitive, one cannot infer that the utterance '*A* and *B* both *v*' is true from the fact that '*A v*-s' and '*B v*-s' are true in their respective contexts. C&L claim that all the expressions from the Basic Set pass the Collective Description Test, but no other expression does. For example, they write, "If there is a true utterance of 'Mount Everest is tall' in a context of utterance *C*, and another true utterance of 'The Empire State Building is tall' in a relevantly different context *C*', then the following collective description is perfectly natural: 'Mount Everest and the Empire State Building are both tall'" (103). If Contextualism were true, they contend, the collective utterance could not be inferred from the two other utterances.

Consider again the Unarticulated Constituent View, according to which sentences of the form '*A* is tall' lack invariant truth conditions, and an utterance of '*A* is tall' thus requires completion to convey a proposition.<sup>22</sup> On this view, the proposition conveyed by an utterance of '*A* is tall' contains unarticulated constituents that are contextually

<sup>22</sup> I should remind the reader that the Unarticulated Constituent View, as I defined it, is neutral regarding semantic content. It is, for instance, compatible with holding that the semantic content of '*A* is tall' corresponds to its standing meaning and is thus insensitive. At any rate, the following argument holds whether or not the proposition obtained after completion corresponds to the *semantic* content of '*A* is tall' relative to a context.

provided. Proponents of this view would hold that sentences of the form 'A and B are tall' do not have invariant truth conditions either, and that an utterance of 'A and B are tall' is truth-evaluable only if comparison classes are provided. Now, one could account for the 'naturalness' of the collective utterance in C&L's example by arguing that there is a natural way to complete this utterance, namely: Mount Everest and the Empire State Building are both tall for things of their types. On this view, the inference goes from the propositions conveyed by the two utterances, namely, that Mount Everest is tall for a mountain and that the Empire State Building is tall for a building, to the proposition conveyed by the collective description. Each of these propositions is a completion of the corresponding utterance. Hence, one need not hold that sentences of the form 'A is tall' and 'A and B are tall' have invariant truth conditions in order to account for the inference described by C&L.

It should be noted that not every completion is equally likely to be meant by a speaker uttering a sentence of the form 'A is tall'. Often, how a speaker intends an utterance to be completed is indicated by the description she uses to refer to A. For instance, it is reasonable to suppose that by uttering 'This cat is tall', a speaker means that the demonstrated cat is tall for a cat, and by uttering 'Baby Celeste is tall', a speaker means that Baby Celeste is tall for a baby. For the same reason, the completion of 'Mount Everest and the Empire State Building are both tall' I proposed above naturally comes to mind.

To be sure, there are many different ways to complete an utterance of 'A and B are tall', not all of which would yield a true proposition. However, Grice's (1975) conversational maxims will generally guide hearers' interpretation of what a speaker means by this utterance. Consider a speaker who utters 'That giraffe and that mouse are both tall'. Understanding the speaker as meaning that giraffe and that mouse are both tall for mammals would clearly make her violate the Maxim of Quality ('Try to make your contribution one that is true'); understanding her instead as meaning that giraffe and that mouse are both tall for members of their own species will (generally) avoid this violation. By appealing to Gricean conversational maxims, one can thus account for the 'naturalness' of the collective description involving a comparative adjective, without supposing that the standing meaning of such a description determines a complete proposition. C&L's second test thus fails to show that there is anything wrong with holding that sentences of the form 'A is tall' lack invariant truth conditions.

In all fairness, I should point out that C&L's first two tests raise a challenge for the Indexical View, according to which expressions such as 'ready' and 'tall' have different values in different contexts. If this is so, then why is it that these expressions behave differently than expressions from the Basic Set in inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports and collective descriptions? I will not speculate as to how one could answer this question, but it should be clear that supporters of the Unarticulated Constituent View do not face this challenge.

### 7. TEST 3: INTER-CONTEXTUAL DISQUOTATION

C&L's third test is what they call the *Inter-Contextual Disquotation Test*. If an expression  $e$  is context-sensitive, they argue, then there is a true utterance of an instance of the following schema (where 'S' contains  $e$ ):

(ICD) There are (or can be) false utterances of 'S' even though S.

For example, an utterance of the following sentence is true if the speaker is French:

(9) There are (or can be) false utterances of 'I am French' even though I am French.

Similarly, if the speaker is demonstrating a car:

(10) There are (or can be) false utterances of 'That is a car' even though that is a car.

Unfortunately, as a test for context sensitivity, the Inter-Contextual Disquotation Test is useless. Many Contextualists, for example, would insist that there *are* true utterances of:

(11) There are (or can be) false utterances of 'George is tall' even though George is all.

C&L disagree, but acknowledge that trying to settle the debate between them and Contextualists this way would reduce it to a collision of intuitions. However, they claim that they can do better. C&L hold that if an expression  $e$  is context-sensitive, then it should be

possible to construct what they call a *Real Context Shifting Argument* (RCSA, for short) concerning  $e$ . In an RCSA, the alleged context-sensitive expression  $e$  is both *used* in the *Storytelling Context*, that is, the context in which the argument is produced, and *mentioned* in reporting an utterance of  $e$  made in another context, i.e., the *Target Context*. An RCSA concerning a sentence  $S$  (that contains  $e$ ) should do two things: first, it should tell a story in which  $S$  is truthfully asserted; second, it should describe a Target Context and show that an utterance of  $S$  in that context would be false. An RCSA concerning ‘That is a car’, for instance, could go as follows:

That’s a car [said pointing at a car]. But an utterance of ‘That’s a car’ made by a speaker who is pointing at a fire hydrant would be false. There are thus true utterances of (10).

Could a similar RCSA concerning ‘George is tall’ be proposed? I don’t see why not:

George, my cat, is much taller than the average cat. So George is tall. But during a conversation about the height of family members, an utterance of ‘George is tall’ would be false, since George is much smaller than other members of the family, who are all humans above five feet tall. There are thus true utterances of (11).

Now perhaps this RCSA is less ‘clear and convincing’ than RCSAs one can propose for expressions from the Basic Set. But this should not matter: RCSAs, just like ‘mere’ Context Shifting Arguments (CSAs), do not allow us to draw conclusions about semantic content. The problem is that like CSAs, RCSAs rely on intuitions about the truth conditions of utterances of the same sentence in various contexts. C&L’s own objection to CSAs can thus be leveled against RCSAs: the fact that the same sentence  $S$  can be uttered to convey something true in the Storytelling Context, and something false in some Target Context, does not entail that the semantic content of  $S$  is context-sensitive. RCSAs thus suffer from the same deficiencies as CSAs. Furthermore, the fact that a convincing RCSA concerning  $S$  can be proposed does not entail that  $S$  lacks invariant truth conditions; it merely entails that  $S$  may be uttered in some Target Context to convey a proposition that differs from the one an utterance of  $S$  conveys in the Storytelling Context.

I should add that C&L’s Speech Act Pluralism seems to undermine their use of RCSAs. Recall that according to Speech Act Pluralism, an utterance of sentence  $S$  conveys many different, possibly incompatible propositions. This view suggests that it is impossible to determine whether a given utterance of  $S$  is true or false: some of the

propositions conveyed by this utterance are true, others are false. C&L make a very similar point in discussing possible replies to their first test: “We don’t know what it is to have intuitions about the truth value of utterances as such. If we are asked to have intuitions not about what an utterance says, asserts, claims, etc. but just about its truth value, we are at a loss” (98). Hence, by their own lights, C&L’s third test appears inapplicable.<sup>23</sup>

#### 8. ONE OTHER OBJECTION TO CONTEXTUALISM

C&L raise two general objections against Contextualism. One targets Radical Contextualism, and consists of a series of inconsistency charges.<sup>24</sup> Since I am no proponent of Radical Contextualism, I will deal only with the other objection, which goes as follows: “If [Contextualism] were true, it would be miraculous if people ever succeeded in communicating across diverse contexts of utterance. But there are no miracles; people do succeed in communicating across contexts with boring regularity. So [Contextualism] is false” (123).

I find this objection a little wanting. First of all, on C&L’s own view, one needs to know something about the context of utterance in order to know what semantic content is expressed by an uttered sentence when the latter contains an expression from the Basic Set. This entails that for C&L, communication across contexts is impossible if the interlocutors are not informed about each others’ contexts. Hence, C&L’s Semantic Minimalism and Contextualism both share this consequence: for at least some uttered sentences, people can succeed in communicating across contexts only when they are informed about the relevant features of their respective contexts.

C&L would no doubt protest that the amount of information their theory requires for successful inter-contextual communication is

<sup>23</sup> My own view is that it is usually possible to isolate, among the various propositions conveyed by an utterance, the one that the speaker primarily means, or what we may call the intuitive truth conditions of the utterance.

<sup>24</sup> For example, C&L write, if Radical Contextualism is true, it seems impossible to answer the question ‘Under what conditions is an utterance of a sentence S true?’. This is because according to Radical Contextualism, every sentence lacks invariant truth conditions. Any answer to the question would thus be inconsistent with Radical Contextualism, they write, since it would entail that at least one sentence, namely the sentence used to answer the question, does have invariant truth conditions.

much smaller than what is predicted by Contextualism. They would point out that an eavesdropper who hears an utterance containing no expression from the Basic Set, and knows nothing about the context of this utterance, would still have no problem understanding it. Suppose the eavesdropper hears an utterance of ‘John is ready’, but knows nothing about the context of utterance. What would the eavesdropper understand exactly? It seems clear to me that the eavesdropper would fail to know what is communicated by the speaker, since he would not be in a position to tell what that speaker means by ‘John is ready’. What is John asserted to be ready for? His wedding? His upcoming presidential campaign? The second coming? Surely, C&L would not want to insist that the eavesdropper understands what the speaker is communicating by uttering ‘John is ready’. Therefore, in such a case, communication across contexts would fail. But this does not mean that the eavesdropper understands nothing. If he is a competent English speaker, he will know that ‘John is ready’ means that John is ready, and will thus understand what the uttered sentence means. But this does not entail that ‘John is ready’ has invariant truth conditions; it merely shows that the eavesdropper understands the standing meaning of ‘John is ready’, which is something that Contextualists who reject Meaning Nihilism would happily acknowledge.

## 9. CONCLUSION

I have examined C&L’s objections to Contextualism and found them unsatisfactory. In discussing these objections, I have relied on an important distinction between two claims that C&L tend to conflate: the Truth-Conditional Invariantist claim that the standing meaning of a sentence *S* determines a complete proposition, and the Insensitive Semanticist claim that *S*’s semantic content is insensitive. I have defended a moderate rejection of Truth-Conditional Invariantism, according to which many, but not all, English sentences containing no expression from the Basic Set do not have invariant truth conditions. The best arguments for this view are CSAIDs and Incompleteness Arguments. These arguments convincingly support the claim that sentences of the forms ‘*A* is ready’ and ‘*A* is *F*’, where ‘*F*’ is a comparative adjective, lack invariant truth conditions; furthermore, as I have shown, these arguments do not generalize to all sentences.



Although I have been mainly critical of C&L's views and arguments, I should insist that their book has great merits: it provides an impressive review of the literature on Contextualism, and combines thought-provoking argumentation and bold ideas with originality. I have benefited greatly from reading this book, and so will anyone interested in debates about Contextualism.<sup>25</sup>

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