

[REVIEW]

Truth-Conditional Pragmatics

By François Recanati, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, vii+324pp.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the book under review is to argue against the traditional conception of the semantics/pragmatics distinction. According to the traditional view, the determination of the truth-conditional content of an utterance is guided by semantics, i.e. the rules of the language. Of course, even within the traditional framework, pragmatics does come into play in order to determine the values of indexical expressions such as *I* or *this*, but the pragmatic intrusion is entirely prescribed by the rules of the language: *I* refers to the speaker, *this* refers to some salient object that the speaker intends to refer to, etc. This view is called *Minimalism* because it restricts the truth-conditional role of pragmatics to ‘saturation,’ “a pragmatic process of contextual value-assignment that is triggered (and made obligatory) by something in the sentence itself” (p. 4).¹ Other pragmatic processes come into play only after the truth-conditional content of an utterance is determined by grammar-driven processes.

Through the investigation of various phenomena, however, Recanati attempts to reject the Minimalist view in favor of Truth-Conditional Pragmat-

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¹ In fact, minimalism can be formulated in several ways. The version that the book purports to reject is I-Minimalism, formulated as follows.

I-Minimalism: The intuitive truth-conditional content of an utterance is affected by the bottom-up process of saturation, but not by top-down processes such as free enrichment.

ics (TCP). According to TCP, not only saturation, a bottom-up or grammar-driven process triggered by grammar, but also pragmatic modulation, a top-down or context-driven operation that is not controlled by grammar, can modify what would otherwise be the truth-conditional content of an utterance. The differences between saturation and modulation are illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Differences between Saturation and Modulation

	Grammar-driven? (= Bottom-up?)	Mandatory?
Saturation	Yes	Yes
Modulation	No	No

TCP's claim is simple: there exist optional, context-driven operations that can nevertheless affect the intuitive truth-condition of the utterance. In this respect, TCP corresponds to Moderate Contextualism, a position which holds that the linguistic meaning of a non-indexical expression does not necessarily correspond to what the expression contributes to propositional content.² Contextual modifications of the truth-conditional content as defined by TCP are called *strong pragmatic effects*.³ Among the phenomena which Recanati claims to yield strong pragmatics effects are adjectives (Chapter 2), weather reports (Chapter 3), embedded implicatures (Chapter 5), context-shifts (Chapter 6) and open quotations (Chapters 7, 8).

This review is organized as follows. Sections 2.1–2.3 will summarize Recanati's argument on adjectives, weather reports and open quotations respectively. Section 3 will address potential shortcomings in the theoretical tools used by Recanati.

2. Overview

2.1. Adjectives

Contrary to the traditional view, Recanati claims that so-called 'absolute'

² Radical Contextualism holds that the linguistic meaning of a non-indexical expression cannot be what the expression contributes to propositional content. Although Recanati confines himself, in the book under review, to arguing for TCP, he confesses that he is also sympathetic to Radical Contextualism (p. 17).

³ The term is defined by King and Stanley (2005). Advocating the Minimalist view, however, King and Stanley (2005) claim that there is no such effect.

adjectives like *red* are no less relative than adjectives like *small*.⁴ For example, ‘a red book’ is red in the specific way in which books (as opposed to cars, newspapers, birds, etc.) are red; for a book to be red is for its cover but not necessarily its inner pages to be mostly red.

Is the interpretation of *red* an instance of saturation or modulation? In sentences such as *Imagine a red {surface/spot}*, there is no need, says Recanati, for the context to specify any relevant part or dimension of the surface or the spot talked about. This optional character suggests that the meaning of *red book* or *red bird* should be accounted for in terms of modulation rather than saturation.

2.2. Weather reports

It is generally considered that meteorological predicates like *rain* carry an argument slot for a location which can be filled either explicitly by means of an adverbial phrase as in (1), or implicitly by a contextually determined location as in (2) (Perry (1993)).

- (1) It’s raining here / in Paris.
- (2) It’s raining.

The provision of the value for the slot might appear to result from saturation rather than modulation, as suggested by the contrast between (3, 4) and (5).

- (3) A: John has arrived.
B: Where has he arrived?
A: #I have no idea.
- (4) A: It has rained.
B: Where has it rained?
A: #I have no idea.
- (5) A: John has danced.
B: Where has he danced?
A: I have no idea.

⁴ Relative adjectives like *small* are generally considered not to be intersective, i.e., small elephants are not the intersection of the set of elephants and the set of small objects. This is why we cannot say *A small elephant is small*. According to Recanati, however, this view ignores the fact that when we say *A small elephant is not small*, the meaning of *small* undergoes a semantic shift. The first occurrence of *small* means *small for elephants*, while the second occurrence means *small compared to ordinary objects*. If the meaning is kept constant, it is true that a small elephant is small, where both occurrences of *small* mean *small for elephants*.

Since it is evident that *arrive*, but not *dance*, carries an argument slot for a location, the contrast between (3, 4) and (5) seems to show that *rain* also carries an argument slot for a location.

Recanati tries to reject this standard view. His argument is simple. The crucial (and only) evidence is what he calls ‘the weatherman example,’ illustrated in (6).

- (6) I can imagine a situation in which rain has become extremely rare and important, and rain detectors have been disposed all over the territory (whatever the territory—possibly the whole Earth). In the imagined scenario, each detector triggers an alarm bell in the Monitoring Room when it detects rain. There is a single bell; the location of the triggering detector is indicated by a light on a board in the Monitoring Room. After weeks of total drought, the bell eventually rings in the Monitoring Room. Hearing it, the weatherman on duty in the adjacent room shouts: ‘It’s raining!’ His utterance is true, iff it is raining (at the time of utterance) in some place or other (pp. 81–82, also Recanati (2002: 317)).

From (6), Recanati draws the conclusion that “the standard view regarding meteorological predicates must be given up, and “[r]ain is just like ‘dance’ in this respect” (p. 111). According to Recanati, the contrast between (3, 4) and (5) is purely pragmatic: “the location of the event is often relevant when the event being described is a meteorological event, hence it is quite typical to find tacit reference to a place in a meteorological utterances—more typical than for other event predicates” (p. 111). Accordingly, the provision of an implicit location in sentences like (2) should be accounted for in terms of modulation (more specifically, free enrichment) rather than saturation, contrary to the standard view.

The remaining pages of Chapter 3 of the book are devoted to the argument against those that might be proposed to defend the standard view. For instance, advocates of the standard view could claim that meteorological predicates like *rain* contain an argument slot for a location, and that the slot might be bound by a covert existential quantifier.⁵ Under this

⁵ Alternatively, one could argue that, in the weatherman example, the implicit argument slot is indeed assigned a specific location, namely *the whole earth* (Stanley (2005), Martí (2006)). Recanati tries to argue against this option as well. I will not go into the debate in this review, though.

analysis, *It's raining* in (6) represents the proposition that there is a location l such that it's raining in l , where l represents an argument slot for a location, and 'there is a location l ' corresponds to a covert existential quantifier. If this argument is correct, the weatherman example can no longer be used to support the view that *rain* does not carry an argument slot for a location, since even in that example there is an implicit argument for a location, namely l . Recanati rejects this argument by pointing out that the negation of *It's raining* given in (7a) can never be interpreted as in (7b), no matter what context we may construct following the weatherman example.

- (7) a. It's not raining!
 b. In some place or other, it is not raining.

To express the proposition in (7b), the weatherman ought to say something like (8), instead of (7a).

- (8) The rain has stopped!

If, as some researchers say, *rain* carried a variable for a location bound by a covert existential quantifier, it might naturally be expected that the quantifier would interact with negation in (7a), making it possible to interpret (7a) as expressing the proposition in (7b). This is not the case, however. The unavailability of (7b) is automatically accounted for by Recanati's position. If no modulation is applied, (7a) simply means that it is not the case that a raining event is taking place. This proposition corresponds to (9), but not to (7b).

- (9) It's not raining anywhere.

So far, so good. Surprisingly, however, Recanati concedes eventually, when he encounters an objection based on such examples as (10), due to Sam Wheeler III, a philosopher of language at the University of Connecticut.

- (10) Therapists are monitoring a large group of patients suffering from Fred's Syndrome, a pathological tendency to start projects and never complete them. A new drug, Completin, is being tested. Patients are monitored by graduate students, who push a button every time a patient finishes a project. 'Patient #271 has finished,' says the researcher, looking at the console. 'John has finished' can mean 'John has finished something or other.' (p. 116)

No one would say that *finish* is normally a one-place predicate. Recanati puts forward the idea that the special use of *finish* in (10) is obtained by applying Quine's (1960) *Der* operator, as defined in (11).

- (11) (*Der P*) $x_1...x_{n-1}$ iff there is something x_n such that $Px_1...x_n$.
 (p. 81)

This recessive function turns an n-place predicate into an n-1-place predicate. For example, *Der* (transitive eat_1) = intransitive eat_2 , such that “John eats₂” is true iff John eats₁ something or other. Ironically, this move forces Recanati to say the same thing about *rain* in (6) and to accept the standard view on meteorological predicates; *rain* normally carries an argument for a location, but *Der* can suppress it as follows: $Der(rain_1) = rain_2$, where $rain_1 = rain$ in normal contexts like (1) and (2) while $rain_2 = rain$ in the weatherman example.

Even though he gives up rejecting the standard view on meteorological predicates, Recanati still sticks to a TCP account of the phenomenon by claiming that recessive meaning shifts as generated by *Der* operator are free pragmatic processes; “[...] the account based on the idea of recessive shift would support TCP just as much as the account in terms of free enrichment. That is why I face the possibility of such an account light-heartedly” (p. 125).

2.3. Open quotations

In (12)–(16) below, the linguistic expressions put in quotation marks are ostensively displayed or ‘demonstrated.’

- (12) ‘Fortnight’ designates a period of fourteen days.
- (13) ‘Very’ is a four-letter word.
- (14) A ‘fortnight’ is a period of fourteen days.
- (15) In *Mémoire d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand wrote that he returned to France in 1800, ‘with the century.’
- (16) John is very ‘cool.’

There is a difference, however, between (12) and (13) on the one hand, and (14)–(16) on the other. In (12) and (13), the linguistic expression within quotation marks is recruited as an NP (more precisely, as a singular term), regardless of the part of speech it belongs to in normal contexts. This type of quotation is called closed quotation. In closed quotation, the quotation marks can never be omitted. In (14)–(16), on the other hand, the quotation marks can be suppressed without affecting the grammaticality of the sentences, as in (17)–(19).

- (17) A fortnight is a period of fourteen days.
- (18) In *Mémoire d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand wrote that he returned to France in 1800, with the century.
- (19) John is very cool.

This type of quotation is called an open quotation.⁶

Recanati claims that open quotations provide a striking illustration of pragmatic modulation. In addition to its normal semantic content, the word or phrase demonstrated in open quotation conveys an extra level of meaning that is pragmatic in nature, by virtue of the speaker's very act of ostensive display. By uttering (15), for example, the speaker asserts that in *Mémoire d'outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand wrote that he returned to France in 1800, with the century, and additionally implies that Chateaubriand used the words *with the century* to describe the event. This additional meaning is, according to Recanati, akin to that of (20).

(20) She took out her key and opened the door.

The second conjunct of (20) is interpreted as saying that she opened the door with the key mentioned in the first conjunct, even though that information is not literally expressed anywhere in the sentence. Since it is generally agreed that the interpretation of the second conjunct of (20) results from pragmatic modulation, the additional meaning produced by open quotation should also be attributed to pragmatic modulation.⁷ Recanati thus concludes that a threefold distinction illustrated in (20) is at play in open quotation (pp. 273–274).

- (21) a. the meaning / content of the quoted word, i.e. their contribution to the meaning / content of the sentence they occur in;
 b. the conventional meaning of the quotation marks (or of their counterpart in oral speech);
 c. the contextual meaning of the quotation.

This multi-level analysis can also handle such recalcitrant cases as (22) and (23).

(22) Paul says he's due to present his work in the 'paper session.'

(23) Paul says that 'Quine' is late for his own paper. [Context: Paul misidentifies an old man named McPherson as the famous philosopher Quine.]

In (22) and (23), by demonstrating the words *paper session* / *Quine*, the

⁶ In a closed quotation, the word within quotation marks is 'mentioned,' while in an open quotation, the word or phrase within quotation marks is 'used.'

⁷ By uttering (16), the speaker asserts that John is cool, but she indicates at the same time that she is borrowing the word *cool* from someone else, without fully endorsing it. Why she is distancing herself from the word is another question that has to be answered in order to fully grasp the meaning of the quotation. This use of open quotation is called 'scare quotes.'

speaker is mimicking Paul's deviant use of the words. (22) and (23) are interpreted as saying (24) and (25) respectively.

(24) Paul says he's due to present his work in what he calls the 'paper session.'

(25) Paul says that the person he calls 'Quine' is late for his own paper. What is crucial here is that (22) and (23) do not entail (26) and (27).

(26) Paul says he's due to present his work in the paper session.

(27) Paul says that Quine is late for his own paper.

This might appear to go against the multi-level analysis mentioned above. It does not, so Recanati argues. (22) and (23) involve the phenomenon of *context-shift*, insofar as the language spoken in a context is considered to be one of the coordinates of the context in question (p. 280). The words *paper session* / *Quine* in (22) and (23) are not interpreted in the current context, but in the source context in which Paul used those words. "Any word can, by being quoted in this echoic manner, be ascribed a semantic value which is not its normal semantic value, but rather what some other person takes to be its semantic value" (Recanati (2000: 140)). Context-shifts are an instance of pragmatic modulation in that they are optional, context-driven operation that can produce strong pragmatic effects as defined in Section 1. It can then be concluded that the pragmatic intrusion observed in (22) and (23) confirms the validity of TCP, rather than run counter to the multi-level analysis of open quotation.

3. Comments on Recanati's Argument

Original and convincing as it is, Recanati's argument is not without its potential shortcomings. My main concern is the status of *Der* operator which Recanati elicits to argue for a TCP analysis of meteorological predicates. As we have seen in Section 3, Recanati assumes that the meaning shift generated through the application of *Der* is a free pragmatic process. Presumably, he considers its alleged pragmatic nature to come from the fact that the application of *Der* is optional, as he suggests in the Optionality Criterion:

(28) Optionality Criterion

Whenever a contextual ingredient of content is provided through a pragmatic process of the optional variety, we can imagine another possible context of utterance in which no such ingredient is provided yet the utterance expresses a complete proposition.

(Recanati (2004: 101))

In fact, Recanati concludes from the optionality of the provision of a location for the verb *rain*, as witnessed by the weatherman scenario in (6), that it is a free pragmatic process. As regards to this move, Stanley (2005) says, “Unfortunately, Recanati’s reasoning here is fallacious. [...] one cannot conclude from the fact that Q is true (that ‘it is raining’ can be used to express a complete proposition, even though no location is contextually provided) that the antecedent is true, that the location is not provided through saturation. To do so would be to commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Yet that it [*sic*] is just what Recanati infers from the Optionality Criterion, together with the premise that ‘It is raining’ can be used to express a complete proposition, when no location is provided.” If *provided* in (28) is replaced by *suppressed*, the same holds for Recanati’s argument for the pragmatic nature of *Der*. In a different context, Recanati himself admits, “Cancellability [= Optionality] is a *necessary* condition for a meaning component to count as pragmatic; it is not a sufficient condition. So cancellability *per se* does not establish the pragmatic nature of the meaning component” (p. 298, emphasis in the original). What Stanley and Recanati state here is evident from Table 1 above. For a meaning component to count as pragmatic, it must be shown both that it is optional and that it is *not* driven by grammar. Nowhere does Recanati prove, however, that the application of *Der* is not controlled or constrained by the semantics of the linguistic expression in question.

Indeed, there are phenomena that may be considered to support the semantic nature of *Der*. As seen in 2.2 above, *Der* can be applied to transitive *eat*₁ such that *Der* (transitive *eat*₁) = intransitive *eat*₂. This accounts for the fact that *eat* can be employed in both (29a) and (29b).

- (29) a. John was eating the carrot. (*eat*₁)
 b. John was eating. (*eat*₂)

Der cannot be applied, however, to the related verb *devour*, as shown by (30) (cf. Borsley (1999: 67)).

- (30) a. John was devouring the carrot.
 b. *John was devouring.

This suggests that the lexical semantics of each verb must specify the applicability of *Der*. A similar contrast can be found between the English verb *like* and its French counterpart *aimer*. The complement of *like* can never be suppressed, whereas that of *aimer* can, as shown in (31) and (32).

- (31) a. I like watching TV very much.
 b. *I like very much.

- (32) a. J'aime beaucoup regarder la télé.
 I-like very-much watch the TV
 b. J'aime beaucoup.
 I-like very-much

Again, the applicability of *Der* must be specified for each verb in the lexicon.

If the application of *Der* is a purely semantic process *pace* Recanati, the phenomena adduced in the book to argue for TCP can now be handled within the confines of semantics. Consider the adjective *red* discussed in Section 2 above. Assuming that *red*₁ occurring in *red book*, *red car*, *red newspaper*, *red bird*, etc. carries an argument slot for 'parts,' while *red*₂ in *red surface* or *red spot* does not, the two uses of *red* can be represented in the lexical semantics of the word as shown in (33), just like the two uses of *rain* discussed in Section 3.

- (33) *Der* (*red*₁) = *red*₂

Similarly, assuming the argument structures in (34) for different uses of quotation marks, they can be generated through the application of *Der* as in (35) and (36).

- (34) a. quotation marks 1 in (22) and (23): (x, y, z), where
 x = the expression quoted, y = the person whose expression is quoted, z = the language with respect to which the expression is interpreted
 b. quotation marks 2 in (14)–(16): (x, y)⁸
 c. quotation marks 3 in (12) and (13): (x)⁹

- (35) *Der* (quotation marks 1) = quotation marks 2

- (36) *Der* (quotation marks 2) = quotation marks 3

If, in this manner, *Der* works within the confines of semantics, Recanati's argument fails to refute the Minimalist view, which restricts the truth-conditional role of pragmatics to 'saturation,' a process of contextual value-assignment to indexical expressions or free variables: various interpretations of *red*, *rain*, and quotation marks just turn out to be instances of saturation. The fact that even Recanati's thorough and in-depth analysis

⁸ In this use of quotation marks, there need be no argument slot for a language, because the quoted expression is just interpreted with respect to the language in which the whole utterance is interpreted.

⁹ In this use of quotation marks, there need be no argument slot for a person, because "the speaker talks about words without evoking any use of those words in a source context distinct from the current context" (p. 287), and hence the quotation is not echoic.

does not fully establish the adequacy of TCP shows that the issue he tackles in the book is challenging in the true sense of the word. As Recanati says, “the issue is far from settled” (p. 125). This intriguing book invites every reader to participate in the dispute over the semantics/pragmatics distinction.

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