# Problems and Perspectives on the Limits of Pragmatics: Reply to Critics

Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone[1]
*Rutgers University*

The five papers collected here are a testament to the diverse and far-reaching concerns of research in the philosophy of language, semantics, and pragmatics. The authors have not only engaged with our arguments in *Imagination and Convention* (henceforth IC), but they have worked to bring our ideas into contact with new spheres of language use, new interpretive mechanisms, and new philosophical questions. We are grateful and excited to see our ideas taken up, generalized, and, of course, contested here. In the interest of enriching and challenging this ongoing dialogue, we have prepared a brief reaction to each of the pieces in turn. We hope thereby both to clarify our major points of disagreement with our critics, as well as to highlight the important innovations, extensions and provocations by which our critics have carried the debate forward.

## Reply to M. Garcia-Carpintero

Although we found MGC's paper perceptive, its main focus is the nature of assertion—a topic we had nothing to say about. Along the way, though, MGC does express reservations about our general position. Before we react to them, it will help to recapitulate some of the main points of IC.

Our work is targeted towards Grice's theory of conversational implicatures (CIs), but it applies equally well to many related theories from philosophy, linguistics, and psychology, all of which assume that semantic content is enriched or transformed by general interpretive mechanisms to yield idiosyncratic speaker meanings. Our objection has two prongs. First, we argue, many apparently pragmatic contents turn out to be determined conventionally, rather than by general interpretive mechanisms, and so, cannot be conversational implicatures (CIs). (This is the topic of Part II of IC.) Second, we argue, when we consider linguistic exchanges that are not underwritten by convention, we find that they involve different kinds of

thinking that can lead dynamically to indefinitely many conclusions; in other words, the utterances are prompts for the hearer's imagination rather than signals of communicated content derived indirectly by general mechanisms. (This is the topic of Part III of IC.) Thus, we conclude there are no CIs in Grice's sense. A response to us can, accordingly, take the form of either contesting the existence of a convention where we purport to find one; arguing that the particularity and open endedness we uncover in other alleged cases is no threat to the status of a conversational implicature; or, of course, providing an alleged conversational implicature that is neither conventionalized nor the indeterminate product of special figures of speech.

With this dialectical setup in place, we turn to MGC's reservations. MCG's main critical point—as he himself states in his introduction—is to argue that assertions require communicated content, but that in many instances that content is indirectly determined, much as a CI would be.[2] So, we must be wrong about the non-existence of CIs. For MCG, examples such as these all provide instances of *bona fide* indirect assertions:

(1) Utterance: 'Who the heck wants to read this book?'
putative assertion: Nobody wants to read this book.

(2) Utterance: 'Paul is a good friend'
putative assertion: Paul is disloyal.

(3) Utterance: 'Nuclear reactors are time bombs'
putative assertion: Nuclear reactors might disastrously fail at any moment (Bergmann, 1982, p. 231).

We think there's room to contest this data. Rhetorical questions seem to instantiate the conventionalized indirection we associate with indirect speech acts in IC: rhetorical questions conventionalize the successive orchestration of multiple semantic contributions (raising a question, answering it in the negative), which can achieve desired effects through the dynamics of discourse. "Time bomb" seems to be a dead metaphor, which now has a conventionalized derived interpretation (tellingly, dictionaries list a separate meaning for the term describing a dangerous and unpredictable situation). These kinds of indirection would not amount to CIs in Grice's sense and would not challenge our framework.

Moreover, on our view, speakers can prompt the hearer's imaginative engagement with specific points in mind. In some cases, it may be

---

[2] Note that one mainline view on assertions is that they provide the truth conditional contents that CIs are allegedly derived from—this is so even if their content is not limited to compositionally determined semantic contents alone. It follows straightaway, then, that MCG, as he acknowledges, cannot be defending Grice. But he still wants to defend a notion of indirect meaning that he presumes we would reject, namely, his notion of an indirect assertion.

appropriate to report that point by giving a proposition. For example, the speaker's point in a sarcastic utterance of (2) might be that Paul is a bad friend. Whether it makes sense to describe the speaker's point as an assertion is an aspect of the broader theory of speech acts on which we have no position. In particular, the doctrine of speech act pluralism suggests that each utterance involves countless speech acts and diverse, correct ways to report them, including as acts of assertion.[3] According to such a view, examples (1-3), even if analyzed as MGC understands them, would not count as evidence for indirect meanings and again would not challenge our framework.

MGC is uncomfortable with the hedged way we present such suggestions, but we regard them merely as plausible hypotheses awaiting further inquiry. When it comes to the philosophical dialectic, however, we certainly do not intend to hedge. We intend to straight out *deny* that the productive interpretation of a truly ironic utterance, as (1) might be, or a truly sarcastic utterance, as (2) might be, or a truly metaphorical utterance, as (3) might be, requires ascribing *any* content whatsoever to the *utterance*—semantic or pragmatic—outside of its literal meaning. These forms of expression are in a different line of work. We think the difficulty of pinning down exactly what the content would be is a striking illustration of this. Should we take the "sarcastic content" of (2) to be that Paul is disloyal? Or that he is just unreliable? Or maybe that he is a casual acquaintance whose allegiance is yet to be put to the test? Or some combination of these propositions? The fact that all these ideas come to mind, and none of them has a privileged status, shows that the utterance gets its effects by prompting the hearer to think things through and appreciate them for himself: the speaker uses the utterance to hint at how the speaker sees things, not to say it. This, of course, is all compatible with hinting being a sort of speech act—just one that is essentially indeterminate, and so, to repeat, not in the business of presenting one specific (propositional) content.

MGC is explicit that our indeterminacy argument does not move him; and that it does not, does not move us. This is a familiar dialectical stalemate for us. MGC seems to think our qualm is that the alleged speaker meanings for these non-conventionalized inferences are not amenable to being made fully explicit. But that's not our plaint—there may be many propositions we can entertain that we cannot render explicit in natural language, perhaps including, for example, certain kinds of pictorial content.[4] We remain neutral on that. But what we are not neutral about is whether the content of an utterance can ever be *indeterminate*. We argue it cannot. Denying indeterminacy of content seems to us essential not only to Grice's conception

---

[3] See Cappelen, Lepore (2005).

[4] For discussion of content across modalities in terms compatible with the framework of IC, see Stone, Stojnic (2015).

of communication, but also to a wide range of other approaches to content in the philosophy of language—indeed, ultimately, we think, to the very idea of assigning public meanings to utterances. Now, plenty of philosophers are ready to challenge such notions. MGC cites Yalcin's and Buchanan's arguments that coordinating on content must be regarded as imprecise and open ended. We might put Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, with its eclectic invocation of the diverse and idiosyncratic inferences that speakers prompt with utterances, in a similar camp. As seems typical of dialectical impasses, the divergences between such views and our own are far-reaching and systematic. MGC's critique is thus an instructive reminder that disputes about the interpretive mechanisms at play in examples such as (1-3) take place within a larger context of foundational debates about the nature of truth, reference, meaning and communication.

## Reply to J. Odrowąż-Sypniewska

JOS begins with an invitation to position IC amid another set of debates: the contextualist-minimalist debates of the last decade. Without endorsing her exact characterization of the history, we can say that we did not put the contextualist-minimalist debate front and center in IC in part because we wanted to move beyond it. Both contextualists and minimalists have typically assumed a broadly Gricean framework, where communicative intentions enrich and transform semantic contents into extended, pragmatic meanings, paradigmatically including conversational implicatures—and it is this whole framework that we challenge in IC.

Our ongoing work with Una Stojnic illustrates how the conventionalist approach to meaning we now advocate departs both from contextualism and from minimalism.[5] In this work, we argue that all semantic context sensitivity gets resolved conventionally. In particular, we hold that all context sensitive expressions behave more like indexicals than the standard story would have it for traditional demonstrative expressions. When a speaker uses the indexical "I," she picks out herself regardless of what she intends to be doing. Just the same, we sketch a formal system where the pronoun "he" gets a semantic value in context as a function of linguistic rules governing the prominence of references and the coherence of discourse. We believe that *all* bona fide semantic context sensitivity is completely governed by linguistic rules, and it's only because previous work had an incomplete account of the rules that they concluded that the rules left the semantic value of contextually determined elements open. In sum, we disagree with *minimalists* insofar as we are committed to much more context sensitivity than has been hitherto acknowledged, even by contextualists; but we disagree with *contextualists* as

---

[5] See particularly Stojnic, Stone, Lepore (forthcoming).

well because they, unlike us, assume that semantic conventions do not determine semantic values on their own but must be supplemented by suitable speaker intentions.

JOS, as do many of the contributors to this issue, focuses on our discussion of indirect speech acts, in particular, indirect requests. According to us, the sentence "Can I have the French Toast?" is ambiguous between a request meaning and an inquiry meaning. In light of critical readings by JOS and others, we have found it helpful to clarify our ambiguity thesis: our considered view is that English grammar assigns the sentence two logical forms, one that merely raises an inquiry and another that combines raising an inquiry with expressing a preference.[6] How this ambiguity arises is in our view a matter of further research in the syntax-semantics interface; many more attractive analyses are possible than our attribution of a lexical ambiguity to 'can', which JOS rightly critiques.

We are convinced that the data surrounding indirect requests shows an important role for conventions. There is a long tradition, which JOS invokes, which argues that the relevant conventions are merely *conventions of use*, which need to be distinguished from conventions of meaning. We think it is much harder to draw such a distinction than is often appreciated, because of the ways apparent use-based effects can arise even when embedded under semantic operators; by contrast, the dynamic conception of semantics we argue for in IC embraces both domains of interpretation in a uniform framework.[7] Moreover, even if you could work out the details, appeal to conventions of use would not be much help dialectically. Our target is Grice's theory of conversational implicature: Grice understood that conversational implicatures arise from the interaction of semantic content with general principles of rationality; he took pains to distinguish them from conventional implicatures. Concretely (and echoing our remarks about minimalism and contextualism earlier), offering a conventional explanation for the availability of an interpretation for a particular utterance suggests that intention recognition and mind reading will play a very different role in fixing or recovering that interpretation from what is assumed on the familiar Gricean story.

## Reply to M. Matczak

MM's interest is in legal interpretation, in particular, in whether the philosophy of law must start from a Gricean approach to interpretation. For Grice, to interpret others' speech is to identify their communicative intentions. Applied to the law, this becomes the demand that to interpret the

---

[6] See Lepore, Stone (forthcoming).
[7] See Lepore, Stone (2016).

law is to retrieve the lawmaker's intent. MM runs through a battery of problems with this Gricean approach to the law.

In contrast, MM defends convention-based approaches to legal interpretation, and locates us squarely within this latter framework.—In particular, MM focuses on the advantages of our social view of communication over Grice's individualism. That is, according to us, communication depends on socially developed conventions, and not, as with Grice, on individual psychological states. So, on our account, speakers do not make meaning with their intentions, but rather rely on the socially determined conventions their language community coordinated on. *Since* we rely on convention, an utterance can mean something its speaker did not intend to communicate. MM finds this way of thinking about meaning more congenial to how legal interpretation should be understood, and points out important parallels in legal philosophy. We are pleased to learn that we might contribute to this conversation, and appreciate MM for drawing attention to it.

Much of the first part of MM's essay is a useful and informative survey of the debate between us and various versions of the Gricean approach, that is, the set of views according to which, in one way or another, linguistic meaning must combine with speaker intentions in order to determine communicative content. MM again discusses indirect requests; he may not have us completely right when he endorses the positions that "Can I have the French Toast?" uttered in a restaurant, signals a request and "Can I get a real Guinness in this town?" uttered even in a bar, remains an inquiry. What we actually endorse is the view that *both* strings are *ambiguous* between inquiry and request readings—even if the less natural reading might never occur to speaker or hearer in context.

Clarifying this point further, our view is that ambiguous strings are conventionally linked to two or more semantic interpretations by the grammar. There may be different, alternative conventions that potentially apply to the string, as in the case of a lexical ambiguity, as we find with the word 'bank'.—There may also be alternative potential derivations of the string that apply the same conventions in different ways, as in the case of structural ambiguity, as we find with the phrase 'old men and women'. The point is that semantic conventions establish alternative meanings. We deny that the conventions also say how to resolve such ambiguities in context. (We remained mute about the details of ambiguity resolution in the book.) Our considered view is that context often provides obvious cues that leave no doubt about what reading the speaker must have had in mind. If you say you are walking over to the bank and we know there are no rivers anywhere nearby, we are likely to conclude you mean a financial institution—not as a matter of convention, but rather as a matter of common sense. But, of course, the speaker would not be deemed irrational—or to have departed from ordinary English—if they meant side of the river. MM's example of

disambiguation of questions in context is, we think, much the same.

A further aspect of MM's project is to clarify the difference between "the letter of the law" and "the spirit of the law." According to MM, recognizing a more pervasive role for linguistic convention in interpretation, as we advocate, makes it possible to ground this distinction in the different status of conventional content—for example, in what content is at issue in a statute and what content is not. However, because of the many interrelationships tying together aspects of linguistic meaning, broadly conceived, we are wary of drawing deep distinctions among kinds of meaning. (Recall our discussion of conventions of meaning versus conventions of use earlier.) Furthermore, our work seems to leave open the possibility that interrogating the spirit of the law might itself involve a kind of open-ended engagement of the kind we explored in Part III of IC.

MM ends his discussion expressing reservations that we have not gone far enough; in particular, he claims our view is too wedded to a Kripkean model of content and a Lewisean account of convention. Though we invoke both theorists in our discussion to draw contrasts and highlight certain features of our own view, we do not believe our arguments draw in any essential way on either of their frameworks. Indeed, some of our discussion of linguistic flexibility and innovation presumes that we cannot go all the way with Lewis on convention. In order to draw our conclusions against Grice, all we really need to take from Lewis is his notion of coordination and its central place in communication. Kripke's views, meanwhile, are attractive to us only because they highlight the social nature of meaning, by sharpening the intuition that we rely in communication on conventions established by others. We can take on this point without endorsing Kripke's further proposal that this reliance arises via specific causal and historical connections.

## Reply to K. M. Jaszczolt

Let us begin our response to KJ by clarifying our appeal to the imagination. KJ seems to think that we think that when the imagination is provoked we believe something inferior infects the conversation. On the contrary, we believe that when acts of speech distinctively provoke the imagination, it can be powerful and even necessary for the speaker's point. For example, when we say that a metaphor invites its audience to explore the analogy between disparate concepts, we suppose that this imaginative effort can yield valuable insights that no other line of thinking affords—that is why metaphor so famously resists paraphrase. Communicative conversation is obviously not always so richly and variously evocative. But our main point is that none of these practices gets its content from inferences underwritten by principles of rationality. That is, none is Gricean.

KJ also does not like our claim that all there is to pragmatics at the end of

the day is disambiguation. We are not sure we are that keen on putting our point that way either. We have no interest in fighting over labels; if someone wants to call some linguistic conventional rules "pragmatic," that's fine with us. As KJ points out, different approaches to pragmatics do have different commitments. We must decide on a case-by-case basis whether our criticisms apply to a specific proposal. In fact, our discussion of Horn and Levinson in Chapter 3 of IC anticipates this. What we object to is not the linguistic rules they argue for, but rather their claim that in doing "linguistic pragmatics" they are following in Grice's footsteps. They are not.

What we hoped to do with our own definition of pragmatics is to undermine the idea that mind reading—paradigmatically, the explicit representation and reasoning about self-referential communicative intentions that Grice bakes into his notion of CI—is essential in successful communication. Instead, on our view, it suffices to have coordinated encoding and decoding; that is, speaker and hearer can already communicate as soon as they employ the same set of linguistic conventions. The one wrinkle, as we have seen, is that hearers must sometimes disambiguate between distinct, linguistically determined interpretations, both of which are compatible with the string uttered. Even here, as we have observed, shallow cues from context may suffice to lead the hearer to the right answer, without any direct speculation on what the speaker intended.

Ultimately, then, our view is simply that speakers merely intend their words to be interpreted however their social community has coordinated on their being so interpreted, regardless even of whether the speaker and hearer can articulate which propositions these conventions deliver, or even whether they know what these conventions are. We offer "direct intentionalism" as an implementation of this idea. KJ thinks direct intentionalism is "too speculative" to be of any value. That's simply not true. Our position is intended to remind Griceans of the lessons learned during the Kripke-Putnam revolution and show what their consequences are when extended across the full panoply of communication and interpretation.

### Reply to M. Witek

Finally, MW offers a development of our ideas that we find quite congenial. MW's focus is on cases of accommodation. In this interpretive pattern, the presuppositions of a speaker's utterances get added to the conversational record as though the speaker had explicitly asserted them. For example, when someone says, "I have to pick up my sister," he presupposes he has a sister. But in ordinary conversations an audience will not deem the utterance inappropriate even if they did not know in advance that the speaker has a sister. The audience will simply accept that the speaker has a sister. This is accommodation. More striking examples, like (4), originally due to Lauri

Karttunen, show that the information conveyed by accommodation can be central to the speaker's point.

   (4) We regret that children cannot accompany their parents to commencement exercises.

MW accounts for accommodation as a conventional way to exploit encoded meaning. The explanation builds on our model of direct intentionalism—and so, our rejection of cooperative mutual knowledge as a requirement for communication. It also builds on our arguments for extending linguistic conventions beyond the truth conditional contributions traditionally associated with semantics. This is a plausible idea and seems especially powerful in making sense of cases like (4).

We think further work should explore MW's proposal on its own merits. Positioning it with respect to previous work is trickier, however. We don't explicitly offer a positive account of accommodation in IC—though what MW says about accommodation is certainly in the spirit of what we have to say about indirect speech acts, for example. At the same time, we doubt that the arguments of IC actually undermine the specific account of accommodation given by Thomason, Stone, and Devault (TSD) either. Note that TSD do *not* propose that intention recognition supplements or transforms semantic content in accommodation. It's true that TSD explain the *success* of accommodation in terms of collaborative reasoning and plan recognition—but, by the same token, we admit in IC that people often draw on collaborative reasoning to smooth their conversations. What's crucial to the dialectic is that TSD's model of accommodation assumes that all the relevant content *is linguistically encoded*; their model does *not* lead to a new level of implicated content for utterances that exploit accommodation. In fact, TSD acknowledge that the intention recognition they model may depend on conventions in many ways: with reference to (4), TSD write "We suspect that such cases represent constrained and perhaps even conventionalized discourse strategies" (p. 51 of 2011 version).[8]

In short, given the empirical uncertainties associated with accommodation in previous work, MW has moved the discussion forward by setting out a specific way that these phenomena fit our framework and reconciling the intuitions at play—in a way that's consonant with the themes of IC, but which, in its own way, provides a provocative further suggestion.

---

[8] Thomason's earlier work includes an extensive argument that researchers should expect conventions not only for using meaning straightforwardly but also for exploiting meaning. See Thomason (1990).

# References

Cappelen, H., Lepore, E. (2005). *Insensitive Semantics*: *A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lepore, E., Stone, M. (2016) The Breadth of Semantics: Reply to Critics. *Inquiry, 59 (2)*, 195-206.

Lepore, E., Stone, M. (forthcoming). Explicit Indirection. D. Fogel, D. Harris, and M. Moss (eds.), *New Work on Speech Acts*. Oxford.

Stojnic, U., Stone, M., Lepore (forthcoming). Discourse and Logical Form: Pronouns, Attention and Coherence. *Linguistics and Philosophy.*

Stone, M., Stojnic, U. (2015). Meaning and Demonstration. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, *6 (1)*, special issue on „Pictorial and Diagrammatic Representation," 69-97.

Thomason, R. H. (1990). Accommodation, Meaning, and Implicature: Interdisciplinary Foundations for Pragmatics. P. R. Cohen, J. Morgan, M. Pollack (eds.), *Intentions in Communication* (pp. 326-363). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Thomason, R. H., Stone, M., Devault. D. (2006*). Enlightened Update: A Computational Architecture for Presupposition and Other Pragmatic Phenomena*. Ms., University of Michigan, Rutgers University, University of Edinburgh. Talk at the NSF sponsored Workshop on Accommodation, OSU.