Sub-Sententials: Pragmatics or Semantics?

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Abstract Stainton points out that speakers "can make assertions while speaking sub-sententially". He argues for a "pragmatics-oriented approach" to these phenomena and against a "semantics-oriented approach". In contrast, I argue for a largely semantics-oriented approach: typically, sub-sentential utterances assert a truth-conditional proposition in virtue of exploiting a semantic convention. Thus, there is an "implicit-demonstrative convention" in English of expressing a thought that a particular object in mind is F by saying simply 'F'. I note also that some sub-sentential assertions include demonstrations and argue that these exploit another semantic convention for expressing a thought with a particular object in mind. I consider four objections that Stainton has to a semantics- oriented approach. The most interesting is the "syntactic ellipsis" objection, which rests on two planks: (A) the assumption that this approach must claim that what appears on the surface to be a sub-sentential is, at some deeper level of syntactic analysis, really a sentence; (B) the claim that there is no such syntactic ellipsis in these sub-sentential utterances. I argue that (A) is wrong and that (B) may well be. I also reject the other three objections: "too much ambiguity"; "no explanatory work"; and "fails a Kripkean test". Nonetheless, occasionally, sub-sentential utterances semantically assert only a fragment of a truth-conditional proposition. This fragment needs to be pragmatically enriched to yield a propositional message. To this extent a pragmatics-oriented approach is correct.

Keywords sub-sentential · Stainton · semantics · pragmatics · implicit demonstrative · convention · demonstration · syntactic ellipsis

1 Introduction

Rob Stainton has an interesting discussion of sub-sententials in a number of works, particularly in a long article, "In Defense of Non-Sentential Assertion" (2005), and a book, *Words and Thoughts* (2006). He points out that speakers "can make

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assertions while speaking sub-sententially" (2005: 384). Among his many nice examples is the following, that I shall number "(1)":

> it seems that someone could hold up a letter and say 'From Spain', thereby claiming, about the displayed letter, that it comes from Spain. (2005: 384–5)

Stainton argues for a "pragmatics-oriented approach" to these phenomena and against a "semantics- oriented approach". In contrast, I shall argue for a largely semantics-oriented approach: typically, though not always, sub-sentential utterances assert a truth-conditional proposition in virtue of exploiting a semantic convention.

How are we to get to the truth about this issue, indeed about linguistic phenomena in general, and about the semantics-pragmatics issue in particular? The received answer is clear: we should look to our meta-linguistic intuitions (Stanley and Szabó 2000: 240; Neale 2004: 79; Carston 2004: 74; Recanati 2010: 14). I have argued that this intuition-based methodology is very wrong (1996, 2012b). If we are not to proceed in this way, how should we proceed? I have offered an answer in "What Makes a Property 'Semantic'?" (2013a). I'll start by summarizing this method before turning to sub-sententials.

2 Methodology

We need a *theoretical basis* for distinctions that play a role in the semantics-pragmatics issue; for example, for the Gricean distinction between what is said and what is meant (1989). I argue that the required basis is to be found by noting first that languages are representational systems that scientists attribute to species such as bees, prairie dogs, and humans to explain their communicative behaviors.[1] We then have a powerful theoretical interest in distinguishing two sorts of properties of any particular utterance in a language: (a), the representational properties that it has simply in virtue of being a token-expression in that language, that it has simply as a result of the organism's exploitation of that language; (b), any other properties that may constitute the organism's "message". I call the (a) properties part of "what is said", and "semantic", and the (b) ones – for example, Gricean "implicatures" and certain "enrichments" - part of "what is meant but not said", and "pragmatic". "Semantics" is the study of semantic properties, "pragmatics", pragmatic ones.[2] This theoretical basis then provides an argument for the view that what is said is constituted by properties arising from three sources: (i) from (largely)[3] conventional

[1] This view of human languages is rejected by Chomskians. They see these languages as internal states not systems of external symbols that represent the world. I argue that this is deeply misguided (2006a: chs 2 and 10; 2006b; 2008a, b).

[2] "Pragmatics" is also used for "the theory of interpretation", the study of the processes of interpreting utterances. So the term is ambiguous (Devitt 2013a: 103–5).

[3] I say "largely" because I accept the Chomskian view that some syntax is innate. The qualification should be taken as read in future.

linguistic rules in the speaker's language, rules that determine what is *encoded* in the language; (ii) from disambiguations where more than one rule governs an expression in the language; (iii) from the reference fixings, "saturations", of, for example, indexicals (and tenses), deictic demonstratives and pronouns. This is a fairly traditional view. However, whereas that view is typically promoted on the basis of intuitions, I claim to have given it a theoretical basis.

From my perspective, "semantics" is concerned with the representational properties that symbols have in virtue of being uses of a language, the properties that constitute what is said. These properties contribute to conveying the message of an utterance. Other properties may also contribute to conveying this but these are the concern of "pragmatics" not semantics. So the key semantic issue is the nature of those linguistic representational properties. The symbols have those properties in virtue of being part of a representational system of rules established (largely) by conventions. So the key issue comes down to: What are the conventional rules of the system?[4]

I go along with two common views: that there can be pragmatic modulations of what is said, either enrichments or impoverishments; and that there can be pragmatic "implicatures". So, in effect, I have a four-way distinction among the properties of utterances: (A) encoded conventional meaning; (B) what is said (=encoded + disambiguation + reference fixing); (C) what is said + pragmatic modulation; (D) implicatures. (A) and (B) are semantic properties; (C) are partly semantic, partly pragmatic; (D) are pragmatic properties. My view becomes seriously controversial in arguing, in *Overlooking Conventions* (forthcoming) that many, though certainly not all, of the pragmatists' striking examples exemplify properties of sorts (i) to (iii) above and hence go into (B) in my four-way distinction. There are more of such properties than we have previously noted: much more of the content of messages should be put into the convention-governed what is said – into semantics - than has been customary. The pragmatists have made the wrong response to their examples, putting far too many into (C) instead of (B). A paradigm example of this mistake is treating referential uses of descriptions as pragmatic phenomena; or so I have argued (2004, 2007). Stainton's treatment of sub-sententials is another paradigm. So I am urging a view of linguistic phenomena that is very much in the spirit of the tradition that the pragmatists wish to overthrow.

What is a linguistic convention? It is a convention of using a certain expression to express a certain part of a thought, or part of a message. Putting this in Gricean terms, it is a convention of using that expression with a certain speaker meaning.

How do we tell when there is such a convention if we are not to follow the custom of simply relying on our linguistic intuitions? We should look to linguistic *usage*. Where there is a convention of using an expression with a certain speaker

[4] I think that conventions should loom very large in our view of human language. In stark contrast, Chomsky thinks that the "regularities in usage" needed for linguistic conventions "are few and scattered" (1996: 47; see also 1980: 81–3). Furthermore, such conventions as there are do not have "any interesting bearing on the theory of meaning or knowledge of language" (1996: 48). I think these views are very mistaken (2006a: 178–89; 2006b: 581–2, 598–605; 2008a: 217–29).

meaning, we predict that the expression will be regularly so used. So, such a regularity provides evidence of the convention. We should posit a convention wherever it provides *the best explanation* of the regularity. (Note that although the regularity provides *evidence* for a convention, and may have *caused* the convention, it is not to be *identified* with the convention.)

How are we to gather evidence of this regularity? I have urged elsewhere (2006a, 2012a, b, 2015) that it be gathered by the informal observation, and the scientific study, of the corpus of the language. Furthermore, it can be gathered using the linguists' "technique of elicited production": we can conduct experiments in which situations are constructed or described and we see what people say or understand in those situations.[5]

It is important to recognize that there is sure to be some indeterminacy in answering the key question of what are the conventions of the representational system that is a language. For, in general, there is a sorites problem about when a regular practice becomes a convention. Consider the convention among graduate students of meeting in O'Reilly's for a drink around 6pm on Fridays. At semester beginning there was no such convention. By semester end, there was. There was never any explicit agreement. Rather, two or three went there the first week. A few more went next week. The word of this got around. More and more people started to go regularly. People started to expect others would go. A convention was established. But there was no determinate point in the semester at which it was established.

We must attend to a terminology matter. The methodology that I have just summarized talks of "what is said" where Stainton talks of "what is asserted." Now there is a distinction to be made between sayings that are statings or assertions and sayings that are mere rehearsings. But if we set that distinction aside, as I did (2013a: 101 n. 25), then, from my perspective, there is just one theoretically motivated *semantic* notion here, whether expressed by 'what is said' or 'what is asserted'. Given Stainton's terminology, it is better, for the purposes of this paper, to talk of 'what is asserted'. So I shall. So, on my usage, what is asserted, like what is said, is semantically constituted.

I will be arguing for the following two theses. (T1) Typically, what is asserted by a sub-sentential is a truth-conditional proposition. Since, as just noted, what is asserted, in my sense (= what is said), is a semantic property of an utterance, I am thus taking what Stainton calls a "semantics-oriented approach" to these cases. So this is at odds with his "pragmatics-oriented approach". (T2) Occasionally, however, what is asserted by a sub-sentential is only a fragment of a truth-conditional proposition. This fragment needs to be pragmatically enriched to yield a propositional message. To this extent I am in accord with a pragmatics-oriented approach.

I shall argue for thesis (T1) in sections 3 to 5 by discussing five of Stainton's key examples of sub-sentential speech that he thinks, wrongly in my view, support his pragmatics- oriented approach. I shall then consider his objections to the semantics-oriented approach, starting with what strikes me as the most theoretically interesting

[5] Linguists also get evidence from usage by testing reaction times, eye tracking, and electromagnetic brain potentials.

one. Stainton assumes that the semantics-oriented approach must claim "that much, or even all, of such speech is actually syntactically elliptical – and hence should be treated semantically, rather than pragmatically" (2005: 383–4). Let us call Stainton's assumption, "the syntactic ellipsis assumption". "The syntactic ellipsis objection" then is that there is no such ellipsis with the sub-sententials in question. We will get to this objection in section 6.

3 Implicit Demonstratives

I start my argument for thesis (T1) with (1), Stainton's example of the letter from Spain. In introducing his examples, Stainton is careful to talk only of it *appearing* to be the case that what is used to make an assertion is a mere phrase. His pragmatics-oriented approach "takes the appearances at face value": "pragmatics provides the real-world object". In contrast, according to Stainton, "the semantics-oriented approach denies the appearances, and maintains that syntax, and with it semantics, are doing more than meets the eye" (p. 385). This reflects, of course, his syntactic ellipsis assumption.

We should all agree with Stainton that the utterance of "From Spain" in (1) conveyed the propositional message that *this*, the displayed letter, is from Spain. The issue is how much of this message is constituted by semantic properties of the utterance and hence, on my usage, asserted; and how much of the message is constituted by a pragmatic enrichment and hence, on my usage, not asserted. My thesis is that the utterance's message is entirely semantic: the proposition that this is from Spain is asserted by "From Spain".

To argue the matter I turn, as usual, to conventions. The speaker of "From Spain" is simply exploiting the conventions of English to assert that *this is* from Spain, where my 'this' refers to the displayed letter. When one has a demonstrative thought that a particular sighted object is from *a* there is, uncontroversially, a convention of expressing this thought, "This/that is from *a*". My point is that there is *also* one of expressing that thought simply, "From *a*"; this is *another conventional way* of speaker-meaning that the object in question is from Spain. Similarly, there is a convention that dispenses with the plural demonstratives, 'these/those'. And there is, of course, nothing special about the preposition 'from'. Let '*PP*' be any prepositional phrase. There is a convention of expressing the thought that one might express, "This/that is *PP*" or "These/those are *PP*", simply, "*PP*". We might say that these sub-sentential utterances contain *implicit* demonstratives and exemplify an "implicit-demonstrative convention". The reference of an implicit demonstrative is determined in just the same way as an explicit one. That way is, on the folk view, by what the speaker had in mind,[6] and, on what seems to me the best theoretical view,

[6] Some prefer to say that the reference is determined by what the speaker "intends to refer to". This can be just a harmless difference but it may not be. Having *x* in mind in using the term simply requires that the part of the thought that causes that use refers to *x*. In contrast, for a speaker *liter-*

by a certain sort of causal-perceptual link between the speaker and an object or objects (1974, 1981a, b, 2004).

What is the evidence for this implicit-demonstrative convention? Well, expression of the thought in the abbreviated way is indubitably a regular occurrence: there is nothing at all odd in what Stainton's speaker did. This regular way of expressing a demonstrative thought seems to be accepted in the community. So we have evidence that this regularity reflects a linguistic convention. Supposing that there is a convention offers *the best explanation* of the regularity. What could be the basis for denying this? The regularity certainly *could* arise from a convention: we could do the Kripke trick (1979) and *specify* a language, English* in which it was a convention. (Are there any actual languages where such a convention is *even more obviously* present than in English?) I suggest that English does not differ from English*. There seems to be no principled basis for denying this. Since "From Spain" conveys the message that the letter is from Spain simply by exploiting the conventions of the language, that message is semantically constituted. So I am prepared to say, as does Stainton, that "From Spain" "actually asserts" (p.387) that the letter is from Spain. But when I say it, unlike when Stainton does, I am committed to what is asserted being semantic.

There is nothing special about sub-sententials that are prepositional phrases. Suppose that the person held up the letter and said, 'A letter'. That is a conventional way of saying that *this is* a letter; similarly, 'Mail', *this is* mail; 'Pink', *this is* pink; and so on. There are several conventions that enable sub-sententials to express demonstrative thoughts (and some other thoughts, for that matter).

4 The Role of Demonstrations

Our story of (1) does not do it full justice: there is *another* way in which the speaker of "From Spain" exploits convention to say that the letter is from Spain. He exploits the convention for demonstrat*ions* by holding up the letter. There is a convention of using a gesture toward an object in mind as part of an expression of a thought about that object.[7] Demonstrations, like demonstratives, are conventional devices for referring to objects in mind.

It is common, of course, for demonstratives to be accompanied by demonstrations. This has misled many into thinking that a demonstrative *demands* a demonstration which then determines its reference. That was the view of David Kaplan in

ally to intend to refer to *x*, given that intentions are propositional attitudes, seems to require that she entertain a proposition containing the concept of *reference*. So she can't refer without thinking about reference! This would be far too intellectualized a picture of referring. Uttering and referring are intentional actions, of course, but it seems better to avoid talking of intentions when describing them.

[7] Other gestures have a conventional meaning too. Thus one can assert that the Yankees will reach the play offs by responding to "Will the Yankees reach the play offs?" with a nod. The nod conveys that message by convention and there is nothing interestingly pragmatic about it.

his classic "Demonstratives" (1989a: 489–91); and, according to Jason Stanley and Zoltan Szabó, the view is "uncontroversial" (2000: 220–1). Yet the view has many problems and Kaplan rightly came to abandon it in "Aferthoughts" (1989b: 582).[8] I have summarized the problems as follows:

> (i) A demonstration is often so vague that it alone would not distinguish one object from many others in the environment. (ii) If an object is sufficiently salient in an environment, a demonstrative that refers to it may well not be accompanied by a demonstration. (iii) Reference is often to an object that is not around to be demonstrated; e.g., "That drunk at the party was boring". (2004: 290–1)

Just as there can be demonstratives without demonstrations, there can be demonstrations without demonstratives. Consider a person confronted by a line-up and asked the question, "Who mugged you?" She points wordlessly to a man. She has designated him, and not simply *speaker*-designated him. Her demonstration in these circumstances is a conventional expression of a whole thought just as much as would be her responding "Harry" when asked that same question at the scene of the crime. She is relying on the same convention that plays a role in many referential cases to *semantically* designate him.

How is the reference of a demonstration determined? In much the same way as the reference of a demonstrative. Take a person's deictic use of the pronoun 'he' as our specimen demonstrative. According to the best theory, in my view (1974, 1981a, b, 2004), 'he' refers to a male that stands in a certain sort of causal-perceptual relation to the speaker. Similarly, a demonstration refers to an object in the gestured area that stands in a certain sort of causal-perceptual relation to the speaker. Perhaps we should say that demonstratives are, but demonstrations are not, *linguistic* referential devices. Whatever, they are distinct referential devices.

This may prompt an objection along the following lines to my treatment of (1). "On your view, the demonstration that accompanied "From Spain" referred. So, we can take the whole utterance to convey the message that *this*, the demonstrated letter, is from Spain, *without supposing that (1) includes an implicit demonstrative that refers to the letter*. So, your line on demonstrations undermines the case for an implicit-demonstrative convention." The objection fails because just as an *explicit* demonstrative need not be, and often is not, accompanied by a demonstration, so too, an *implicit* demonstrative. Thus, compare these two assertions that Stainton might have made whilst looking straight at the letter but without holding it up or otherwise demonstrating it[9]: first, he might have said, "This is from Spain"; second, he might have said simply, "From Spain". Both these demonstration-less utterances would have asserted that *this*, the perceived letter, is from Spain. And each would have done so by exploiting a convention: in the first case the convention for explicit demonstratives, in the second, for implicit ones.

[8] He now thinks that a demonstration "is an aid to communication, like speaking more slowly and loudly, but is of no semantic significance" (1989b: 582). Clearly I disagree.

[9] One *can* demonstrate an object by meaningfully moving one's eyes, of course, but merely looking at an object is not demonstrating it.

Where a demonstrative, whether explicit or implicit, is accompanied by a demonstration and all goes well, the demonstrative and the demonstration will each semantically refer, in their own right, to the one object. All did go well in (1). So, "From Spain" together with the gesture *doubly* refer to the letter in asserting that it is from Spain, once by implicit demonstrative and once by demonstration. And what is asserted is semantically determined. It is no more pragmatically determined than is what would be asserted by "This is from Spain".

All might not go well, as illustrated in Kaplan's famous example of an explicit demonstrative accompanied by a demonstration:

> Suppose that without turning and looking I point to the place on my wall which has long been occupied by a picture of Rudolph Carnap and I say:
>
> (27) Dthat…is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. But unbeknownst to me, someone has replaced my picture of Carnap with one of Spiro Agnew. (1979: 396)

('Dthat' is Kaplan's way of writing a demonstrative use of 'that'.) In thinking about this example, it is vital to distinguish the semantics of the demonstrative from that of the demonstration. For, the demonstrative in (27) straightforwardly semantically designates Carnap's picture: in using 'dthat' Kaplan had that picture in mind in virtue of his thought being causally grounded in it via many earlier perceptions. The trouble comes from the demonstration: even though Kaplan had that picture in mind in pointing, his gesture was not toward it but toward Agnew's picture. So though Kaplan *speaker*-designated Carnap's picture with his gesture, he did not *semantically* designate it: for, the convention requires that he gestures toward the object in mind.[10] Suppose, now, that Kaplan had not bothered with 'dthat' and had simply used the sub-sentential, 'A picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century', pointing as before toward Agnew's picture. His implicit demonstrative would have semantically designated Carnap's picture but his gesture would not.

Marga Reimer provides another nice example of things not going well: "I…spot my keys, sitting there on the desk, alongside my officemate's keys. I then make a grab for my keys, saying *just as I mistakenly grab my officemate's keys*, 'These are mine'" (1991: 190). I say, though, Reimer does not, that her demonstrative semantically designated her keys. Her grabbing gesture is irrelevant to that but has its own semantics. Like Kaplan's gesture it fails to designate the object in mind because of a mistake. Had she simply used the sub-sentential, 'Mine', her implicit demonstrative would have semantically designated her keys just as her explicit one did.

[10] Of course, the gesture makes Agnew's picture *salient* and hence the audience is likely to take that picture to be the referent of both the demonstrative and the gesture. This would be a *mis*understanding arising from Kaplan's failure to follow the convention for demonstrations. It is a matter for "the epistemology of interpretation". What makes an object the referent is its causal relation to the thought expressed. This is a matter of "the metaphysics of meaning" and salience has nothing to do with it; or so I have argued (2013b: 294 n. 12); see also sec. 6.3 below.

5 Other Examples

So much for Stainton's letter example (1). I continue the defense of (T1) – the thesis that typically, what is asserted by a sub-sentential is a truth-conditional proposition - by considering another four of Stainton's examples. In sections 6 and 7 I shall turn to his criticisms of a semantics-oriented approach to such examples.

(2) At one point on the Nixon tapes, Nixon, Halderman, and Dean discuss the reporting of an event involving Maurice Stans and money from Vesco. Halderman points out that it was not until "the back section" that the *Post* reported that the money had been returned. Dean responds: "Typical" (2005: 389). Dean is simply exploiting the implicit-demonstrative convention for an utterance of a sub-sentential adjective to assert that *that*, the event referred to by Halderman, is typical. Dean's message is semantically constituted.

(3) Stainton discusses (p. 396) the following example presented by Jason Stanley:

> Suppose Bill walks into a room in which a woman in the corner is attracting an undue amount of attention. Turning quizzically to John, he arches his eyebrow and gestures towards the woman. John replies…"a world famous topologist" (Stanley 2007: 42).

Stanley wants to treat this case semantically but he has a problem because he shares Stainton's syntactic ellipsis assumption (section 2). On that assumption, treating the case semantically demands that it exemplify syntactic ellipsis. According to the syntactic theory that Stainton favors, syntactic ellipsis cannot appear in "discourse initial" utterances (2005: 395). Stanley agrees. So his problem is that John's utterance, "a world famous topologist", seems to *be* discourse initial. In response, Stanley argues that because of the quizzical look, arched eyebrow, and gesture in (3), John's utterance *is not really* discourse initial and so can, after all, be treated as a case of syntactic ellipsis. So it can be treated semantically. Stainton rejects this view, insisting that the utterance must be treated pragmatically.

I shall take no stand on whether or not John's utterance is discourse initial because, contrary to what Stanley and Stainton suppose, this issue is not important to a semantic approach. It is not important because, as I shall argue in section 6, the syntactic ellipsis assumption is false. What *is* important is that John is exploiting the implicit-demonstrative convention to convey the message that *that object*, referring to the woman in the corner that he has in mind, is a world famous topologist. That's why that message is semantically not pragmatically constituted. That's why that message is what John *asserts*.

(4) The next example I shall consider is another one that has played a role in the exchange between Stainton and Stanley. Suppose that someone passes a woman in the street and says, "Nice dress" (Stainton 2005: 397). This is a paradigm exploitation of the implicit-demonstrative convention. The person has a particular dress in mind as a result of a causal-perceptual link to it and is asserting that *that*, the dress in mind, is a nice dress. This is semantic through and through.

Stanley rightly thinks that "it is intuitively plausible to suppose" that the speaker in (4) "simply intended her utterance to be shorthand for 'that is a nice dress'" (2007: 46). Reinaldo Elugardo and Stainton wring their hands about what this might

possibly mean through several pages before remarking: "We are not entirely sure what philosophers have in mind, when they appeal to things like 'shorthand'" (2004: 453). The implicit-demonstrative convention supplies a simple answer that they don't consider: there is a semantic convention in English of expressing the thought that that is a nice dress by the short "nice dress" as well as by the long "that is a nice dress".

(5) The final example I shall consider in support of (T1) is drawn from that article by Elugardo and Stainton:

> Suppose that Fritz and Rob are walking past a misbehaving teenage boy. Fritz utters, "From Brazil". Fritz here says, about the boy, that he is from Brazil. (2004: 459)

I agree, of course, that Fritz did indeed say that. That is a semantic matter for me but not for Elugardo and Stainton. They see a problem for the semantics-oriented approach that they are discussing because there is "no good reason for saying the salient label was 'he' versus 'that boy' versus 'that teenager'" (p. 459). This is aimed at an approach that is committed to there being a syntactic ellipsis here. But my semantic approach has no such commitment. It is concerned only with the conventions. And the convention being exploited here provides only an implicit demonstrative. So what is semantically expressed, what is said, might be explicitly expressed well enough with 'that is from Brazil'.

But might it not be the case that Fritz intended to convey not just that a certain *object* was from Brazil but that a certain *boy* or a certain *teenager* was from Brazil? It surely might but, given that the object in question obviously is a boy and a teenager, it may be very hard to tell whether Fritz did in fact intend this richer message. Still, suppose he did. Then had he made his message explicit he would have used a complex demonstrative, "That boy is from Brazil" or "That teenager is from Brazil". There is surely no convention for conveying such a message implicitly by simply saying "From Brazil". So Fritz's message would be a small pragmatic enrichment of the semantic propositional what is said. There will be more on pragmatic enrichments in section 8.

It is time to turn to Stainton's objections to the semantics-oriented approach.

6 The Syntactic Ellipsis Objection

6.1 Introduction

My semantics-oriented approach to examples (1) to (5) is what Stainton aptly calls a "slot-filling" one. He rejects such approaches unequivocally: "sub-sentential speech cannot be reduced to reference assignment to 'slots'" (2005: 389n). Why not? His most interesting objection rests on two planks. It rests first on (A), the earlier-mentioned syntactic ellipsis assumption. Stainton assumes that the semantics-oriented approach must claim "that much, or even all, of [sub-sentential] speech is actually syntactically elliptical – and hence should be treated semantically, rather

than pragmatically" (2005: 383–4). So the slot-filling approach is committed to there being syntactic ellipses in (1) to (5). His objection rests second on (B): there is no such ellipsis.

Stainton must be wrong about at least one of (A) or (B). I think he is wrong about (A) and maybe about (B) too.

My reason for thinking that he must be wrong about at least one is simple. I have argued in section 3 that there is, for example, a convention of using the sub-sentential '*F*' to express a thought with the content that this is *F*, where 'this' refers to an object the speaker has in mind. If so, that content is semantically constituted: that content is *asserted* (on my usage). *No acceptable syntactic theory alone could rule this out*. This point does not depend on my being right about the convention for '*F*'. Suppose that I am not right. Still, there *could be* a language that is otherwise like English but in which it is conventional to use '*F*' to express the thought that this is *F*: English* is possible. *No acceptable syntactic theory could show that English* is impossible*. Either (A) or (B) must be wrong. I shall consider them in turn.

6.2 (A): The Syntactic Ellipsis Assumption

We should start by considering what syntactic ellipsis is. Stainton gives some paradigm examples, including the following:

A: Who lives in Madrid
B: Juan doesn't

A; Juan will soon move to Madrid
B: I wonder why

The idea is that underlying the B-utterances are the whole sentences, 'Juan doesn't live in Madrid' and 'I wonder why Juan will soon move to Madrid', respectively; parts of these sentences go unpronounced in the utterance. So though the B-utterances *appear to be* sub- sentential on the surface, at a deeper level they are not (2005: 395). The following utterance provides another good example: "Mary went to visit the zoo and John, the museum". Underlying this utterance is the sentence: "Mary went to visit the zoo and John went to visit the museum".

Stainton's syntactic ellipsis assumption is that, according to the semantics-oriented approach, sub-sententials *must* be like this: what appears on the surface to be a sub-sentential is, *at some deeper level of syntactic analysis*, really a sentence. This assumption, reflecting the powerful influence of contemporary generative grammar, carries a large part of the burden of Stainton's case against the semantics-oriented approach.

Why does Stainton makes this assumption? I take him (and Stanley) to embrace what Robyn Carston calls "the Isomorphic Principle", a principle that Carston rightly thinks "has been fairly widely held by philosophers" (2002: 22). She quotes a formulation by Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore: "If a sentence S expresses the proposition that P, then syntactic constituents of S express the constituents of P"

(1991: 333).[11] Kent Bach is an example of someone who insists that the structure of a sentence must be an image of the structure of the thought it expresses: he excludes from semantics anything that does not, according to the syntactic theory he favors, "correspond" to something that is "there in the sentence" (1994: 133; see also, 1998: 716; 2001: 15; 2005: 24). This reflects what I call, in discussing Bach, "the tyranny of syntax" in semantics. I argue that there is no basis for it (2013c: 188–9). I shall now draw on that discussion.

Consider a simple example. There was once a widely used language of naval flags. A yellow flag on a ship's masthead conveyed the truth-conditional propositional message that people on the ship had yellow fever. This was a semantic convention. And it is obviously not appropriate to deny that it was by arguing that parts of this meaning do not "correspond" to something in the syntax of the flag. Indeed, does the flag even have a syntax that contributes to explaining its meaning? Perhaps so. We note that the meaning of the yellow flag "demands completion" by reference to a ship: it has a slot to be filled. This slot is filled by raising the flag to a ship's masthead, thus asserting a proposition about that particular ship. So, perhaps this fact should be accommodated in a syntactic theory of the flag language that posits a "hidden referential marker" in the flag. Whatever. The key point is that flag on a masthead has its propositional meaning and if a syntactic theory is relevant to this meaning at all it has to accommodate that fact not reject it.

This relates to Stainton's claim that the semantics-oriented approach has

> the heavy burden of explaining away street signs, maps, chapter headings, product labels, business cards, name on boats, vocative use of titles, addressed envelopes, shopping lists, CD covers, dictionary entries, phone books, TV guides, bank checks, book and movie titles, menus, etc. (2005: 432)

The semantics-oriented approach has a heavy burden only on the presumption that street signs etc. are not propositional on the face of them. Yet some of them, at least, seem to be propositional. A certain street sign is surely a conventional way of conveying the message that the speed limit in its location is 30 mph. A certain entry in a phone book is a conventional way of conveying the message that the telephone number of X, living at Y, is Z. What does this show about the syntaxes of the sign and entry? Who knows? But *no syntactic theory could nullify the conventional propositional meanings of street signs and phone books*.

These examples, along with many idioms ('spill the beans', 'kick the bucket', etc.), suggest that although the explanation of the complex propositional meaning of a symbol may mostly involve ascribing a matchingly complex syntax, *it often does not*. Conventional meaning is not under the tyranny of syntax in the way that the Isomorphic Principle requires. Rather, it is always an *open question* to what extent, if any, a meaning is to be explained in terms of a syntactic structure, whether a "surface" or "deep" structure. One might well insist, of course, that the *most theoreti-*

[11] She also cites Frege 1977. Fodor 2001 is an effective *criticism* of the Isomorphic Principle: "If you read a sentence as though it were compositional, then the thought that it *ought* to be conventionally used to express often turns out not to be the one that it *is* conventionally used to express" (p. 13).

cally interesting explanations of meaning posit rich syntactic structures (hence the excitement of generative grammars). But that is a different matter. It does not undermine the point that there is no good inference from a symbol having a complex meaning to its having a matchingly complex syntactic structure.

I conclude that the Isomorphic Principle is false. Were it true it would, of course, support (A), Stainton's syntactic-ellipsis assumption about sub-sententials. He offers no other support for (A) and I think it has none. I conclude that it is false too.

6.3 (B): No Syntactic Ellipsis in (1) to (5)

I am no syntactician and so must tread a lightly with (B). But here are some considerations against it.

In discussing, the Dean's utterance of "Typical" in (2), Stainton says:

> Crucially, what makes the former filling-in-to-arrive-at-what-is-asserted pragmatics is that the saturation is not a matter of linguistic derivation, but is instead a matter of all- purpose inference triggered by the pragmatic unfitness of the sub-propositional content – where, moreover, the inference is based on both linguistic context and other kinds of knowledge. (2005: 389).

My main concern is with what Stainton denies, but first a word about what he asserts. His view is that the saturation that yields the propositional content is *constituted by pragmatic inferences made by the hearer*. This sort of view is wide-spread among linguistic pragmatists, as Carston notes (2004: 67). I have argued elsewhere that it amounts to a serious methodological flaw of pragmatism, the conflation of "the metaphysics of meaning" – for example, the semantics of what a speaker asserts - with "the epistemology of interpretation", the pragmatics of how a hearer interprets what is asserted (2013b: 287–97, forthcoming).[12] The content of the utterance is constituted by the speaker; inferences made by the hearer to understand the utterance are no part of it.

Turn now to Stainton's denial. Why isn't the saturation of Dean's utterance "a matter of linguistic derivation"? Why isn't the utterance the result of a derivation involving what we might call "demonstrative deletion"? Elugardo and Stainton claim, about a similar example, that "the only thing which syntactic structure contributes to the content here, even relative to a context, is a propositional function" (2004: 445). One wonders about the basis of these claims. Why is the structure not contributing an implicit demonstrative referring to the event described by Halderman?

Consider this example (based on one of Kripke's, 1979: 14). *S* and *H* see Smith in the distance and *S* says:

(a) What is Jones doing?

H responds:

[12] See also Neale 2004; Bach 2005.

(b) Raking the leaves.

According to Stephen Neale (2007), it is an open empirical question in syntactic theory whether the underlying syntactic structure of the sub-sentential in (b) might not be something rather like

(c) α raking the leaves

in which α is "phonologically null" or "aphonic". Now suppose that, instead of asking (a), *S* had simply asserted (b) himself. If it is an open question whether the sub-sentential in *H*'s assertion (b) has a syntactic structure like (c), shouldn't it be just as much an open question whether the sub-sentential in *S*'s assertion (b) has? Perhaps not. A received principle of syntactic ellipsis is that the deleted material be "recoverable" (Neale 2004: 137–43). Thus, when *H* asserts (b), a deleted 'Jones' could be recovered from *S*'s (a). But had S asserted (b) out of the blue there would have been no prior discourse from which to recover deleted material. But why can't that deleted material be recovered from (b) itself? If there really is an implicit-demonstrative convention in English, - if English is English* - then the structure of the sub-sentential (b) alone could provide the missing demonstrative. If this is not accommodated by our current syntactic theory of English, wouldn't it be a simple matter to adjust that theory by taking '*F*' to be derived by deletion from 'This is *F*'? It is, after all, the responsibility of a syntactic theory to be in accord with the conventions of the language.

Stainton objects to positing any phonologically null elements where there is "no compelling syntactic evidence" for the posit, where it is "merely to account for what the sound *was used to say*" (2005: 424; see also 2006: 94–144). But why is that not enough evidence *if* there is a *convention* of using the sound for that purpose. And if the syntactic theory does not accommodate this, so much the worse for the theory.

In sum, (A) and (B) cannot both be right. (A) is wrong and (B) may well be. This concludes my response to Stainton's syntactic-ellipsis objection to a semantics-oriented approach. But he has other objections.

7 Stainton's Other Objections

7.1 Too Much Ambiguity

Stainton objects that a semantics-oriented approach

> requires the introduction of a new *expression* in each case where semantic ellipsis is held to apply: things that can be used to perform speech acts, are syntactically non-sentential, but nevertheless are *not* ordinary word and phrases…there would be a very large class of one-word and one-phrase sentences… (2006: 84)

When "nice dress" appears in a sentence like, "Fiona came to the party in a nice dress", it has a sub-propositional, meaning but when it appears as a sub-sentential in (4), it has a "new" propositional, meaning. On the semantics-oriented approach

such ambiguity would be rampant. Stainton thinks that this "is not a good thing" though "not ultimately damning" (p. 84).

But this is the wrong way to look at a proposal like mine. The proposal is that the utterance of "nice dress" in (4) participates in one of *just a few* implicit-demonstrative conventions, each of which is a convention of using an expression *of a certain syntactic type with a certain sub-propositional meaning* to make propositional assertions. In (4), the convention is of expressing the thought that one might express, "This is *NP*", simply, "*NP*", where '*NP'* is a noun phrase. As noted in section 3, there are similar conventions for prepositional phrases and others (and doubtless there are other conventions for sub-sententials that are not implicit- demonstrative conventions).[13] Why suppose that there are these conventions? Because, to repeat, that best explains the regularities in the phenomena.

Stainton himself imagines a "rebuttal" of his too-much-ambiguity objection that is a bit along these lines:

> we do not have to worry about the ambiguity of the sound-pattern, because there can be a single semantically productive mechanism that yields the propositional meaning of the word/phrase-in-the-non-sentence-construction (p. 89)

Stainton gives this rebuttal short shrift:

> the problems with it are legion. First, it predicts that all unembedded uses of subsentences will be propositional and force-bearing, which is not the case…Worse, this introduces a further kind of construction that simply cannot occur embedded in larger expressions,… Finally, it would require the postulation of many different constructions…what needs to be added to arrive at a propositional content varies: sometimes an object is added, sometimes a property, sometime a generalized quantifier, etc. (p. 92)

But the trouble with the rebuttal is its commitment to a *single* "productive mechanism" which seems to apply to *any* word/phrase. My proposal is of *several* conventions each applying to a *single* syntactic type of word/phrase. This deals with Stainton's first problem. And it pretty much deals with the final one. There is indeed good evidence for several implicit-demonstrative conventions, but these conventions restrict the additions that arrive at a propositional content to what can be the referent of an implicit demonstrative. There may be other additions that are pragmatic not semantic, as we shall see in next section.

What about Stainton's second problem? It raises two questions. (a) Has my proposal really introduced a construction that cannot occur embedded in larger expressions? (b) If it has, does this amount to an objection? Does it count against there being a convention of using a sub- sentential to express a full propositional meaning? The answer to (a) seems to be "Mostly yes"; thus, "Mary hopes that nice dress" is ill-formed. But what about "If nice dress, then expensive"? And here are some other suggestions: "That's not right, but interesting idea"; "I wouldn't wear it, but cute hat".[14] Concerning (b), it seems that an objection must rest on a principle that

[13] We might see these productive "meta-conventions" as examples of what are called "regular polysemy" (Ravin and Leacocke 2000: 10).

[14] Thanks to Richard Stillman for these suggestions.

conflicts with what our discussion has revealed about the conventions of English. That discussion shows that the meaning "nice dress" expresses when used in (4) according to the implicit-demonstrative convention is different from the meaning it expresses when used in "Fiona came to the party in a nice dress". One wonders about the empirical basis of any principle that could outlaw this.

7.2 No Explanatory Work

Stainton objects that semantics-oriented proposals posit extra "machinery" that "does no explanatory work" (2006: 84). For, the semantic machinery already in place, together with familiar pragmatic abilities, will do the trick:

> given only knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and a limited range of pragmatic abilities, a speaker could make non-sentential assertions; and given only knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and a limited range of pragmatic abilities, a hearer could interpret utterances of ordinary words and phrases as assertions.… Hence there is no reason to introduce, as an extra competence, knowledge of one-word and one-phrase [non-sententials]. (85)

(Stainton wrote this before he considered the "rebuttal" and so thought that semantic proposals require knowledge of an "enormous class" of novel "form-meaning" pairs (pp. 84–5). As we have just seen, they actually require knowledge of only a few implicit-demonstrative conventions.)

This objection is an example of common thinking that is strikingly exemplified in the usual construal of Grice's Modified Occam's Razor: "Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity" (1989: 47). On that construal, as I have pointed out elsewhere (2013b: 297–9), the Razor advises against positing a sense *wherever there is a pragmatic derivation of the message*. Thus, in the circumstances of (4), there is a pragmatic derivation of the propositional message, *that is a nice dress*, from the sub-propositional meaning, *nice dress*, a derivation that the speaker and hearer *could* make. So there is no explanatory need to suppose that "Nice dress" in (4) semantically expresses the propositional meaning rather than its familiar sub-propositional meaning. So, the Razor advises, we should not suppose this. I have argued that following this advice is another serious methodological flaw of linguistic pragmatism (2013b: 299–300; forthcoming). The problem with the advice is, briefly, that it would make all metaphors immortal. When a metaphor "dies", an expression comes to mean conventionally what it once meant metaphorically. *Yet there is still a pragmatic derivation of the new meaning from the old.* We should not prefer a pragmatic to a semantic explanation of linguistic regularities simply because *there is* such a pragmatic derivation but only because *the pragmatic explanation involving that derivation is better*. And for that explanation to be *even good*, it is not enough that speakers and hearers *could* make the derivation, the derivation has to be *actually present*, in the appropriate way, in their cognitive lives (2007: 12–18).

Consider the appropriate way in (4), for example. For a pragmatic explanation of the sort that Stainton is contemplating to be good, it would have to be plausible that,

in those circumstances, there would be mental processes in the typical speaker and hearer that differed from the standard convention-exploiting ones. In speakers there would have to be thoughts about hearers and their expected non-convention-exploiting derivations; in hearers there would have to *be* those derivations or inferences. These mental processes need to be *psychologically real*. And it is plausible to think that they are real in Gricean particularized conversational implicatures. But it is not plausible to think this with "Nice dress" in (4). We should prefer the semantic explanation.

7.3 Fails a Kripkean Test

The final objection I shall consider draws inspiration from Kripke (1979). Stainton stipulates a language, Linglish, that lacks the phonologically null elements that, on one understanding, would have to be posited by my implicit demonstrative proposal. However, as I have emphasized (6.3), that is not my way of understanding the proposal. So, to make Stainton's objection bear on my way, let us broaden his stipulation: Linglish lacks implicit-demonstrative conventions *altogether*. Stainton goes on to consider a Linglish speaker, Angelika, who performs as in the Spanish letter case, (1). Stainton claims that Angelika could "be understood to have communicated the proposition that the displayed letter was from Spain" (2005: 424; 2006: 129). And so she could be. And the message conveyed would be partly constituted by a pragmatic enrichment by the speaker. But if Angelika's practice *became conventional* in the linguistic community then Linglish would have *changed* to now have an implicit-demonstrative convention; it would have become English.[15] Languages change when new conventions are adopted.

This concludes my argument for thesis (T1): typically, what is asserted by a sub-sentential is a truth-conditional proposition: the utterance has a semantically constituted propositional content. This counts against Stainton's pragmatics-oriented approach to sub-sententials.

8 The Assertion of Propositional Fragments

I shall now argue briefly for thesis (T2): Occasionally, what is asserted by a sub-sentential is only a fragment of a truth-conditional proposition. This fragment needs to be pragmatically enriched to yield a propositional message. To this extent I am in accord with a pragmatics-oriented approach.

Stainton provides the following two examples, into which I have inserted numerals:

[15] This response is based on one I made (1981b) to Kripke's original move (1979) against referential descriptions.

> (6) Meera was spooning out strawberry jam onto her toast, and produced (or, more safely, appeared to produce) the phrase 'Chunks of strawberries'. (7) Anita nodded, and (seemingly) added 'Rob's mom'. It appears that Meera asserted something like *This jam contains chunks of strawberries*, while Anita asserted something like *Rob's mom made it*. In both cases, they appear to have made true statements while using something sub-sentential. (2005: 384)

I start with (7). This seems a clear case of only a propositional fragment being asserted. Even with an implicit demonstrative, all that is conventionally conveyed is the propositional fragment that Rob's mom…*this*…. There is no linguistic convention available that could make this sub-sentential the assertion of the intended message that Rob's mom made this. The intended message is obtained by the speaker's pragmatic enrichment of what is literally asserted.

I'm inclined to say the same about another of Stainton's examples:

> (8) A: The White House staff doesn't visit Tip O'Neill in his Congressional office.
> B: An old grudge (p. 418).

This conveys the message that the White House staff doesn't visit Tip O'Neill in his Congressional Office *because of* an old grudge. Had B conveyed that message by saying "That's because of an old grudge" he would have literally asserted that message. But B's actual remark has no "because of" and I don't suppose that there is a convention of conveying the message that *S because of N* by responding to '*S*' with '*N*'. (In contrast, there is a convention of conveying that message by '*N*' in response to a why-question about *S*.)

What about (6)? This as another exploitation of the implicit-demonstrative convention. So Meera has asserted the full proposition that *these are chunks of strawberry*. That is the utterance's *semantic* property. Perhaps the intended message is a bit richer: that this jam contains chunks of strawberries. Any such extra richness is not something that the utterance has by convention. It would be as a result of pragmatic properties added by the speaker to the proposition she literally asserted.

The pattern to my responses is to look for properties that the utterance has simply as a result of the exploitation of linguistic conventions. We have a theoretical basis for distinguishing these properties that make the utterance an instance of a linguistic system from any others that may constitute the message, whether we call them "what is said," "what is asserted," or whatever.

9 Conclusion

Rob Stainton argues for a "pragmatics-oriented approach" to sub-sentential assertions, and against a "semantics-oriented approach". In contrast, I have argued for a largely semantics-oriented approach: typically, sub-sentential utterances assert a truth-conditional proposition in virtue of exploiting a semantic convention. Thus, there is an "implicit-demonstrative convention" in English of expressing a thought that a particular object in mind is *F* by saying simply '*F*'. Stainton's most

theoretically interesting objection to a semantics-oriented approach rests on two planks: (A) the assumption that this approach *must* claim that what appears on the surface to be a sub-sentential is, at some deeper level of syntactic analysis, really a sentence; (B) the claim that there is no such syntactic ellipsis in these sub-sentential utterances. I have argued that (A) is wrong and that (B) may well be too. Nonetheless, occasionally sub-sentential utterances semantically assert only a fragment of a truth-conditional proposition. This fragment needs to be pragmatically enriched to yield a propositional message. To this extent a pragmatics-oriented approach is correct.

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