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Words and Thoughts: Subsentences, Ellipsis, and the Philosophy of Language, by Robert J. Stainton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 248. H/b \$55.00, £30.00.

Philosophers of language seem to assume that sentences are invariably the units of linguistic communication, the means by which people make assertions and perform speech acts of other sorts. In real life, though, people often assert things by uttering mere phrases or even single words, as when they answer questions ('in the refrigerator') or identify things ('a 1982 Margaux'). Similarly, they can make offers ('coffee or tea?') or requests ('one more, please') without using complete sentences. Examples like these seem to show that the above assumption is false, so obviously so that it might better be regarded as a pretense or, if you like, an idealization. With that in mind we might well wonder why anyone would feel the need to show that this assumption is false and, for that matter, why anyone would make it. In any case, Robert Stainton goes to extraordinary lengths to show that it is indeed false. In this clearly written, meticulously organized, well argued, and highly informative book, based on a dozen earlier papers, he considers every imaginable basis for supposing that subsentential assertions are impossible. Once he shows that they are perfectly possible, he draws some important conclusions about relations between words and sentences, language and thought, and semantics and pragmatics.

There are two basic strategies for trying to show that assertions cannot be made using a mere word or phrase. It can be argued that for any apparent instance of this, either a full-fledged assertion has not actually been made or, contrary to appearances, a complete sentence really has been uttered (one can well imagine a combined approach, according to which some seemingly phrasal assertions fall into one category and some into the other). Stainton formulates and critically examines various versions of arguments of each type, some more subtle and challenging than others. In some cases he credits the argument to a particular author, in others he extracts the argument from some thesis that seems to have implications for subsentential utterances, and in still other cases he devises an argument of his own, often a refinement of some previously considered argument.

It is not feasible here to discuss the individual arguments that Stainton takes up, and it would not do justice to the insights behind his rebuttals to them to make sweeping generalizations about the details of those rebuttals. But feasibility trumps justice, at least

in book reviews. The simplest strategy for rebutting arguments of the first sort, that subsentential utterances cannot be assertions, is to put the burden of proof on the proponent of the argument and ask for what is lacking in the speech act to keep it from counting as an assertion. To put the idea all too simply, what's to keep a speaker, at least in the right sort of situation, from uttering a word or phrase and using it to make an assertion? If he points to a certain car and says, 'a Lamborghini', he could easily intend to be asserting that that car is a Lamborghini and reasonably expect to be taken to be asserting that. He is not merely implicating, suggesting, or hinting that that's what it is.

Of course, he would not be making his assertion fully explicit. To do that he would have to have at least uttered 'That's a Lamborghini' (or perhaps 'That car is a Lamborghini,' or even 'The car I am pointing at is a Lamborghini'), but why suppose that an assertion has to be fully explicit to be an assertion at all? After all, as Stainton points out toward the end, in connection with my work on conversational *implicature* (as opposed to Grice's *implicature*), speakers often use sentences to make assertions that fall short of being fully explicit. For example, someone stuck in a long meeting might step out to call his dinner companion and, after explaining what he is doing, say 'I'll be late,' meaning that he'll be late for their dinner date. Similarly, on the way out of the National Gallery in London, a person might say to his friend, 'My favorite painting is Rembrandt's self portrait at the age of 63,' meaning that this is favorite painting in that museum. Utterances of such sentences are perfectly ordinary examples of assertions that are not fully explicit. So why can't utterances of subsentences also be assertions? If one can utter a mere word or phrase – who could deny that? – what's to stop one from assertively uttering it, assuming one can reasonably expect one's listener to figure out what one is thereby asserting?

According to arguments of the second type, assertive utterances of apparent subsentences are, despite appearances, actually utterances of complete sentences. To show this, it is not enough to argue that the speaker could have uttered a certain sentence or even, however less plausibly, that the speaker had a certain sentence in mind. One must show that a certain sentence actually was uttered. Showing this requires defending the claim that in some sense a sentence can contain much more than meets the eye—or ear. This claim has to go much further than the familiar doctrine from syntactic theory that sentences can contain unpronounced constituents, so-called 'empty categories', as in

‘What did John eat e ?’, ‘Jack₁ promised Jill₂ e_1 to stop smoking,’ and ‘Jack₁ asked Jill₂ e_2 to stop smoking.’ It requires positing enough linguistic material to yield something whose semantic content is the proposition asserted. So, for example, an assertive utterance seemingly of the phrase ‘a Lamborghini’ must really be of the sentence ‘That is a Lamborghini’. Or is it of the sentence ‘That car is a Lamborghini’? Or of the sentence ‘The car I am pointing at is a Lamborghini’?

In light of such questions, Stainton’s primary response to these hidden sentential views is to point out that, on the supposition that a sentence is actually uttered, it is indeterminate which sentence that is. And if this is indeterminate, that is good reason for denying that *any* sentence is uttered. This response applies whether the claim is that the apparent phrasal utterance contains additional syntactic structure (containing unpronounced constituents) or merely has elements of semantic content that are not contents of any of its syntactic constituents. Stainton takes up different versions of both sorts of view, including some that are relatively plausible, but his primary case against them is based on a problem of indeterminacy. I am oversimplifying, of course. Chapter 6 in particular contains plenty of subtle and complex linguistic argumentation against various defenses of the claim that apparent phrases used to make assertions are really syntactically elliptical sentences. Elsewhere Stainton registers doubts about the claim that some seeming phrases are semantically elliptical for sentences. And pragmatic ellipticality is the wrong sort of property to help the sententialist, since it is merely the property of being able to be used in lieu of a sentence, that is, to be used to assert (less than fully explicitly) what a sentence could be used to assert (fully explicitly).

In the third and final part of *Words and Thoughts* Stainton extracts various consequences from what he already argued for. He first rebuts the contention that ‘grasping propositions requires sentences,’ which is based on the supposition that thought is inner speech. Stainton points out that such a view is faced with a problem (among others) of uniqueness and precision. If thought is inner speech, then when a person entertains a particular thought there ought to be a unique sentence whereby he is thinking it and a precise interpretation of this sentence comprising that thought content. But there is not much evidence for this and plenty of evidence against it, for example, that natural language is rife with ambiguity and vagueness. Stainton also invokes research on certain aphasias to call this view into question.

Stainton then considers what is in effect a back-door challenge to the possibility of subsentential assertion. It appeals to some version or another of the putative principle that sentences have primacy over words. This is illustrated by Frege's 'context principle', according to which 'expressions have meaning only in the context of a sentence.' (Whatever *that* means, could it plausibly deny that sentences mean what they mean in virtue of what their constituents mean?) Stainton distinguishes five different sentence primacy principles—methodological, metasemantic, semantic, pragmatic, and psychological—and argues that none is both plausible and capable of threatening the possibility of subsentential assertion.

The concluding chapter takes up implications bearing on the semantics-pragmatics boundary. The main idea is really a development of the platitude that assertion is something done not by sentences but by speakers. Declarative sentences are the paradigmatic form of words for making assertions, but assertiveness is not built into them. One can use a declarative sentence literally without making an assertion and literally make an assertion without uttering a sentence. So, when one does use a sentence assertively, this cannot be solely a matter of semantics. Even when *what* is asserted (literally) is determined semantically, *that* it is asserted is not. What a speaker does in using the sentence is a matter of pragmatics, of the same sort as that involved in using a word or phrase assertively.

It seems to me that Stainton successfully rebuts all the arguments he considers against the possibility of subsentential assertion. However, it is hard to understand why he felt compelled to go to such lengths to do this (persistent badgering from a few philosophers and linguists?). Even so, *Words and Thoughts* is an interesting and often fascinating book. There is much to learn from it, thanks to the rich and varied linguistic ideas and psychological findings that Stainton brings into the discussion. It is clearly written and organized, and its philosophical argumentation is consistently rigorous, deftly applying many subtle distinctions.

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