Robert J. Stainton, *Words and Thoughts: Subsentences, Ellipsis, and the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, 248 pp.

In §19 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes the following:

> But what about this: is the call 'Slab!' […] a sentence or a word? […] [Y]ou can call 'Slab!' a word and also a sentence; perhaps it could be appropriately called a 'degenerate sentence'[.] […] [I]n fact it *is* our 'elliptical' sentence. – But that is surely only a shortened form of the sentence 'Bring me a slab'[.] […] But why should I not on the contrary have called the sentence 'Bring me a slab' a *lengthening* of the sentence 'Slab!'? […] And why should I translate the call 'Slab!' into a different expression in order to say what someone means by it?[1]

Wittgenstein's intentions, discernible from the larger context of this quotation, are not the same as those of Robert Stainton (professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario) in his book *Words and Thoughts: Subsentences, Ellipsis, and the Philosophy of Language*; indeed, they are partly contrary to them. Nevertheless, this quotation expresses well Stainton's central contention: that speakers can use perfectly ordinary words and phrases, not embedded in any larger structure, and without any ellipsis at work, and thereby communicate complete thoughts, i.e. perform full-fledged speech acts (including assertions). Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that Stainton does not cite these words of Wittgenstein's anywhere in his book, especially given his penchant for beginning chapters with a quote from this or that philosopher (albeit only in order to disagree with him).

Let me say right off the bat that Stainton's book is excellent. It is written in an enjoyable and engaging style, and the arguments it offers are presented clearly and forcefully. Stainton makes his position on subsentential speech seem an extremely convincing one, and the conclusions he bases upon it (regarding language-thought relations, sentence primacy, and the semantics-pragmatics boundary) are indeed exciting. Stainton has been pursuing this topic ever since his (unpublished) PhD dissertation at MIT, and this book brings together ideas that he has previously developed in a great many published articles.

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1986).

The main claim of *Words and Thoughts* is, then, that people really can utter ordinary words and phrases in isolation (e.g. "On the stoop" or "Moving pretty fast!") and thereby perform full-fledged speech acts. Stainton explains exactly what each part of this claim means. A *full-fledged speech act* is, first of all, a linguistic act, and a fully grammatical one at that. Next, what it conveys is a propositional content, that is, something which is truth-evaluable: a thought. Third, a full-fledged speech act carries illocutionary force, such as making an assertion, asking a question, or issuing a command. Finally, in the cases that interest Stainton, the literal content of the speech act is propositional, so that the proposition in question is not merely implicated, but actually asserted. Now, it is Stainton's view that speakers can effect such acts using *ordinary words and phrases* (subsentences) *in isolation.* In order to explain these notions syntactically, he uses the standard equipment of generative grammar (more specifically, its Government and Binding incarnation), the dominant linguistic theory in the English-speaking world. In this framework, and with regard to the general schema for any syntactic category (called the "x-bar schema", and usually represented via a tree-structure), a sentence is a substitution instance of this schema whose grammatical head is an INFL node; that is, it is a syntactic category whose basic character is determined by the inflectional morphology of the verb, tense marking, and so on. An ordinary phrase, on the other hand, is any substitution instance of this schema whose grammatical head is a lexical category; that is, its basic character is determined by its being organized around a noun, a verb, and the like. Ordinary words themselves are simply freely occurring items listed in the lexicon. The use of such ordinary words and phrases in isolation means not that they stand outside any discourse/conversational exchange, but rather that they are not part of a larger syntactic category; they cannot, in a given case, be fitted into a larger tree-structure that would encompass them.

So much for the syntactic explanation of these notions; now they need to be explained semantically and pragmatically, in accordance with the famous threefold division of the study of sign systems introduced by Charles Morris (*Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, 1938), which Stainton frequently makes use of. Semantically, ordinary words and phrases do not typically express propositions; rather, they express individual concepts or properties, among other things (for more precise definitions, Stainton employs Richard Montague's terminology). Pragmatically, ordinary words and phrases lack a conventional illocutionary force. Yet Stainton claims that such ordinary words and phrases can nevertheless be used in isolation to communicate propositions and perform speech acts. So if one follows Stainton in differentiating between the three senses of "sentence" (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic), his claim is that, although words and phrases

are not sentences in the first two senses (they lack the relevant form and content), they are indeed sentences in the pragmatic sense (they can be used to perform speech acts).

But how are hearers able to understand these subsentences as conveying complete thoughts; how are they able to *grasp* the proposition being asserted? Stainton calls his reply to this question the representational-pragmatic view. Such a proposition is, he contends, arrived at by combining, in the sense of function-argument application, a content from language (the linguistic meaning of that which was actually spoken, suitably "developed") with a content from elsewhere, "which is never 'translated into' natural language format" (p. 156). Two questions immediately arise: how is this other content found, and what is the medium of this purported combining? In response to the first question, Stainton invokes pragmatics, declaring himself to be a (moderate) contextualist. The hearer, having recognized the speaker's intention to communicate a full proposition, employs non-algorithmic, non-deductive general-purpose inferential processes, which draw on information from the environment, memory, and so on in order to find the missing element of the proposition. Understanding a linguistic act requires, therefore, both linguistic and extra-linguistic abilities, and the nature of the latter as just explained implies that a formalizable theory of interpretation for speakers cannot be found.

As for the medium of combination, Stainton endorses the computational-representational theory of mind and claims that this medium is *Mentalese*, the hypothesized language of thought (as distinct from natural language) introduced by Jerry Fodor. Thus the hearer grasps the intended proposition by building a sentence of Mentalese that expresses it; that is, a Mentalese representation encoding the part of the proposition derived from what was actually said is combined with a Mentalese representation encoding the part of the proposition which is inferred. In claiming that informational integration takes place in a representational system which is not natural language, Stainton argues against philosophers such as Peter Carruthers, who claim that integration does indeed take place in natural language. (Carruthers asserts that language is "ideally positioned" to play the role of a content-integrator; see his *The Architecture of the Mind* (2006) and the sources Stainton cites.)

This, then, is the main idea of *Words and Thoughts*. However, in order to establish his thesis that subsentential speech is genuine, Stainton devotes more than a third of his book to refuting claims that apparent subsentences are not genuine, since what speakers are producing are, in fact, sentences. The detailed discussion that follows, the greater part of which concerns the notions of semantic and syntactic ellipsis, is very interesting (Stainton apologizes for it needlessly, in my opinion); yet there would be

no point in reproducing it here. Suffice it to say that Stainton does not reject semantic and syntactic ellipsis as such; he merely says that they do not apply to the phenomenon he is concerned with. His main point is that grasping a proposition does not require one to recover a sentence of natural language that expresses it.

And now let us turn to the implications of Stainton's main thesis. The first class of implications he sees as following from the existence of subsentential speech concerns language-thought relations. One direct consequence of his arguments is that thought outstrips language (from which it should not be inferred, however, that language is not heavily implicated in thought). Stainton also claims that one can make subsentential arguments, so that arguing is not "exhaustively *linguistic*" (p. 183). Contrary to those who believe that only items of natural language have logical form, he contends that things which are not such items (i.e. the thoughts conveyed in non-sentential speech) also have it, since they can stand in form-based entailment relations. The second class of implications has to do with sentence primacy. Stainton offers several different readings of the *context principle*, i.e. the principle which says that sentences are prior to words (whose most famous formulation was given by Frege in his *Foundations of Arithmetic*), and concludes that the genuineness of subsentential speech is reconcilable with some but not all of these readings, and that, therefore, the views set forth by the non-reconcilable readings must be rejected. The final class of implications concerns assertions and the semantics-pragmatics boundary. Stainton concludes that both what makes something an assertion and what determines the asserted content are largely pragmatic, rather than semantic/conventional.

As I noted at the outset, Stainton's main argument is an extremely convincing and well-developed one. It is truly difficult to find much to object to in it, unless one is a determined ellipsis theorist with room enough to develop a theory showing that apparently subsentential speech is just an ellipsis, after all. One might object to the seeming ambiguity in Stainton's use of the terms "conveyed" and "communicated"; for he sometimes employs them in the sense of "merely conveyed/communicated", as opposed to "asserted" (see p. 59 and 161), while at other times he uses them such that this opposition is annulled (e.g. "manages to convey a fully propositional content" (p. 6), "communicate complete thoughts" (p. 12)). In his presentation at the very lively *Philosophy of Linguistics* conference held in Dubrovnik in September 2007, Steven Gross identified some problems with Stainton's relevance theory-influenced characterization of assertion. These concern assertion from the hearer's point of view, non-linguistic and non-symbolic assertion, ungrammatical assertion, metaphorical assertion, and assertion of the trivial consequences of what is asserted. Such

considerations do not, however, affect the main thesis of Stainton's book, nor its important implications.

In conclusion, this book is an excellent example of the New Philosophy of Language (characterized by a heavy reliance on empirical data, particularly from the cognitive sciences), and will certainly prove to be of great value to philosophers, linguists, and cognitive scientists alike.

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