“I love you,” says Chris to Kim. “I love you,” says Kim in return. How sweet! And how linguistically interesting! Though Chris and Kim utter the same sentence, Chris says that Chris loves Kim, whereas Kim says that Kim loves Chris. The difference in what they say should have some consequences for linguistic theory. Perhaps it shows that distinct utterances of ‘I love you’ can semantically express distinct propositions. If that is right, then semantic theory should pay close attention to utterances. A semantic theory should, for instance, entail that distinct utterances of ‘I’ can refer to distinct people, and distinct utterances of ‘I love you’ can semantically express distinct propositions.

Yet many semantic theories never mention utterances. They instead ascribe semantic properties to linguistic expressions. Even when semantic theories deal with indexicals, such as ‘I’ and ‘you’, many merely relativize reference and content to contexts, without mentioning utterances. Is this a mistake? Should semantics deal with utterances?

Utterances must, of course, be mentioned somewhere within a comprehensive theory of language. But the traditional distinction between semantics and pragmatics suggests that utterances belong in pragmatics. Semantics, according to this traditional distinction, describes the semantic properties of linguistic expressions. Pragmatics describes what speakers do with those expressions when they utter them. So, the theory of speech acts is a part of pragmatics. Utterances are speech acts. So, utterances should appear in pragmatics, not semantics, on this traditional conception.

But perhaps the traditional division of duties between semantics and pragmatics breaks down when it comes to indexicals. It’s entirely reasonable to
think that the meaning (or content) of an indexical depends on the circumstances of its utterance. So, it may appear that semantics needs to refer to utterances.

Below, I consider various arguments for and against including utterances in semantics. Some of these arguments may be familiar; others may not. In the end, I conclude that utterance-semantics is viable, but must incorporate a rather surprising view of linguistic meaning in order to avoid serious objections. The most serious objections concern (a) expressions that are metaphysically impossible to utter and (b) synonymous simple expressions. The view of linguistic meaning needed by utterance-semantics brings it closer to expression-semantics than one might expect.

1 Linguistic Expressions, Utterances, Contexts, and Contents

Utterances are acts in which an agent utters a linguistic expression. So utterances are events of a certain sort. Utterances, like other events, occur at times and locations. Linguistic expressions, by contrast, are neither actions nor events. They either have no times and locations (if they are completely abstract entities) or they have times and locations that are distinct from those of their utterances. For example, some utterances of ‘I’ occurred entirely during the 4th of July 2015 in Cleveland, but the word ‘I’ itself does not occur, or exist, entirely within that time and location. Thus, each utterance of a linguistic expression is distinct from that linguistic expression. (Some philosophers seemingly take utterances to be tokens of expressions, rather than actions or events. I discuss the contrast between utterances and tokens in section 6.2. But notice that tokens of expressions are also distinct from expressions.)

I will initially take a semantic theory to be an utterance theory iff, roughly, (a) it attributes paradigmatic semantic properties, such as referring, having a content, and being true, to utterances and (b) it takes linguistic meanings of expressions to be functions from utterances to contents, or relations between

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1 Zimmermann (1997) discovered the apparent problem with synonymy for what he calls ‘possible utterances’. I independently discovered the apparent problem shortly after Zimmermann's paper was published, but before I read the paper. I attempt to clarify and generalize the apparent problem in section 9 below. Bach (2005), Salmon (2004b), and Neale (forthcoming) also discuss expression-semantics vs. utterance-semantics, and come down against utterance-semantics.

2 Kaplan (1990) argues that words are contingent objects created by speakers.