

Relatively Speaking

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ABSTRACT

Puzzles about sentences containing expressions of certain sorts, such as predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals, and 'know', have spawned families of views that go by the names of *Contextualism* and *Relativism*. In the case of predicates of personal taste, which I will be focusing on, contextualist views say that the contents of sentences like "Uni is delicious" and "The Aristocrats is hilarious" vary somehow with the context of utterance. Such a sentence semantically expresses different propositions in different contexts, depending on what standard or perspective (or whose standard or perspective) is implicitly adverted to. According to relativist views, the propositional content of such a sentence is fixed, but what it takes for that proposition to be true varies somehow with the context, depending on the relevant standard or perspective. I will argue that such views are neither well supported by the data nor well motivated by the puzzles themselves. Even so, there is an element of truth in each.

I will sketch an alternative view, dubbed *Radical Invariantism*, according to which the appearance of context sensitivity is illusory. Rather than impute either kind of context sensitivity to these sentences or to their contents, Radical Invariantism says that these sentences are distinguished by what they don't do. Because they are not explicitly relativized, they leave a certain semantic slack. They fall short of fully expressing a proposition, instead expressing merely a "propositional radical." We can explain away the appearance of *semantic* context sensitivity pragmatically, by taking into account facts about how, and under what conditions, speakers who use or encounter these sentences manage to pick up the slack. This can occur in either of two ways. Speakers either take a certain standard or perspective as understood, or else they treat the sentence as if it expresses a standard- or perspective-independent proposition even though it does not.

What is right about Contextualism is that the problematic sentences do not have context-independent propositional contents. What is right about Relativism is that these sentences do not have context-dependent propositional contents. What is wrong about both is their implicit assumption that these sentences have propositional contents at all. Radical Invariantism denies that they do. To appreciate how and why this can be, we will compare explicitly relativized sentences ("Uni is delicious to sushi lovers") with their puzzling unrelativized counterparts ("Uni is delicious"), and compare both with analogous sentences containing straightforwardly relative terms like 'neighbor', 'obvious', 'tall', 'rich', 'legal', 'poisonous', and 'scary'. The basic argument will be that the explicitly relativized sentences do express propositions, that they do so only because they are explicitly relativized, hence that their unrelativized counterparts fall short of doing so (and the unrelativized predicates they contain express not properties but merely property functions). This argument will be complemented by a pragmatic account of what speakers mean, and of how they manage to be understood, when they utter unrelativized sentences containing relative terms. I will argue that there is no need to posit special semantic parameters (standards, perspectives, judges) for predicates of personal taste. Despite having some distinctive pragmatic properties, predicates of personal taste can be treated semantically in the same way as relative predicates of other sorts. It is enough to explain under what conditions a speaker can, and under what conditions he cannot, reasonably expect to convey what he means without making the intended standard (perspective, judge) explicit.

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The Problem

Problem sentences: unrelativized (“bare”) sentences containing relative predicates of certain sorts, such as predicates of personal taste, possibility predicates, perspectival predicates, and perhaps gradable adjectives. These bare relative sentences (BRSs) may be contrasted with their explicitly relativized counterparts (ERSs), which do not give rise to special problems.

The problem sentences, these BRSs, intuitively seem to be true in some contexts and false in others. The problem is to explain how this can be or how this can mistakenly seem to be.

Options

The problem sentences either are or are not truth-valuable (capable of being true/false) – they either do or do not semantically express propositions.

If the problem sentences do express propositions, the options are (factoring out obvious indexicality):

Propositional Invariantism: a BRS expresses the same classical proposition in any context

Contextualism: a BRS expresses different classical propositions in different contexts

Relativism: a BRS expresses the same *non*-classical (relative) proposition from context to context, a proposition that can be true relative to one context and false relative to another; what counts as having the predicated property shifts.

If the problem sentences do not express propositions:

Expressivism/Nonfactualism: in using a BRS, a speaker is not making an assertion – there is nothing to be right or wrong about.

Radical Invariantism: a BRS expresses the same propositional radical from context to context – a BRS is propositionally (or semantically) incomplete, but can be used literally to assert propositions that are completions of the propositional radical it expresses.

Types of utterances to consider (as to whose perspective is typically relevant)

- simple statements
- questions
- suggestions and reminders
- action explanations
- attitude reports
- collective reports

Problems with different approaches

The Problem with Propositional Invariantism

No intuitively or otherwise plausible candidate for being the semantically expressed proposition – either much too weak or much too strong

Problems with Contextualism

Semantic Intuitions Fallacy: assumption that intuitions about truth-values of typical utterances of a sentence are responsive to sentence semantics and nothing else

Proposition Fallacy: assumption that if a sentence, with all of its constituents used literally, can be used to convey a proposition, the sentence itself must semantically express one

Context Sensitivity Fallacy: assumption of context sensitivity when there might only be propositional incompleteness

Contextualism assumes that if a declarative sentence does not semantically express a unique proposition independently of context, it expresses different propositions in different contexts in some versions gratuitously posits hidden indexicals, unarticulated constituents, or extra logical form, or else, by not attributing context sensitivity to anything in a BRS, mistakes completion of the propositional content of a speech act performed in uttering the sentence for context sensitivity of the sentence itself.

Uniqueness problem: no one contextualist account is plausible for the whole gamut of cases.

Context *ex machina*: treats determination *in* context as if it were determination *by* context. Speaker's communicative intentions are no substitute for determination by context – they determine speech act content (and force), not semantic content.

Disagreement Problem: hard to explain how one speaker who ostensibly disagrees with another's assertion is rejecting the same proposition. This problem motivates relativism.

At least Contextualism is right about what propositions there are, even if the problem sentences (BRSs) don't express them. (Only explicitly relativized counterparts of these sentences (ERSs) are capable of semantically expressing these propositions.)

Problems with Relativism

In positing relative propositions, Relativism is motivated not only by wanting to avoid the three fallacies and the other shortcomings of Contextualism but also by the apparent phenomenon of "faultless disagreement."

Counts-as Fallacy: If what a relative predicate 'F' applies to can vary with context, then something can be F in one context and not-F in another, and what it is to be F can vary with context. This seems to imply that a relative predicate expresses the same property in any context but that this one property can be different properties in different contexts. It seems better to acknowledge that if what "counts as" being F can vary, being F is not a property.

Relative Proposition Fallacy: If something cannot be just plain *F* (tall, tasty, tempting) but *F* only relative to some standard or perspective, then the proposition that '*a is F*', being itself perspective-neutral (and standard-, judge-, experiencer-neutral), expresses cannot be true or false full stop but true or false only relative to a standard or perspective, or to a judge or experiencer. This assumes without argument (beyond appealing to intuitions about truth and falsity) that '*a is F*' fully expresses a proposition.

Threat of Perspectival Solipsism: It is not clear how Relativism can account for how we can grasp propositions about matters of taste from others' perspectives.

Claim: There are no facts that can't be captured by classical propositions – apparent non-classical propositions are actually either partially specified classical propositions or propositional radicals, perhaps sometimes misconstrued by speakers as propositions.

Bare relative predicates, like 'is tasty', 'is fun', 'is (epistemically) possible', 'is far away', 'is to the left', 'is tall', and 'is old', express property *functions*, not properties. They need to be explicitly relativized to express properties. So, for example, matters of taste are perspective-relative (or standard-, judge-, or experiencer-relative), and facts about them can be captured only by perspective-involving, classical propositions.

At least Relativism is right that the semantic contents of BRSs do not vary from context to context.

Problems with Expressivism/Nonfactualism

Frege-Geach problem

hard to reconcile with the fact that ERSs have (classical) propositional contents
reads metaphysical theses into semantics and pragmatics

General argument for Radical Invariantism

Contextualism and Relativism are implausible for unrelativized sentences containing predicates that obviously do not express properties.

There is no relevant difference between the problematic sentences and other unrelativized sentences, ones containing predicates that obviously do not express properties.

So, Contextualism and Relativism are implausible for the problematic sentences as well.

Propositional Invariantism and Expressivism/Nonfactualism are obviously implausible.

Radical Invariantism, as the only remaining alternative, avoids the fallacies, respects the semantic/pragmatic distinction, keeps metaphysics out of semantics, and, because it takes linguistic form at face value and avoids positing magical contextual effects or mysterious (relative) propositions, should at least be regarded as the default hypothesis – presumed right until proven wrong.

Objections to Radical Invariantism

Obj: Some thoughts, such as those speakers express in uttering BRSs, are inherently perspectival.

Reply: Yes, indeed some thoughts are inherently perspectival, but that doesn't make their propositional contents perspectival. Rather, the perspectival element of their contents don't have to be represented – to be in position to entertain the relevant proposition, one can just occupy that perspective.

Obj: Radical Invariantism gets the phenomenology wrong, by putting perspectives (or whatever the relativity is to) into contents, which they don't seem to be present in.

Reply: The phenomenology, being perspectival, doesn't fully capture the content.

Obj: In using a BRS, speakers sometimes take themselves to be conveying something that is perspective- or person-neutral, hence not have a perspective or person(s) in mind as part of what they are asserting or otherwise trying to convey.

Reply: It doesn't follow that what the speaker is trying to convey is fully propositional. Even if it isn't, it could still be capable of being believed and asserted (however incoherently).

Obj: Radical Invariantism “overgenerates”: by keeping perspectives out of the semantics of BRSs, it imposes no constraint on what speakers can mean in uttering such a sentence.

Reply: Yes, as a thesis about the semantics of BRSs, it imposes no such constraint. But it can be supplemented with a pragmatic account of how speakers can reasonably expect to be understood in uttering such a sentence. With perspectival relativity, typically it is the speaker's perspective, especially if the utterance is specific rather than generic, but not in (e.g.) questioning, suggesting, and reporting cases. And by not explicitly relativizing, speakers can keep their options open and thereby hedge their bets.

Some pragmatic questions

Under what conditions can a speaker use a BRS to convey a proposition that includes the intended perspective? When is this perspective the speaker's, that of a group that includes the speaker, the hearer's, that of a group that includes the hearer, or that of independent individual's group?

Under what conditions must a speaker make the intended perspective explicit, by uttering an ERS that specifies that perspective?

Relevant factors:

- Is the proposition about a particular experience (or thing experienced) or is it generic?
- Does the subject matter of the utterance or of the prior discourse render salient a certain the perspective of a certain experiencer or ?
- Is a suggestion rather than a statement being made? A question being asked?
- Is some behavior being explained? An attitude being ascribed?

Predicates of personal taste and other kinds of relative terms

- “predicates of personal taste”: *fun, funny, boring, tasty, tasteful, cute, sexy, cool*
- relational terms: *neighbor, fan, enemy, local, foreign, noon, summer, stationary, adjacent*
- perspectival terms: *left, distant, up, behind, foreground, horizon, faint, occluded, clear, obscure*
- gradable adjectives, both relative and absolute: *tall, old, fast, smart; flat, empty, pure, dry*
- ostensibly unary expressions (when used without complements) that denote binary relations: *ready, late, finish, strong enough, legal, eligible, incompetent, experienced, useful, effective, applicable, relevant, difficult*
- terms for “response-dependent” properties: *edible, poisonous, scary, nauseating, comfortable, inspiring, filling*

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