

Problems and Arguments in Relativist Semantics

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Aim of the course

- To present the main forms of relativism in contemporary semantics
- To introduce and assess the main arguments found in the debate between relativism and its competitors
- Investigate how relativism treats embedding under attitude verbs
- Discuss new phenomena of relevance: “perspectival plurality”

Plan of the course

- LECTURE 1: Relativism and its variants
- LECTURE 2: Main arguments in the literature, part 1: Intuition-based arguments
- LECTURE 3: Main arguments in the literature, part 2: Syntactic arguments
- LECTURE 4: Relativism and the attitudes
- LECTURE 5: Perspectival plurality

LECTURE 1

Relativism and Its Variants

Plan of Lecture 1

1. Relativism: a schema
2. The Kaplanian framework
3. Two forms of relativism
4. Other positions in the debate

1. Relativism: a schema

Relativism: a basic schema

- The (very) basic idea:
 - a certain (type of) object has a certain (type of) property relative to a certain (type of) element [**Dependence**]:

x is F relative to C

- (Also: certain objects standing in certain relations relative to certain elements.)

Particular implementations of the schema

- **Ethics:** acts/persons are *morally valuable* relative to moral codes;
- **Aesthetics:** works of art are *aesthetically valuable* relative to aesthetic standards;
- **Epistemology:** propositions are *justified* relative to standards of justification/systems of beliefs;
- **Philosophy of science:** scientific theories are *adequate* relative to a paradigm;
- **Ontology:** objects *exist* relative to metaphysical frameworks;
- **Feminist theory:** claims are *valid* relative to standpoints; etc.

Additional claims

- There is more than one *C*. [**Pluralism**]
- None of the *C*s is absolutely correct. [**Non-absolutism**]
- Some of the *C*s exclude each other. [**Exclusion**]
- The switch from some *C*s to others cannot be rationally compelled. [**Conversion**]
- Different *C*s are symmetrical (e.g., equally valid) [**Symmetry**]

- Focus here: [**Dependence**]

Natural language semantics

- Natural language semantics purports to assign **meanings** to expressions in natural language.
- More formally, a semantics is a function that takes natural language expressions (e) and yields meanings (m):

$$f(e) = m$$

- Main question: how to specify m ?

Truth-conditional semantics

- One of the main concepts used in semantics: **truth**.
- Core idea: the meaning of a sentence in natural language consists in *what should be the case* for the sentence to be true – literally, the sentence's truth-conditions.

‘Jupiter has 63 moons’ is **true** iff Jupiter has 63 moons.

- For sentences with context-sensitive expressions, truth-conditions will make reference to (aspects of) context:

‘I’m Romanian’ is **true** iff the utterer of ‘I’ is Romanian.

Compositionality

- The meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its components and the way they combine.
- More formally, if E is a complex expression, M its meaning and COMB a meaning combination function,

$M = \text{COMB}(m_1, m_2, \dots, m_n)$ – that is,

$f(E) = \text{COMB}(f(e_1), f(e_2), \dots, f(e_n))$.

Relativism

- Given the centrality of the notion of truth, relativism in semantics can be understood as a form of **relativism about truth** (in the sense of the notion employed in semantics):

x is **true** relative to C

- Let's call x s “truth-bearers” and C s “relativizers”.
- Main questions:
 - which truth-bearers?
 - which relativizers?

Truth-bearers

- A multiplicity of candidates:
 - Judgments
 - Beliefs
 - Propositions
 - Sentences
 - Utterances
 - Etc.
- Various ways to argue for the primacy of each of these.
- Focus here: **utterances(/sentences)**

Relativizers

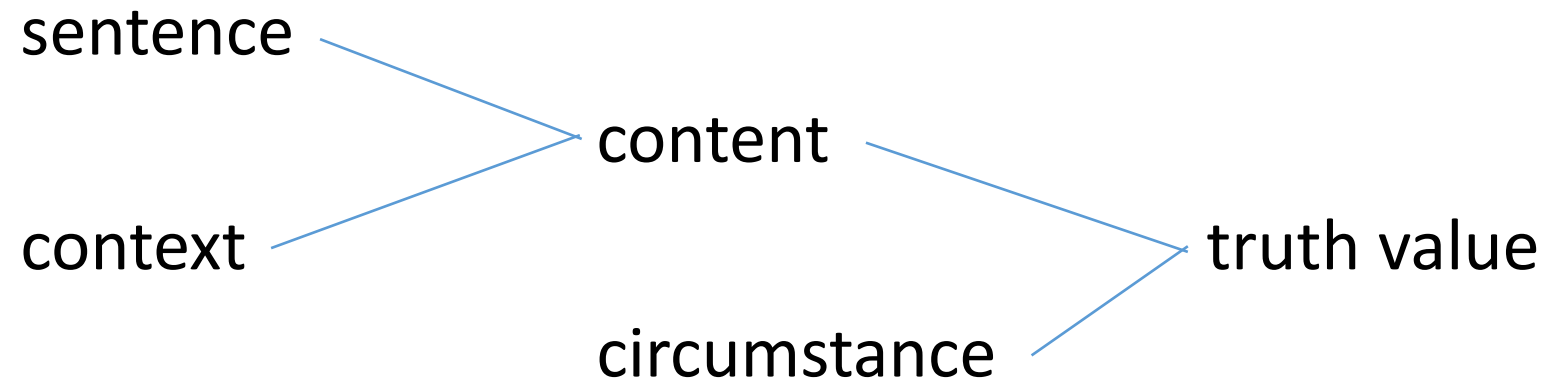
- A multiplicity of candidates:
 - Language
 - Interpretation
 - Conceptual schemes
 - Cultures
 - Forms of life
 - Etc.
- These are all valid relativizers (some more trivial than others).
- Focus here: none of these!

2. The Kaplanian framework

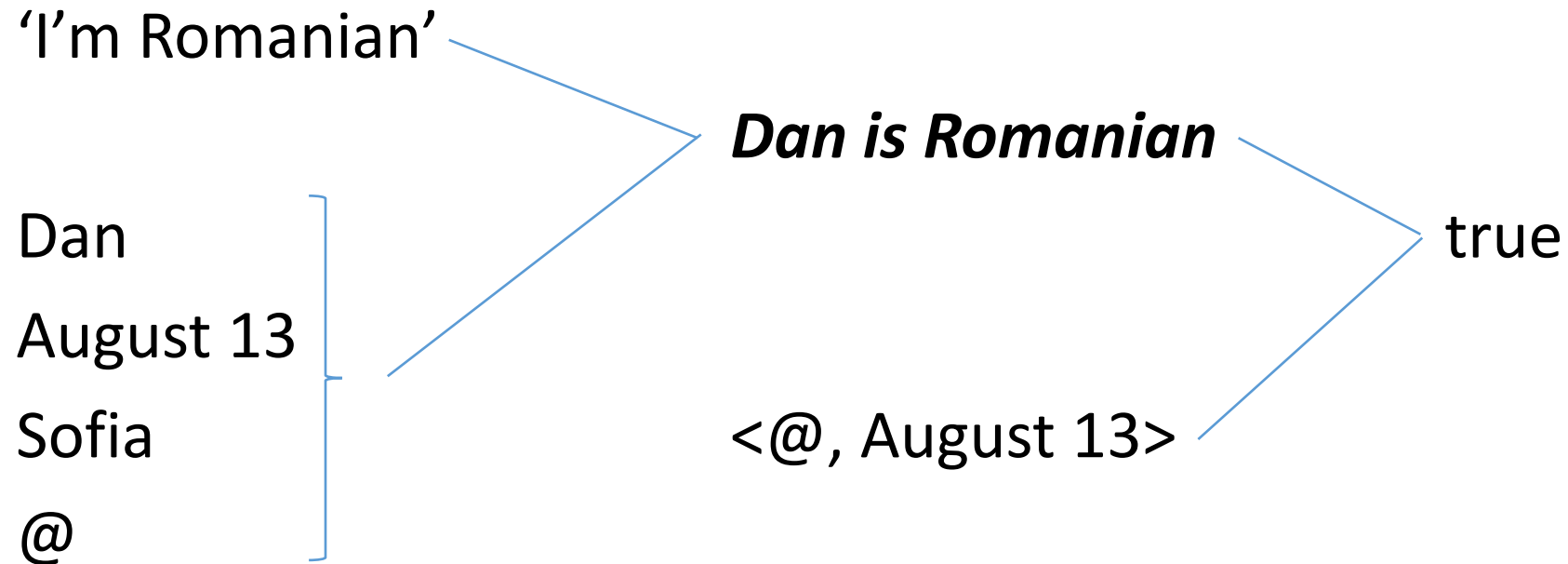
Kaplan's (1989) framework

- A crucial distinction:
 - **context of utterance**: an actual situation in which an expression is used. Modeled as a tuple containing an *agent*, a *time*, a *location*, a *world*.
 - **circumstance of evaluation**: “both actual and counterfactual situations with respect to which it is appropriate to ask for the extensions of a given well-formed expression. A circumstance will usually include a *possible state or history of the world*, a *time*, and perhaps other features as well.” (Kaplan 1989: 502, my emphasis)

Kaplan's framework, schematically



Kaplan's framework (example)



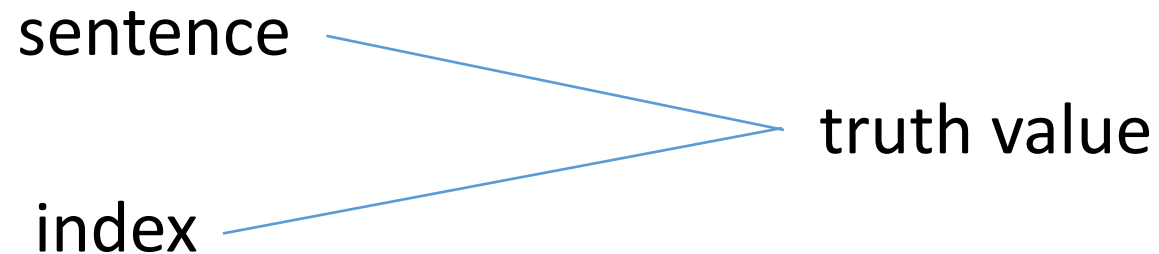
$[[\text{'I'm Romanian}]]^{c, \langle w, t \rangle} = 1$ iff the agent of the context is Romanian in w at t .

Motivating the distinction, 1

- **Accounts for the modal profile of sentences:**
 - Necessity: truth in all possible worlds.
 - In order to ascertain whether 'I'm Romanian' is necessary, we have to ascertain whether the content expressed in its context is.
 - In order to do that, we have i) to determine the content; ii) keep the content fixed.
 - 'I' has to refer to the same individual in all the possible worlds that we inspect.
- **Directly referential expressions:** names, indexicals, demonstratives, variables etc. (as opposed to, e.g., descriptions).

Motivating the distinction, 2

- **Avoids conflating the necessary with the logically true.**
- Against the “index theory” (Lewis (1970)):



- The **index** comprises all contextual elements that are responsible for the truth of utterances (including agent, time, location, world).

Motivating the distinction, 2

- Necessity in index theory is defined as truth at all indices.
- However, consider the sentence ‘I am here now’.
- This sentence is true at all indices, because **the speaker is always at the place and time of utterance** (= logical truth).
- Yet, ‘I am here now’ is far from being necessary: the speaker could have easily have been at a different time/location.
- Thus, we need to distinguish between context and circumstance (cf. Lewis (1980)).

Motivating the distinction, 3

- **“The operator argument”:**

If we built the time of evaluation into the contents (thus removing time from the circumstances leaving only, say, a possible world history, and making contents specific as to time), it would make no sense to have temporal operators. To put the point another way, if what is said is thought of as incorporating reference to a specific time, or state of the world, or whatever, it is otiose to ask whether what is said would have been true at another time, in another state of the world, or whatever. Temporal operators applied to eternal sentences (those whose contents incorporate a specific time of evaluation) are redundant. Any intensional operators applied to perfect sentences (those whose contents incorporate specific values for all features of circumstances) are redundant. (Kaplan 1989: 503)

Motivating the distinction, 3

- **Crucial** (and widely contested) **assumption**: certain expressions in natural language, such as ‘it is necessary’, ‘it is possible’, ‘yesterday’, past + future tenses etc. are best conceived as “intensional operators” – that is, as expressions that shift the circumstance.
- Example: ‘It is possible that it rains’. ‘It is possible’ shifts the world of evaluation to a different one than @.
- **Main point**: if expressions would have contents that specify the world and the time, then intensional operators wouldn’t have anything to shift. (Compare: ‘It is possible that it rains in @’). Given the assumption above, contents are world- and time-neutral.

Truth in a context

- Definition:

If c is a context, then an [utterance] of φ in c is true iff the content expressed by φ in this context is true when evaluated with respect to ***the circumstance of the context***. (1989: 522)

- Context has a double role: i) to provide elements into the content of utterances; ii) to provide values for the parameters in the circumstances of evaluation.
- Utterance truth is relative to circumstances of evaluation (here, the circumstances of the context).

Back to the schema

- So, relativism in semantics can be captured by the following implementation of the schema:

Utterances of natural language sentences are true/false relative to circumstances of evaluation.

- Truth-bearers: utterances.
- Relativizers: circumstances of evaluation.

3. Two forms of relativism

Relativisms

- Variation in the view can be obtained by answering the following questions:
 - What other parameters belong to the circumstance?
 - What are the possible values of those parameters?
 - What context gives the value of those parameters?

What other parameters?

- Kaplan: “A circumstance will usually include a possible state or history of the world, a time, and *perhaps other features as well.*” (1989: 502, my emphasis).
- Kaplan (1989) mentions **location**, but forgets about it in the formal system.
- Lewis (1980) mentions **standards of precision** (for sentences like “France is hexagonal”).

Perspectival expressions

- Most discussions about relativism in semantics nowadays involve “perspectival expressions” (expressions for the interpretation of which appeal to a **subject’s point of view** is needed), such as:
 - predicates of taste (“tasty”, “disgusting”, “fun”, “boring”);
 - aesthetic adjectives (“beautiful”, “balanced”, “sublime”);
 - moral terms (“good”, “bad”, “ought to”);
 - epistemic modals (“might”, “must”, “possibly”);
 - epistemic vocabulary (“knows”, “justified”);
 - future contingents (“will”); etc.

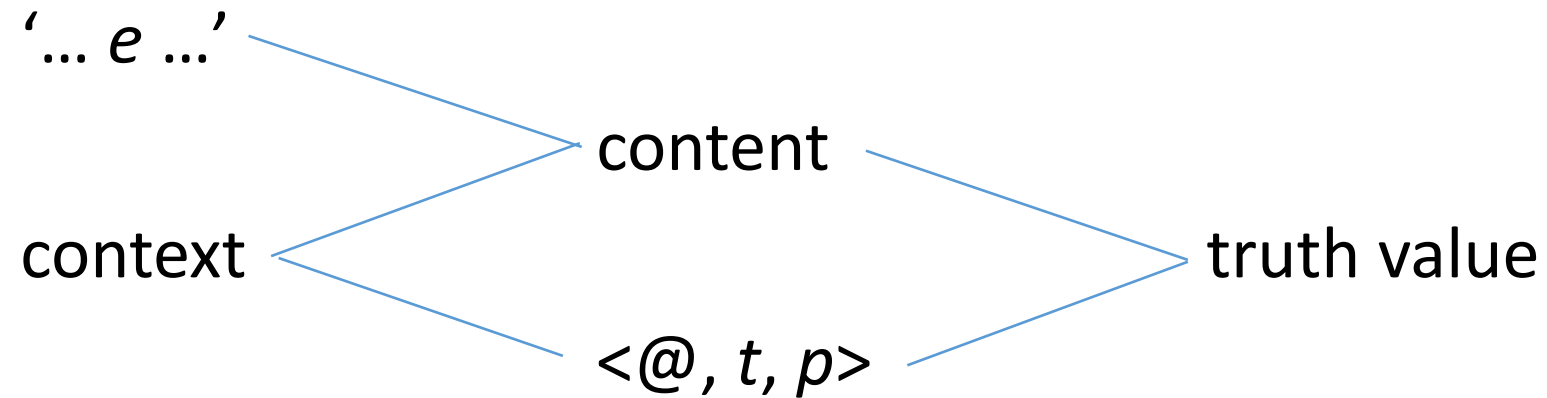
Context-sensitivity

- Sentences containing perspectival expressions are context-sensitive (in the sense that utterances of the same sentence can have different truth values in different contexts).
- Context 1: Dan likes vegemite; Context 2: Lidia hates vegemite.
‘Vegemite is tasty’
is **true** in as uttered in Context 1, **false** as uttered in Context 2.
- They are, thus, amenable to treatment within the Kaplanian framework.
- Their context-sensitivity is connected to their perspectivality.

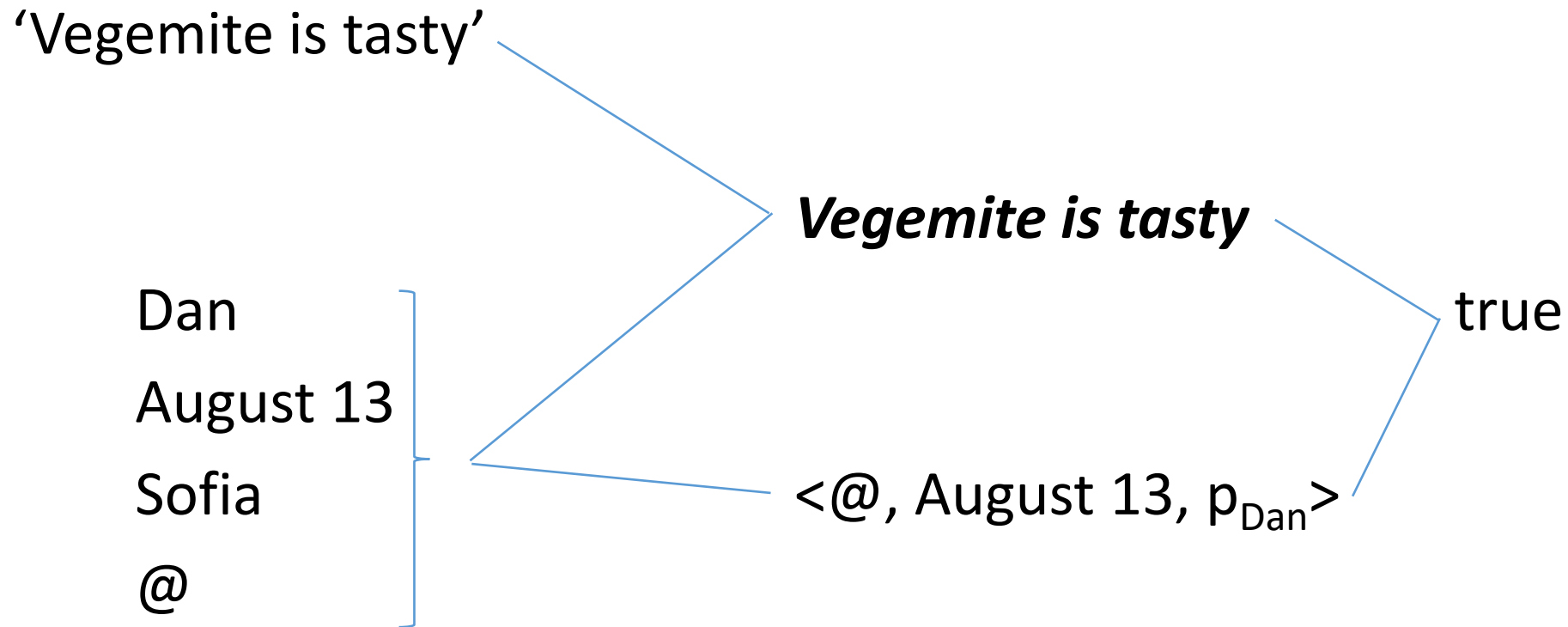
Relativism about perspectival expressions

- To capture the subjectivity/perspectivity and the context-sensitivity of such expressions, the relativist simply introduces the corresponding parameters in the circumstance:
 - standards of taste/judges;
 - aesthetic standards;
 - moral standards;
 - bodies of knowledge;
 - epistemic standards;
 - world histories; etc.
- Alternative: use a catch-all parameter, **perspectives** (Kölbel (2002)).

Relativism about perspectival expressions



Relativism about predicates of taste



What are the possible values of the perspective parameter?

- Default value: the perspective of **the speaker**.
- But it is possible to assign other values too: the perspective of a salient individual different from the speaker (“exocentric uses”), that of a group (“group uses”), that of humans in general (“generic uses”) etc. [See discussion of “stances” in Lasersohn (2005).]
- In this respect, relativism is very flexible.

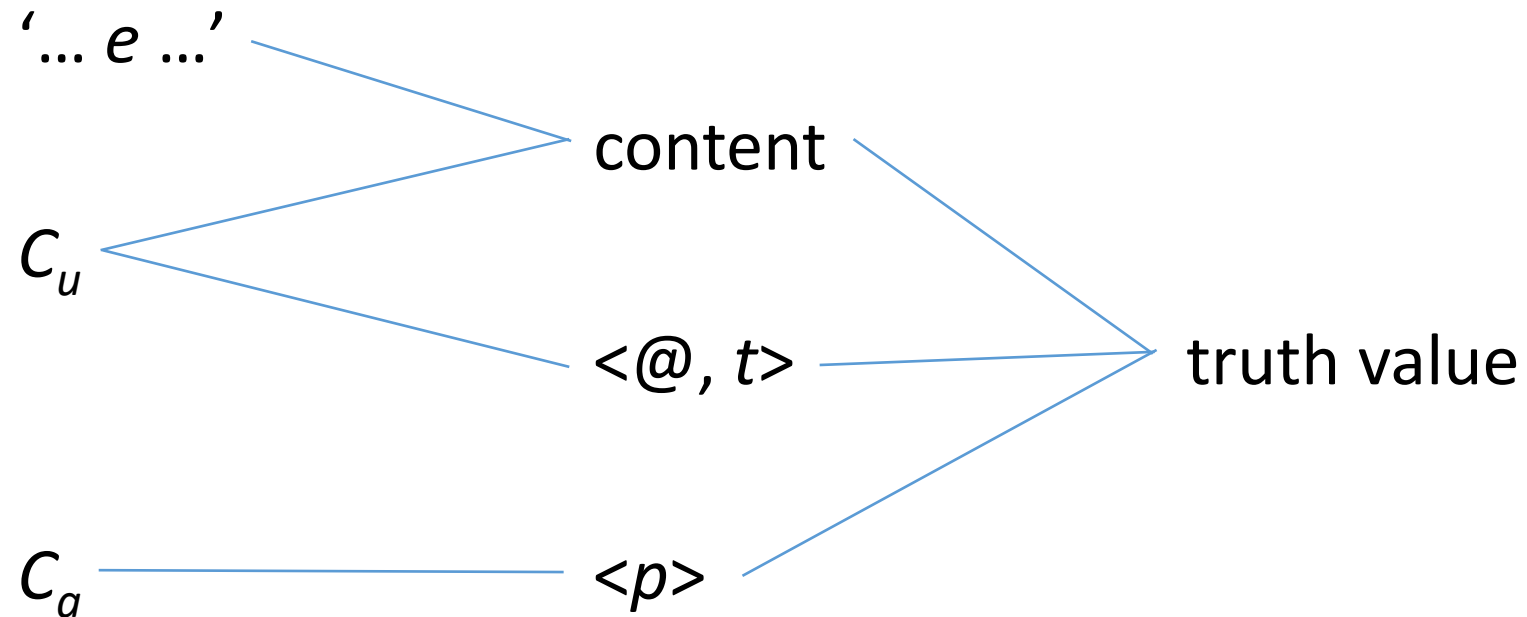
What context gives the value of the perspective parameter?

- Given the dual role of context, in this version of relativism the value for the perspective parameter is retrieved from **the context of utterance**.
- Which means that once the context of utterance is given, nothing else is needed to get a truth-value (we have both content and circumstance).
- That is, *utterance truth is absolute*.
- Hence, this version of relativism is properly called **Moderate**.

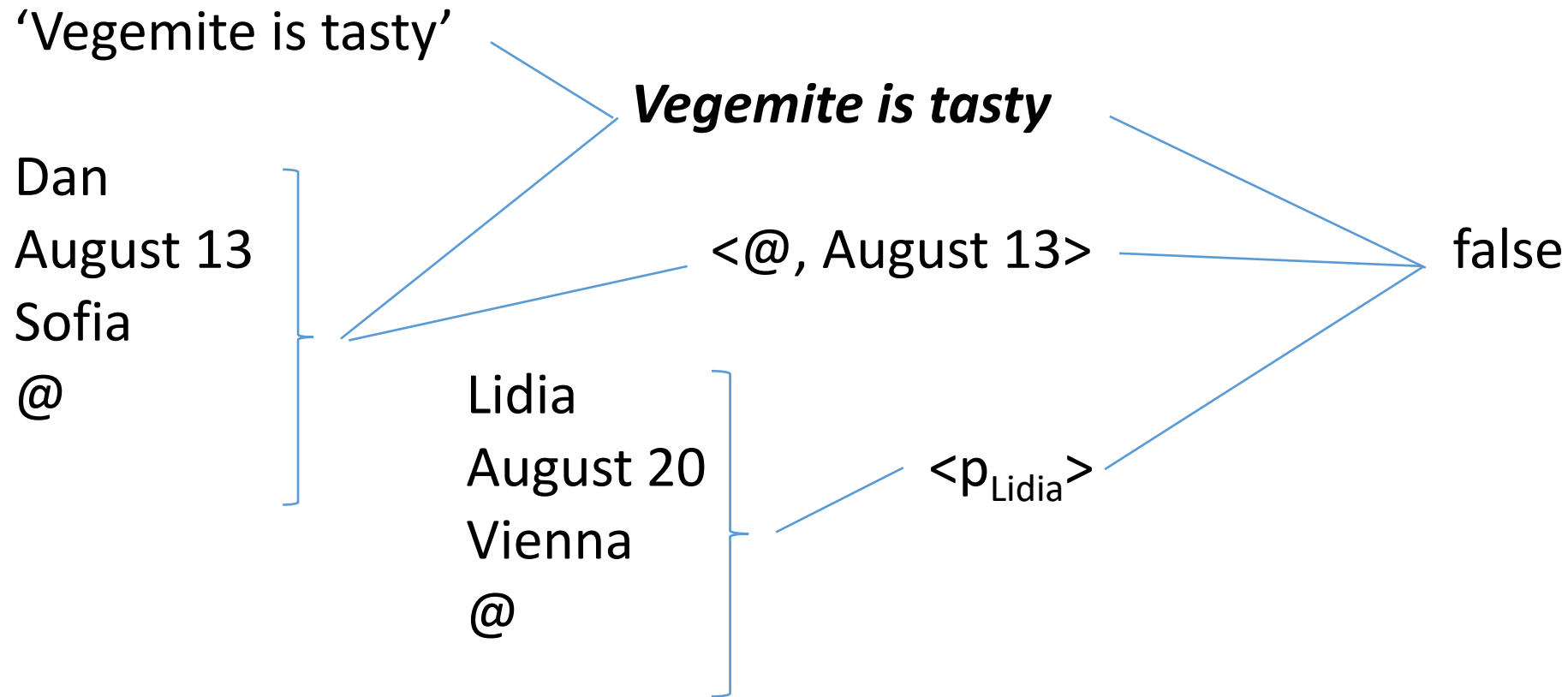
Radical Relativism

- MacFarlane (2003, 2005, 2014) and Lasersohn (2005, 2016) postulate **contexts of assessment** in addition to contexts of utterance.
- A context of assessment is “a possible situation in which a use of a sentence might be assessed” (MacFarlane 2014: 60).
- The role of the context of assessment: **to provide the value for the perspective parameter** (i.e., “assessment-sensitivity”).
- That is, *utterance truth is relative!*
- Hence, this version of relativism is properly called **Radical**.

Radical Relativism about perspectival expressions



Radical Relativism about predicates of taste



Moderate vs. Radical Relativism

- Of course, it can be the case that $C_u = C_a$ (case in which the assessor is the speaker and Moderate and Radical Relativism come down to the same thing), but the crucial point is that **they can differ**.
- The difference between the two views can be seen formally:

Moderate Relativism

$[[\text{Vegemite is tasty}]]^{c, \langle w, t, p \rangle} = 1$ iff vegemite is tasty in w at t according to p .

Radical Relativism

$[[\text{Vegemite is tasty}]]^{c, \langle w_u, t_u, p_u \rangle, \langle w_a, t_a, p_a \rangle} = 1$ iff vegemite is tasty in w_u at t_u according to p_a .

4. Other positions in the debate

Contextualism

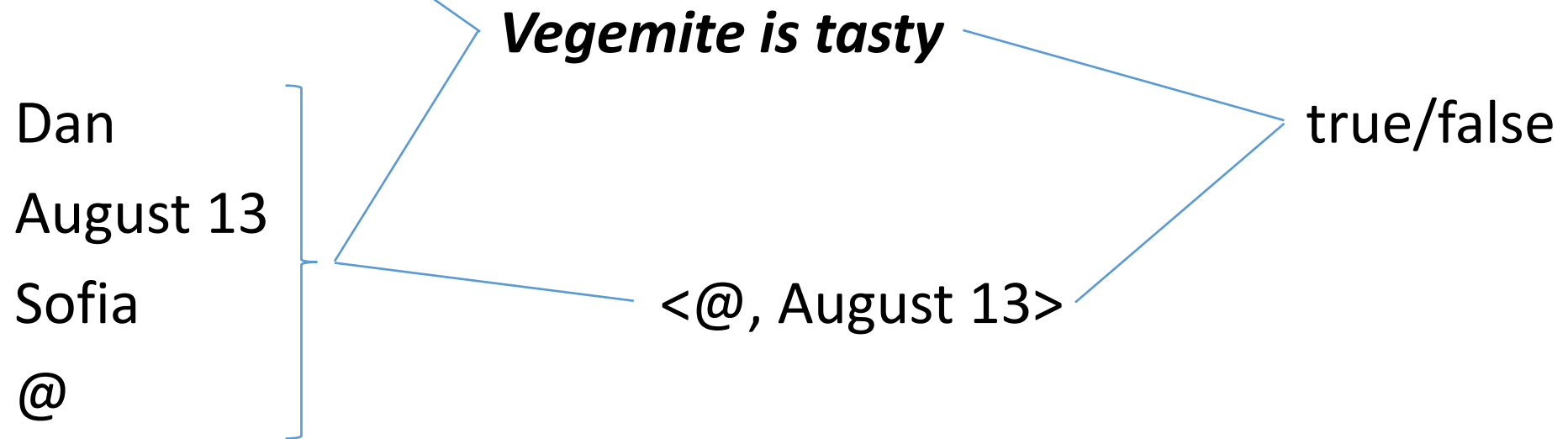
- Relativism differs from Contextualism about predicates of taste in that perspectives appear in different places in the semantic apparatus:



Absolutism

- Relativism differs from Absolutism about predicates of taste in that the latter doesn't use perspectives at all:

'Vegemite is tasty'



Expressivism

- The core claim of expressivism about predicates of taste is that utterances serve to express the speaker's attitude.
- Two main forms:
 - Pure Expressivism: such utterances **merely** express attitudes (positive ones: “yummy!”; negative ones: “yuck!”)
 - Hybrid Expressivism: such utterances both express attitudes **and** have truth-conditional content (Buekens (2011); Gutzmann (2016)). Because of the latter, both Contextualism and Relativism are compatible with Hybrid Expressivism.

“Content Relativism”

‘Vegemite is tasty’

Dan
August 13
Sofia
@

Vegemite is tasty for Lidia

Lidia
August 20
Vienna
@
 p_{Lidia}

<@, August 20>

false

Incorporating world and perspective

- Some views incorporate the perspective into the world:
 - Einheuser (2008): “factual relativism” – *pairs of worlds and perspectives* (corresponding to “the substratum” and to the subjective element, respectively).
- Other views fuse world and perspective:
 - Coppock (2017): “outlook based semantics” – *outlooks* settle both matters of fact and of opinion.

Logical space

	Is there a place for perspectives?	Are perspectives part of content or circumstance?	Is utterance truth relative or absolute?
Absolutism	No	–	Absolute
Contextualism	Yes	Content	Absolute
Moderate Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Absolute
Radical Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Relative

Thank you!

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