

Problems and Arguments in Relativist Semantics

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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 3

Main arguments in the literature, part 2: Syntactic arguments

Recap

- There are two main types of arguments in the literature on perspectival expressions:
 - **Intuition-based arguments:** disagreement, retraction, eavesdropping cases etc. – mostly used in support of Relativism;
 - **Syntactic arguments:** licensing, binding, control etc. – mostly used in support of Contextualism.

Problems with intuitions

- Various authors have expressed doubts about specific intuition-based arguments (e.g., whether the intuition of disagreement is present in core cases). However, there is a more fundamentally methodological question: **why trust intuitions at all?** How reliable are they?
- Additional issue: **Who's** intuitions count? Those of the experts, those of the folk etc.?
- Further issue: even assuming we solve this, it is not entirely clear what it is that those intuitions are **about**. Are they about semantic content, pragmatic content, other types of conveyed content etc.?

Beyond intuitions

- It seems that we don't have a principled way to distinguish legitimate ways to appeal to intuitions from illegitimate ways.
- For this reason, we should look for arguments based on more solid evidence that could support (either alone or in tandem with the intuitions) the views in the debate.
- Contextualists, but also some Relativists, have appealed to arguments based on **syntactic phenomena**.
- My aim in what follows: to present and assess some of them.

Plan of Lecture 3

1. The argument from licensing
2. The argument from binding
3. The argument from control
4. The Operator Argument revisited

Material

- For the arguments, I will rely (almost exclusively) on Schaffer's (2011) article "Perspective in Taste Predicates and Epistemic Modals", which gathers most of the arguments in previous literature.
- For counterarguments, I will rely (almost exclusively) on Collins's (2013) article "The Syntax of Taste", where he responds to all of Schaffer's arguments.

Clarifications

- Methodology: find cases that show the need to postulate perspectives as arguments in the logical form of perspectival expressions.
- **Arguments vs. adjuncts**: arguments are mandatory, adjuncts are not.

John quickly gave the book to Mary in the garden.
- 1-place vs. 2-place predicates: the former need one argument, the latter need two arguments. (**tasty**_) vs. (**tasty** _ _); (**give** _ _ _)
- The version of Contextualism supported by such cases is one according to the which perspectival expressions have an argument place for perspectives.

1. The argument from
licensing

Licensing

- An expression licenses another if the former allows the latter to combine with it.
- Schaffer (2011): licensing can be used as a diagnostic for covert arguments. Licensing of an argument = making it explicit.
- Example: passives.

The ship was *sunk*.

The ship was *sunk* by the pirates.

- The fact that the agent of sinking can be made explicit might be evidence of a covert argument for the agent.

Licensing of perspectives

- The same happens with predicates of taste and perspectives:
 - **Vegemite** is *tasty*.
 - **Vegemite** is *tasty* for me/for Bob/for everyone.
- The fact that the perspective for 'tasty' can be made explicit might be evidence for a covert argument for perspectives.
- *Might be*, because, as Schaffer acknowledges, 'for me' (as well as 'by the pirates') can be **adjuncts**.
- How to distinguish arguments from adjuncts?

Testing for arguments/adjuncts, 1

- TEST 1: Adjuncts, but not arguments, can be inserted between an expression and its arguments (Schaffer (2011)).
- Example: assuming that 'student' is a relational noun (every student is a student of something), we have:
 - The student of history with the nose ring failed.*
 - **The student with the nose ring of history failed.*

Testing for arguments/adjuncts, 1

- The same is the case with predicates of taste and perspectives:

Vegemite is *tasty* for me when sober.

*Vegemite is *tasty* when sober for me.

- If this test is successful, then 'for me' specifies an argument of 'tasty'.

Testing for arguments/adjuncts, 2

- TEST 2: adjuncts, but not arguments, iterate (can be “stacked”) (Glanzberg (2007), Schaffer (2011)).
- Example:

John *kissed* Mary on the beach under the stars at midnight.

*John *kissed* Mary Sally Bob.

Testing for arguments/adjuncts, 2

- However, this is not the case with perspective-specifying expressions:

*Vegemite is *tasty* for me for Bob for everyone.

- If this test is successful, then 'for me' specifies an argument of 'tasty'.

Doubts about the first test

- Insertion is sometimes felicitous (Collins (2013)):

Vegemite is **tasty** on **Tuesdays for me** (as opposed to Wednesdays, when I go to the dentist).

Ice cream is **tasty** in a **cone for me**.

- The infelicity of Schaffer's example is explained by the fact that sobriety is connected with agency (only *agents* can be sober), and 'for me' duplicates that information. Compare:

Vegemite is **tasty** when **sober**.

Doubts about the second test

- Not all adjuncts can iterate freely – stacking is **constrained** (Collins (2013)).
- More specifically, adjuncts *of the same type* cannot stack:
 - ***John** *kissed* **Mary** on the beach on the grass on the car's roof.
- The only ways to interpret the sentence is as
 - describing a conjunction of kissing events;
 - describing one kissing event in a very specific location, where there is inclusion.

Doubts about the second test

- Similarly, the only ways to interpret

***Vegemite** is **tasty** for me for Bob for everyone.

is as

- describing a conjunction of pleasurable experiences
- describing a complex experience whereby everyone has the experience of Bob having the experience of oneself having the experience of finding vegemite tasty.
- This second reading is extremely bizarre! If so, no appeal to arguments is needed to explain the infelicity.

2. The argument from binding

The many uses of 'tasty'

- We have already seen that 'tasty' (and perspectival expressions in general) have many uses:
 - from the speaker's own perspective (egocentric);
 - from a different person's perspective (exocentric) – “putting oneself in somebody else's shoes”;
 - from the perspective of a group the speaker belongs to (or not);
 - from the perspective of humankind etc.

Bound uses of 'tasty': example

- Schaffer (2011: 193):

The Smiths go out for ice cream. Ma only likes chocolate, Pa only likes vanilla, Suzy only likes raisin, and Billy only likes mint chip. Today they are in luck. Each finds their favourite flavour; So Ma, by way of celebrating their good fortune, says:

(Q) Everyone got something tasty.

The bound reading

- The most natural reading of (Q) in this scenario is that everyone got something tasty *for themselves*.
- Not the only reading possible: in different scenarios, the egocentric reading might be more natural (or any of the others).

The argument, in a nutshell

- The argument starts from such bound readings and concludes, via certain assumptions about the connection between semantics and syntax, that 'tasty' has an argument place for perspectives in its logical form.
- The binding argument has been used in connection to a great variety of expressions: nouns, locations, tenses etc. and against a variety of positions: truth-conditional pragmatics, relativism etc.

The argument in general terms

1. A certain position A claims that the target expression E, as it appears in simple sentences, has no argument place for the relevant parameter P in its logical form.
2. In certain quantified sentences, binding occurs: the value of the relevant parameter varies with the quantifier at stake.
3. There is no binding without a bindable variable.
4. Therefore, the target expression E, as it appears in the quantified sentences, has an argument place for the relevant parameter in its logical form.
5. The logical form of the target expression E is the same when E occurs in quantified sentences and in simple sentences.
6. Therefore, the target expression E, as it appears in simple sentences, has an argument place for the relevant parameter in its logical form and thus position A is mistaken.

The argument for 'tasty'

1. Relativism claims that 'tasty', as it appears in simple sentences like 'Vegemite is tasty', has no argument place for perspectives in its logical form.
2. In (Q), binding occurs: the value of the perspective varies with the quantifier 'everyone'.
3. There is no binding without a bindable variable.
4. Therefore, 'tasty', as it appears in (Q), has an argument place for perspectives in its logical form.
5. The logical form of 'tasty' is the same when it occurs in (Q) and in simple sentences like 'Vegemite is tasty'.
6. Therefore, 'tasty', as it appears in simple sentences like 'Vegemite is tasty', has an argument place for perspectives in its logical form and thus Relativism is mistaken.

Criticism of the binding argument

- Semantic binding doesn't entail syntactic binding (Neale (2008), Pupa & Troseth (2011), Collins (2007)).
- The argument overgenerates massively (Cappelen & Lepore (2005), Recanati (2002,2004)).
- There are many ways to account for binding without postulating the required variables (Jacobson (2001), Cappelen & Hawthorne (2007), Elbourne (2005), Pagin (2005) etc.).
- ... including some relativist-friendly ways!

Relativist answers to the argument from binding

- MacFarlane (2014): postulate ambiguity, such that ‘tasty’ is a 1-place predicate when used egocentrically, but a 2-place predicate when bound.
- Lasersohn (2008): “index-binding” – that is, binding is done in the metalanguage. Quantifiers like ‘everyone’ bind both elements in the logical form and in the metalanguage.
- Zeman (2015): appeal to “variadic operators” (Recanati (2002)), which are functions that increase the adicity of predicates. Quantifiers like ‘everyone’ contribute a variadic operator in the logical form.

3. The argument from control

PRO and control

- Schaffer (2011): another diagnostic for covert elements is the possibility of having them control the covert subject of infinitival clauses.
- Infinitival clauses have a phonologically null but syntactically realized subject argument (PRO):

The ship was sunk to collect the insurance.

The ship was sunk to [PRO] collect the insurance.

- PRO is subject to relations of **control**:

The ship was *sunk* by [PRO] to [PRO] collect the insurance.

Control of perspectives

- The same happens with predicates of taste:

It is fun to dance.

It is fun to [PRO] dance.

- The interpretation of the sentence is that it is fun to dance *for the person who is doing the dancing* – that is, PRO is controlled by the perspective argument of ‘fun’:

It is *fun* [for PRO] to [PRO] dance.

- Thus, ‘fun’ has a covert argument place for perspectives.

Doubts

- The argument cannot apply to ‘tasty’. (Examples?)
- It is not clear how to understand the syntactic realization of the control relation (Collins (2013)).
- There are similar constructions for which no antecedent for PRO is needed:

The French agreement to raise the steel tariffs was met with outrage.

The French agreement to [PRO] raise the steel tariffs was met with outrage.

Doubts

- The agents of the two events (the agent(s) of the French agreement and the agent(s) of are steel tariffs raising) are not arbitrary, but they should differ. Ignoring such examples and focusing on the others is methodologically dubious.
- Additionally, Lasersohn (2009) shows that the right semantics for control with **factive attitude verbs** is relativistic (i.e., postulation of argument places for perspectives yields the wrong results).

4. The Operator Argument

Kaplan

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))

What expressions

- What expressions are operators in Kaplan's view?
 - Modal phrases like 'it is possible that', 'possibly', 'it is necessary that', 'necessarily' etc.
 - Temporal phrases like 'yesterday', 'in two days from today'; also, the tenses.
 - [Locational phrases like 'in Paris', 'two miles from here' etc.]
- Are there similar expressions in the case of predicates of taste (and perspectival expressions in general)? How do we shift perspectives?

Kölbel

In the relativist semantics for taste predicates, we can introduce a class of operators that are analogous to Kaplan's modal and temporal operators in that they shift the standard of taste parameter in the circumstance of evaluation, just as modal and tense operators shift the world and time parameter respectively. English seems to contain a construction that might intuitively be interpreted in this way, namely the "For S , p "-construction, as in "For Anna, whale meat is tasty", or "Whale meat is tasty for Anna". (Kölbel (2009: 384))

Regimenting the argument

- L1. **Parameter Dependence:** S is evaluable for truth only once a value along parameter M is specified.
- L2. **Uniformity:** S is of the same semantic type when it occurs alone or when it combines with E.
- L3. **Vacuity:** E is semantically vacuous (it does not affect truth value) when it combines with a sentence that semantically supplies a value for M.
- L4. E is not redundant when it combines with S. [Kaplan's claim]
- L5. By Vacuity and (L4), S does not supply a value for M when it combines with E.
- L6. By Uniformity and (L5), S does not supply a value for M when it occurs alone.
- L7. By Parameter Dependence and (L6), S cannot be evaluated for truth.

(Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009: 71)

The argument with our example

- L1. **Parameter Dependence:** ‘Vegemite is tasty’ is evaluable for truth only once a value for the perspective parameter is specified.
- L2. **Uniformity:** ‘Vegemite is tasty’ is of the same semantic type when it occurs alone or when it combines with ‘for John’.
- L3. **Vacuity:** ‘For John’ is semantically vacuous when it combines with a sentence that semantically supplies a value for the perspective parameter.
- L4. ‘For John’ is not redundant when it combines with ‘Vegemite is tasty’.
- L5. By Vacuity and (L4), ‘Vegemite is tasty’ does not supply a value for the perspective parameter when it combines with ‘for John’.
- L6. By Uniformity and (L5), ‘Vegemite is tasty’ does not supply a value for the perspective parameter when it occurs alone.
- L7. By Parameter Dependence and (L6), ‘Vegemite is tasty’ cannot be evaluated for truth.

Against The Operator Argument

- Cappelen & Hawthorne argue by analogy with modal, temporal and locational operators.
- Thus they show that:
 - **Uniformity** is unmotivated for many of the standard temporal, locational, modal, and precisional constructions that figure in these arguments.
 - For temporal operators, **Uniformity** is particularly questionable (and, in so far as one is a presentist, **Parameter Dependence** is questionable as well).
 - For precisional and modal terms, **Parameter Dependence** is particularly questionable. (Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009: 73).

Resisting C&H's arguments

- In Zeman (2013) I tried to show that the analogies Cappelen & Hawthorne rely on break down. I tried to show that **Parameter Dependence**, **Uniformity** and **Vacuity** all hold for predicates of taste and phrases like 'for John'.
- So, even if they are right in the case of modal, temporal and locational operators, nothing follows for phrases like 'for John' and predicates of personal taste.

Sententiality

- A separate objection is that **Sententiality** for phrases like ‘for Anna’ is not mandated.
- In Zeman (2013), I showed that **Sententiality** is not required for the argument to go through. A rewriting of the argument with expressions like ‘for John’ being construed as predicate operators is possible.
- Remaining question: are these expressions best interpreted as operators (that is, as adjuncts)? See the arguments discussed above!

Summary and conclusions

- I have presented in detail three arguments based on syntactic phenomena: **licensing**, **binding** and **control**. They were proposed in support of Contextualism over Relativism(/Absolutism).
- The argument from licensing depends on treating phrases like ‘for John’ as specifying arguments of ‘tasty’. The argument/adjunct tests were not conclusive.
- Binding can be accounted for by the relativist in a way that avoids the conclusion of the argument from binding.
- The argument from control is not decisive.
- The status of the Operator Argument is still debated 😊

Thank you!

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