

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 4

Relativism and the Attitudes

Plan of Lecture 4

1. Attitude (and speech) reports
2. The traditional and the Relativist frameworks
3. Three (more) arguments for Relativism

1. Attitude (and speech) reports

Attitude (and speech) verbs

- Attitude verbs:

think, believe, know, assume, consider etc.

- Speech verbs:

say, utter, claim, assert, state, pronounce etc.

Reporting

- Reporting what others (or ourselves) think, believe, know, say etc. is a very common practice:

John believes that Elvis is alive.

Mary thinks that Jupiter has 63 moons.

Anne knows that $2 + 2 = 4$.

Bob said that his husband is a CEO.

- The semantics of such reports has puzzled philosopher and linguists for a long time – presumably, because they involve some kind of perspective change.

Reports with perspectival expressions

- Reporting what people believe, think, know, say etc. about perspectival expressions is also very common:
 - John believes that vegemite is tasty.
 - Mary thinks that Mona Lisa is beautiful.
 - Anne knows that water boarding is wrong.
 - Bob said that the treasure might be under the tree.
- Equally puzzling for philosophers and linguists (perhaps even more so).

A prima facie argument against Contextualism

- For Contextualism, the **context of utterance** determines the value of the perspective parameter. Thus:

John believes that vegemite is tasty.

John believes that vegemite is tasty *for the speaker/the relevant person in the speaker's context*.

The speaker/the relevant person in the speaker's context might be different from John, hence Contextualism yields wrong results.

- But, of course, John **is** the relevant person in the speaker's context, so the relevant perspective should be John's.

The Shifting Principle

- Many authors (Stephenson (2007), Sæbø (2013), Pearson (2013), Bylinina (2016) etc.) have made this is a mandatory constraint on attitude reports.
- Stephenson:
[P]redicates such as *think* **obligatorily** shift the [perspective] parameter of the embedded clause to the matrix subject. (2007: 500, my emphasis)

Counterexample to The Shifting Principle

- Imagine that John is trying to determine what foods his 2 years old daughter Alicia likes. He is feeding her various foods, and observes her reactions. Upon feeding her vegemite, and seeing signs of pleasure, John utters ‘Vegemite is tasty’. Later, John’s husband, Bob, reports John’s findings by saying

John thinks that vegemite is tasty.

- The most natural interpretation of the sentence in this scenario is that vegemite is tasty *for Alicia, not for John*.

Counterexample to The Shifting Principle

- The same holds if Bob would report John's findings by

John thinks that vegemite is tasty.

John knows that vegemite is tasty.

John said that vegemite is tasty.

- If so, The Shifting Principle fails (the relevant perspective is not that of the matrix subjects).

'Find'

- Interestingly, this doesn't work with 'find' (Sæbø 2013).
- While, in the same scenario, John can express his findings by saying 'Alicia finds vegemite (to be) tasty', Bob cannot report John's findings by saying 'John finds vegemite (to be) tasty'.
- 'Find' seems to imply a much tighter connection between the matrix subject and the relevant perspective.

2. The traditional and the Relativist frameworks

Hintikka

- Most semanticists adopt the account of attitude verbs put forward by Hintikka (1969).
- Core notion: a subject's **doxastic alternatives** – that is, sets of possible worlds compatible with what the subject believes in the actual world where the embedded proposition is true.

The traditional framework

- To give an account of a sentence like

John believes that Elvis is alive

we need to make 'Elvis is alive' true in all of John's doxastic alternatives – that is, all possible worlds compatible with what John believes in the actual world in which Elvis is alive.

- Formally:

$[[\mathbf{believe}]]^{c, w} = \lambda p \in D_{\langle s, t \rangle} [\lambda x . \text{for every world } w' \text{ compatible with what } x \text{ believes in } w, p(w') = 1]$

The traditional framework and predicates of taste

- To give an account of a sentence like

John believes that vegemite is tasty.

we need to make ‘Vegemite is tasty’ true in all of John’s doxastic alternatives – that is, all possible worlds compatible with what John believes in the actual world in which vegemite is tasty.

- Question: tasty for whom? If we adopt the Shifting Principle, the relevant perspective would be necessarily John’s, but that yields wrong results.

The traditional framework and predicates of taste

- However, by giving up The Shifting Principle, the traditional framework can account for the reading in the scenario given.
- That is, in the scenario given what John believes is that *vegemite is tasty for Alicia*, and thus we need to make that content true in John's doxastic alternatives.

The Relativist framework

- Lasersohn:

To capture the idea that one may believe different things while adopting different [perspectives], we may treat *believe* and similar verbs as **3-place predicates**, denoting relations between an individual, a sentence content, and a **context** which that individual assumes in **assessing** the sentence content. (2008: 365, my emphasis)

- Formally:

$[[\mathbf{believe}]]^{c, w, j} = \lambda p \in D_{\langle s, t \rangle} [\lambda x . \text{for every world } w' \text{ compatible with what } x \text{ believes in } w, p(w', j_c) = 1]$

Comparison

- Traditional analysis:

$[[\mathbf{believe}]]^{c, w} = \lambda p \in D_{\langle s, t \rangle} [\lambda x . \text{for every world } w' \text{ compatible with what } x \text{ believes in } w, p(w') = 1]$

- Relativist analysis:

$[[\mathbf{believe}]]^{c, w, j} = \lambda p \in D_{\langle s, t \rangle} [\lambda x . \text{for every world } w' \text{ compatible with what } x \text{ believes in } w, p(w', j_c) = 1]$

- Both analyses account for the reading in the scenario given.

3. Three (more) arguments for Relativism

First argument: *de se* readings

- Consider: I'm shopping in a supermarket and I leave a trail of stuff on the floor.

I'm making a mess.

Dan is making a mess

- If I don't know my name, then the second sentence cannot capture this situation.
- Widespread solution: *de se* contents – i.e., contents that are relative to individuals.

De se reading with predicates of taste

- Lasersohn (2009): egocentric uses are similar to *de se* readings.

Vegemite is tasty.

- I might not know who I am, but still I like vegemite.
- Contextualism cannot give the right account of such cases.

Second argument: factive attitude verbs

- Among attitude verbs, some are **factive** – that is, they presuppose the truth of the embedded proposition.
- Examples:
know, recognize, regret, remember, forget etc.

Reports with factive attitude verbs

- Consider the following report:

John recognizes that his theory has flaws.

- The sentence implies that **both John and the speaker** are committed to the truth of 'John's theory has flaws'.

Reports with factive attitude verbs and predicates of taste

- Consider the following report:

John recognizes that vegemite is tasty.

- The sentence implies that **both John and the speaker** are committed to the truth of 'Vegemite is tasty'.

The problem for Contextualism

- However, the sentence implies that John is committed to the truth of ‘Vegemite is tasty’ *from his own perspective*, and it implies that the speaker is committed to its truth *from her own perspective*.
- This reading is unavailable for Contextualism, who has to choose a single value for the perspective parameter. Options:
 - set the parameter on John’s perspective:
John recognizes that vegemite is tasty *for John*.
 - set the parameter on the speaker’s perspective:
John recognizes that vegemite is tasty *for the speaker*.

The problem for Contextualism

- Both possible readings, but not the one we are after.
- No problem for relativism: *de se* contents to the rescue.

Third argument: truth evaluative adverbs

- **Truth evaluative adverbs:** adverbs that “express a commitment on the part of the speaker to a particular truth value for the complement clause to the verb they modify” (Lasnik (2009: 372))
- Examples:
 - correctly, incorrectly, accurately, inaccurately, mistakenly** etc.

Reports with truth evaluative adverbs

- Consider the following reports:

John correctly believes that Bill stole the money.

John incorrectly believes that Bill stole the money.

- The first sentence implies that **both John and the speaker** are committed to the truth of ‘Bill stole the money’; the second sentence implies that John is committed to its truth, but that the speaker is committed to its falsity.

Reports with truth evaluative adverbs and predicates of taste

- Consider the following reports:

John correctly believes that vegemite is tasty.

John incorrectly believes that vegemite is tasty.

- The first sentence implies that **both John and the speaker** are committed to the truth of ‘Vegemite is tasty’; the second sentence implies that John is committed to its truth, but that the speaker is committed to its falsity.

The problem for Contextualism

- However, the first sentence implies that John is committed to the truth of ‘Vegemite is tasty’ *from his own perspective*, and it implies that the speaker is committed to its truth *from her own perspective*.
- (Similarly for the second sentence.)
- Again, accounting for this reading is impossible for the Contextualist, who has to choose one of the two values for the perspective parameter (John’s or the speaker’s), none of which yield the right results.

Thank you!

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