

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

Recap

- Absolutism, Contextualism, Moderate Relativism and Radical Relativism – they are all contenders in the debate over the semantics of perspectival expressions.
- Two main types of arguments in the debate: intuition-based arguments and syntactic arguments.
- Additional arguments can be found when we deal with attitude/speech reports.
- Today: a less discussed phenomenon – “perspectival plurality”, of interest in itself, but also thought to be problematic both for Contextualism and Relativism.

LECTURE 5

Perspectival Plurality

Plan of Lecture 5

1. Perspectival plurality: the phenomenon
2. Problems for Contextualism and Relativism
3. Relativist accounts of perspectival plurality

1. Perspectival plurality: the phenomenon

Perspectival

- The starting point of this course, and a point of agreement for many positions in the debate, was that the expressions focused on are *perspectival* (“perspectival expressions”).
- That is, appeal to, or the provision of, a **perspective** is needed for their semantic interpretation.

Perspectival plurality

- There are cases in which appeal to, or the provision of, *more than one perspectives* is needed.
- This is **perspectival plurality**: the phenomenon whereby sentences with more than one perspectival expression have interpretations that require more than one perspective.
- One finds occasional references to this phenomenon in the literature (Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009), Kissine (2013)), but it hasn't been studied in depth until recently (Kneer (2015); Kneer, Vicente & Zeman (2017); Zeman (2017)).

Perspectival plurality: working example

- Context: Halloween has just passed, and several parents in the neighborhood have gathered together to talk about how the kids spend the holiday. Each parent describes what their kid did. One of Johnny's parents utters

Johnny played a **silly** prank on a neighbor and had a lot of **tasty** vegemite.

- In such a context, the most natural interpretation of the sentence is that the vegemite was tasty *for Johnny*, but the prank was silly *for someone else* (the speaker, a third person etc.). Call this interpretation a “plural reading”.

Perspectival plurality: working example

- The plural reading is, of course, not the only possible interpretation of the sentence: in different contexts, it can have different readings (both the prank being silly and the vegemite tasty of the same person, for example).
- The intuition of plurality can be “pushed”: assume that it is known in the context that the parent doesn’t like vegemite etc.
- The existence of the plural reading, though, shows that predicates of taste *exhibit* perspectival plurality.

More examples with predicates of taste

At this amusement park, we aim to please the whole family. We offer both **delicious** wines from the local vinery and **fun** rides in swimming seats – among many other attractions.

Even your vegetarian partner would love the new restaurant. The steaks are of course **delicious**, but I'm sure the broccoli burgers are very **tasty**, too. (Kneer, 2015)

We had mixed success with the stuff we bought from the pet store yesterday. The cat food was **tasty**, but the dog food wasn't [tasty]. (Second sentence from Anand (2009))

Examples with other expressions

Johnny drew a **nice** portrait in the playtime and saw an **exquisite** painting at the main exhibition. [aesthetic adjectives]

Jeremy **should** lie, but Immanuel **shouldn't**. [moral terms]

There **might** be a green one, and there **might** be a red one too. [epistemic modals]

Quantified sentences

- Context: Halloween has just passed, and several parents in the neighborhood have gathered together to talk about how the kids spend the holiday. Each parent describes what their kid did. After all parents report, one of them says

Every kid played a **silly** prank on a neighbor and had a lot of **tasty** vegemite.
- In such a context, the most natural interpretation of the sentence is that the vegemite was tasty *for every kid*, but the prank was silly *for someone else* (the speaker, a third person etc.). The sentence has a (at least one) plural reading.

Embedding under attitude verbs

- Sæbø (2009: 337):

The mother snipe thinks that **the ugliest** baby birds are **beautiful**.

- The only way to interpret this sentence as non-contradictory is to take the perspectives relevant for the interpretation of the two aesthetic predicates to be different – that is, the interpretation is that the baby birds are beautiful *for the mother snipe*, but the ugliest *for the speaker* (or for a third person). This is a plural reading.

Remarks

- Perspectival plurality is a phenomenon exhibited by a large variety of perspectival expressions (even more if we consider other contextual elements, such as time, worlds etc. as perspectival).
- It appears in various environments – in simple sentences, but also in quantified ones, and in embeddings under (some) attitude verbs.
- Essentially, the plural readings are **combinations** of egocentric and exocentric uses (and others – e.g., bound uses) of perspectival expressions.

2. Problems for Contextualism and Relativism

Lasersohn against Contextualism

- Lasersohn (2008) appeals to perspectival plurality in quantified sentences to argue **against** Contextualism.
- Context: Several parents take their kids to an amusement park. In the evening, the parents get together to talk about how the kids spend the day. Each parent describes what their kid did. After all parents report, one of them summarizes the situation by saying
Every parent bought a kid on a **fun** ride and a **delicious** candy.

Lasersohn against Contextualism

- About the possible readings of the sentence in this scenario, Lasersohn says:

[The sentence] can be interpreted at least three ways: The speaker might be expressing his or her own opinion that the rides were fun and the [candies] were [delicious], or claiming that each [parent bought] a ride that was fun for him or her and a [candy] that was [delicious] to him or her, or that each [kid] received a ride that was fun for [the kid] and a [candy] that was [delicious] to [the kid]; but *the sentence cannot mean that each [parent bought] some [kid] a ride that was fun for [the parent], and a [candy] that was [delicious to the kid]*. (2008: 325, my emphasis)

Lasersohn against Contextualism

- In other words, Lasersohn denies that any **plural readings** of the sentence in the context given are available.
- This is bad news for Contextualism: the view predicts that such readings should be available, given that **no constraint** on the interpretation of variables (for perspectives) is proposed.
- At minimum, Lasersohn challenges the Contextualist to come up with such a constraint.

Kneer, Vicente and Zeman against Relativism

- In Kneer, Vicente & Zeman (2017), we show that plural readings are available with sentences structurally similar to the one Lasersohn uses to argue against Contextualism:

Every kid played a **silly** prank on a neighbor and had a lot of **tasty** vegemite

- So, even agreeing that in the case he presents no plural readings are available, that is not *generally* the case with this type of sentences.

Kneer, Vicente and Zeman against Relativism

- We also show that plural readings of simpler, non-quantified sentences are available:

Johnny played a **silly** prank on a neighbor and had a lot of **tasty** vegemite.

- Lasersohn doesn't consider such sentences, but considerations of consistency support the idea that would deny the availability of plural readings in their case too.

Diagnosis

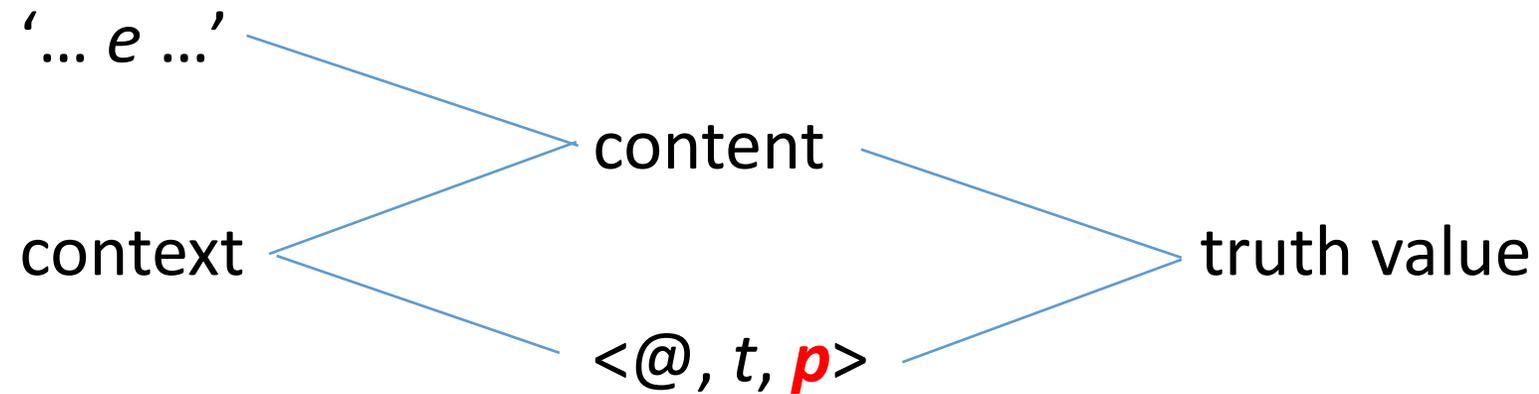
- We also diagnose the problem for Lasersohn's version of Relativism.

- Thus, he writes:

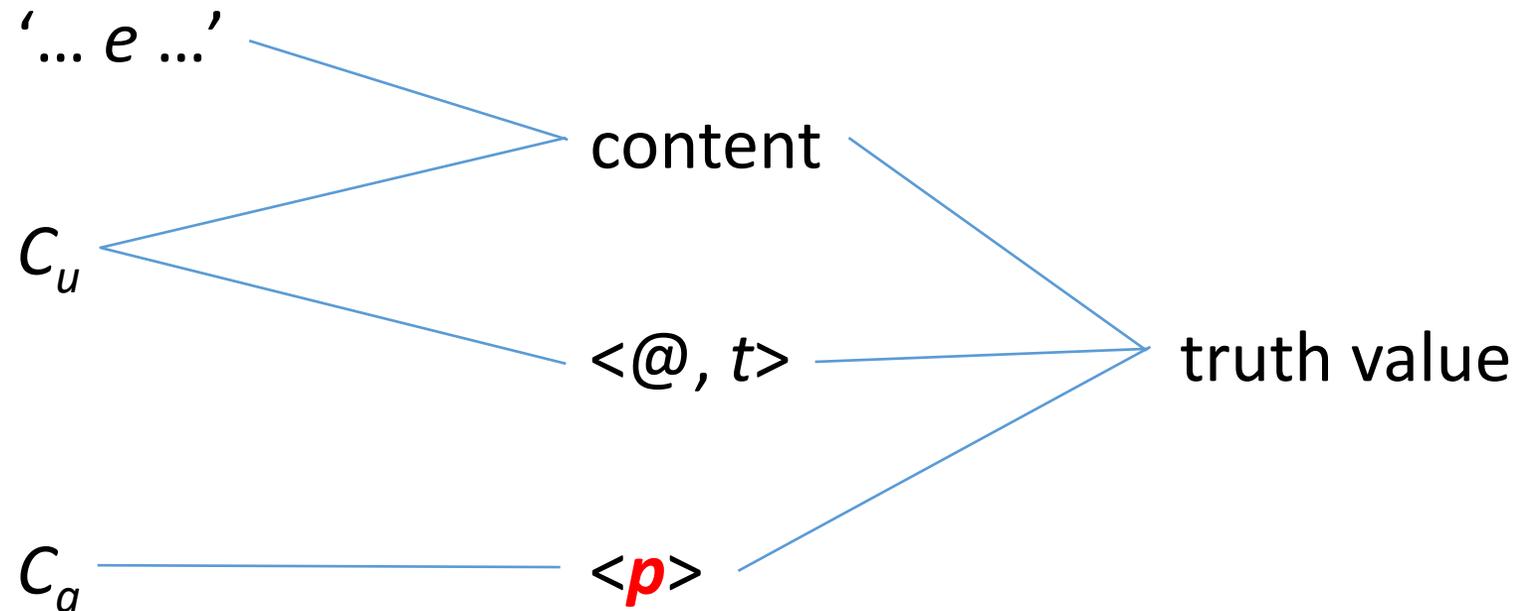
The intuition behind this pattern can perhaps be expressed this way: In a relativist theory, in order to assess a sentence for truth or falsity, one must adopt a stance – that is, *truth assessment is always done from a particular perspective*” (2008, 326, my emphasis)

- By “a particular perspective” Lasersohn means a **unique perspective**.

Moderate Relativism about perspectival expressions



Radical Relativism about perspectival expressions



A Relativist principle

- We take this idea to be encapsulated in the following principle:

Uniqueness of Perspective Constraint (UPC)

A sentence has to be evaluated for truth relative to one and only one perspective (of a certain kind).

- As long as (**UPC**) is taken to be a core element of Relativism, the availability of plural readings remains a problem for the view. Our examples show that perspectival plurality is problematic for Relativism.

3. Relativist accounts of perspectival plurality

Possible relativist accounts

- MacFarlane (2014): postulate ambiguity, such that ‘tasty’ is a 1-place predicate when used egocentrically, but a 2-place predicate when used exocentrically.
- Kneer, Vicente & Zeman (2017): “the paraphrasing strategy” – break down complex sentences into simple ones and keep a restricted version of (**UPC**).
- Zeman (2017): “multiple indexing” – postulate multiple parameters for perspectives in the circumstances of evaluation, each corresponding to an occurrence of a perspectival expression (that is, reject (**UPC**)).

The paraphrasing strategy

- **Core idea:** treat complex sentences as conjunctions of simple sentences, each containing at most one perspectival expression. Each such simple sentence is then evaluated relative to one and only one perspective (call the simple sentences “units of evaluation”).
- This is a conservative account in that it preserves (**UPC**), albeit in a modified form:

Uniqueness of Perspective Constraint* (UPC*)

A unit of evaluation has to be assessed for truth relative to one and only one perspective (of a certain kind).

The paraphrasing strategy

- However, the view allows each simple sentence to be evaluated **relative a different perspective**. This helps with plural readings.

- Example:

[Johnny played a **silly** prank on a neighbor] & [Johnny had a lot of **tasty** vegemite]

- Each of the units of evaluation will be assessed relative to the relevant perspective (the first relative to the speaker's perspective, the second relative to Johnny's perspective etc.).

The paraphrasing strategy

- It applies to quantified sentences as well:

[Every kid played a **silly** prank on a neighbor] & [Every kid had a lot of **tasty** vegemite]

(+ an identity of domain clause).

- It applies to non-conjunctive sentences too:

Johnny had a **funny-looking, tasty** dish.

[Johnny had a dish] & [The dish was **funny-looking**] & [The dish was **tasty**]

Issues for the paraphrasing strategy, 1

- It is not sure that all sentences that have plural readings are amenable to paraphrasing. Possible troublesome cases:
 - The dog food is **astonishingly tasty**.
 - The book was **fun yet informative**.
- Most probably, the proponent of the paraphrasing strategy might need to uphold some additional claims, which constitutes a theoretical burden.

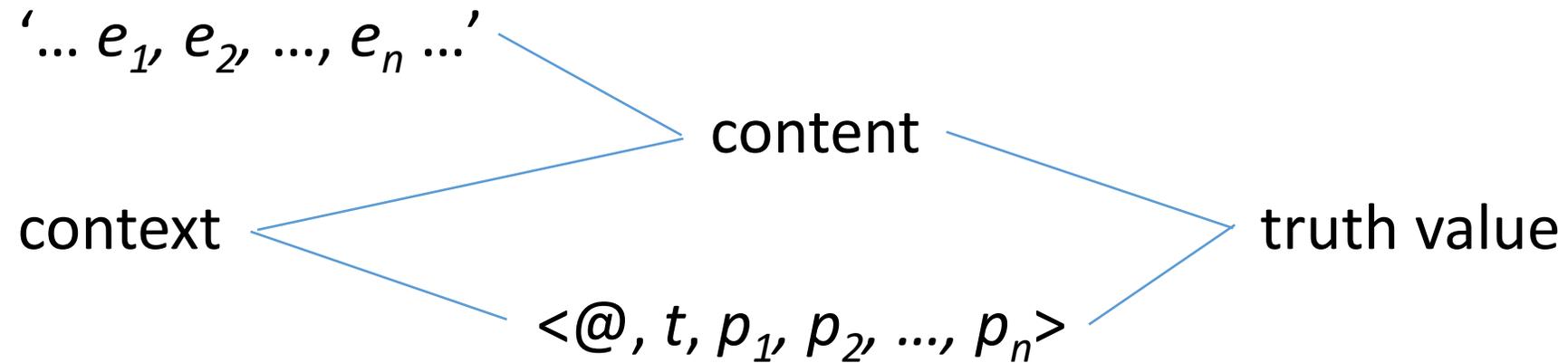
Issues for the paraphrasing strategy, 2

- It is implausible from a syntactic point of view (and probably from a semantic one too) that the best representation of such sentences is done by conjunction of simple sentences.
- This is not necessarily problematic, since the proponent of the paraphrasing strategy can say that the paraphrase belongs to a level of representation meant for truth evaluation only.
- However, the issue of economy arises: postulating this additional layer of representation is not economical and arguably ad-hoc.

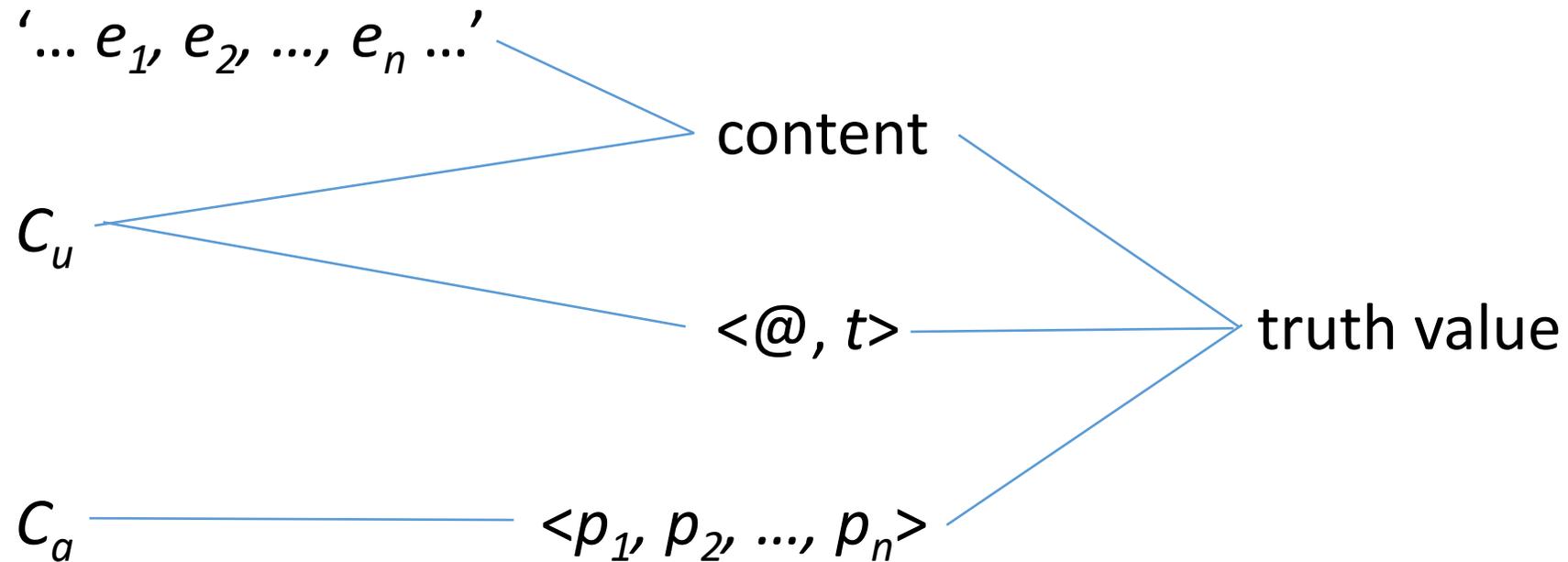
Multiple indexing

- **Multiple indexing:** the idea that more parameters of the same type should be introduced in the semantic apparatus.
- Examples of multiple indexing: for Kaplan (1989), time is both an element of the context of utterance and a parameter in the circumstances; Kamp (1971), Vlach (1973) introduce multiple time parameters in the index; Cresswell (1990) introduces multiple worlds parameters etc.
- However, in the way intended here, multiple indexing is the idea of introducing a **sequence** p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n of parameters for perspectives *in the circumstance*.

Moderate Multiple Indexing Relativism about perspectival expressions



Radical Multiple Indexing Relativism about perspectival expressions



Abstract truth conditions

- Formally:

$[[\text{Johnny played a **silly}^1 \text{ prank and had a lot of **tasty}^2 \text{ vegemite}}]]_{c, \langle w, p_1, p_2 \rangle}****$
= 1 iff Johnny played a silly prank in w according to p_1 and had a lot of tasty vegemite in w according to p_2 ,

where p_1, p_2 is the sequence of parameters for perspectives introduced, each parameter co-indexed with an (occurrence) of a predicate of taste.

- Once we plug in the values in context for p_1 and p_2 , we get the different readings of the sentence.

Issues for multiple indexing, 1

- Question: how many parameters in the sequence? Answer: as many as you need.
- However, this is not the end of the story. The examples I have given contain only two perspectival expressions. But, in principle, sentences with infinitely many such expressions are possible.
- How to account for those? Answer: introduce **infinite sequences**.
- Is this view palatable? (Rabern (2012) claims that infinite sequences are *necessary* for semantics.)

Issues for multiple indexing, 2

- What kinds of contents we end up postulating if we follow this strategy? Answer: they are similar to *multi-centered contents*.
- One might think that such contents are OK from a purely semantic point of view, but how can such contents be **entertained** (i.e., asserted, believed etc.)? Some type of connection has to be specified.

Issues for multiple indexing, 3

- Glanzberg (2007): (simple) Relativism puts a strain on our cognitive capacities by introducing a multitude of perspectives. This might threaten language **learnability** and **computability**.
- The problem is exacerbated with Multiple Indexing Relativism, since the number of parameters is even bigger. (I believe this worry can be answered: see Zeman (2017).)

Logical space

	Is there a place for perspectives?	Are perspectives part of content or circumstance?	Is utterance truth relative or absolute?	How many parameters for perspectives?
Absolutism	No	–	Absolute	Zero
Contextualism	Yes	Content	Absolute	One
Moderate Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Absolute	One
Multiple Indexing Moderate Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Absolute	Multiple (possibly infinitely many!)
Radical Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Relative	One
Multiple Indexing Radical Relativism	Yes	Circumstance	Relative	Multiple (possibly infinitely many!)

Thank you!

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