

COMMENTS ON JOHN MACFARLANE'S 'NON-INDEXICAL CONTEXTUALISM'

Zoltán Gendler Szabó
Cornell University

0. The thesis

(NC) A sentence may be semantically context-sensitive even if it expresses the same proposition in every context of utterance. That is because propositional truth itself may be relative to some aspect of the context of utterance.

Explanation: Semantic context-sensitivity is defined as dependence of truth-value on some aspect of the context of utterance. It is contrasted with indexicality – dependence of content on some aspect of the context of utterance. (NC) says that there may be *non-indexical context-sensitivity*. Non-indexical context-sensitivity differs from what MacFarlane calls *relativity* – dependence of content on the context of assessment.

Caveat: As MacFarlane notes, if you go along with Lewis's notion of context (NC) is trivial. One aspect of the context of utterance is the world in which the utterance takes place, and propositional truth is relative to worlds on almost everyone's view. The point is that propositional truth may be relative to something other than possible worlds.

The example: Let a circumstance of evaluation be a triple of a world, a time, and an epistemic standard. Assume that a sentence is true in a context of utterance just in case the proposition it expresses in that context is true relative to the circumstance of evaluation determined by that context.

- (1a) 'Keith knows that the bank is open on Saturday' expresses the same proposition in every context of utterance – i.e. that Keith knows that the bank is open on Saturday.
- (1b) This proposition is true relative to a circumstance of evaluation $\langle w, t, e \rangle$ iff Keith's epistemic position with respect to the proposition that the bank is open on Saturday in w at t satisfies e .
- (1c) Keith's epistemic position with respect to the proposition that the bank is open on Saturday satisfies some but not all epistemic standards.

Another caveat: MacFarlane wants dependence with causal/explanatory force. (1c) does not guarantee that the variation in the truth-value of 'Keith knows that the bank is open on Saturday' across contexts is *due to* variation in the epistemic standard at play.

1. Contested terms

The heart of the thesis is that propositional truth might be relative to something other than possible worlds. Many think this assumption is contrary to what we do (or should) mean by 'proposition'. I will return to this issue at the end. Besides 'proposition' there are two other contested terms in (NC).

- context

Objection: The context of utterance should include only what is *common ground* in the conversation. Epistemic standards depend on the mental state of the speaker (e.g. on what is at stake for her) and this is typically not common ground. So, contexts should not include epistemic standards.

Reply: The first premise is false. The context of utterance includes the time of utterance, even though conversational participants can be mistaken about what time it is. So, not everything in context must be common ground.

Objection: Despite their mistakes, conversational participants also have correct indexical beliefs about the time of utterance (expressible by ‘This utterance is happening *now*’) and it is common ground that they have such beliefs. Such beliefs suffice to secure common ground status for the time of utterance.

Reply: If so, epistemic standards may also be common ground even if the conversational participants have some false beliefs about what they are.

- semantics

Objection: A semantic theory for a language must tell us what the expressions of the language mean, and it needn’t tell us anything more. The *meaning* of a declarative sentence is a function from contexts of utterance to propositions expressed by the sentence in that context.

Reply: Semantics can only account for logical validity if it attends to the parameters propositional truth is relative to.

Objection: It is unclear how much semantics should tell us about logical validity. It is customary to think that semantics should explain the validity of an inference from ‘Jack walks and Jill talks’ to ‘Jill talks’ but not the validity of an inference from ‘Jack walks’ to ‘Jack moves’. I think semantics should explain neither or both. Neither inference is formally valid, as long as the relevant notion of form is syntactic. Both are analytically valid, as long as the relevant notion of analyticity is tied to linguistic competence.

Reply: Semanticists who don’t want to account for logical validity may not care about context-sensitivity of this sort. This does not mean the phenomenon is illusory or that it lacks theoretical interest.

2. What does believing (1a-c) get you?

- (2) Keith knows that the bank is open on Saturday.
(*Truth-value varies from context to context depending on epistemic standard.*)

- (3) Keith knows that that the bank is open on Saturday but he did not know this yesterday even though he believed it and had exactly the same grounds he has now.
(False in all contexts, even if (2) is true in the current context, was false in yesterday's context, and Keith's beliefs or his grounds for his beliefs remained the same.)
- (4) John said that Keith knows that the bank is open.
(True in all contexts if John made an assertion by uttering (2).)

3. Should we get more of this?

- Non-indexical contextualism for 'ready'

- (5a) 'Tigger is ready' expresses the same proposition in every context of utterance – i.e. that Tigger is ready.
- (5b) This proposition is true relative to the circumstance of evaluation $\langle w, t, a \rangle$ iff Tigger is ready to perform action a in world w at time t .
- (5c) Tigger is ready to perform some but not all actions.

Objection: 'Tigger is ready' does not express a proposition – at best it expresses a propositional radical.

Reply: OK, call it a propositional radical. Just make sure you remember to say then that 'that Tigger is ready' designates the same thing.

- (6) Tigger is ready.
(Truth-value varies from context to context depending on activity.)
- (7) Tigger is ready but he wasn't ready yesterday even though nothing about him changed.
(False in all contexts, even if (6) is true in the current context, was false in yesterday's context, and nothing about Tigger changed.)
- (8) Kanga said that Tigger is ready.
(True in all contexts if Kanga made an assertion by uttering (6).)

- Non-indexical contextualism for 'Ernie'

- (9a) 'Ernie lives on Sesame Street' expresses the same proposition in every context of utterance – i.e. that Ernie lives on Sesame Street.
- (9b) This proposition is true relative to the circumstance of evaluation $\langle w, t, E \rangle$ iff the guy called 'Ernie' E lives on Sesame Street in world w at time t .
- (9c) Some but not all guys called 'Ernie' live on Sesame Street.

Objection: Well, surely 'Ernie' is ambiguous. There are as many 'Ernie's as Ernies.

Reply: Would you say something like 'There are a dozen banks in town because there are ten places to open an account and two to stroll along the river'? If not, and 'Ernie' is ambiguous, how can you talk of several Ernies?

- (10) Ernie lives on Sesame Street.
(*Truth-value varies from context to context depending on the guy called 'Ernie'.*)
- (11) Ernie lives on Sesame Street but Ernie does not live on Sesame Street.
(*False in all contexts, even if (10) is true in the current context, was false in yesterday's context, and no Ernie changed his address.*)
- (12) Big Bird said that Ernie lives on Sesame Street.
(*True in all contexts if Big Bird made an assertion by uttering (10).*)

4. Are we nomadic Z-landers with respect to epistemic standards?

John Perry about weather-reports in the language of the nomadic Z-landers:

The point is to reflect, in our semantics, the lesser burden that is put on the Z-landers' assertions and beliefs compared to ours because of their impoverished sources of information and their limited repertoire of weather-sensitive actions. The only job of their assertions and beliefs concerning the weather is to deal with the nature of the weather in Z-land. Their assertions and beliefs are satisfactory, insofar as their "weather-constituent" – rain, snow, sleet, etc. – matches the weather in Z-land, were our need also to register the place of the weather. By taking the propositional content of their beliefs to be propositional functions, rather than complete propositions, and taking them to be true or false relative to Z-land, we mark the difference. [*'Thought without representation' in The Problem of the Essential Indexical, p. 215*]

I think this just *is* non-indexical contextualism about 'It is raining' in nomadic Z-landerese – what Perry calls propositional function MacFarlane would call proposition.

5. Speculation about propositional truth and aboutness

- (A) Propositional truth depends exclusively on the properties of and relations among the entities the proposition is about.

Note: Like MacFarlane, I use 'depends' with causal/explanatory force. If you don't think propositions are about anything, replace 'the proposition' with 'a belief with that proposition as content' in (A).

- Intuitively, the proposition that grass is green is not about possible worlds. Its truth-value varies across possible worlds because the properties of grass (something the proposition *is* about) vary.
- (A) is compatible with temporalism. Although I am not sure of this, we might be able to make sense of the idea that the proposition that grass is green is about the present but not about any particular time.
- (A) appears to be incompatible with non-indexical contextualism about 'know'. Consider (2) as it is uttered in a context. The most plausible thing to say is this: the proposition expressed is not about epistemic norms (invariantism). The second best is to say that it is about some specific epistemic norm (subject-sensitive invariantism and standard contextualism). The least plausible thing to say is that it is about epistemic norms but not about any particular epistemic norm (non-indexical contextualism).