

Nota bene: For developments of the basic idea presented here, see  
 "The Pragmatics of Insensitive Assessments"

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## CONTEXTUALISM, ASSESSOR RELATIVISM, AND INSENSITIVE ASSESSMENTS

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### *Introduction*

Claims about what is *tasty* or about what *might* be the case are relative, somehow, to palates and bodies of information. One standard way to account for such relativity has been to say that the truth-conditions expressed by such claims vary with some feature of the *context* in which the utterance is made, a feature which picks out the relevant palate or body of information. For example:

Might-C: An utterance of a sentence of the form *P might be the case* is true if and only if P is compatible with the body of information that is relevant in the context of utterance (cf. DeRose 1991, 1998; Bach 2008; Schaffer 2009).

Tasty-C: An utterance of a sentence of the form *X is tasty* is true if and only if X accords with the standard of taste that is relevant in the context of utterance (cf. Glanzberg 2007; Schaffer 2009).

Contextualist analyses promise to capture what we are interested in when we make epistemically modal judgments or judgments of taste. When the gambler considers whether the next card might be an ace, she seems to be asking whether *she* knows anything that rules out that it is an ace. When we search the fridge for something tasty, we are looking for something that accords with *our* palate. Recently, however, a number of authors (MacFarlane 2005, 2008; Egan 2007; Egan et al. 2005; Lasersohn 2005; e.g.) have suggested that contextualism fails to account for phenomena relating to linguistic expressions of agreement and disagreement — what we will call *felicitous insensitive assessments* — and have proposed much discussed alternative analyses according to which the truth of claims of the form *P might be the case* or *X is tasty* is relative to contexts of *assessment*, rather than contexts of utterance.

In this paper, we provide one hitherto overlooked way in which contextualists can embrace the phenomenon by slightly modifying an assumption

that has remained in the background in most of the debate over contextualism and relativism. Finally, we briefly argue that the resulting contextualist account is at least as plausible as the relativist alternative and should be carefully considered before contextualism is abandoned for relativism.

*The challenge: insensitive assessments and assessor-relativism*

The challenge against contextualism that we are concerned with builds on the existence of *felicitous insensitive assessments*. For “might” and “tasty”, these are cases where (i) the speaker, S, has judged that something is the case based on information available to S in the context of utterance, or judged that something is tasty based on its accord with S’s own palate, but where (ii) it is linguistically appropriate for an assessor, A, to assess S’s judgment based on information available in A’s context, or based on A’s palate rather than based on information available in S’s context or on S’s palate. Here are some (apparent) examples:

*Might:*

Alice has asked whether anyone has seen her keys. Bill, who left them in the car, answers:

(1) “The keys might be in the car.”

Unknown to Alice and Bill, the neighbourhood girl, Emily, has just stolen the keys from the car and is hiding behind a bush, listening to the conversation. Here are two possible thoughts of hers in response to Bill’s utterance:

(2) “No, they can’t be, because I have them here.”

(3) \*“That’s true, but I have them here.”

*Tasty:*

Sam, seen by the dining table in a television documentary:

(4) “Fish sticks are really tasty!”

Compare two possible comments by little John, who is watching the documentary and really dislikes fish sticks:

(5) “No, they are disgusting!”

(6) \*“Yes, but they are disgusting!”

Assume that nothing Bill and Alice know rules out that the keys are in the car and assume that fish sticks really do accord with Sam’s palate: then (1) and (4) seem true according to Might-C and Tasty-C. Still, the expressions of disagreement or denial of (2) and (5) seem felicitous; whereas the agreement expressed by (3) and (6) seem odd. This is contrary to what Might-C and

Tasty-C seem to predict. Moreover, cases like these are easily multiplied, and can involve a variety of what we might call "assessment phrases", linguistic constructions that seem to imply assessments of utterances as true or false, and which are typically used to express agreement or disagreement with a stated or believed opinion: "that is true", "that is false", "you are wrong about that", "you are mistaken", "I was wrong", "I agree", "I disagree", "yes", "no", "she knows that" or "it is not the case that".<sup>1</sup>

"Relativists" like Andy Egan, John MacFarlane and Peter Lasersohn think that the best way to accommodate linguistically appropriate insensitive assessments is by introducing a notion of assessment-relative utterance truth. This allows for the following alternatives to Might-C and Tasty-C:

Might-R: An utterance of a sentence of the form *P might be the case* is true relative to a context of assessment if and only if P is compatible with the information available in that context (cf. MacFarlane 2005; Egan 2007).

Tasty-R: An utterance of a sentence of the form *X is tasty* is true relative to a context of assessment if and only if X accords with the standard of taste of that context. (cf. Lasersohn 2005).

That seems to straightforwardly account for insensitive assessments. When Bill has said that Alice's keys might be in the car and Emily says to herself, "No, they can't be, because I got them here", Emily's utterance seems felicitous because *Bill's utterance is false relative to Emily's information*. Similarly, John's rejection of Sam's claim that fish sticks are tasty seems felicitous because *fish sticks are not tasty according to John's standard*.

At the same time, the introduction of assessor-relative utterance truth changes a fundamental semantic concept and forces us to revise not only logic (MacFarlane 2005) but also a number of assumptions connecting semantic analysis to psychology and linguistic behaviour. For example, the conception of assertion as a speech act concerned with stating what is true at the context of utterance must be modified to fit the relativist framework (see Egan 2007 for a discussion); also the notion of disagreement, which is closely connected to that of assertion, must be redefined (see Macfarlane

<sup>1</sup> As is generally acknowledged, some assessment phrases tend to produce less clear intuitions than others. In particular, many think that it would be less natural for Emily to reply by "That's false, I have them here." (e.g. von Stechow and Gillies 2008, p. 84). As Egan (2007, p. 4 n5) points out, that might well be due to a conversational implication that the speaker had performed bad reasoning.

2007 for a discussion).<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, the adoption of a relativistic semantics is not a step that should be taken lightly.

*What is it to assess an utterance?*

If one is wary of assessment-relative truth and wants to defend contextualism, there are two ways one might want to go. The first is to deny that there *are* felicitous insensitive assessments and to explain away their appearance.<sup>3</sup> Since we think that there are such assessments, we want to explore the second: to show how they can be accommodated within contextualism.

What distinguishes contextualism from assessor-relativism is that it takes the truth-conditions of an utterance to be determined by some aspect of the context of utterance. That is why contextualism and insensitive assessments seem incompatible. But they are only incompatible given the following principle, which is a standard background assumption in much semantic theory, including the debate about insensitive assessments:

S-Assessment: When we assess utterances using various assessment phrases, we normally (barring confusion, misunderstanding, etc.) assess the satisfaction of their truth-conditions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There are also linguistic phenomena that are less straightforwardly accounted for by relativism. See von Stechow and Gillies (2008); for attempts to accommodate these and other potentially troublesome phenomena within relativism, see MacFarlane (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, ch. 4) suggest that a flexible traditional contextualist semantics will be able to explain away many alleged cases of felicitous insensitive assessments as actually being sensitive to the standard operative in the speaker context. Moreover, on their account, actual cases of well-informed speakers expressing insensitive assessments are examples of *infelicitous* assessments. To account for the prevalence of insensitive assessments among reasonably competent speakers, they invoke some sort of error theory (*ibid.*, p. 115–121). Our suggestion in this paper will be that contextualists can accept that (some) such assessments are in perfect accord with linguistic practice and pragmatic purposes of conversation.

<sup>4</sup> Our arguments are cast solely in terms of truth-conditions, while most of the current debate over contextualism and relativism employs the distinction between propositional content and circumstances of evaluation (following Kaplan 1981). We gain two things by sticking to the less fine grained notion of truth-conditions. First, the presentation becomes much simpler since a lot of side issues can thereby be ignored. Secondly, and more importantly, that our main points can be stated and argued in purely truth-conditional terms proves that they hold for *all* instances of relativism and contextualism that satisfy these general truth-conditional characterizations.

To accommodate insensitive assessments, contextualism needs a substitute for S-Assessment. Of course, for most domains of discourse, S-Assessment is a central and perfectly innocent assumption, which has gone largely unquestioned.<sup>5</sup> This doesn't mean that it should be immune to revision, but it means that contextualism needs a substitute that coincides with S-Assessment for most domains but departs from it in the right way in cases of insensitive assessments, and does so for non-*ad hoc* reasons. Preferably, the substitution should force fewer changes to logic, semantics and pragmatics than does relativism.

We think that there is a substitute that accomplishes just that, by introducing an element of context-dependence:

C-Assessment: When we assess utterances using various assessment phrases, we normally (barring confusion, misunderstanding, etc.) assess the satisfaction of the conditions that are made most salient by the utterances in the context of assessment.

First, C-Assessment is likely to capture all the central and innocent cases handled by S-Assessment. In normal cases of successful communication, an utterance will make most salient the truth-conditions of the utterance. Second, and for much the same reason, C-Assessment is not an *ad hoc* principle. It is very plausible independently of the role we think it plays in accommodating insensitive assessments in a contextualist, non-relativistic framework. Third, it has other applications than the relativist's favourite cases of insensitive assessments:

- (7) "I believe Anne did it."
- (8) "No, she couldn't have."
- (9) "I was amazed how much healthier Bob looked."
- (10) "Yes, so was I."

The "No" of (8) is presumably rejecting the claim that Anne did it, not the claim that the speaker of (7) believes that she did it; the "Yes" of (10) is presumably assessing the claim that Bob looked healthier or perhaps that it is amazing how much healthier he looked, not the claim that the speaker of (9) was amazed.<sup>6</sup> Finally, C-Assessment accounts for what goes on in the relativist's cases of insensitive assessment. For example, in assessing Bill's

<sup>5</sup> Kölbel (2009, p. 392) mentions it, but dismisses it without much discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Appealing to cases like (8) and (10), Kai von Stechow and Anthony Gillies (2008, pp. 82–83) suggest that some insensitive assessments of *might-P* statements can be explained as assessments of P (*the keys are in the car*), not of the full modal claim (*the keys might be in*

utterance, Emily is assessing whether the keys' being in the car is compatible with *her* information, not with Bill's and Alice's because that is the condition that is made salient when Emily is assessing Bill's utterance.

Substituting C-Assessment for S-Assessment provides a non-*ad hoc* accommodation of insensitive assessments without the contortions of assessment-relative truth. But it raises three important worries. First, it might seem that assessing an utterance by assessing other truth-conditions than the truth-conditions of the utterance must involve some kind of mistake or bad faith. Second, it might seem that in disconnecting felicitous assessments of utterances using phrases like "yes", "no", "that's true" and so forth from the truth-conditions of utterances, we lose grip on what the truth-conditions of utterances *are*. Third, given C-Assessment and the existence of felicitous insensitive assessments, it seems that we can end up saying that utterances that are true are nevertheless felicitously assessed as false. That seems contradictory. The following three sections address these worries.

#### *The pragmatics of insensitive assessments*

The first worry about C-Assessment is that assessing an utterance by assessing the satisfaction of truth-conditions *other* than those of the utterance would necessarily involve mistakes or bad faith. But whether it does, it seems, must depend on the *communicative purpose* of such assessments: the "public" purpose that governs such assessments and how addressees respond to them. If speakers and hearers take insensitive assessments to be concerned with the truth-conditions of the original utterance, mistakes or bad faith would indeed be involved. What is striking about these assessments, however, is that they are *not* concerned with assessing the (non-relative) truth-conditions the satisfaction of which the speaker was concerned to get across. Sam's concern was to get across that fish sticks accorded with Sam's taste; John's concern in assessing Sam's utterance was to assess whether fish sticks accorded with John's taste. Bill's concern was to get across that the keys' being in the car was compatible with what he (or he and Alice) knew at the time; Emily's concern was to state that it was incompatible with what *she* knew. Given that this divergence of concerns is common knowledge, insensitive assessments can be linguistically appropriate, involving no error or slight of hand.

One might of course ask *why* we see this divergence of concerns in some areas of discourse but not others. This, though, is everyone's question; the relativist needs an explanation of why utterances in these areas have

*the car*). We think that this covers at most a small sample of the cases that have impressed relativists. (In particular, it won't cover insensitive *agreements*.)

assessment-relative truth-conditions. Nevertheless, it might be easier to understand C-Assessment given a brief sketch of our preferred answer to that question, an answer equally available to relativists.<sup>7</sup>

We think that insensitive assessments are directed at utterance types such that (i) there is rarely any point to expressing assessments of the truth-conditions of such utterances and (ii) the utterances prompt attention to a closely related condition the satisfaction of which is relevant to assess. For example, relative to our primary interest in epistemic modals — as guides to action and belief formation under uncertainty — we have no interest in a proposition's compatibility with bodies of information less complete than that accessible to us at the time. For the purpose of directing our search for the keys, it is simply irrelevant that their being in the car is compatible with some body of information inferior to our own. This would be why, when Emily hears Bill say that the keys might be in the car, Bill's utterance makes most salient the condition that the keys' being in the car is compatible with information accessible in *Emily's* context. Similarly, since we tend to have privileged access to our own personal taste, it is typically pointless to assess the truth of expressions of personal taste, but frequently of interest to express one's own judgments of taste about the same thing. Though John probably understood that Sam expressed that fish sticks accord with Sam's taste, the assessment worth expressing by John concerned whether fish sticks accord with *John's* taste.<sup>8</sup>

This is a mere sketch of a pragmatic explanation, but it suffices to clarify the main point: that the communicative purpose of insensitive assessments might be to move the conversation forward by assessing the satisfaction of conditions other than those that the speaker was concerned to get across, rather than to go back and assess the satisfaction of conditions that concerned the speaker. If this purpose is understood by assessors and

<sup>7</sup>For relativist attempts to explain the existence of why certain areas of discourse have a relativistic semantics, see (Egan 2007; MacFarlane 2007). The explanation sketched here is developed more fully in Almér and Björnsson (2009) and applied in Almér (2007) and Björnsson & Finlay (2009).

<sup>8</sup>Although "X is tasty" and "It might be that X" admit or call for insensitive assessments, the same isn't true about "I like the taste of X" or "X is compatible with what we know", even though the truth-conditions the satisfaction of which the speaker is concerned to communicate using the two sentences might be exactly the same. One of several possible explanations for this difference is that only the latter involve a separate explicit term ("I", "we") specifically signifying the element that differs between the truth-conditions of the utterance and the closely related truth-conditions involving the assessor rather than the speaker or parties of the conversation, thus preserving the salience of the former truth-conditions in spite of pragmatic pressures.

their audience, there need not be any error or slight of hand involved. Relativists accommodate this phenomenon by introducing assessment-relative truth-conditions for utterances; we have suggested that contextualists can substitute C-Assessment for S-Assessment.

#### *Utterance truth and speaker concerns*

The second worry about C-Assessment was that the disconnect between (a) felicitous assessments of utterances and (b) truth-conditions of the same utterances removes our sense of what those truth-conditions are. To fully take care of this worry, we would need an explicit characterization of the truth-conditions of utterances; here, a clear enough outline of such a characterization will have to suffice. One plausible suggestion is that *the truth-conditions of an utterance are those that guide its production and conversational uptake by addressees in normal cases of successful communication*. Typically, these will be the conditions that are tightly enough connected to the lexical meaning of the sentence uttered and the satisfaction of which speakers are concerned to get across to hearers. (Exactly how to identify these conditions is of course a vexed issue involving the interplay of lexical meaning and pragmatic processes that govern the determination of contextually determined elements of truth-conditions, but the details are not important here.) As we saw in the previous section, these are just the sorts of truth-conditions that come apart from what assessors are concerned with in cases of felicitous insensitive assessments.

#### *True but felicitously assessed as false*

Given C-Assessment, some cases of insensitive assessment are cases where true utterances are felicitously rejected or assessed as false. At a first glance, that might look like a contradiction. However, *everyone* who is doing truth-conditional semantics should distinguish between the semanticist's notion of utterance truth and the everyday uses of assessment phrases, including "true". Semantic analyses need to be cast in notions with stable theoretical contents, but ordinary language typically adapts in flexible ways to varying communicative purposes depending on context. From the contextualist's perspective, cases where *utterances are true in the semanticists sense* but felicitously rejected or called "false", such as (2), (5) and (8), are merely one among many examples of this. The semanticist's notion of utterance truth is geared towards explaining the production and conversational uptake by addressees in normal cases of successful communication; everyday



assessments of utterances are also often concerned with those very truth-conditions, but sometimes direct our interest towards related but different conditions.

### *Conclusion*

We have argued that contextualist analyses can accommodate insensitive assessments of the sort that has been taken to support assessor relativism. To avoid unnecessary complications, we have ignored subtle differences between forms of contextualism or relativism that take contextually determined elements (standards of taste, bodies of information) to be part of the contents or propositions expressed by utterances, and those that take them to be part of the circumstances relative to which we should evaluate the proposition expressed when assessing the truth-value of the utterance.<sup>9</sup> We have also ignored a recent and very interesting attempt by Berit Brogaard (2008) to give a contextualist account of insensitive assessments in moral discourse by understanding contextually determined standards as part of the circumstances of evaluation and providing an intriguing account of indirect discourse. The reason for this is that the rationale for the contextualist strategy developed here is independent of such details: by substituting C-Assessment for S-Assessment, the contextualist achieves by local modification of semantic theory what the relativist handles by introducing a relativistic notion of utterance truth and modifying related central semantic notions. We take it that, all else being equal, this is a reason to prefer a contextualist account.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>For an overview of some of the options, see Cappelen (2008), MacFarlane (2009) and Schaffer (2009).

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