

The evidence for relativism

Max Kölbel

Received: 1 June 2007 / Accepted: 5 July 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

Abstract The aim of this paper is to examine the kind of evidence that might be adduced in support of relativist semantics of a kind that have recently been proposed for predicates of personal taste, for epistemic modals, for knowledge attributions and for other cases. I shall concentrate on the case of taste predicates, but what I have to say is easily transposed to the other cases just mentioned. I shall begin by considering in general the question of what kind of evidence can be offered in favour of some semantic theory or framework of semantic theorizing. In other words, I shall begin with the difficult question of the empirical significance of semantic theorizing. In Sect. 2, I outline a relativist semantic theory, and in Sect. 3, I review four types of evidence that might be offered in favour of a relativistic framework. I show that the evidence is not conclusive because a sophisticated form of contextualism (or indexical relativism) can stand up to the evidence. However, the evidence can be taken to support the view that either relativism or the sophisticated form of contextualism is correct.

Keywords Relativism · Contextualism · Indexicality · Context of use · Circumstance of evaluation · Taste predicates · Knowledge attributions · Epistemic modals · Future contingents · David Lewis · David Kaplan

The aim of this paper is to examine the kind of evidence that might be adduced in favour of a relativist semantics for some expressions. Relativism is here understood to be the claim that sentences of some category express propositions the truth of which

M. Kölbel (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Birmingham,
Birmingham, UK
e-mail: m.kolbel@bham.ac.uk

is relative to a parameter over and above the standard world parameter.¹ Thus temporalism—the view that tensed sentences express propositions whose truth-value varies with time—is an example of relativism in this sense. However the example I shall concentrate on in this paper is that of predicates of personal taste, such as “tasty”, “beautiful”, “pretty”, “funny”, “cool” etc. I shall also make some remarks about how relativism might be applied in other areas, such as knowledge ascriptions, epistemic modals and future contingents.

It will be useful to begin with some general reflections on the relationship between language use and semantic theories, and what kinds of phenomena count as empirical support for some semantic hypothesis. I shall then move on to an exposition of the basic idea of a relativistic semantics for some expressions. After these two preparatory sections, I move on to discuss what type of evidence could be used to support a relativistic semantics for certain expressions.

1 Semantics and language use

Let me start with some very general remarks on the relationship between semantics and language use. This will be helpful later when considering the sorts of evidence that might be used to support relativistic semantics for certain expressions. I'll be presenting the issue in a way that is inspired by David Lewis's “Languages and Language” (1975).

1.1 The actual-language-relation

Natural language semantics very roughly involves the modelling of natural language phenomena by means of formal semantic theories. So much is uncontroversial. However, the exact interrelation between formal semantics and natural language phenomena is an issue that is delicate and often neglected.²

A language, in the sense studied by formal semanticists and logicians, can be represented as a *function*, a function that assigns meanings to repeatable types of some sort. Let's say that a language L has a domain $S(L)$ (the sentences of L) and a range of meanings $M(L)$ (the meanings to be assigned to members of $S(L)$). To each sentence s in $S(L)$, L assigns a meaning $L(s)$ which is a member of $M(L)$. Languages in this sense are abstract objects that can be studied by a priori means. What we know about these languages we know by stipulation or pure reasoning. But what is the relevance of these abstract objects, functions, studied by semanticists, to the sphere of human linguistic communication? Can a language, understood as a function from a domain of sentences into a range of meanings, in any sense be “the language *used*

¹ The definition is supposed to be neutral as to the nature of propositions. The issue is also independent of whether one admits propositions at all, for even a semanticist who denies the existence of propositions and operates only with a definition of truth for sentences will still face the question whether sentence truth is relative to any parameters over and above a context of use and a possible world. Deniers of proposition are invited to transpose the discussion in ways that suit their convictions.

² One excellent recent book that does not neglect this issue is Predelli (2005).

by some population of language users”? What is it for a possible language to be the actual language of some population? Once we have an answer to this question, we can investigate whether a particular language (as described by some semantic theory) is a language used by some group, in particular whether a language described by a *relativistic* semantics is used by anyone.

It would be naïve to expect there to be only one correct way of defining the actual language relation (ALR). How the ALR is best defined will depend on the kind of languages L we are considering, in particular on the kind of meanings we have in $M(L)$, and the *way* in which L assigns members of $M(L)$ to members of $S(L)$.³ In other words, we have to have an idea about the kind of languages we are willing to consider as candidates before we can say more about the ALR. (Alternatively, we could start with a hunch about the ALR and then narrow down the kinds of language that are candidates.) Thus, in order to relate formal semantics to language use, we can't avoid answering two interdependent questions:

- (Q1) What kinds of meanings do usable languages assign to sentences, and how do they assign these meanings?
 (Q2) What is the ALR, i.e. the relation R such that the users of any language stand in R to the language they use.

Formal semanticists usually consider only a certain range of answers to (Q1). The range of meanings, $M(L)$, they consider is usually either (a) a set of material necessary and sufficient conditions for truth, or (b) a set of propositions. I shall in this paper remain true to this restriction. I will try to avoid, however, the issue of how (a) and (b) are related. Assuming that meanings are propositions or truth conditions permits a straightforward answer to (Q2): a population *uses* a language L if the conditions under which their utterances of sentences of L count as correct coincide with the conditions under which the propositions assigned by L to these sentences are true (i.e. coincide with the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth assigned to these sentences by L). This simple answer to (Q2) ignores the existence of non-declarative sentences, and it also simplifies considerably in assuming that there is only one clear sense in which we assess utterances (their semantic contents) as correct.

Even after restricting $M(L)$ in this way, answers to the two questions are still interdependent, for example because there are different *ways* in which propositions or conditions for truth can be assigned to sentences. For illustration, let us compare two quite different approaches to (Q1), a Traditionalist approach and a Progressive approach.⁴ The Traditionalist says that the candidate languages are specifiable functions that assign propositions to sentences in contexts of use, where contexts of use

³ One illustration of how answers to the two issues interdepend is this: Lewis (1975, p. 183) suggests treating metaphor, hyperbole and irony at the semantic level. This allows him (or so he hopes) to maintain his definition of the ALR, according to which a population uses a language L iff in it there prevails a convention of truthfulness and trust in L . Grice (1989) by contrast, hopes to accommodate the same phenomena at a pragmatic level. On Grice's approach one first needs to specify a semantics for literal meaning and then spell out pragmatically under what conditions sentences with these literal meanings are used. Thus again: a certain way of approaching the semantics is enabled by (or forces him to adopt) a certain approach to the ALR. See below for some elaboration.

⁴ There are some similarities and differences between my Traditionalist and Progressive and certain positions in the current debate about semantics and pragmatics (see for example Recanati 2001; Wilson and

consist in a finite list of parameters such as time, place, audience and speaker of the context. The Progressive says that the languages in question are difficult to specify (perhaps impossible to specify) functions that assign a proposition to a sentence in context of use (where a context of use is a concrete situation in which a sentence can be uttered). Let's look at how each of the approaches might deal with a sentence like "I could eat an ox." Let's consider two utterances:

- (U1) "I could eat an ox." [uttered seriously at t1 by Takeru Kobayashi, a competitive eater]
 (U2) "I could eat an ox." [uttered hyperbolically at t2 by a very hungry MK]

A Traditionalist language would assign to this sentence, in any context, the proposition, concerning the speaker and time of that context, that he or she is literally able to eat an ox at that time. Such a language does not distinguish between the context of U1, in which a hot dog eating champion makes a serious (and perhaps true) claim, and a context C2 in which an ordinary mortal makes an exaggerated (false) claim (which indirectly conveys something that is, perhaps, true). These languages will not be sensitive to any differences in the context of utterance other than the speaker and the time of the context. The propositions a Traditionalist language assigns to the sentence in a context will say exactly the same thing about whoever is the speaker at whatever is the time of the context. By contrast, a Progressive approach would consider languages that assign propositions to sentences in a different way. It would consider languages that assign to (U1) the proposition concerning Kobayashi that he can eat an ox at t1, and to (U2) the proposition concerning MK that he is very hungry at t2.

Progressives and Traditionalists are going to have different answers to Q2. Consider the datum that (U1) seems correct just in case Kobayashi can eat an ox at t1, and that (U2), by contrast, seems correct just in case MK is very hungry at t2. The Progressive will say that this disconfirms the view that the population in question uses one of the traditionalist languages. The Progressive will claim that a population uses a language just if the truth conditions the language assigns to any sentence in any context coincides with the intuitive correctness conditions of utterances of that sentence in that context. Or, put in terms of propositions, the requirement is that the intuitive conditions under which an utterance is correct coincide with the conditions under which the proposition assigned (in the context) to the sentence used is true.

Traditionalists, on the other hand will have a different view of the significance of these data. They will concede the intuition that (U1)'s correctness—in *some sense*—requires that Kobayashi can literally eat an ox, while (U2)'s correctness *in that sense* merely requires MK to be very hungry. However, they will say that there is a difference between the semantic content of an utterance and what is communicated by it. The intuitive conditions of correctness mentioned above may be in line with what is communicated. The semantic conditions for the truth of a sentence in a context need to

Footnote 4 continued

Sperber 2001; or Bach 2001). However, the current example is just supposed to illustrate a general point, namely that one is going to have a different view about the actual language relation depending on how one thinks a language assigns propositions to sentences in contexts, in particular whether pragmatic considerations play a role in this assignment.

coincide with the conditions of correctness only of the *literal* content of an utterance, not the communicated content. Thus traditionalists will claim that a population uses a language just if the conditions for the truth of the proposition assigned to a sentence in a context coincides with the conditions for the *literal* correctness of utterances of the sentence in that context.

Progressives and Traditionalists each face their own problems and enjoy their own advantages. Progressives will find that their languages are less amenable to formal theorising, while Traditionalists will find that they have a harder time specifying the role of the data of language use in supporting the hypothesis that the language used by some population is of this or that kind. Progressives can claim to do better justice to the facts of flexible use of language, while traditionalists can claim to offer a more systematic account of how knowledge of stable meanings contributes to communication. The two general approaches cannot here be weighed against one another. In what follows, I will follow a somewhat traditionalist tendency, i.e. I shall assume in effect that it is possible to distinguish in some way between intuitions of correctness and intuitions of literal correctness, and that it is the data of literal correctness that the semanticist is interested in. However, there will be more discussion of the evidential role of correctness intuitions in Sect. 2 below.

1.2 Context sensitivity

Among the phenomena of natural language that have interested semanticists the various phenomena of context sensitivity (broadly understood) play a prominent role. The topic of this paper also falls under this heading: we are interested in the semantics of some potentially context-sensitive expressions such as “is tasty” (predicates of personal taste), “knows” (predicates used for knowledge attributions), “might” (epistemic modals), etc. For all these expressions it has been claimed that they are context-sensitive in some way, and the relativist thesis concerns how exactly we should construe this. For this reason, I want to take as my point of departure a standard framework for dealing with context sensitivity, namely that developed by Kaplan (1977) and Lewis (1980). I shall mostly stick to Kaplan’s terminology, but for the purposes of this paper Lewis’s framework would work just as well.

Kaplan’s contribution to (Q1) is this. An indexical language assigns a *character* to each sentence.⁵ Now, a character does not by itself determine a proposition or a truth-condition, something we need if we are to follow any of the standard answers to (Q2)). A character is a function from a *context of use* (henceforth “context”) to a *content*. Contents (also: “propositions”), in turn, are functions from *circumstances of evaluation* to truth values. Thus, ultimately, (the semantics of) an indexical language determines truth-values of sentences in contexts relative to circumstances.

In Kaplan’s framework, a context of use can be represented as a quadruple consisting of the agent, time, position and world of the context (1977, p. 543). No doubt, if he wanted to include indexical expressions that require a further parameter of context, Kaplan would add it to the context. For present purposes, we don’t need to worry

⁵ Thus the members of $M(L)$ are characters, or perhaps pairs of characters with illocutionary forces.

about the completeness of the parameters in the context. So let us assume minimally that each utterance of a sentence takes place in a context of use but not specify further what exactly a context is.⁶ Since a sentence's character assigns a content to each context of use, one can say that a sentence "expresses" a content in a context of use. A sentence is *indexical* just if it expresses different contents in different contexts of use. Thus, intuitively the sentence "Triangles have three sides." is not indexical because it expresses the same content in each context of use, while the sentence "I am hungry." is indexical: uttered by me on Monday at noon, it expresses a content concerning me on Monday at noon, while uttered by you on Tuesday at 10 am, it expresses a content concerning you on Tuesday at 10 am.

The contents expressed by sentences in contexts determine truth-values relative to *circumstances*. Circumstances are represented, in Kaplan's semantics, as ordered pairs $\langle w, t \rangle$ consisting of a possible world w and a time t . This reflects Kaplan's view of certain operators which "shift" the parameters of circumstance. In a non-modal language, we probably would not need a world-parameter in the circumstances, because all that would ever be relevant to the truth-value of a content would be the actual world.⁷ However, the operator " \Box " shifts the world-parameter. The content expressed by some sentence " $\Box \phi$ " is true at a circumstance $\langle w_1, t_1 \rangle$ just if for all w , ϕ is true at $\langle w, t_1 \rangle$. The time-parameter is similarly shifted by tense-operators.

Thus the general Kaplanian answer to (Q1) is this: indexical languages are functions that assign to each sentence a character, i.e. a function from context of use to content. But what should we say about (Q2)? Under what conditions does a population of language users *use* one of these Kaplanian languages? We will need to rely on some answer to (Q2) whenever we want to find evidence for some particular semantic treatment of some natural language expressions. Thus, for example, what confirms the view that the sentence "I am hungry." is indexical and expresses contents that vary in truth-value with possible worlds? Suppose we are considering the hypothesis that a population uses some Kaplanian language L . What kind of testable consequences does this hypothesis have? Usually semanticists assume that they can test the predictions as to the *contents* of sentences in contexts, that the hypothesis generates, against data of language-use. What are these predictions? And what are these data?

Most natural language semanticists operate with a very simple application principle. If we restrict our attention to assertoric sentences, then the obvious assumption is this: the utterance of a sentence is intuitively correct just if the proposition that sentence expresses in that context is true. Transposing this into a direct answer to (Q2),

⁶ We might even think of the context along Lewisian lines not as an n -tuple of contextual features but as a location (1980, p. 21).

⁷ Though one might, even without such operators, evaluate sentences or utterances with respect to non-actual situations. For example, one might evaluate a proposition with respect to the situation someone *thinks* is actual, but which is not in fact actual (in other words, one might wonder whether that person accepts that proposition). These ways of evaluating sentences or utterances would provide a motivation for a world parameter in the circumstances of evaluation even in the absence of a modal operator that shifts the parameter. Some arguments for relativism can analogously be seen as arguments for a circumstantial parameter that may not be shifted by any operator, but is nevertheless needed to account for certain ways of evaluating utterances or propositional attitudes (e.g. Kölbel 2003).

this means that a population uses a language just if any utterance of a sentence of that language in some context counts as correct among that population exactly when the proposition that language assigns to that sentence in that context is true in the world of the context (and at the time of the context):

(ALR1) A population *P* *uses* a language *L* just if:
 for every sentence *s* of *L*, an utterance of *s* in a context *c* counts as **correct** in *P* iff the content *L* assigns to *s* in *c* is true at the world of *c*.

(ALR1) is a kind of application principle for formal semantic theories. It allows the generation of testable predictions from the assumption that some population uses some language, namely predictions as to the conditions under which an utterance of a sentence of that language counts as correct among the population in question. The (admittedly basic) idea is that we have theory-independent access to data concerning the correctness of utterances (or the conditions of correctness). We consult the judgments of users of a language about the conditions under which utterances are correct, and this allows us to test the hypothesis that they use some specific language in the abstract semanticist's sense.⁸

Assuming (ALR1) also provides a test⁹ for indexicality: if two utterances of the same (unambiguous) sentence differ in correctness, then the sentence in question must be indexical.¹⁰ This test is a species of "context-shifting argument" (see Cappelen and Lepore 2005, esp. chap. 2). Thus, for example, the sentence "I am hungry." can be shown to be indexical by observing that an utterance of the sentence is correct in one and not correct in another context of utterance. Furthermore, this shows that the indexical element in the sentence must be sensitive to an aspect of context that changes between the two contexts.

(ALR1) is an extremely simple way of thinking about the actual language relation. It is obvious that there are several dimensions in which (ALR1) could be refined. The most obvious simplification lies in the assumption that there is just one, pretheoretically accessible, notion of correctness which can serve for the purposes of (ALR1). Clearly, there are many distinct norms to which linguistic utterances are subject, perhaps even a complex system of norms. The same utterance of a declarative sentence may be correct in the sense of being sincere, but not correct in the sense of being false. The same utterance may be correct in the sense of conveying a truth but incorrect in the sense of asserting a falsehood. The same utterance may be correct in the sense of expressing a truth yet incorrect in the sense of being tactless. Compliance with which of all these norms is intended by "correct" in (ALR1)?

One answer might be: the norm of truth. A population uses a language *L* just if the conditions for the truth of utterances of *L*-sentences coincides with the conditions for the truth of the contents assigned to those sentences in the relevant contexts by *L*:

(ALR2) A population *P* *uses* a language *L* just if:

⁸ Kaplan defines a notion of utterance truth that is analogous to (ALR1), see Kaplan (1977, p. 522).

⁹ "Test" in the sense of "sufficient condition".

¹⁰ As above, by "indexical" I mean merely that the proposition expressed by the sentence must vary between the context of the two utterances.

for every sentence s of L , an utterance of s in a context c by a member of P is **true** iff the content L assigns to s in c is true at the world of c .

(ALR2) precludes some of the interpretations of “correct” that (ALR1) allows, for example, “true” cannot be interpreted as “compliant with the norms of courtesy” (as “correct” might). But there are still many different ways in which an utterance can be evaluated as true or false. For example, the same utterance can be an assertion of a true content yet otherwise convey an untrue one. The same utterance may be evaluated as true by one person and as untrue by another. Thus making use of (ALR2) will still require some clarification as to which judgements regarding the truth of utterances are to be recognized as relevant when considering whether a population uses a particular language.

It is clear that when assessing whether a population uses a given language we should ideally take into consideration a more differentiated set of data. Ideally, we should be able to consider the intuitive conditions under which an utterance is sincere, polite, literally true, non-literally true etc, and measure all these data against the predictions of the hypothesis that a population uses a language. Such refinement would require, in the first place, a different kind of answer to (Q1). Thus, for example, we could introduce a refinement by considering languages that assign to sentences in context a content paired with an illocutionary force. This would make room for differentiating between truth and sincerity. Thus our new answer to (Q2) would allow us to make predictions both about the conditions under which utterances are true *and* about the condition under which they are sincere. However, I will have to confine my discussion in this paper to simple application principles like (ALR1) and (ALR2), which link our intuitive notion of the correctness of the literal *content* of an utterance with the truth of the propositional contents assigned to utterances by semantic theories.

2 Relativist semantics

In this section, I shall outline a relativist semantic framework for predicates of personal taste. I shall also add some brief remarks on a relativist treatment of other expressions like, e.g. “knows”, “might”, “rich”, etc. The framework will be a simple modification of Kaplan’s framework. I shall then go on to consider what the relativist’s answer to (Q2) should be.

2.1 Outline of relativist semantics

In the standard framework outlined above, the truth-value of a *sentence* is relative to two different factors: a context of use and a circumstance of evaluation. On the one hand, a sentence can express different contents in different contexts of use. This can be called “context-sensitivity” or “indexicality”. On the other hand, the content expressed by some sentence in some context can have different truth-values in different circumstances of evaluation. Let’s call this latter dependency “circumstance-sensitivity”. The best known type of circumstance-sensitivity is contingency. Any contingent content (or sentence in context) is circumstance-sensitive, because its truth-value varies from

possible world to possible world. Now, the types of circumstance-sensitivity we can model depend on the parameters in the circumstance. In Kaplan's actual semantics, circumstances of evaluation contain a world- and a time parameter, so a proposition can be world-sensitive (contingent) and time-sensitive (tensed). In a more standard version of the Kaplanian framework contingency is the only form of circumstance-sensitivity (a circumstance of evaluation consists merely of a possible world). In the relativist semantics outlined below, the circumstances of evaluation will contain an extra parameter: a standard of taste. Thus there will be two kinds of circumstance-sensitivity: contingency as well as standard-sensitivity. Kaplan's time-parameter will be dropped for expository convenience—the issues here discussed are independent of whether temporalism is true.

Consider the following two sentences:

- (1) Whale meat is tasty.
- (2) I like whale meat.

Sentence (2) is intuitively indexical: the proposition it expresses in a particular context will be about the speaker of the context and what he or she likes at the time of the context. Of course different utterances of (2) can be made at different times or by different speakers and the content expressed will vary accordingly. Sentence (1), according to relativist semantics, is not an indexical sentence, i.e. it semantically expresses the same proposition in all contexts of use.¹¹ However, even though (1) expresses the same proposition in all contexts, that proposition can vary in truth value with the circumstances of evaluation. Most semanticists envisage only one way in which the truth-value of a proposition can vary with the circumstances of evaluation, namely from possible world to possible world: in one world, whale meat might be tender and juicy, while in another world, whale meat might be rubbery and bland. But the relativist has in mind a variation in truth value that goes beyond relativity to possible worlds. The relativist claims that even once we hold the possible world fixed, the value of the proposition that whale meat is tasty still varies with a standard of evaluation. We might call this the “standard of taste parameter” in the circumstances of evaluation. Whatever a standard of taste is, individual tasters “possess” standards of taste at times (or, less metaphorically expressed: a pair of a taster and a time determines a unique standard of taste).¹²

The relativist proposal is a natural extension of Kaplan's semantic framework. While Kaplan, being a temporalist, considers circumstances that consist of a possible world parameter and a time parameter, the relativist semantics I want to consider

¹¹ I am assuming that (1) is generic and that the tense of “is” does not make (1) indexical.

¹² I have explained in more detail in Kölbel (2003, 2005), what standard (or perspective-) possession amounts to. The key idea is that there are certain rules regarding the correct employment of the concept of tastiness, and some of these rules say that it is correct to judge something to be tasty only if the judge responds in a certain way to it. Thus, some of the conditions of correct employment of “tasty” are sensitive to features of thinkers that may vary from one thinker to another. We can think of all the personal features that determine whether it is correct for a thinker to employ or not employ a certain concept of personal taste (such as “disgusting”, “delicious”, “pretty”, etc). Let's call this complex of features the thinker's *profile*. A thinker's profile together with conceptual rules will determine which propositions on matters of taste it is correct for the thinker to believe. The idea of standard possession is simply that a thinker's standard of taste is the standard which assigns the value “true” to all these propositions.

employs circumstances that consist of a possible world parameter and a standard of taste parameter.¹³ Further relativist applications may require further or different parameters, such as a state of knowledge, a standard for knowledge, a set of “open” worlds, or a catch-all standard of evaluation. But for the moment we can consider a circumstance of evaluation to be an ordered pair $\langle w, s \rangle$ of a possible world w and a standard of taste s .

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.”. We can start with an operator-forming operator FOR on singular terms. A standard-shifting operator $\ulcorner \text{FOR } t \urcorner$ is formed by prefixing the expression FOR to a singular term t referring to a person. Such an operator can in turn be prefixed to a sentence p , thus yielding a sentence $\ulcorner \text{FOR } t, p \urcorner$. Here are some syntactic and semantic instructions we might use to introduce FOR into a language of the sort we are considering:

- (S1) For all sentences ϕ and all singular terms α , $\ulcorner \text{FOR } \alpha, \phi \urcorner$ is a sentence.
 (S2) For all ϕ , α , w , s and a : if ϕ is a sentence and α is a personal name referring to a , w is a possible world, and s is a standard:
 $\ulcorner \text{FOR } \alpha, \phi \urcorner$. is true in a circumstance $\langle w, s \rangle$ iff ϕ is true in $\langle w, s(a) \rangle$. (where $s(a)$ is a ’s standard of taste)

In other words, $\ulcorner \text{FOR } \alpha \urcorner$ shifts the standard parameter in the circumstances to the standard of the referent of α . The operator thus removes sensitivity to a standard of taste, and a sentences that previously expressed a proposition that is standard-sensitive will, when prefixed with such an operator, no longer express a standard-sensitive proposition. If “for” in English works like FOR, then someone for whom whale meat is not tasty might thus correctly say this:

- (3) For Anna, whale meat is tasty, but whale meat is not tasty.

Which would be analogous to

- (4) In possible world W , whales are extinct, but whales are not extinct.

This doesn’t seem to be too far removed from the way we actually use the “For S , p ”—construction. The operator “FOR”, together with the quantificational resources

¹³ Einheuser (2008) uses a terminological variant: what I call “possible world”, she calls a “substratum”, and what she calls a “possible world”, I call an ordered pair of a possible world and a standard of taste. Einheuser seems to think that this variation makes a metaphysical difference, because people with different tastes now come out as inhabitants of different worlds containing different facts (while sharing a substratum). I doubt the metaphysical significance of this terminological move: it merely *sounds* more exciting to say that we don’t share the same world than to say that we don’t share a standard of taste. But then I may not be in disagreement with Einheuser, for her conception of metaphysics or ontology seems to be pretty light: she claims that “*Facts* and *meanings* are theoretical concepts introduced to systematically account for our linguistic behaviour and cognitive interaction with the world.” (p. 3).

of a language would also allow one to construct operators that function like the standard modal operators. Thus “FOR everyone, p ,” and “FOR some people, p ,” are analogous to the necessity and possibility operator respectively:

(5) For some people, Picasso is better than Matisse.

would be analogous to

(6) In some possible worlds, the British Empire outlasts the Soviet Union.

There is a clear difference between the operators “For some people” and “In some worlds” (=“possibly”): the first shifts *only* the standard of taste parameter in circumstances of evaluation (as indicated in (S2)), while the second shifts *only* the world parameter.¹⁴

Similar relativist treatments can be suggested for other, philosophically interesting natural language constructions. For illustration, let me mention knowledge attributions, epistemic modals gradable adjectives and future contingents. Consider the following four sentences:

(7) George knows he has hands.

(8) Bob might have passed the exam.

(9) Carl is rich.

(10) There is a sea-battle 20 September 480 BC.

Each of these could reasonably be treated as sensitive to a circumstantial parameter other than a possible world. The truth value of the proposition expressed by (7) may vary, at a given world, with different epistemic standards: perhaps relative to low standards, George can correctly be said to know, while relative to high standards, he can correctly be said not to know. Thus, in a situation where the sceptic has raised the possibility that George is a handless brain in a vat, the proposition expressed by (7) counts as false, while in any normal context, it counts as true.¹⁵ The proposition expressed by (8) varies, even at the same possible world, with a body of knowledge. Perhaps relative to Bob’s body of knowledge at t_1 , the proposition expressed by (8) is true, while relative to the examination officer’s body of knowledge at t_1 , the same proposition is not true.¹⁶ (9) expresses a proposition the truth-value of which varies with a standard of richness: relative to low standards, it’s true, while relative to high standards, it’s

¹⁴ The clauses for “Possibly” might look like this:

(M1) For all sentences ϕ , \lceil POSSIBLY $\phi \rceil$ is a sentence.

(M2) For all ϕ : if ϕ is a sentence, \lceil POSSIBLY $\phi \rceil$ is true in a circumstance $\langle w, s \rangle$ iff for some worlds w^* , ϕ is true in $\langle w^*, s \rangle$.

In English, the interaction of the two operators might cause some complication to do with scope. Consider, for example, the sentence “Whale meat might have been tasty for Anna.”. Should this be construed as “POSSIBLY (FOR Anna, whale meat is tasty.)” or as “FOR Anna, POSSIBLY whale meat is tasty.”. Einheuser (2008, p. 9) discusses the sentence (4) “This might have tasted great.” because on her “fact-relativist” account it can come out true for the wrong reasons. In effect her solution is an analysis of “might” that is equivalent to the analysis I just offered. However, she claims that (4) has a reading according to which some world in which everything except the speaker’s taste is changed makes (4) true. I doubt that (4) has this reading in English.

¹⁵ For more details and further references, see MacFarlane (2005b).

¹⁶ For more detailed discussion and further references, see Egan et al. (2005), Richard (2004).

false.¹⁷ Finally, according to an Aristotelian anti-fatalist view, (10) expresses a proposition that is true from 20 September 480 onwards, but it does not have a truth-value until then, because until that time, the future was still open with respect to whether there would be a sea-battle on September 20th 480 BC. Thus the proposition expressed by (10) does not have the same truth-value at all times, but rather its truth-value varies with time.¹⁸

In all these cases, we could introduce operators that shift the relevant circumstantial parameter. Thus, one might introduce operators such as “ON STANDARD e , ...”, “FOR ALL S KNOWS, ...”, “FOR s , ...” or “AT t it is determined that ...”. Again, some English locutions may function in a more or less similar way.

2.2 The actual language relation for relativists

Given the difference between languages described by a relativist semantics and those described by more standard semantic theories, we need to re-consider the ALR. In other words, a new answer to (Q1) in this case requires a new answer to (Q2). (ALR1) says that when a population uses a language L , an utterance of a sentence s in a context c is correct just if the proposition expressed in L by s in c is true in the world of c . However, in a relativist semantics of the sort just outlined, a proposition and a world do not yet determine a truth-value. A proposition may be standard-sensitive, i.e. it may be true at a world and standard while false at that world and a different standard. When giving an answer to (Q2) that is appropriate to relativist languages, we need to take this into account. The question is: truth relative to which standard amounts to correctness (compare [Evans 1979](#))?

It may help to consider first how standard semantics answers the analogous question for world-sensitive (i.e. contingent) propositions. An utterance of a sentence in a context is correct just if the proposition expressed by that sentence in that context is true *in the world of the context* (cf. [Kaplan 1977](#), p. 522). There is exactly one possible world that is relevant for the evaluation as correct or incorrect of an utterance that expresses a contingent proposition: the possible world in which the utterance was made (the world of the context of the utterance). The relativist has to decide whether she follows this example and says that for each utterance there is one unique circumstance of evaluation that is relevant for the evaluation as correct or incorrect of that utterance (compare [MacFarlane 2008b](#)).

There are at least two reasons why the relativist cannot easily follow this example. First, while it is clear that it is the world of utterance that is relevant for evaluating the correctness of a declarative utterance expressing a contingent proposition, it is not at all clear which standard of taste is to be used in evaluating an utterance expressing a proposition concerning a matter of taste. If we assume that at any time everyone *possesses* a standard of taste, we could, for example, say that

¹⁷ See [Fara \(2000\)](#) for a related view.

¹⁸ For a defence of a similar view and further references, see [MacFarlane \(2003, 2008a\)](#). NB: this brand of time-sensitivity is different from the type of time-sensitivity defended by temporalists like Kaplan or Prior. This becomes clear if one considers that (10), even according to temporalists, does not express a tensed proposition.

the correctness of an utterance goes with the truth of the expressed proposition at the circumstance of evaluation consisting of the world of utterance and *the utterer's* standard of taste. But there clearly are alternative ways of evaluating the correctness of such an utterance. We could evaluate it in terms of truth on the evaluator's standard of taste, or on some fixed standard of taste, such as that of Ferran Adrià or Delia Smith. It seems to be a distinctive feature of this area of discourse that none of the standards is privileged. (The same reasoning clearly applies in the case of epistemic modals and in the case of future contingents.). The very same utterance by Anna of "Whale meat is tasty." can be usefully evaluated according to several different standards of taste, Anna's standard, my standard, Ferran Adrià's standard, etc. None of these ways of evaluating the utterance seems to be clearly privileged, in the way the actual world is privileged in the evaluation of contingent utterances.

The second reason is that in the case of utterances concerning the contingent future, to assume that the utterance already determines one history as the privileged one is to assume that the future is precisely *not* open. Or conversely: to assume that the future is open is to assume that at any time of utterance before 20 September 480 BC, it is not yet settled which of the possible future courses of events is the one against which we should evaluate an utterance of sentence (10).

It is quite tricky to do justice to the second point, and I shall have to come back to it on another occasion. However, there is a straightforward way of dealing with the first. There are many ways of evaluating utterances: when Anna says that whale meat is tasty, I can evaluate what she says against her own standard of taste, against my own standard, or against some other person's. Thus, her utterance can be correct on her standard, my standard, someone else's standard. Thus, when articulating an appropriate ALR, we should take into account that there is not just one notion of correctness for utterances of sentences expressing propositions concerning matters of taste, but that there are many. There is correctness by the utterer's lights, by the audience's lights, by my lights or by your lights. If a population uses a language, then the proposition assigned by the language to a sentence (in context) should be true on my standard just if an utterance of that sentence (in that context) by a member of the population is correct by my lights. And that proposition should be true on your standard just if an utterance of that sentence (in that context) is correct by your lights. In general, that proposition should be true on *S's* standard just if an utterance of that sentence (in that context) is correct by *S's* lights. Our answer to (Q2) should say that a population uses a language just if for all *S*, the conditions for an utterance's correctness-on-*S's*-standard coincide with the conditions under which the proposition expressed by that utterance in that language are true on *S's* standard. More precisely, this yields the following revised definition of the ALR:

(ALR3) A population *P* uses a language *L* just if:
 for every sentence *s* of *L* and for every person *S*, an utterance of *s* in a context *c* counts as **correct by *S's* lights** in *P* iff the content *L* assigns to *s* in *c* is true at the world of *c* and the standard of *S* in *c*.

(ALR3) complicates our view of the ALR. We were already operating at a high level of idealization, abstracting away from differences in illocutionary force as well

as from notions of correctness other than correctness of the semantic content of utterances. Replacing the notion of the correctness of an utterance by that of the correctness of an utterance *by someone's lights*, it might be objected, would seem to exaggerate the normative grip we have on language use.

I believe that this worry underestimates the sophistication of the system of norms that governs language use as well as the employment of concepts. The more traditional semantics is already committed to the idea that competent language users have a grasp of the conditions under which the semantic content of an utterance conforms to *what they themselves believe*, and also of the conditions under which that content conforms to *what some other person believes*, or generally conforms to *some particular representation of the world*. In addition, there is the idea of objective correctness, i.e. conformity to the one *true* representation of the world. This idea is invoked in (ALR1). The standard view has it that everyone's beliefs are subject to this norm of correctness: believing something not in conformity with the one *true* representation is a mistake. On this view, it is quite natural to ignore other possible norms, norms to which no-one is subject.

The relativist, however, claims that *in certain areas* such as matters of taste, not everyone is required to believe in accordance with the same representation, not everyone is subject to the same standard. It may be correct for one person to believe that whale meat is tasty and correct for another to believe that it is not. There is more than just *one* true representation to which everyone is supposed to conform. On the standard view, correctness by *x's lights* and correctness by *y's lights* amount to the same norm because the assumption is that they coincide. On the relativist account, they can come apart (in some areas), and therefore the definition of the ALR needs to take this into account.

Some of the many ways of evaluating an utterance may be more interesting than others for the purposes of establishing that a population uses a certain language. For example, we may have grounds for believing that certain utterances are correct by the utterer's own standard, thus we can test the hypothesis that the relevant speaker is using some language by seeing whether the proposition expressed in that language by the sentence used in the utterance does indeed express a proposition that is true on the standard of the utterer. Restricted to this notion of correctness (correctness on the utterer's standard at the time of utterance), the situation is exactly like in standard modal semantics: the context of utterance selects the circumstance of evaluation that is relevant. However, the relativist will admit other ways of evaluating an utterance as well.

3 Evidence

I have shown that it is only with the help of some application principle, such as (ALR1), that a semantic theory can be treated as an empirical hypothesis. Thus evidence for or against a semantic framework will always be evidence concerning a combination of a semantic theory and an application principle of this sort. In other words, we can only assess combinations of answers to (Q1) and (Q2). I have now outlined two dif-

ferent frameworks which serve as alternative answers to (Q1), and I have also outlined corresponding answers to (Q2). Any evidence purporting to be evidence in favour of the relativist framework will thus have to be considered as evidence that favours the combination of a relativist semantics with an application principle like (ALR3) over a traditional semantics combined with an application principle like (ALR1) or (ALR2).

3.1 Basic evidence (“faultless disagreement”)

The basic evidence consists in cases that might be called cases of “faultless disagreement”.¹⁹ However, the basic evidence is not meant to consist in the purported fact that these cases do indeed involve both faultlessness and disagreement in some pre-theoretical sense. Rather, the evidence at best consists in the fact that there *appears* to be faultless disagreement. This should be taken in the following sense: there are two utterances of apparently unambiguous sentences, which do not appear to be relevantly indexical and one of which appears to be the negation of the other, and both utterances appear to be free of any fault on the part of the utterer. Let’s consider one such case:

(U1) Anna: “Whale meat is tasty.”

(U2) Bob: “Whale meat is not tasty.”

If we suppose that Anna likes the taste of whale meat and Bob does not, that both utterances are sincere, and that both of them have adequate grounds for their claims, then it would seem that we have a case of apparent faultless disagreement: it *seems* superficially that ...

- (a) one of the sentences uttered is the negation of the other;
- (b) the sentences uttered are not ambiguous;
- (c) nor relevantly indexical (i.e. sensitive to variation in the context of use);
- (d) Anna and Bob are not at fault.

I take it that the existence of cases of *apparent* faultless disagreement like the one described (i.e. cases where (a–d) *seem* to hold) is uncontroversial.

What can we conclude from this? Well, within the standard semantical framework, we would have to conclude that at least one of the appearances (a–d) is deceptive. Thus either the word “not” is not classical negation, or the sentences are, contrary to appearances, ambiguous, or they are, contrary to appearances, indexical (i.e. context-sensitive), or one of the two speakers, contrary to appearances, is guilty of some fault (i.e. the fault of believing/stating something untrue).

Denials of (a) and (b) would seem to be excessive, so it is the denials of (c) and (d) that constitute the most viable options for adherents of standard semantics. Rampant

¹⁹ I used this term in my 2002 and 2003, mirroring Wright’s “blameless disagreement”. I introduced “faultless” instead of “blameless” because I wanted to draw attention to the fact that not only do we sometimes have the impression that none of two disagreeing parties is free of blame, but we also sometimes have the impression that both parties are free of any fault whatsoever (whether or not they can be blamed for it). A similar (though in some respects less effective) pattern of argument starts from two utterances of the same sentence one of which seems correct the other of which does not. This form of argument has affinities to what Cappelen and Lepore (2005) call “context-shifting arguments”.

Realists (as Wright 2001 calls them) deny (d) and claim that either Anna or Bob is saying something untrue and therefore not fault free. This is a metaphysically costly position as it commits us to objective evaluative facts the epistemological access to which is quite unclear. If such a position is defensible across the board, there is no need for any revision of standard semantics. However, it is precisely dissatisfaction with such a position that motivates the current debate, and denying (d) should thus count as a clear drawback of Rampant Realism.

Contextualists,²⁰ deny (c) and postulate hidden indexicality. On this view, the proposition semantically expressed by (U1) is not the negation of the proposition semantically expressed by (U2) because some expression in the sentences used, let's say the predicate "is tasty", is indexical in such a way that it expresses different contents in the respective contexts of (U1) and (U2). One implementation of this view would have it that "is tasty" expresses the relational property of being tasty by the standards of the utterer, so that (U1) expresses the proposition that whale meat is tasty by Anna's standards and (U2) expresses the proposition that whale meat is not tasty by Bob's standards. On this view, there is only apparent disagreement. The exchange between Anna and Bob is analogous to an exchange where Anna says "Charles is my nephew" and Bob says "Charles is not my nephew"—unless Anna and Bob are siblings, there is no need to suppose that they are disagreeing. The *prima facie* drawback of this view is that there is a strong sense that Anna and Bob *are* disagreeing in (U1) and (U2). It seems that Bob can't accept what Anna has said without changing his mind, and vice versa.²¹

Adopting a relativist semantics provides an alternative to Rampant Realism and contextualism, for it permits us to save all the phenomena, (a–d). If (U1) and (U2) express propositions that are standard-sensitive, then it is possible to maintain that the second of these is the negation of the first (it is true in a circumstance iff the other is not true in their circumstance), but to maintain also that neither Anna nor Bob is at fault, for their standards of taste differ relevantly so that each believes a proposition that is true on his/her own standard. The drawback of relativism is obviously that it involves a departure from standard semantics. However, the departure is minimal and well-motivated, given the drawbacks of the two possible standard positions.

It is worth mentioning, that the relativist position involves a particular take on talk of a "fault" in (d). The idea is that individuals are, for example, subject to the norm that they should believe and assert only propositions that are true at the actual world and on their own standard of taste, and that being at "fault" in the sense of (d) involves violating a norm one is subject to. Of course, if we evaluate both Anna's and Bob's utterance using, say, Kjell's standards, we will find that one of them believes a proposition that is false on Kjell's standard of taste. Thus, by Kjell's standard (and anyone's standard) one of them is wrong. However, Anna and Bob are not subject to the norm

²⁰ Also called "indexical relativists" (Wright 2001; Kölbel 2003) or "revisionists" in Kölbel (2002).

²¹ There are ways of explaining the apparent incompatibility of what Anna and Bob say. For example, as I explain in Kölbel (2007), if the sentences used in (U1) and (U2) carry the presupposition/conventional implicature that the standards of taste of participants of the conversation converge on the tastiness of whale meat, then the phenomenon of apparent incompatibility would be neatly explained by the fact that the propositions semantically expressed are jointly inconsistent with the presupposed proposition.

that they should believe and assert only propositions that are true on Kjell's standard. Thus, even though no-one in their right mind should endorse both what Anna said and what Bob said, and even though no-one should say that they are both right (in the sense that what they said is right), there is nevertheless a clear sense in which they are not at fault, because none of them is violating a norm for evaluating their claims *to which they are subject*.²²

Similar basic evidence can be adduced concerning the other cases I mentioned in Sect. 2: epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions, gradable adjectives:

- (KA1) Anna in c1: "George knows he has hands."
- (KA2) Anna in c2: "George does not know he has hands."
- (EM1) Anna: "Bob might have passed the exam."
- (EM2) Exams officer: "It's not the case that Bob might have passed the exam."
- (GA1) Anna in c1: "Carl is rich."
- (GA2) Anna in c2: "Carl is not rich."

For each pair of utterances, we can easily imagine situations where both are seemingly faultless, despite the fact that one is the negation of the other and they appear not to be ambiguous or indexical. Thus standard semantics again leaves us the option of denying either (c) or (d), i.e. of denying that there is faultlessness or denying that the propositions semantically expressed are incompatible. Again, relativism provides an alternative that allows us to maintain all of (a–d).²³

It is clear that the basic evidence is not conclusive in favour of relativism. At best relativism can win on points in the comparison with standard semantics. Let me therefore consider some further arguments that are designed to discredit the contextualist alternative to relativism.

3.2 Object language assessments of what is said

One kind of evidence that has been cited against contextualism and in favour of relativism²⁴ is given by language users' own assessments of others' utterances. Consider another exchange between Anna and Bob:

- (I1) Anna: "Charles is my nephew."
- (I2) Bob: "Charles is not my nephew."
- (I3) Anna: "What Bob said is true."

²² Thanks to Karl Schafer for discussion on this point.

²³ We cannot adduce analogous basic evidence in the future contingents case. Here the evidence consists in the fact that according to the view that the future is open, the same utterance by Xerxes on 19 September 480 BC of the sentence "There will be a sea-battle tomorrow." will be neither correct nor incorrect until the crucial date, while it will be correct from that date on. In this case there is no obvious contextualist alternative to relativism. A non-obvious contextualist solution would claim that the context-sensitivity of the sentence is such that it fails to express a proposition until the 20 September 480 BC. The drawback of this position is that it needs to explain away the appearance that utterances concerning the contingent future do express propositions. It would also need to get around the problem that we do seem to have beliefs about the future, and such beliefs could then not be full-fledged propositional attitudes.

²⁴ Lasersohn (2005), Einheuser (2008), Egan et al. (2005), MacFarlane (forthcoming, 2005a).

(I1) and (I2) make indexical reference to the respective speaker, which is why Anna and Bob are not expressing contradictory propositions and so Anna can assess what Bob said as true in (I3). However, a similar continuation would not seem correct in the case of (U1) and (U2):

(U3) Anna: “What Bob said is true.”

Anna would seem incoherent if she continued in this way. The fact that she would seem to constitute evidence against contextualism. For according to contextualism, what Anna and Bob say in (U1) and (U2) respectively (the propositions they semantically express) is compatible, so why should (U3) appear to be incoherent?

This argument does depend on a number of assumptions. First, it assumes that the phrase “What Bob said” in (U3) refers to the proposition expressed by Bob in (U2). This may be controversial. However, I shall not question it here.²⁵ Secondly, it assumes that “is true” as used by Anna conforms to the equivalence schema. I shall also grant that assumption.

I believe that on these two assumptions, the current argument forces the contextualist to refine her position. The contextualist will have to explain why (U3) appears incoherent, and does so purely on a priori grounds. Such an explanation is available if the contextualist claims that the sentence “Whale meat is tasty”, *in addition* to semantically expressing the proposition that whale meat is tasty on the speaker’s standard of taste, carries a presupposition, or conventional implicature, that the speaker’s standard of taste agrees with the audience’s standard of taste in the evaluation of whale meat. Now, while the propositions expressed by (U1) and (U2), according to contextualism, are not incompatible by themselves, they *are* incompatible given the presupposition/conventional implicature just introduced. Thus a refined contextualism can defend itself against the argument from object language assessment.²⁶

3.3 Object language speech reports

Another type of construction that might be used to support relativism are speech reports or other propositional attitude ascriptions. Consider how Bob might report (U1):

(U4) Bob: “Anna said that whale meat is tasty”.

Intuitively, this is a correct report. However, we might contrast this with the way we normally report clearly indexical utterances:

Anna: “I am hungry.”

Bob: “Anna said that she was hungry”.

It seems that in reporting indexical utterances, one must take care appropriately to adjust any indexical elements in the that-clause used in the report. Appropriate adjustment here means the following: if the speech reported contains an indexical expression

²⁵ Instead of (U3) we might have considered (U3)*: “That’s true.” or (U3)**: “The proposition expressed by (U2) is true.”

²⁶ The objection, and response, transfers *mutatis mutandis* to epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions and gradable adjectives.

e that varies in content with some contextual parameter p , then if the context of the report differs in respect of p from the context of the reported utterance, then the report cannot contain e . That's why Bob cannot correctly report Anna's utterance of "I am hungry." by saying "Anna said that I am hungry." This is a corollary of Kaplan's (1977) thesis that the contents of indexicals are determined solely by the actual context in which they are uttered. Kaplan calls operators that effect a violation of this principle "monsters", and he claims that English does not contain monsters.

Now, if the predicate "is tasty" was indexical in the way suggested by the contextualist, then its content would vary with the standard of taste of the person uttering it. Thus, given that Anna and Bob have relevantly different standards of taste, one would expect Bob's report in (U4) to come out as incorrect, for Bob's use of the predicate "is tasty" would seem to express the property of being tasty on Bob's standard of taste. So, the correctness of (U4) would seem to count as evidence in favour of relativism.

Again, this objection is not conclusive, for contextualists can claim that vis-à-vis the hidden indexicality they are postulating propositional attitude contexts act like monsters. In other words, the contextual factor determining the content of expressions like "is tasty", can shift away from the actual context of utterance when the expression is embedded, for example, in a "says that" or "believes that" context. Thus, propositional attitude ascription contexts are to "is tasty" what direct quotation is to ordinary indexicals. Just as "I" in "Anna said 'I am hungry'." refers to Anna, "is tasty" might express the property of being tasty on Anna's standard when embedded in the sentence "Anna said whale meat is tasty.", even when Bob utters it. As long as the contextualist is not afraid of monsters, or of context-sensitive expressions that are subject to monsters, they can get around the objection.²⁷

3.4 "For" means the same as "FOR"

It has been claimed (e.g. Lewis 1980; Stanley 2005) that the only justification for including a parameter in Kaplan's circumstances of evaluation is an operator that "shifts" that parameter. Now, I do not see any reason to accept the principle "no parameter without operator that shifts it". However, as mentioned in Sect. 2, there are some good candidates of natural language expressions for the status of operator that shifts one of the new parameters. But while the absence of operators is not necessarily evidence against relativism, the existence of operators may well be evidence in favour, namely when there is no better account of the expression in question than as an operator shifting the circumstantial parameter postulated by the relativist. Suppose the "For S , p " construction was best understood along the lines outlined in Sect. 2, i.e. as equivalent to the FOR operator. That would be count as evidence for relativism

²⁷ There are other expressions that could be argued to be context-sensitive in the way outlined, for example, "local", "enemy", "foreign", etc. In "John went to a local bar.", local may pick out John's surroundings as opposed to the speaker's surroundings. However, it is debatable whether such examples really show that the context-sensitive expression in question is sensitive to anything other than the context in which it is being uttered. For some discussion see, for example, Schlenker (2003), Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and Stanley (2005).

concerning matters of taste. I shall therefore briefly review some advantages of such a treatment of “For S , p ”, and then discuss two competing hypotheses.

The hypothesis that “For S , p ” is equivalent to “FOR S , p ” can neatly explain why an utterance like (U5) would be correct:

(U5) Bob: “For Anna whale meat is tasty. But whale meat is not tasty.”

It would be correct because on Anna’s standard of taste whale meat is tasty, while on Bob’s it is not. Since Bob is the utterer, what is said is correct by his lights. The hypothesis would also explain why anyone uttering

(U6) “For everyone, whale meat is tasty.”

would therefore also be committed to saying that whale meat is tasty. Similarly, it explains why uttering

(U7) “For me whale meat is not tasty. But whale meat is tasty.”

is incoherent. According to the semantics outlined in Sect. 2, the truth of the proposition expressed by the first sentence in any context entails that the proposition expressed by the second sentence is not true on the utterer’s standard.

However, there are competing accounts of “For S , p ”. One account that might immediately come to mind is the hypothesis that “For S , p ” is semantically equivalent to “ S believes that p ”. Such an account would be available both to a contextualist and to a Rampant Realist. This would be able to explain all the cases just discussed. (U7), for example, would come out as incoherent because it would be an instance of Moore’s paradox.

But there are, I believe, cases that show directly that “For S , p ” and “ S believes that p ” are not equivalent. For example, it seems entirely coherent to say “John has no view as to whether whale meat is tasty. But in fact whale meat is tasty for him.”. According to the hypothesis, the sentence is semantically equivalent to “John has no view as to whether whale meat is tasty. But he believes that whale meat is tasty.”, which seems incoherent.

A better option for the contextualist—but this is not available to the Rampant Realist—would be an account that straightforwardly claims that the “For S , p ” is a monster. It shifts the context relevant for the interpretation of indexicals contained in p away from the actual context of utterance to a new context determined by the value of S . Thus it is again resort to monsters that can help the contextualist compete with the relativist.

It is worth noting that this last argument in favour of relativism does, in my view, put it ahead of the Rampant Realist. There seem to be counterexamples to the first alternative, and the second alternative is not available unless one postulates hidden indexicality, or at least some kind of hidden syntactic structure. Thus it remains an open question whether the Rampant Realist can account for the “For S , p ” construction.

My review of possible evidence has shown that relativist semantics can be supported by a number of considerations. However, a sophisticated form of contextualism, one that admits Kaplanian monsters and one that makes subtle claims about conventional implicatures or presuppositions, seems to be able to compete with relativism.

References

- Bach, K. (2001). You don't say. *Synthese*, 128, 15–44.
- Cappelen, H., & Lepore, E. (2005). *Insensitive semantics: A defense of semantic minimalism and speech act pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Egan, A., Hawthorne, J., & Weatherson, B. (2005). Epistemic modals in context. In G. Preyer & G. Peter (Eds.), *Contextualism in philosophy*. Oxford: OUP. Available at <http://www.brian.weatherson.net/papers.html>
- Einheuser, I. (2008). Varieties of relativism. In M. García-Carpintero & M. Kölbel (Eds.).
- Evans, G. (1979). Does tense logic rest on a mistake? In *Collected papers* (1985) (pp. 341–363). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fara, D. G. (2000). Shifting sands: An interest-relative theory of vagueness. *Philosophical Topics*, 28, 45–81.
- García-Carpintero, M., & Kölbel, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Relative truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kaplan, D. (1977). Demonstratives. In: J. Almog, et al. (Eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kölbel, M. (2002). *Truth without objectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Kölbel, M. (2003). Faultless disagreement. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 104, 53–73.
- Kölbel, M. (2005). Moral relativism. In: D. Westerstahl & T. Tännsjö (Eds.), *Lectures on relativism*. Göteborg University.
- Kölbel, M. (2007). How to spell out genuine relativism and how to defend indexical relativism. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 15, 281–288.
- Laserson, P. (2005). Context dependence, disagreement, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 28, 643–686.
- Lewis, D. (1975). Languages and language. *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, 7, 3–35. Reprinted in Lewis (1983).
- Lewis, D. (1980). Index, context, and content. In: S. Kanger & S. Öhman (Eds.), *Philosophy and grammar*. Dordrecht: Reidel. Reprinted in Lewis (1998).
- Lewis, D. (1983). *Philosophical papers* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. (1998). *Papers in philosophical logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (2003). Future contingents and relative truth. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53, 321–336.
- MacFarlane, J. (2005a). Making sense of relative truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105, 321–339.
- MacFarlane, J. (2005b). The assessment sensitivity of knowledge attributions. In T. S. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Oxford studies in epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (2008a). Truth in the garden of forking paths. In M. Kölbel & M. García-Carpintero (Eds.), *Relative truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (2008b). Nonindexical contextualism. *Synthese*, doi:10.1007/s11229-007-9286-2.
- MacFarlane, J. (forthcoming). Epistemic modals are assessment-sensitive. In B. Weatherson & A. Egan (Eds.), *Epistemic modals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Predelli, S. (2005). *Context: Meaning, truth and the use of language*. Oxford: OUP.
- Recanati, F. (2001). What is said. *Synthese*, 128, 75–91.
- Richard, M. (2004). Contextualism and relativism. *Philosophical Studies*, 119, 215–242.
- Schlenker, P. (2003). A plea for monsters. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 26, 29–120.
- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2002). Truthfulness and relevance. *Mind*, 111, 584–632.
- Stanley, J. (2005). Semantics in context. In: G. Preyer & G. Peter (Eds.), *Contextualism in philosophy: Knowledge, meaning, and truth* (pp. 221–254). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, C. (2001). On being in a quandary. *Mind*, 110, 45–98.