# Relativism and Perspectival Content
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Abstract: Recent relativists, despite their differences, share a preference for *perspectival contents*, i.e. contents that do not comply with the traditional constraint requiring propositional contents to have absolute truth-values. Misgivings about perspectival contents are probably the number one reason why relativism has faced vehement opposition. This chapter discusses three of the main roles that propositional contents are usually expected to play: as objects of belief, as objects of compositional semantic values and as objects of assertion and shows in each case that perspectival contents are suitable to play the part.

## 0. Introduction

> "The evaluativist view is, as I've said, a kind of relativism …. But the term "relativism" has had the misfortune of being defined by its opponents." (Field 2009, 255)

If would-be opponents of relativism define "relativism" in a way not acceptable to relativists, then they aren't opponents of relativism, but are criticizing some other view. Still: Hartry Field's remark has the ring of truth. Why? — Is it a case of "dissuasive definition" (Harman 1975, 3), i.e. a type of (self-) deception on the part of the would-be opponents? Or is it the relativists themselves who have not articulated their view clearly, and thus failed to establish definitional sovereignty?

At least in the recent debate (on which Field is commenting) there is an explanation for the difficulties relativists seem to have in imposing their own definition. Recent relativists[1], despite their differences, have one trait in common: a preference for perspectival contents, i.e. propositional contents the truth-value of which is not settled by the (objective) state of the world. Articulating a relativist view therefore requires clarifying the nature and theoretical role of these contents. But spelling out the nature and role of propositional contents is a challenge for anyone, quite independently of the issues relativists address. It is therefore no surprise that a lot of

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[1] E.g. Kölbel 2002, 2015a; MacFarlane 2005, 2014; Lasersohn 2005; Recanati 2007, Stephenson 2007; Egan 2007, 2012; Zeman 2015, Dinges 2017, Coppock 2018.

controversy should surround the feasibility and clear articulation of theories that involve perspectival contents.

This chapter aims to report some of the progress that has been made in this area, by providing a selective overview of what is at stake in operating with perspectival representational contents. I shall begin by introducing the idea of contents of representation and distinguishing several roles that contents are expected to play. In §2, I distinguish traditional and perspectival contents of representation. In §§ 3, 4 and 5, I respectively discuss how perspectival contents fare as objects of belief, as compositional semantic values and as objects of assertion.

## 1. Contents and Their Roles

Contents (also called "propositions", Fregean *Gedanken*, etc.) serve to characterize how things are represented as being by the representation whose content they are. They are the "objects" of belief, assertion, supposition, desire, etc., i.e. of "propositional attitudes" and "propositional acts". These roles interlock: I may *believe* the content that the pie is hot, and then *assert* that content to warn you. You may *believe* what I have asserted or test the *hypothesis* that that pie is hot and perhaps come to *reject* it, i.e. believe the negation of that content: the content that the pie is not hot. In this episode, the very same thing (the content that the pie is hot) figures as the object of belief, of assertion, as the information conveyed, as what is hypothesized and rejected.

A further role of contents[2] is as *compositional semantic values*. The semantic theory of a language assigns semantic values to the atomic expressions of that language (or of its "base language", see Lewis 1970) and states compositional rules that specify how the semantic values of compound expressions are determined by those of the constituents and the mode of composition. It is often thought that the semantic

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2 Cf. Kaplan 1977/89, Lewis 1980, Rabern 2012.

values such a theory assigns to complete sentences (or to sentence-context-pairs, if the language has context-sensitive expressions) are propositional contents.[3]

These roles (as objects of propositional attitudes and acts, and as semantic values) summarise some of the explanatory uses to which contents are put: Some phenomena concerning mental or linguistic representations can be explained by the contents of these representations. For example, the logical relations among contents may be used as a model for the logical relations among representations with these contents; or certain aspects of the meaning of expressions may be explained by pointing to the contents of expressions (in context). The general strategy is to explain some similarities between representations by the sameness of their content, and differences between them by differences in content. For example, if one belief is incompatible with another, and it is their contents that explain this, then any other two beliefs with the same contents will also be incompatible. Or, if a sentence's embeddability is explained by its content, then any other sentence with the same content will be predicted to be embeddable in the same way.

Since contents are merely theoretical entities that play the mentioned theoretical roles,[4] contents can be construed differently depending on one's explanatory aims. If certain features are regarded as within the range of phenomena to be explained by the proposition-assigning part of the theory alone, then it should assign different propositions whenever two representations differ with respect to those features. For example, if truth or correctness is a feature that should be explained by propositional content alone, then two representations that differ with respect to truth-value or correctness should not be assigned the same propositional content. On the other hand, if certain similarities, e.g. in psychological role, are amongst the primary explanatory targets of our content assignment, then some representations that differ as to correctness may still need to be construed as equal in content. The decision to adopt contents as objects of propositional attitudes and acts, and as

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3 Historically, this role has sometimes preceded the other roles, e.g. in Frege 1892.
4 Some theorists propose to reduce propositions to certain act types (See, e.g. Soames 2011, Hanks 2011). However, even in this context, the proposed reductions answer to, and are justified by, the intended theoretical roles, not vice versa (cf. Lewis 1970, 22).

semantic values, leaves a lot of room for differences in implementation, possibly depending on explanatory aims. Anyone constructing a theory assigning propositional contents to representations of some sort will inevitably have certain explanatory interests and preferences which guide his or her choice of similarities and differences to be modeled as sameness or difference of propositional content. There is thus a pragmatic element to the choice between different conceptions of propositions. [5]

## 2. Traditional and Perspectival Contents

In addition to the mentioned roles, contents have traditionally been taken to be the primary truth-bearers. This assumption is usually accompanied by the view that the truth-values of propositions vary only with how things are.[6] Since there is only one way things actually are, this amounts to saying that (actual) truth-values of propositional contents are absolute. Thus, traditional conceptions assume that contents have absolute truth values:

(Abs)   Propositional contents have absolute truth-values.

Some representations, such as beliefs, aim to represent things as they are, while other representations, such as hopes, do not. Let's call representations of the first type "belief-like".[7] On the traditional conception, any belief-like representation will therefore be representationally correct if and only if its content is true:

(Corr)  It is correct to accept (believe, assert etc) a propositional content iff it is true.

(Abs) and (Corr) entail that the representational correctness of a belief-like representation depends solely on its propositional content:

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[5] See Kölbel 2015a, §5 for more detail. It has often been discussed whether contents can play all these roles at once. See, e.g., Dummett (1973/81), Lewis (1980) or Rabern (2012).

[6] For discussions of propositions as truth-bearers, see, e.g. Kirkham 1992, and Künne 2003.

[7] Stalnaker (1984, p. 79) speaks of "acceptance" as a general attitude of which each belief-like attitude is a species.

(¬Persp)  The propositional content of a belief-like representation (together with the objective state of the world) determines whether the representation is correct.

However, some theoretical purposes and roles for contents suggest that there are contents that it may be correct for one person to believe at one time, but not correct for another person or at another time. For example, suppose we are interested in the similarity amongst all those who believe themselves to be philosophers and want to model this similarity as a sameness in propositional content, i.e. by saying that there is a content they all believe: call it "C". Then we must operate with a conception of propositional content that rejects (¬Persp) (and therefore either (Abs) or (Corr)). For some of those who believe C do so correctly, while others don't: whether it is correct for a thinker to believe C depends on the thinker and on the time at which he or she has the belief.

Let us call any conception of propositions that rejects (¬Persp), i.e. that allows that the correctness of belief-like representations can depend on factors other than the representation's propositional content and the objective state of the world, a "perspectival" conception, and let us call the propositions with which such a conception operates "perspectival contents". Assuming the connection between truth and the correctness of belief-like representations ((Corr)), perspectivalists will also reject (Abs). Thus, perspectival contents typically satisfy (Persp) and (¬Abs):[8]

(Persp)  The propositional content of a belief-like representation (together with the objective state of the world) does not determine whether the representation is correct.

(¬Abs)  Propositional contents do not have absolute truth-values.

Misgivings about, and problems with, perspectival contents are often associated with the expectation that contents play this or that traditional role of contents. I

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[8] Wright (1992, 148–57; 2001, 58) combines (Persp) with (Abs) and thus denies (Corr). On this view, a content's truth is not necessary or sufficient for it being correct to believe it. See Kölbel 1997, 2003.

shall therefore present my selection of considerations about perspectival contents under three roles for propositions: as objects of belief, as compositional semantic value and as objects of assertion.

## 3. Contents as Objects of Belief

A typical worry about perspectival contents is that if the state of the world does not determine whether believing a given content is correct, then we don't know what state the world needs to be in for a belief with that content to be correct. Hence, we don't know which state the belief represents the world as being in. Consider again "C", a perspectival content that it is correct to believe for those, and only for those, who are philosophers at the time of belief. Consider also a perspectival content that it is correct to believe for those, and only for those, who have, at the time of believing, a disposition to experience pleasure from receiving a foot massage. Think of this as the content that foot massages are pleasant, and call it "F". There is no determinate way the world needs to be for beliefs with one of these contents to be correct. If *you* believe C *now*, the requirement on the world is quite different from what it would be if it was believed by someone else or at a different time. If Anna believes F, what foot massages need to be like for the belief to be correct may be quite different from what they need to be like for Ben's belief with the same content—if Anna's and Ben's dispositions are relevantly different. Since there is no determinate way the world is represented as being by these contents, they may seem unsuitable as contents of representation.

One can, of course, stipulate, when starting to talk about representational contents, that no two (actual) representations with the same content can differ as to their correctness. Frege makes such a stipulation (e.g. 1897/1983, 147–8; 1918), and many have followed his example. But it is merely a pragmatic decision, and one that prejudices what kinds of phenomena a mere assignment of contents will be capable of explaining.

There are clearly other ways of thinking about how things are represented as being by a representation. There is a good sense in which any two people who believe it to be raining represent things in the same way. Their beliefs may concern different places and times, but the correctness of these beliefs requires the same of those places and times: namely that it rain there at the time. There is an important representational similarity between all these believers: there are certain conditions that need to hold for each such belief to be correct. There are also psychological similarities between all holders of such a belief. If there is such a representational similarity, then why not model this similarity by assigning the same representational content? Just as it is fine for Frege and his followers to have made their stipulation, there is nothing in principle wrong with treating this similarity as a sameness of representational content.

Now consider again all beliefs with content F. True, such beliefs may differ as to what foot massages need to be like for the belief to be correct. But in each case foot massages are represented as standing in the same relation to the thinker having the representation. This similarity is potentially explanatorily interesting because it accounts for similarities in behaviour. Those who operate a classic framework of contents will have to account for such similarities in a different way, for example by saying that the distinct contents are related in a certain way.

There is no principled reason to prefer a traditional, Fregean, stipulation in line with (¬Persp). So what we find in the literature is usually just overt stipulation or dogmatic insistence. Wright declares that having contents that obey something like (¬Persp) is constitutive of representation (Wright 1992, 91; 2008, 170–1). But others are happy to drop such a requirement (see, e.g. Moore 1997, 4–5, 10). Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) defend (Abs) and (¬Persp), but assume that this is the default position. Cappelen and Dever (2013) again, primarily argue against selected arguments that try to establish a need for a modification of the traditional framework of representational content in line with (Persp).

There is, however, a conclusive argument by David Lewis (1979b) to the effect that a certain version of a perspectival content framework, namely centred contents, can do everything that the corresponding traditional framework of contents as uncentred sets of possible worlds can do. Centred contents are sets of centred worlds, i.e. sets of world-center pairs, where a center is simply a thinker and a time. Uncentred contents are simple sets of worlds. There is a small subset of the centred contents, the "boring" or "portable" ones[9], which have exactly the same theoretically relevant properties as traditional uncentred propositions. Portable centred contents are those sets of world-center pairs where, if one world-center pair is a member, all other world-center pairs with the same world element are also a member. Lewis' result holds for *unstructured* contents, conceived of as simple sets of evaluation points. But the same holds for perspectival versions of *structured* propositions that comply with (Persp), when compared with corresponding traditional versions that comply with (¬Persp): there will be a portable counterpart amongst the perspectival structured propositions for each traditional structured proposition.[10]

Lewis's argument, and the extension of his argument to structured propositions, shows that generalizing from a traditional framework of contents complying with (¬Persp) to a corresponding perspectival framework that complies with (Persp), will not jeopardize any explanatory resources that were present before the generalization.

I want to discuss three further worries concerning perspectival propositions as the objects of belief. One is the worry that, if belief contents are construed in such a way that whether it is correct to believe them can depend on the perspective of the believer, then every such belief will be automatically correct. This worry simply assumes that everyone is infallible about, and in control of, their own perspective. But the assumption is unmotivated. For example, suppose perspectives are construed simply as Lewisian centers, i.e. thinker-time pairs: thinkers are neither in

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9 See e.g. Egan 2007 and Kölbel 2013.
10 See Kölbel 2014.

control of, nor infallibly knowledgeable about, what time it is or who they are. Consider again content F: a content that it is correct to believe for those, and only those, who have at the time of belief a disposition to experience pleasure when undergoing a foot massage. People are not in direct control of what makes them experience pleasure, nor are they infallibly knowledgeable about which procedures will cause pleasure in them. Thus, believing this content is subject to error just like belief in most traditional contents.

The second worry is that if we concede that another person's belief with a certain content is correct, this will force us to accept that content ourselves (e.g. Boghossian 2011) But if we concede that it is correct for Mia to believe C, then this doesn't commit us to believing C ourselves. For if Mia has the dispositions required for actually believing this correctly, this does not mean that we also have such dispositions (see Kölbel 2015a; Dinges 2017, §3).

The third worry is that somehow allowing belief contents to be perspectival will open the floodgates towards skepticism about objective reality and objective knowledge. However, simply stipulating that contents of representation are traditional (i.e. comply with (Abs) and (¬Persp)) is not going to make the objectivity skeptic disappear. On the contrary, stipulating all representation to be objective will reinforce the impression that objective reality is merely an ideology (Rorty 1985). A conception of representational content that leaves room for both objective and non-objective representations provides a better starting point for arguing about objective reality.[11]

## 4. Contents as Compositional Semantic Values

A compositional semantic theory of a language will assign to each sentence (in context) a semantic value. It will do this by assigning semantic values to primitive

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11 I have argued this point elsewhere, see Kölbel (in preparation). See also Coppock 2018, who makes the point that the framework of representational contents should not prejudice the question which aspects of reality are objective. She therefore operates with "outlooks" as primitive evaluation points without presupposing that these will be structured as world-center-pairs.

expressions and stating how the semantic values of complexes result from the semantic values of constituents and the way they are put together (compositional axioms). Given these assumptions, we can motivate the view that we need contents that do not comply with (Abs). Take, for example, the sentence

(1)     The sun is shining.

What should be the semantic value when (1) is uttered on Vienna's Stephansplatz at Easter 2019? A traditional answer would have it that it would be a traditional content that is true if and only if the sun is shining on Stephansplatz at Easter 2019 (the place and time of the context of utterance). Thus, the utterance would have the very same semantic value as an utterance of

(2)     The sun is shining here now.

or of

(3)     The sun is shining on Stephansplatz at Easter 2019.

would have had if uttered in the same context. Lewis (1980) points out a problem with that view. If the utterances of (1)–(3) in that context have the same semantic value, then why does prefixing them with "Somewhere" not yield equivalent compounds?

(S1)     Somewhere the sun is shining.
(S2)     Somewhere the sun is shining here now.
(S3)     Somewhere the sun is shining on Stephansplatz at Easter 2019.

While (S1) is fine if uttered in the same context—it is true if there is a place where the sun is shining Easter 2019—(S2) and (S3) make no sense.

If we want to treat "Somewhere", for example, as an intensional locational operator then we should treat (1) as having something like a location-unspecific proposition (a kind of perspectival content) as semantic value, i.e. a content that it is correct to believe at some places but not at others. This would explain the difference with (2) and (3), which are not in this way unspecific. Since we could repeat the argument with "Sometimes", the semantic value of (1) in the context has to be a content that is also unspecific as to time *and* place.

Kaplan (1977/89, p. 503–4, fn. 28) very casually offers a similar argument (often called "operator argument"), in which he assumes, without argument, that certain expressions (like "sometimes", "always", "somewhere", etc) are intensional operators, and then concludes that the expressions with which they compose must have intensions that are variable with respect to time, place etc.

In recent debates about relativism, the possibility of such intensional treatments has sometimes been cited by relativists as an advantage of operating with perspectival contents. Thus, for example, "for John" or "for some people" could be treated as intensional operators that can be concatenated with sentences (or perhaps predicates) like "Licorice is tasty." (or the predicate "is tasty").[12]

Defenders of traditional contents have rejected the premiss that "sometimes", "somewhere" etc are intensional operators, and offer quantificational accounts instead. They also argue against "for John", "sometimes", etc being *sentential* operators (see Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009, 74–82).

The second point, about the syntactic category of the operators in question, has been answered: they can also be categorized as intensional predicate modifiers, thus the assumption that they are sentential is not essential to their being intensional.[13]

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[12] See, e.g. Kölbel 2009, 2011, 2015a, 2015b.
13 See Kölbel 2011, p. 144; 2015b, p. 58.

But the first point simply says that there is an alternative account, so it does not provide any reason against the relativist's perspectival contents as semantic values.[14]

One point that is often overlooked is that by denying the assumption, in Kaplan's operator argument, that certain expressions are intensional operators, no answer has yet been given to the version of Lewis's argument that I have presented above.[15] For that argument did not assume that "Somewhere" was an intensional operator. The premiss was merely that (S1) differed in meaning from (S2) and (S3), so that, if (S1)–(S3) were the result of applying "Somewhere" respectively to (1)–(3), and if the semantic values are compositional, then (1) should not have the same semantic value as (2) and (3). This means that *independently* of whether we use an intensional or a quantificational treatment of "Somewhere", if we assume that (S1) is the result of concatenating (1) and "Somewhere", then the semantic value of (1) must be something that is variable with respect to place. On our assumptions (i.e. the claim that (S1) = "Sometimes"^(1) and compositionality) the semantic value of (1) cannot be a traditional proposition that has the same truth-value at every place. On a quantificational treatment too, it needs to be the semantic value of an open sentence containing an unbound variable.[16]

Thus, there are reasons to allow non-portable perspectival contents as compositional semantic values.[17] One reaction is to question whether the same thing needs to play all three roles. For example, one might say that the compositional semantic value of a sentence in context need not be *identified* with the assertoric content of an utterance of the sentence in that context—it is enough if the former determines the latter, perhaps together with other factors (see Rabern 2012). This brings us to the last role for contents that I want to discuss here.

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14 King 2003 argues that a quantificational account of tense is confirmed by the fact that semanticists have moved from Prior's intensional paradigm to quantificational accounts nowadays. However, he does not offer principled objections againt an intensional treatment of tense either. See Rey forthcoming for a detailed account.

15 Schaffer forthcoming is an exception.

16 For temporal and locational modifiers, Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009 deny "uniformity", i.e. that (S1) = "Sometimes"^(1), thus allowing them to maintain compositionality.

17 Reasons that have been amply discussed both in the relativism literature and in the unarticulated constituents literature.

## 5. Contents as Objects of Assertion

Propositional contents also have a role as objects of propositional acts. That perspectival contents can play this role has been questioned for many reasons, but mostly this has concerned the act of assertion.

One set of worries starts from the Fregean idea that to assert a content is to present it as true, or from the idea that knowledge or truth are "norms of assertion".[18] It seems clear that, to the extent to which a perspectivalist wants to accept these ideas about assertion at all, she can modify them to accommodate that the objects asserted do not have absolute truth-values.

A related area of discussion concerns what happens in successful assertoric communication. On a very simple model, preferred by many, thinker A believes a content c, asserts c in order to pass on this information to thinker B. Thinker B witnesses the assertion, trusts A and as a result comes to believe c herself. The same content is believed and subsequently asserted by one thinker, and then received and believed by another thinker. The merits of this simple picture have long been questioned in discussions of *de se* or indexical thought and language. For example, following Frege (1918), Evans (1981) and Pollock (1982) deny that the content of the source's belief and that of the recipient's acquired belief are always the same. More recently, there is a lively literature on how *de se* contents, or other perspectival contents, figure in linguistic communication.[19] One of the standard positions in this debate ("uncentering", following Kindermann 2016) is to say that while the source's belief may have a (non-portable) perspectival content, the content of a resulting assertion will not be perspectival, or will be a portable perspectival content.[20] Another standard position ("recentering") is to claim that when the source believes

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18 See e.g. Frege 1892, Dummett 1973/81, Evans 1979/85, Rosenkranz 2008, Pagin 2016.
19 See e.g. Kölbel 2002, Stalnaker 2008, Ninan 2010, Torre 2010, Moss 2012, Stojanovic 2012, Weber 2013 and the papers collected in García-Carpintero & Torre 2016.
20 E.g. Egan 2007, 2012, Stalnaker 2008.

and asserts a non-portable perspectival content, the recipient acquires a belief with a distinct, but systematically related non-portable perspectival content.[21]

The debate about communication with perspectival contents is too large to be summarised adequately here. Instead, I shall briefly mention two frameworks for theorising about assertion, and the role they can afford to perspectival contents: accounts of assertion and conversational updating that follow Stalnaker's (1999) and Lewis's (1979a) pioneering work, and normative accounts in the style of Brandom (1983). To start with the latter: assertion and other conversational moves are here characterized in terms of the norms they give rise to within a game-like activity of conversation. In a Brandomian account, the significance of assertion is that of undertaking an obligation to justify what one has asserted when challenged to do so, and of issuing a license to others to use what one has asserted as a premiss (in their justifications). This type of account can be readily adapted to perspectival contents. The best developed account is that of John MacFarlane (2014, ch. 5)[22], who adds to norms much like Brandom's an obligation to retract what one has asserted in those "contexts of assessment" where the asserted proposition is not true. This is meant to explain under what conditions speakers have an obligation to retract. MacFarlane's account is taylor-made for perspectival contents and claims (→ Assessment Relativism).

On the Stalnaker-Lewis model of conversational updating, at every stage of a conversation, there is a set of contents that are accepted: let's call that the "score" of the conversation (similar terms used include "presupposition set", "context set", and "common ground"). What is accepted, i.e. the score, can be changed by making conversational moves.[23] The most paradigmatic example of this is making an assertion. Making an assertion counts as a proposal to add the content asserted to the score. The proposal will come into effect if no-one challenges the assertion, e.g. by saying "No.". If no challenge is made the asserted content is added to the score.

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21 E.g. Weber 2013. Another proposal is "multicentering", e.g. Ninan 2010, Torre 2010, Kindermann 2016.

22 Kölbel 2002 (chs.1.7 and 6) also uses a Brandom-style account of assertion to carve out a role for perspectival contents.

23 For discussion of the nature of the score, see Lewis 1979a, Kölbel 2011, Stalnaker 2014.

Moreover, all moves in the conversation are added (as a matter of conversational record) as well as other obviously manifest information. Which moves are acceptable at any point, and the interpretation of such moves, will depend on the score.

Misgivings about perspectival contents as objects of assertion in this conversational model derive from the plausible idea that the acceptance of contents in the score is importantly related to participants' belief of these contents, and their chances of being correct if they were to believe them. In line with the simple picture of communication mentioned above, a (portable) content would be asserted, the score would be updated by it, and other conversationalists could then simply adopt any contents from the score as suitable objects of belief. The recipient would come to believe the very same content that the source already believed and asserted.

However, the conversational model covers more than just these ideal cases of so-called "serious" conversations that are held with the sole purpose of information transfer. It is not unusual for an audience to fail to challenge (and thereby accept) assertions of contents they themselves do not believe. Sometimes contents get accepted that some or all participants do not believe, even if this is common knowledge amongst them. Asserters may transparently lie, while audiences may simply play along. The rules of score change remain the same.[24] Of course, a conversation sometimes results in a change of belief in its participants. However, this will not just be a matter of the audience coming to believe whatever is in the score. Rather, the nature of the conversation, the reliability of asserters and other factors will influence to what extent, if at all, a conversation changes a participant's beliefs. Thus, even if we allow perspectival contents to be asserted, and to update the conversational score, there will be a further step before this has effects on participants' acquired beliefs. "Recentering", as in the debate about *de se* communication, is always an option. Thus, there is no difficulty in principle in

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[24] Some claim that the linguistic moves I am describing do not count as assertions. However, conversational updating effects are the same in these cases. See Kölbel 2010.

admitting perspectival contents as objects of assertion and updating, even in this model.[25]

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[25] See Kölbel 2013 for a detailed proposal with regard to the role unstructured perspectival contents in a Stalnaker-Lewis update model.

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