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Objectivity, Relativism and Context Dependence

Kurseinheit 1

Fakultät für
**Kultur- und
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schaften**

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Table of Contents

	Introduction of the Author	5
	Learning Objectives of this Text	7
	References	9
1.	Introduction	19
2.	Sharing a World	27
2.1	Introduction	27
2.2	Propositions and Concepts as the Common Property of Many	31
2.3	A Puzzle about Expertise	41
2.4	Unisono and Polyphonic Calibration	44
3.	What Semantics Does	57
3.1	Introduction: A Formal Model	57
3.2	What Kind of Data does a Semantic Theory Predict?	59
3.3	Compositionality and Semantic Values: The Basic Idea	65
3.4	Extensional Languages	71
3.5	Adding Variables and Binding	74
3.6	The Need for Intensional Semantics	78
3.7	Summary	88
4.	Kaplan's Framework	91
4.1	Context Dependence and Temporal Intensions	91
4.2	Context Sensitivity	97
4.3	The Semantics for L4	102
4.4	Temporalism and its Alternatives	111
4.5	Summary	118
5.	Extending Kaplan's Framework: Relativism	119
5.1	Introduction: Assessing Claims on Non-objective Matters	119
5.2	Varieties of Context Dependence	125
5.3	Indexical Relativism about Taste	128
5.4	Non-indexical Relativism about Taste	137
5.5	Operators	143
5.6	Indexical and Non-indexical Relativism in Other Cases	149

6.	Evans' Problem and Radical Relativism	161
6.1	Introduction	161
6.2	Empirical Bridge Principles	162
6.3	Temporalism and Other Approaches to Tense	165
6.4	Evans' Objection	167
6.5	Moderate Relativism in General	170
6.6	Radical Relativism: Future Contingents	171
6.7	Radical Relativism: Vagueness	176
6.8	Conclusion	185
7.	Conclusion: The Metaphysics of Perspectival Representation	187
	Annex: Notes on Exercises	191

Introduction to the Author

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- Arguing about Language*, co-edited with Darragh Byrne, London: Routledge 2010.
- Articles: Two Dogmas of Davidsonian Semantics. *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (Dec. 2001), pp. 613–35.
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- Vagueness as Semantic. In R. Dietz & S. Moruzzi (eds.), *Cuts and Clouds: Issues in the Philosophy of Vagueness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010.
- Conversational Score, Assertion and Testimony. In Herman Cappelen and Jessica Brown (eds.), *New Essays on Assertion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

Learning Objectives of this Text

The primary aim of this text is to provide an accessible introduction to recent debates concerning two opposing positions which are typically called “relativism” and “contextualism”. Debates in this area are clearly related to perennial philosophical questions concerning objectivity and relativism. However, these recent debates are explicitly about the correct account of the “semantic content” of certain sentences. They are, therefore, debates in a specialized field, that of natural language semantics, and the central notion, *semantic content* is a technical notion in this field.

The present text is designed to achieve the primary aim (i.e. to introduce the uninitiated to this recent debate) by pursuing three objectives: first to explain how questions of natural language semantics engage with wider philosophical questions concerning the relationship between language, thought, societies and the world, secondly to explain the technical background needed to understand the recent debate, and thirdly to explain and contribute to the current debate. Chapter 2 is mostly dedicated to the first objective, while chapters 3 and 4 are mostly dedicated to the second. Chapters 5 and 6 serve the third objective.

The aim of this text is ambitious. One important reason for this is that it is not easy to provide an accessible introduction to natural language semantics that provides all the background needed to understand the current debate. The introductory material in chapters 3 and 4 therefore differs from standard introductions in the philosophy of language. It stresses foundational issues as well as phenomena of context dependence, while leaving aside traditional controversies on which introductions usually focus, e.g. debates regarding reference, the proper treatment of names or definite descriptions, etc. An attempt has been made to provide fully articulated formal semantic descriptions of various toy languages so that the reader is enabled to check for him or herself all the claims made about formal semantics. This means that these chapters are not easy and will require concentrated study, especially by those completely unfamiliar with semantics.

Another reason why this text is ambitious is that it tries to ground its introduction to the relativism debates on some fundamental considerations about the nature, purpose and empirical status of natural language semantics. This is itself a controversial area of debate.

A third reason why this text is ambitious is that it not only tries to introduce the reader to recent debates concerning relativism, it also attempts to make progress in these debates.

As a result readers will have to work hard to master this text. On the plus side, their efforts will be repaid not only by putting them into a position to adjudicate and take part in a cutting edge philosophical debate, but also by giving them a thorough introduction to natural language semantics, which will be useful in other areas of the philosophy of language.

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