

Max Kölbel

Objectivity, Relativism and Context Dependence

Fakultät für
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schaften**

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Introduction to the Author

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Publications (selection):

- Books: *Truth without Objectivity*. London: Routledge 2002.
- Relative Truth*, co-edited with Manuel García-Carpintero, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.
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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.
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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.