

Relativizing utterance-truth?

Dan López de Sa

Received: 13 July 2007 / Accepted: 7 May 2008 / Published online: 30 May 2008
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

Abstract In recent years, some people have held that a radical relativist position is defensible in some philosophically interesting cases, including future contingents, predicates of personal taste, evaluative predicates in general, epistemic modals, and knowledge attributions. The position is frequently characterized as denying that utterance-truth is absolute. I argue that this characterization is inappropriate, as it requires a metaphysical substantive contention with which moderate views as such need not be committed. Before this, I also offer a more basic, admittedly less exciting alternative characterization of the position, in terms of departing from the Kaplan–Lewis–Stalnaker two-dimensional framework.

Keywords Relativism · Utterance-truth · Utterances · Sentence · Context · Contextualism · Two-dimensionalism

In recent years, some people have held that a radical relativist position is defensible in some philosophically interesting cases, including future contingents, predicates of personal taste, evaluative predicates in general, epistemic modals, and knowledge attributions. The position is frequently characterized as denying that utterance-truth is absolute, see for instance (MacFarlane 2003, Sect. 4). The aim of this note is to argue that this characterization is inappropriate. Before this, I offer a more basic, admittedly less exciting alternative characterization.

D. López de Sa (✉)
ICREA at LOGOS, Universitat de Barcelona, Montalegre 6, 08001 Barcelona, Spain
e-mail: dlopezdesa@ub.edu

D. López de Sa
Arché, University of St Andrews, Fife, Scotland

1 Index, context, and beyond

In recent decades, partly motivated by the works of David Kaplan, David Lewis, and Robert Stalnaker, most people have been convinced that a two-dimensional framework is required in order to represent the ways in which the truth of sentences depends on how things may be and on the semantic contribution of embedded sentences. Although recent discussion has made clear that the framework is susceptible of substantially different implementations and philosophical interpretations, we can bracket most of these important issues here. In the jargon of Lewis (1980), which I adopt, the semantically basic two-dimensional relation is that of a sentence s being true at a context c at an index i . A *context* is a location—time, place, and possible world, or *centered world* for short—where a sentence might be said. It has countless features, determined by the character of the location. An *index* is an n -tuple of features of context, but not necessarily features that go together in any possible context. Thus an index might consist of a speaker, a time before his birth, a world where he never lived at all, and so on. The coordinates of an index are features that can be shifted independently, unlike those of a context, and are used to systematize the contribution of sentences embedded under sentence operators, such as ‘possibly’ or, more controversially, ‘somewhere,’ ‘strictly speaking,’ and so on. Given a context c , however, there is *the index of the context*, i_c : that index having coordinates that match the appropriate features of c . Hence the basic two-dimensional relation can be abbreviated in this special case: sentence s is true at context c iff s is true at context c at index i_c .¹

More recently, and partly motivated by the works of John MacFarlane, some people have been convinced that this framework is shown to be inappropriate by a special sort of variation in some philosophically interesting cases. As I mentioned above, these have been claimed to include future contingents, predicates of personal taste, evaluative predicates in general, epistemic modals, and knowledge attributions. In these domains, some hold, a sentence s at context c could be true *from a certain perspective* but false from another—where perspectives are to be thought of as the same sort of thing as contexts, but representing a location from where a sentence, as said in a (possibly different) location, is viewed or assessed.² This departure from the classical two-dimensional framework as characterized above I will label *radical relativism*.

This is, of course, an essentially negative characterization, as it is neutral as to whether the characterized position ultimately makes sense.

¹ Sentence s is here assumed to contain no ambiguous or vague expressions. Unless otherwise specified I use ‘sentences’ for sentence-types, but ‘utterances’ for utterance-tokens.

² I propose to use ‘perspectives’ instead of MacFarlane’s ‘contexts of assessment,’ see 2003; 2005. I think this terminology helps to avoid confusions with ‘context of use/utterance’ (‘context’ here) and, more importantly, with ‘circumstance/point of evaluation.’ Notice that the contention is neutral as to whether a sentence used in a context expresses different “propositions” with respect to different perspectives or whether one single “proposition” is expressed, and receives different values with respect to different perspectives. (MacFarlane 2005, p. 312) calls the former view ‘expressive relativism’ and the latter ‘propositional relativism.’

That all the initial characterizations of the position are similarly negative should be no surprise: radical relativism is indeed an extremely radical claim, and thus there is some question whether it is finally coherent.³

2 Moderation without absoluteness

In the paper that is partly responsible for the recent interest in radical relativism (MacFarlane 2003, Sect. 4), offered an alternative, also negative characterization: that of denying that utterance-truth is absolute. This has proven very popular in conferences and discussions, and is also endorsed by Andy Egan, John Hawthorne, and Brian Weatherson:

[R]elativist theories deny ABSOLUTENESS OF UTTERANCE TRUTH, the claim that if an utterance is true relative to one context of evaluation it is true relative to all of them. It is uncontroversial of course that the truth value of an utterance type can be contextually variable, the interesting claim that relativists make is that the truth value of utterance tokens can also be different relative to different contexts. (Egan et al. 2005, p. 154)

The thought behind the proposal seems to be the following one. Moderate views have it that a sentence and a context (and the index of that context) determine the appropriate truth-value. Particular tokens of a given sentence also require a context in order to get their truth-values, as witnessed by post-it tokens of ‘I’ll be back in five minutes’ to everyone’s knowledge: one of them might be true on Monday, but false on Tuesday. But *if* the particular act of uttering a particular token of a sentence were to determine, by itself, a particular context, then moderate views would have it that *utterances* have their truth-values absolutely. Radical relativism could then be characterized as denying such a claim of absolute utterance-truth.

The problem with the proposal is that the antecedent of the emphasized conditional does not hold true, on most people’s views on modality. Utterance-truth being absolute requires that the particular act of uttering a particular token of a sentence does determine one (unique) context: *the* context of the utterance. A (unique) context, in turn, determines a (unique) possible world.⁴ Thus, utterance-truth being absolute requires that the particular act of uttering a particular token of a sentence determines one (unique) possible world: *the* world of the utterance. On many views of modality, however, things like the particular act of uttering a particular token of a sentence are not conceived as “world-bound” entities in this way, but rather are held to exist—occur in, take place in, be part of—*many* different worlds. Some moderate views are compatible with these views of modality. But, as we have just seen, utterance-truth being absolute is not. Thus moderate views as such are not committed to utterance-truth

³ That the coherence of the position is not something to be just taken for granted is also a contention of one of the main recent defenders of the view: MacFarlane devotes his (2005) precisely to arguing that it is conceivable that there be a language containing at least one such perspective-dependent (in his terms, *assessment-sensitive*) sentence.

⁴ This also holds with respect to most standard conceptions of contexts alternative to Lewisian worlds centered by spatiotemporal points.

being absolute. Therefore radical relativism cannot be characterized as denying that utterance-truth is absolute—for some moderate views do that as well.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Plausibly, a particular act of uttering a particular token of ‘Dodos are extinct’ is independent of whether dodos are extinct. On some views on modality, this entails that the particular act of uttering also exists in a counterfactual situation in which dodos are not extinct. But then the given particular act of uttering does not have a truth-value absolutely: it is true with respect to the context that involves the actual world, but false with respect to the alternative context that involves the counterfactual situation at which it also exists, but in which Dodos are alive. The defender of a moderate view is not committed to hold such a view—according to which utterances take place in more than one world; but she is neither committed to hold the contrasting view—that they are merely counterparts of the particular utterance itself what inhabit these other worlds. The issue as to which of these different modal views is correct is orthogonal with respect to which of moderate or radical versions of relativism (if any) one holds. Therefore, the defender of moderate views can hold, her moderation notwithstanding, that the particular act of uttering a particular token of ‘Dodos are extinct’ does not have its truth-value absolutely—thus proving the characterization of radical relativism in terms of the denial of the absoluteness of utterance-truth to be inappropriate.

MacFarlane considers the following objection to his characterization:

The objection goes as follows: to say that an utterance is true is to say that the proposition it expresses is true. But on the standard picture, the truth of propositions is relativized to worlds or situations. So the standard picture cannot avoid relativizing utterance truth to worlds as well. If this is right, then the standard picture is not committed to absoluteness after all. (MacFarlane 2003, pp. 327–328)

To this he responds that

to say that an utterance is true is to say more than the proposition it expresses is true: it is to say that this proposition is true *with respect to the world at which the utterance occurs*. (MacFarlane 2003, p. 328, his emphasis)

This, however, does not address my present concern: that there is something like *the world at which a particular utterance occurs* is precisely the metaphysically contestable assumption. And one that one might reject without rejecting moderation.⁵

Particular utterances can exist at different worlds, and arguably also at different times and in different places. Or at least these are things that moderate views as such are not committed to denying. Hence moderate views can hold that a particular

⁵ In his more recent (MacFarlane 2005), he considers and rejects the characterization in terms of absolute vs relative utterance-truth. The reason for his rejection is not, however, as I am contending, that moderate views are not committed to endorsing the absoluteness of utterance-truth. Rather, he submits that “there is something a bit odd about calling utterances or assertions, in the ‘act’ sense, true or false at all” so that to characterize a position “as a thesis about the truth of assertions or utterances in the ‘act’ sense looks like a category mistake” (MacFarlane 2005, pp. 322–323).

utterance receives different truth-values at different contexts (with respect to the indices of these contexts).⁶

One may at this point of course characterize radical relativism as holding that it is not always the case that an utterance *and a context* (and its index) determine the appropriate truth-value: an utterance at a context (at its index) can be true when viewed or assessed from some perspective, but false from some other.⁷ But the appeal to particular utterances, as opposed to the sentences involved, is no longer doing any work. As the route through particular utterances does not make superfluous the relativization to contexts, it is the route itself that is then rendered superfluous. Relative utterance-truth does not provide a characterization of radical relativism.

I conclude that one should rest content with the characterization by means of the contention that radical relativism goes beyond the moderate two-dimensional framework of index and context, in the envisaged manner.

Acknowledgements Many thanks to the members of Arché and LOGOS and audiences in Barcelona, Paris, Southampton and St Andrews, in particular to Richard Dietz, John Hawthorne, Manuel García-Carpintero, Max Kölbel, John MacFarlane, Sebastiano Moruzzi, Elia Zardini, and anonymous referees.

References

- Egan, A., Hawthorne, J., & Weatherson, B. (2005). Epistemic modals in context. In G. Preyer & G. Peter (Eds.), *Contextualism in philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. (1980). Index, context, and content. In S. Kanger & S. Öhman (Eds.), *Philosophy and grammar*. Dordrecht: Reidel. Reprinted in *Papers in philosophical logic*, Cambridge University Press, 1998 (q.v.).
- MacFarlane, J. (2003). Future contingents and relative truth. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53, 321–336.
- MacFarlane, J. (2005). Making sense of relative truth. *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society*, 105, 321–339.

⁶ Of course, these views need not always make *explicit* mention to a context, as some context can be appropriately salient in a given occasion.

⁷ Or one may start using ‘utterance’ to *mean* a sentence at a context, with no connection with the act of *uttering* a token of that sentence.