

What does it take to enter into the circumstance?

Dan López de Sa

Published online: 6 February 2011
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In the recent literature on contextualism and relativism, one often finds disputes as to which kind of consideration would be relevant for positing a feature of a context as a parameter in the “circumstance of evaluation.”

Some, such as Jason Stanley, insist that this can only be via the presence of an operator in the language which shifts that feature:

[T]he difference between elements of the circumstance of evaluation and elements of the context of use is precisely that it is elements of the former that are shiftable by sentence operators. So the position that judges are elements of circumstances of evaluation but cannot be shifted by any sentence operators in the language is an untenable position in the philosophy of language (Stanley 2005, p. 150).

Others, such as John MacFarlane, consider this to be an unmotivated restriction, and argue that one alternative way to enter into the “circumstance” is by being a feature of a context with respect to which the truth of “propositions” expressed in the context is relative:

Certainly we should not posit a parameter of circumstances of evaluation without a good reason, but why suppose that the only thing that could be such a reason is an operator that shifts the parameter? To see how unreasonable [the restriction] is, consider what it would recommend if we were doing semantics for a language devoid of modal operators or counterfactual conditionals. Since

D. López de Sa (✉)
ICREA at Departament de Lògica, Història i Filosofia de la Ciència & LOGOS Universitat de
Barcelona, Montalegre 6, 08001 Barcelona, Spain
e-mail: dlopezdesa@ub.edu

this language would not contain any world-shifting operators, [it] would forbid us from relativizing propositional truth to worlds. But we would still be interested in knowing how the truth values of sentences of this impoverished language depend on features of the context of use, including the world of the context. A sentence S in the language—say, “Dodos were extinct in 2002”—might be true at C_1 (occurring at world w_1) and false at C_2 (occurring at world w_2). The only way we could account for this without relativizing proposition truth to worlds would be to say that different propositions are expressed at C_1 and C_2 . But this is highly undesirable. We would like to be able to say that a speaker at C_1 expresses the same proposition by S as does a speaker at C_2 , though the former speaks truly (in her context) and the latter speaks falsely (in her context). [The restriction] would forbid us from saying this, and this seems to me sufficient grounds for rejecting it, and with it Stanley’s argument against an epistemic standards parameter (MacFarlane 2009, p. 245).

In my view, this kind of dispute arises from two different independent roles that elements in “circumstances of evaluation” are sometimes assumed to have. In what follows, I will distinguish *indices* from *points of evaluation*, and I will try to show the significance of such a distinction vis-à-vis a proper taxonomy of the different positions in these debates, and which kind of arguments can and cannot vindicate some of them as opposed to others.

1 Sentences, contexts, and indices

According to Lewis (1980), *semantic values* of sentences must play a two-fold role: to determine which sentences are true in which contexts, and how the truth of a sentence varies when certain features of contexts are shifted—as to help determine the semantic values of larger sentences having sentences as constituents. For that, he distinguishes *context* and *index*:

A *context* is a location—time, place, and possible world—where a sentence is 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. Since we are unlikely to think of all the features of context on which truth sometimes depends, and hence unlikely to construct adequately rich indices, we cannot get by without context-dependence as well as index-dependence. Since indices but not contexts can be shifted one feature at a time, we cannot get by without index-dependence as well as context-dependence. An assignment of semantic values must give us the relation: sentence s is true at context c at index i , where i need not be the index that gives the features of context c . Fortunately, an index used together with a context in this way need not give all the relevant features of context; only the shiftable features, that are much fewer (Lewis 1980, pp. 21–22).

Each context c determines one particular index, *the index of the context*, i_c : that index having coordinates that match the appropriate features of c . But there may be many indices that are not the indices of any context.

According to Lewis, a sentence s at context c is true iff s is true at context c at index i_c .¹ Thus the coordinates of indices are not elements that should be specified in order for a sentence in a context to receive a truth-value: a context determines its index and hence a sentence and a context determines its value. Coordinates of indices are just the features of context that are shifted by some operator in the language. With respect to indices as introduced, something like Stanley's remark is certainly right: the position that (say) judges are coordinates of indices but cannot be shifted by any sentence operators in the language is "an untenable position in the philosophy of language."

MacFarlane agrees:

Since Lewis's "indices" are nothing more than technical devices for constructing a recursive definition of truth, it is true that there could be no motivation for positing a parameter of the index without an operator that shifts it. But, crucially, Lewis is not working with propositions in his semantic framework. (Indeed, a major point of his paper is that one does not need to.) This is an important disanalogy between his indices and Kaplan's circumstances of evaluation. The latter are constrained by factors that are irrelevant to the former, such as considerations about when we have one proposition or two distinct ones (MacFarlane 2009, fn. 17).

Let's explore this in more detail.

2 Contents and points

A sentence s and a context c determine the following function from indices to truth-values: that which makes true an index i iff s is true at c at i .

Let me call such functions *para-contents*, as they may easily fail to represent the appropriate objects of attitudes. An index is a tuple of shiftable features of context by operators of the language. Suppose that Lewis is right and 'It has been that ...', 'Somewhere ...', 'It must be that ...', and 'Strictly speaking ...' are operators in the relevant sense, so that time, place, world, and (some aspects of) standard of precisions are coordinates of indices (Lewis 1980, p. 27). Then one would hardly model the objects of beliefs and desires by these functions from indices to truth-values, the para-contents.

But maybe *other* functions from tuples of features of contexts to truth-values would do. Some people use 'proposition' for that which is the objects of—precisely so-called *propositional*—attitudes; and some people use 'proposition' for functions from worlds to truth-values. The existence of these two usages wouldn't

¹ In my view, the rejection of a contention like this is what negatively characterizes *radical relativism* as defended by MacFarlane (2003, 2005, inter alia) and Lasersohn (2005), see for discussion López de Sa (2009).

generate trouble for those who—and *only* those who—think that the objects of attitudes are indeed to be modeled by functions from worlds to truth-values. A proposition would then be true only relative to a certain feature of contexts, namely a world.

Propositions in the first sense may not be propositions in the second sense, however—that’s why in my view it is better to avoid the expression ‘proposition’ altogether in this kind of discussion. So let me call *contents* the objects of attitudes. Some people think that world is not the only feature of context to which one’s attitudes contents is relative. Maybe relative to a given world, a certain content is true at some times but false at some others. In that case, contents would be associated with functions from worlds and times to truth-values. Or maybe relative to a given world, a certain content is true relative to some taste-standard but not relative to some other. In that case, contents would be associated with functions from worlds and standards to truth-values. Same for senses of humor, bodies of knowledge, and so on and so forth.

I suggest to reserve *point of evaluation* for tuples of features of context to which the truth of contents is relativized.² The introduction of a parameter in a point of evaluation p is thus motivated by considerations of which features have to be specified in order for a content to acquire a truth-value.³

We can also introduce talk about the content of *a sentence* at a context with something along the lines of: the content of s at c is the content of the belief one would express by uttering s at c .⁴ Notice, however, that this would be a function from *points of evaluation* to truth-values, easily distinct from the para-content, the previous considered function from *indices* to truth-values that s at c determines. Assuming each context c determines one particular point of evaluation, p_c , then plausibly the content of s at c is true relative to p_c iff s at c is true.⁵

With respect to points as introduced, something like MacFarlane’s remark is certainly right: even if we were to assign contents to a language devoid of modal operators or counterfactual conditionals, we could have reasons to introduce worlds as parameters of points, allowing ‘Dodos were extinct in 2002’ to be true at c_1 (occurring at world w_1) and false at c_2 (occurring at world w_2) with the same content at c_1 and c_2 .

² This is not to be confused with the terminology in MacFarlane (2003, p. 329), which refers to tuples of features of context and coordinates of (Lewisian) indices.

³ Some may distinguish different kinds of content, relative to different sorts of points of evaluation (maybe only moral contents are true relative to worlds and moral viewpoints, say)—although some others may think that the category of objects of attitudes better be somehow uniform.

⁴ This would of course require various sorts of finessing I am not in a position to carry out here.

⁵ Some may want to identify the content of s at c with “what is said” by s at c . I tend to side with Lewis here: “Unless we give it some special technical meaning, the locution ‘what is said’ is very far from univocal. It can mean propositional content, in Stalnaker’s sense (horizontal or diagonal). It can mean the exact words. I suspect it can mean almost anything in between” (Lewis 1980, p. 41). As I read Lewis, according to him para-contents are not suited for playing the role of “what is said” by s at c either. That is why there is no semantic advantage in positing para-contents as the semantic values of sentences in context.

3 Indices vs. points

A feature of a context figures as coordinate in an index in virtue of there being an operator in the language that shifts it. By contrast, a feature of the context gets in as a parameter of a point of evaluation in virtue of being something to which the object of attitudes' truth is relative.

The contrast notwithstanding, indices could turn out to be *identical* to points, of course. If, for instance, worlds were the only shiftable feature of contexts *and* the content of attitudes was true only relative to worlds, then indices and points would be just worlds. If both worlds and times were the only shiftable features of contexts *and* the content of attitudes was true only relative to worlds and times, then indices and points would be just pairs of worlds and times. And so on.

But in so far as I can see, this would be no more than an accident. It is hard for me to see why one would have to necessarily find, in considerations in favor of (say) 'Strictly speaking ...' being an operator, the materials for an argument that one's beliefs are just true relative to (say) standard of precisions. So coordinates of indices need not be parameters of points. And, as MacFarlane emphasizes, there seems to be possible considerations in favor of contents being true just relative to (say) epistemic standards, independently of whether (say) 'by the epistemic standards appropriate to the law courts' is an epistemic-standard-shifting operator. So parameters of points need not be coordinates of indices.

4 The many relativisms

As implicit above, the notion that is relevant for characterizing the position explored in MacFarlane (2009) is that of points of evaluation, and not that of indices.

As observed by MacFarlane, the contention that contents' truth is relative to non-traditional features—i.e., that these non-traditional features enter as parameters in points of evaluation—need not be an expression of what I would call *radical* relativism as defended by MacFarlane (2003, 2005, inter alia) and Lasersohn (2005). Indeed we have just contemplated the possibility of adding these parameters under the assumption that s at c is true iff s at c is true at i_c , which radical relativism characteristically rejects.

As it is well known, in some philosophically interesting cases—notably, involving predicates of personal taste, perhaps evaluative predicates in general—there seem to be possible contrasting variations in judgments about an issue in the domain that do not seem to involve fault on the part of any of the participants. According to some, these appearances of faultless disagreement are to be endorsed: it may in effect be the case that s is true at c but false at c^* . According to more traditional *indexical contextualism*, this is so in virtue of the content of sentence s at c being different from that of s at c^* . This seems to straightforwardly account for the *faultlessness* of the judgments that could be expressed by using s at c but not at c^* . What about the facts involving intuitions of *disagreement*, as revealed in ordinary

disputes in the domain? Most presuppose that indexical contextualism simply cannot account for them, and is thereby to be rejected.⁶

The relevant features that distinguish c from c^* , instead of contribute determining different contents for s at c than at c^* , may just be among those features with respect to which a common content of s at c and at c^* is to be evaluated as true or false. In the terms I am suggesting, these may be further parameters in the points of evaluations. Hence the content of s at c and at c^* can be true relative to point p_c but false relative to point p_{c^*} . Such a view is what MacFarlane labels *non-indexical contextualism*.⁷ Non-indexical contextualism thus seems to provide a common object for diverging attitudes—hence, the disagreement—which may get indeed different values with respect to the different points determined by the subjects' different contexts—hence, the faultlessness.

Mutatis mutandis for other relevantly similar cases of apparent contextual variation of a sentence's truth-value.

5 Circumstances

Even if indices turn out not to be points, one can of course merge the two into a new tuple, *indices-plus-points*. And one can then say that a sentence s at context c is true at the index-plus-point $i + p$ iff s is true at c at i , and a content is true relative to $i + p$ iff it is true relative to p . Perhaps some conceive of “circumstances of evaluation” as these multi-task, heterogeneous in nature, index-plus-point tuples.

Absent an argument in favor of why coordinates of indices need be parameters in points, to hold that “circumstances” are that with respect to which contents are to be evaluated *and* that one way (perhaps among others) of entering them is via there being a shifting operator, is indeed to hold such a mixed conception of “circumstances.” This seems to occur precisely in Kaplan (1989) and also MacFarlane (2009).

In my view nothing worth having seems to be gained by having these mixed “circumstances” as index-plus-points tuples, and we lose the clarity of clearly separating tuples of features of context playing such different roles. Also, without them one avoids having to answer the title of this paper with “to be a feature of a context that *either* is shiftable by an operator in the language *or otherwise* such that the object of attitudes' truth-value is relative to it.”

⁶ I have tried to defend a Lewisian version of indexical contextualism from this objection, by exploiting presuppositions of commonality to the effect that the addressee is relevantly like the speaker of the context (López de Sa 2003, 2008). Max Kölbel seems recently to be more sympathetic to such a view, see his (Kölbel 2007) rejoinder to my (2007) discussion of his (Kölbel 2004) paper, and also Kölbel (2009).

⁷ Some use ‘relativism’ for the contention that there are further parameters in points. A recent example is: “Relativism is here understood to be the claim that sentences of some category express propositions the truth of which is relative to a parameter over and above the standard world parameter” (Kölbel 2009). As I argue in (2011), according to such usage, both moderate non-indexical contextualism and radical relativism proper qualify. As I say there, following the lead of Wright (1992), I myself would prefer to call *all* attempts to endorse appearances of faultless disagreement ‘relativisms,’ and then to distinguish moderate (indexical and non-indexical) contextualist versions of relativism from radical ones, see footnote 1.

Acknowledgments Earlier versions were presented in Barcelona, Berlin, Buenos Aires, St Andrews, and Stirling. Thanks to audiences in these occasions and to Manuel García-Carpintero, Max Kölbel, John MacFarlane, Peter Pagin, Clas Weber, Brian Weatherson, Elia Zardini, Dan Zeman, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal. Research partially funded by projects FFI2008-06153 and Consolider-Ingenio CSD2009-0056 (MICINN), and the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme FP7/2007-2013 under grant agreement no. FP7-238128.

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