

Reply to Ken Taylor

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Context Sensitivity vs. Situation Sensitivity

In *Insensitive Semantics* (INS) and several earlier articles (see C&L 1997, 1998, 2003, 2004) we appeal to a range of procedures for testing whether an expression is semantically context sensitive. We argue that claims to the effect that an expression, *e*, is semantically context sensitivity should be made only after checking whether *e* passes these tests. We use these tests to criticize those we classify as Radical and Moderate Contextualist (Taylor is one of our targets in the latter category.)

Taylor in his reply to us claims that the tests we appeal to are deficient because they fail to detect certain kinds of semantic context sensitivity. He says:

‘...if we keep the distinction between context-sensitivity and speech-situational sensitivity squarely in mind, we should find Cappelen and Lepore’s ‘test’ thoroughly irrelevant.’

We take ‘irrelevant’ here to mean that there's a certain kind of semantic variability, what Taylor calls 'situation sensitivity', that our various tests fail to detect.

Taylor's objection is based on a misunderstanding of our tests (and also of the versions of tests now used by many other philosophers, see for example Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson 2005, Hawthorne 2004, MacFarlane 2005, Richard 2003, Stanley 2004,). Since a clear understanding of these tests is important for understand the nature of context sensitivity, we'll spell out our view in some detail - to clarify exactly where Taylor has misunderstood.

Throughout the book, we emphasize that we do not take a stand on what the sources of semantic variability are: they certainly include both what Taylor calls the objective and intentional features of contexts, and possibly more (In this regard we align ourselves with Kaplan in 'Afterthoughts', he holds that 'directing intentions' determine the reference of a demonstrative utterance.) Whatever else Taylor might want to test for, we have a way to do it.

Here's how our tests work: Let 'relevant contextual features' be those features responsible for the semantic value of an expression varying between contexts of utterance -- whatever those features might be. In testing for semantic variability, we appeal to an array of tests, four of which are these:

Test #1: Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report: Take an utterance u of $S(e)$ in context C , by speaker A . If, in a relevantly different context C' , we can indirectly report u with 'A said that $S(e)$ ', that's evidence that e is semantically stable, i.e. that its semantic value doesn't vary between contexts of utterance.

Test #2: Collective Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports: Take several utterances, u_1-u_n , of $S(e)$ in contexts C_1-C_n , all of which are relevantly different. If, in a C' , we can indirectly report u_1-u_n with 'They said that $S(e)$ ' (where 'they' refers to the speakers of u_1-u_n) that's evidence that e is semantically stable, i.e. that its semantic value doesn't vary between contexts of utterance.

Test #3: Inter-Contextual Same-Saying Tests: If, in a relevantly different context C' a speaker B can utter $S(e)$ and in so doing say the same as what a speaker A said in uttering u , that's evidence that e is semantically stable, i.e. that its semantic value doesn't vary between contexts of utterance. (Notice: this test doesn't appeal to sentences containing 'said that').

Test #4: Collective Inter-Contextual Same-Saying: Take several utterances, u_1-u_n , of $S(e)$ in contexts C_1-C_n , all of which are relevantly different. If, in a context, C' we can utter $S(e)$ and say what the speakers of u_1-u_n said, that's evidence that e is semantically stable, i.e. that its semantic value doesn't vary between contexts of utterance. (notice: again no use made of the expression "said that").

Note that these tests all appeal to the notion of *relevantly different contexts*. We don't take a stand on what counts as relevantly different: that's for a proponent of semantic variability to tell us, and that's important in order to see why Taylor's criticism is off the mark. Our strategy is: if someone tells us that e is semantically unstable and that its semantic value varies with features F_1-F_n , then we run the

tests with F1-Fn as the relevantly different features. We do not assume, as Taylor seems to think, that the only relevant contextual features are what he calls objective, i.e. that they don't appeal, for example, to speakers intentions (we point this out repeatedly; see in particular Chapters 1 and 10).

We have to admit we're not exactly sure what Taylor has in mind by situation sensitivity, but we do understand that it involves speakers 'loading' values of various suppressed parameters, and that this loading is done, at least partly, by speakers' intentions. Take, for example, 'ready'; according to Taylor, in its *sub-syntactic basement* there's a parameter, and its semantic value is determined, in part at least, by speakers' intentions (see Taylor's (2) p.7).

If this is so, then relevantly different contexts are those in which speakers, according to Taylor, intend to load different values as values of this parameter in the sub-syntactic basement. If, even in such cases, 'ready' passes our tests, then that's evidence, we claim, that these features are not determinants of semantic values. That is, it's evidence that Taylor's hypothesis about parameters hiding out in the sub-syntactic basement is wrong. And that's exactly what we and our informants find when the tests are run in the right way: Consider test #2 (we could do this for all the tests, but time limitations rules that out): Notice that Taylor has a collective indirect report in his text.

(12) In S1 and S2, Nina said that John is ready.

Taylor conveniently fails to show how he can run our tests on (12). Here's a variation that's easy to have intuitions about: consider a general asking his officers (maybe 100s of them): 'Is everyone ready?' Suppose the answer he gets is "Everyone says they are ready" and he concludes: 'Everyone is ready'. What, according to Taylor, is the value loaded for 'ready' in this case? It can't be any one value, since they are all ready for very different things. (Note: what they are ready for might not even be part of the same project.) Since, according to Taylor, the parameters in the sub-syntactic basement are unavailable for binding, that's no way out here (even if they were so available; see Chapter 6 of INS about the Binding Argument and hidden indexicals.) Or consider a case, much discussed in our book, of reports made under ignorance, a version of Test#1. You overhear

part of a conversation in which Jill utters 'I'm ready', but you don't know what she's ready for. You later report her by 'Jill said that she's ready'. Notice that this isn't direct quotation, since there's a switch from 'I' to 'she', so it is a genuine indirect report, and it is certainly not the case that the speaker intended to load a particular value for 'ready' in here (further evidenced by the variation: 'Jill said that she was ready, but I'm not sure what she was ready for'.).

Because of these and many other examples like them that we provide in INS, we (with many others, see reference above) disagree with Taylor's claim that:

...it seems clear that a speaker who utters either (10) or (11) as a way of reporting (9) without loading a value onto the parameter for 'ready' has failed to ascribed a fully determinate propositional content to Nina.

(9) John is ready.

(10) Nina said that John is ready. [w/r/t (9) as uttered in S.1.]

(11) Nina said that John is ready. [w/r/t (9) as uttered in S.2.]

This is wrong because there are indirect reports (and pure-samesayings) in which the alleged parameter is **not and cannot** be loaded, but where the indirect reports **are true** (or the utterances **samesay** each other).

Semantics, Metaphysics, 'Rains' and 'Red'

Taylor says:

The purely or narrowly semantic content of an utterance will be the proposition or propositions, if any, that are determined by a sentence's syntactic structure and the combination of lexically, contextually, and speech situationally determined semantic values of its semantically valued constituents (Taylor Comments).

This formulation is one that we agree with (see our formulation of semantic minimalism in Chapters 1 and 10). Where we disagree, it appears, is over where to add hidden parameters. Taylor agrees with us that 'red' is semantically stable: Its semantic value is *red*. We disagree is over examples such as 'windy', 'rains' 'ready', 'smart', 'rich', quantified noun phrases, and others (and it's interesting to note that JM is on our side here, at least for some of these cases). In this respect Taylor holds exactly the kind of view we tagged *Moderate Contextualism* in our book and that we argued is an unstable position. In fact, we explicitly discuss

Taylor's view. We're surprised Taylor didn't address our arguments against his view -- it would have been interesting to hear what he had to say about them.

Absent a direct reply from Taylor, we'll just repeat what we say in the book. As far as we can tell, there are two aspects to Taylor's reply to the question 'Why is there a hidden parameter in 'rains', but not in 'red' or 'dances' or ...'"

- a. For 'rains' there is a *felt demand* for a contextual provision of a place', but no analogous demand is felt in connection with 'red' or 'dances'.
- b. 'It's red' and 'She's dancing' express fully determinate propositions, fully truth evaluable propositions, but 'it's raining', 'the cat is on the couch' and 'Alex is smart' do not.

Here's the relevant passage from our book:

If we have understood this right, Taylor's reply is in effect a version of the psychological reply. The first question we have is this: why should psychological facts about how people feel have any bearing whatsoever on the metaphysical question of whether a proposition exists (or is complete)' If it's just about the presence or absence of the relevant feelings, this is irrelevant. Taylor apparently thinks these feelings reflect metaphysical facts, but we don't know why he thinks that. But even if we put that issue aside, the reply misses the mark because it is possible to trigger these feelings with respect to any sentence, whatsoever, at least if we are allowed to talk to people about the relevant feelings.

We then go on to show how radical contextualists (such as Travis, Searle, Recanati, Moravcsik, and Relevance Theorists like Carston, and Sperber/Wilson) have produced examples that trigger these feelings for a very wide range of sentences. More generally, chapter 3 of the book is devoted to arguing that there's no way to give conditions for 'completeness' and 'incompleteness' of propositions in such a way that 'ready' and 'rains' comes out incomplete while "red", "ready for an exam", "rains in San Francisco" comes out complete. This is one of the points at which we are in full agreement with the Radical Contextualists: you don't get to be a little bit of a contextualist and preserve your intellectual integrity. Limitation of time prevents us from rehearsing all those arguments here, but for those interested we recommend reading Chapters 2-4 of the book.

We end with some brief comments on two claims Taylor makes, but doesn't argue for:

1. Taylor asserts, without argument, that 'rain' unlike 'dance' has an obligatory location theta role. We would have loved to see his arguments, since we're convinced there are no sound such arguments. In the absence of arguments, there's nothing to respond to here.
2. Towards the end of his discussion, Taylor says:

[Cappelen and Lepore] make the highly counter-intuitive claim, supported by no evidence that I have seen, that objects can be barely tall, that is, tall without relativization to any reference class or standard of tallness. They admit this to be an incredible claim, endorsed as far as I can tell, by exactly two philosophers

For those of readers interested in our arguments for the existence of minimal propositions, we suggest reading Chapter 11 of INS. For a serious criticism of those arguments, we recommend John MacFarlane's response in "Semantic Minimalism and Non-Indexical Contextualism"; for a reply to MacFarlane, see our "Reply to John MacFarlane".¹

Bibliography

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¹ With respect to the allegedly 'incredible claim endorsed...by only two philosophers', it might be worth noting that even one of our critics, John MacFarlane, agrees with us that an utterance of "A is tall" semantically expresses the proposition *that A is tall*, with no relativization to a comparison class (other who endorse this view are mentioned in our "Reply to John MacFarlane"). MacFarlane says: "This proposition is not a "schema," but "a fullblooded proposition with truth conditions and a truth value," that is, a truth value at each circumstance of evaluation." For more on how MacFarlane's position differs from ours, see the papers mentioned above.

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