

## Comments on John MacFarlane’s “Nonindexical Contextualism”

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### I. MacFarlane’s distinction between “*context-sensitivity*” and “*indexicality*.”

Using Kaplan’s Framework (from “Demonstratives”)

Characters: functions from contexts to “contents”

Contents: functions from “circumstances of evaluation” to extensions.

Expression type	Extension
Predicate	Set of individuals
(Declarative) Sentence	Truth-Value

#### One simple picture:

- Contexts are ordered  $n$ -tuples ( $n$ -tuples for short) of elements of certain kinds (such as worlds, times, locations, agents).
  - Contexts should be “proper,” in that they should correspond to situations in which an utterance could take place.

For example, the world, time and location of the context might have to be such that the agent of the context exists and is making an utterance in that location at that time in that world. (This is if we want, e.g., “I am here now” to come out true in any context in which it’s uttered.<sup>1</sup> As Kaplan puts it, the sentence should be “logically true” according to the logic of indexicals.)

- Circumstances are  $m$ -tuples ( $m \leq n$ ) of elements of certain kinds, but only those kinds as figure in contexts.
  - So within this simple picture, contexts might be quadruples from  $W \times T \times L \times A$ , while circumstances might be pairs from  $W \times T$ .
- The content of an expression  $e$  relative to a context  $c$  is  $\mathbf{f}_e(\mathbf{c})$ .
  - $f_e$  is the character of  $e$ .
- The extension of an expression  $e$  relative to a context  $c$  is  $(\mathbf{f}_e(\mathbf{c}))(\mathbf{v}_c)$ .
  - $v_c$  is the circumstance determined by  $c$  (which on this simple picture is the sub-tuple of  $c$  that is a circumstance.)

#### MacFarlane’s definitions:

- An expression is *indexical* iff it has different *contents* relative to different contexts.
- An expression is *context-sensitive* iff it has different *extensions* relative to different contexts.

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<sup>1</sup>There may be reasons to disagree with this. One might think that every time our answering machines play back a recording of ourselves saying “I’m not here now,” that an utterance is taking place, that the agent of the utterance is not in the location of the utterance (if we’re not screening our calls), and that it’s therefore (if we’re not screening) a true utterance.

### Examples:

Expression	Context-Sensitive?	Indexical?
“I was here yesterday”	✓	✓
“I am here now”	X	✓
“Delia Graff is in New Jersey at 4:30PM (EDT) on 17 September 2005.”	✓	X

### “Contingency as a form of [context-sensitivity]”

- MacFarlane suggests that there is support for this broad notion of context-sensitivity by appealing to David Lewis’s claim in “Index, Context and Content” that “contingency is a kind of indexicality.” The appeal is inappropriate for two reasons.

#### 1. First, Lewis rejects the distinction between character and content.

Lewis is arguing in the paper from which the quote is taken that the assignment of extensions to expressions relative to a context needn’t involve the assignment to those expressions, relative to that context, of *two* functions—a character and a content; rather, he argues, a single, more complex, but mathematically equivalent function from context-circumstance *pairs* to extensions is all that’s needed or desirable. Lewis calls this single function associated with an expression its “semantic value.” The semantic value of a sentence is then a function from context-circumstance pairs to truth-values. One way for this function to be non-constant is if its value varies as the world of the circumstance (what Lewis calls “index”) varies.<sup>2</sup> That’s contingency. Another way for it to be non-constant is if its value varies as the location of the context varies. That’s the so-called indexicality of location-sensitive expressions such as “here.” Lewis is happy, given his rejection of the use of both characters and contents, to treat these two sorts of variation as being on a par.

#### 2. Second, Lewis is a modal realist.

Lewis is happy to treat these two sorts of variation as being on a par because he’s a *modal realist*, and so thinks of non-actual possible worlds as being like California—just a different place from the one we’re in. As he would put it, California is a different *physical* space, while a non-actual possible world is a different *logical* space.

⇒ Making this even more concrete, Stanley (in the new book) notes that Lewis, as a modal realist, must allow quantifier domains to be restricted to objects in certain logical places (e.g. the actual world) as well as certain physical places (e.g. this room). Given this, assuming that quantifier domain restriction is a form of context-sensitivity, Lewis has to allow that when contingency results from restricting the domain of quantification to *actual* individuals, we get the result that contingency is a kind of context-sensitivity.

But since MacFarlane not only wants but depends on the separating out of the two functions—character and content, and since (I presume) he’s also not a modal realist, neither of these Lewisian justifications for regarding contingency as a form of context-sensitivity are appropriate for his view.

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<sup>2</sup>Here I retain the Kaplan terminology of “circumstance” rather than use Lewis’s term “index” just for the purpose of uniformity. This is somewhat misleading, since “circumstance” is what (following Kaplan) we take to be the kind of thing relative to which *propositions* take their truth values. But Lewis argues that circumstances in *that* sense aren’t sufficiently complex for compositional semantics.

## II. Context or Circumstance?

### Choosing where to locate the parameter that causes extension-variation.

#### Temporalism v. Eternalism

- If the extension of an expression varies as the parameter  $P$  of its context of utterance varies, do we attribute this variation to a non-constancy of its *character* with respect to  $P$ , or to a non-constancy of its *content* (in a context) with respect to  $P$ ?

**Delia is hungry.**

This sentence changes its truth value over time.

- Is that because it has different contents uttered at different times?  
(Temporally non-constant character: Eternalism)
- Or is that because the content it has takes different truth values at different times?  
(Temporally non-constant content: Temporalism)
- The distinction between temporalism and eternalism is really a metaphysical distinction, not a linguistic one. Can a *proposition* change its truth value over time?
  - ⇒ Yes: Temporalism.
  - ⇒ No: Eternalism.

In principle there could be temporal propositions, but none expressed by any sentence of our language.

- There's also a corresponding question about properties: can a single property change its extension over time; or are all properties temporally-specific (such as the property of *speaking at 5:30PM (EDT) on 17 September 2005*) and hence had eternally by an individual if had at all by that individual? Lewis was an eternalist about properties as well as propositions. But this is not a standard view.
  - ⇒ The question of change. (Favors temporalism.)
  - ⇒ Lewis's argument from temporary intrinsics. (Thought by many to favor eternalism.)
- How to choose depends on the role that contents play in your semantic framework.

#### Three roles for “contents.”

1. Contents as propositions: a proposition is a way the world could be; it's the kind of thing we learn, gather evidence for, believe, teach, communicate or *know* to be the case.
2. Contents as “semantic values”. The semantic value of an expression (relative to a context) is the kind of thing that composes with other semantic values to determine the semantic value of more complex expressions.
3. Contents as “what is said.” Individuated as finely or as coarsely as we need to in order to account for the appropriateness/truth (or lack thereof) of claims of the form: “they said the same thing,” or “they didn't say the same thing,” or “I've said *it* before and I'll say *it* again” (where we seem to have what-is-said anaphora).

- ⇒ In “Demonstratives” Kaplan seemed to think that contents could play all three roles at once.
- ⇒ Yet one could be an eternalist about propositions, and still think that “contents” need to change their truth-value over time on the grounds that there are temporal operators that operate on things that take different truth-values at different times. (See, e.g., Richard, Salmon.) Such a person thinks that contents are semantic values but not propositions.
- ⇒ Lewis argues, convincingly I think, that *if* contents are not propositions, but something more complex that’s neutral with respect to parameters (such as time) that propositions are not neutral with respect to, then we have no need to posit both characters and contents, but can get away with a single function that, combining the work of Kaplan’s two, delivers truth-values of sentences relative to contexts. (Lewis uses this conditional for a modus ponens argument for its consequent. I’m not sure I agree with that further step. King, in “Tense, Modality and Semantic Values,” argues vigorously against it.)

### Epistemic Standards

Truth value of knowledge claims can vary as the epistemic standards “in play” vary.

#### (A) Jason knows he’s in Piscataway.

- Piscataway as opposed to New Brunswick.
- Piscataway as opposed to being a disembodied brain in a Martian scientist’s vat on Mars,
  - where this is a farfetched “skeptical” possibility;
  - where this is probable and matters.

**Four Grades of accounting for difference in truth-value between two utterances of (A) (a true one and a false one):**

1. Different Language (different characters).
  - ⇒ Absurd. (But still need to say why.)
2. “Indexicalism” (same character, different contents).
  - ⇒ Can’t accommodate proper individuation of what is said.
3. “Non-indexical contextualism” (same character, same contents, different complex circumstances involving epistemic standards).
  - ⇒ MacFarlane’s view.
4. “knows that *p*” context-invariantly expresses a property that’s relational to things we didn’t think of it as being relational to—namely, the subject’s interests and the epistemic standards those interests require. (Subject-sensitive invariantism).

#### (B) Jason knew at 12:45PM (EDT) on 17 September 2005 that he was in Piscataway at that time.

- ⇒ “Shifting Sands” view of vague expressions: a combination of 2. and 4. “John is tall.” Which property is attributed “indexically” depends on speaker’s (or other relevant party’s) interests. But that property is one which is such that whether a thing has it can vary as the relevant party’s interests change.

What are contents on MacFarlane’s view?

1. Propositions? No, because the scale of strict to lax epistemic standards is not a dimension along which things can change or differ in the way they are. What are the candidate dimensions? World, time, place. **Nothing else!!!**

- Twin Earth (simultaneous and cyclic versions). Narrow Content versus externalism.

2. Semantic Values? Not unless needed for composition with operators.

3. What is said? Seems to be. But this is such a varied notion, it's not clear we want to account for it in this way.

(1) William: I want to be king.

(2) Harry: I want to be king.

⇒ They said the same thing.

⇒ So  $\exists x$  (each said  $x$ ).

So we need individual-neutral what-is-said contents.

⇒ And they want the same thing.

⇒ So  $\exists x$  (each wants  $x$ ).

So we need individual-neutral propositional contents.

(3) William: I hate when Bush congratulates himself.

(4) Harry: I hate when Bush congratulates himself.

⇒ So they hate the same thing.

⇒ So  $\exists x$  (each hates  $x$ ).

But what thing is that?

(5) William: I hate when daddy ignores me.

(6) Harry: I hate when daddy ignores me.

⇒ So they hate the same thing.

⇒ So  $\exists x$  (each hates  $x$ ).

But what thing is *that*?

Hypothesis: Reject existential generalization interpretation, and adopt substitutional quantification?

Conclusion: Need to account for when it's appropriate/true to say that two people (or a single person diachronically) said the same thing or want the same thing or need the same thing or hate the same thing. Not clear that Kaplanian contents for *every sentence* need to play a role in such an account.