

Radical Contextualism

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Dissertation Abstract

Philosophers inspired by Wittgenstein have been waging a guerrilla war against compositional, truth-conditional semantics (CTCS) since the rise to dominance of that approach to the study of meaning in the early 1970s. The neo-Wittgensteinian resistance involves two elements: first, a focus on the way our assessment of the truth conditions of sentences changes in various, seemingly open-ended ways when features of the surrounding extra-linguistic context of utterance are varied; and second, the deployment of what is the philosophical equivalent of a weapon of mass destruction—Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following. Examples of seemingly open-ended contextual variation in truth conditions and the reflections on rule-following are meant to be mutually reinforcing: the rule-following considerations are supposed to give general reasons for thinking that all representations have content only in virtue of being caught up in extra-linguistic practices, institutions, indeed the whole human “whirl of organism” (Cavell, 1976), and the examples of contextual variation in truth-conditions are meant to vividly illustrate the way that the content of representations depends on a seemingly open-ended range of background conditions.¹ In the hands of the neo-Wittgensteinian *radical contextualists*, both of these kinds of argument are meant to challenge the central commitment of CTCS. That commitment can be summed up as follows:

¹For examples of arguments that involve both elements, see Searle (1978); Recanati (2004); Travis (2006).

The truth-condition (or content, or proposition) of an occurrence of a sentence S in a context* C is determined by the semantic properties of the parts of S , their mode of combination, the context* C , and nothing else.²

This commitment is an essential part of the explanatory project of CTCS, which seeks to explain how speakers with finite cognitive capabilities master languages that can express an unlimited number of thoughts. If it turns out, as the radical contextualists try to show, that the content of a sentence can vary in unpredictable and open-ended ways depending on features of the surrounding context, then the project of developing a theory that attempts to state in a systematic way how the content of sentences are composed out of the meaning of their parts is doomed—it would have to be a “theory of everything” (Chomsky, 2000, p. 70).

Radical contextualists are sometimes disparaged as “grim pessimists” (Stanley, 2005), or as possessed of a “Californian” state of mind (Fodor, 2003, p. 100), and their arguments are summarily dismissed. There has been no close examination of the claims of the most radical contextualists in the sprawling debates about context and semantic theory. While I defend a version of CTCS against radical contextualist attacks in this dissertation, I think the neglect of radical contextualists’ arguments is unjustified. If the arguments of the radical contextualists were successful, they would threaten the entire project of systematic explanation of linguistic understanding. And even if the radical contextualists arguments fail (as I will argue they do), showing

²“Semantic properties” of parts of a sentence are elements of the language’s lexicon, “mode of combination” is the combination of the semantic properties of the parts of the sentence according to the language’s semantic composition rules, “context*” is an n-tuple of features required to represent the contextually variable, but regular, contribution that context-sensitive expressions like indexicals and demonstratives make to the truth condition of sentences. The technical notion of “context*” is distinct from the intuitive notion of context, which is not limited to an n-tuple of features that semantic theory has introduced to handle the regular semantic context-sensitivity of certain expressions. Radical contextualists argue that the technical notion of context* can never be inclusive enough to handle all of the ways that context influences the truth-conditional content of sentences while remaining explanatorily fruitful (Travis, 1981). This use of “context*” is akin to the distinction between “index” and “context” made in Predelli (2005, p. 354 n. 3), who uses the distinction to mark elements of context relevant for the interpretation of indexicals (the “index”), and the intuitive notion of context as a whole (“context”). But since “index” is in widespread use as a way of referring to circumstances of evaluation, I have refrained from adopting Predelli’s use. I will use “truth-condition”, “content” (of a sentence), and “proposition” interchangeably, to mean a function from circumstances of evaluation to truth-values.

why they fail reveals the limits of the explanatory project of CTCS.

The radical contextualist attack on CTCS has two prongs: one prong of the radical contextualist attack is *a priori*, the other is empirical. My defense of CTCS replies to both prongs, and consists of three interconnected parts: (1) I reply to three *a priori* arguments that radical contextualists argue undermine CTCS; (2) I describe in detail how color adjectives, which play a prominent role in the empirical prong of the radical contextualist attack, are the result of the interaction of different kinds of tractable context-sensitivity; and (3) I show that both radical contextualists and the defenders of systematic semantics rely on an overly simplistic empirical methodology, I develop a more comprehensive, nuanced method of eliciting intuitions, and I show how the application of this method alters the empirical foundation of the contextualist debate.

After an account of the basic commitments and explanatory goals of compositional truth-conditional semantics (CTCS) and the range of different methods that CTCS has adopted to handle the obvious forms of context-sensitivity and indeterminacy of meaning in natural language (including ambiguity and indexicality) in Chapter 1, I explain the empirical prong of the radical contextualist attack on CTCS in Chapter 2.

What follows is the master argument that constitutes the empirical prong of the radical contextualist attack on CTCS spelled out as explicitly as possible. Assume the central commitment of CTCS for the sake of reductio:

1. *The Central Commitment of CTCS*: The truth-condition (or content, or proposition) expressed by an occurrence of a sentence S in a context* C is determined by the semantic properties of the parts of S , their mode of combination, the context* C , and nothing else.
2. *Semantic Invariance*: The semantic properties of the parts of S , their mode of combination, and relevant aspects of the context* remain the same in context 1 (C1) and context 2 (C2).

First Conclusion: Therefore, the truth-condition expressed by a sentence S remains the same in C1 and C2 (from *the central commitment* and *semantic*

invariance).

3. *Contextualist Datum*: The intuitive truth-value what is said by utterances of sentence S does not remain the same in C1 and C2.

4. *Seemingly Semantic Intuitions*: The intuitive truth-value of what is said by utterances of sentence S in C1 and C2 is best explained in terms of the truth-value of occurrences of the sentence S in C1 and C2.

5. *It Takes Two to Make a Truth*: The truth-value of an occurrence of sentence S in a context* C is determined by the truth-condition (content) of S in C and the circumstance of the context*, and nothing else.³

6. *Circumstance Invariance*: The circumstances of evaluation are the same in C1 and C2.

Second Conclusion: Therefore, the truth condition of sentence S changes in C1 and C2 (from *the contextualist datum, seemingly semantic intuitions, it takes two to make a truth, and circumstance invariance*).

Contradiction: *the first conclusion* and *the second conclusion* contradict one another.

Though radical contextualist arguments are never spelled out this explicitly, in effect radical contextualists can be seen as trying to establish that that the most plausible way of avoiding the contradiction is to give up premise 1—*the central commitment of CTCS*.

Radical contextualists try to establish the *contextualist datum* with thought experiments like the following pair of vignettes about a refrigerator with a puddle of milk at the bottom of it:

Suppose that a refrigerator is devoid of milk except for a puddle of milk at the bottom of it. Now consider two possible speakings, by Odile, of the words, ‘There’s milk in the refrigerator’. For the first, Hugo is seated at the breakfast table, reading the paper. And from time to time looking dejectedly (but meaningfully) at his cup of black coffee, which he is idly stirring with a spoon. Odile volunteers, ‘There’s milk in the refrigerator’. For the second, Hugo has been given the task of cleaning the refrigerator. He has just changed out of his house-cleaning garb, and is settling with satisfaction into his armchair, book and beverage in hand. Odile opens the refrigerator, looks in, closes it and sternly utters the above words. [...]

³“If c is a context, then an occurrence of ϕ in c is true iff the content expressed by ϕ in this context is true when evaluated with respect to the circumstance of the context” (Kaplan, 1989, p. 522).

[...] Odile's words in the first case said what was false, while in the second case they said what was true. Both spoke of the same state of the world, or the same refrigerator in the same condition. So, in the first case, the words said what is false of a refrigerator with but a milk puddle; in the second case they said what is true of such a refrigerator. Optionally we may also say that what was said in the words in the first case differs from what was said in those words in the second (Travis, 1989, pp. 18-19).

The intuitions about the truth-value of what is said by Odile in the two contexts described in the *milk* thought experiment are meant to lend credence to *the contextualist datum*, by presenting intuitively plausible examples of changes in the truth values of a what is said by utterances of a sentence *S* in different contexts C1 and C2. For the empirical prong of the radical contextualist argument to challenge the central commitment of CTCS, it has to be the case that the other assumptions (*semantic invariance*, *seemingly semantic intuitions*, *it takes two to make a truth*, and *circumstance invariance*) hold as well. If those assumptions are all true, that means the central commitment of CTCS should be rejected.

Defenders of CTCS have responded by denying one of the other assumptions: either *semantic invariance* (Kennedy and McNally, 2010; Rothschild and Segal, 2009; Szabó, 2001), *the contextualist datum* (Fodor, 2003), *seemingly semantic intuitions* (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005; Sainsbury, 2001), or *circumstance invariance* (MacFarlane, 2007, 2009; Predelli, 2005). I discuss those existing responses to the empirical prong of the radical contextualist attack in Chapter 2.

Once the range of different possible responses to the empirical prong of the radical contextualist attack on CTCS is laid out, it is clear that CTCS has an arsenal of explanatory methods to deploy in response to different cases. The fight over whether the empirical prong successfully challenges the central commitment of CTCS will be messy and proceed on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, working through the radical contextualist examples reveals how powerful the explanatory apparatus of CTCS is, because CTCS often can explain the variation present in the examples using existing methods for accommodating context-sensitivity introduced to handle other cases.

There is therefore a lot riding on a handful of arguments developed by radical

contextualists that, prior to this dissertation, haven't been discussed in detail. These radical contextualist arguments are what John Haugeland has called "debunking arguments", which "try to show *a priori* that [some theory] is not possible". Debunking arguments "rest on general principles and/or conceptual intuitions and hence are more or less independent of empirical results" (Haugeland, 1985, p. 247).

In Chapter 3, I describe three *a priori* debunking arguments that radical contextualists try to use to undermine CTCS. All three arguments assume that CTCS has more substantial commitments than it needs to have. For example, Recanati's contemporary version of Waismann's open-texture argument assumes that CTCS is committed to giving a reductive account of the content of expressions. As long as CTCS does not accept such a reductive account of content, then Recanati's argument doesn't get a grip. Searle argues that the contribution that the Background makes to the content of representations cannot be represented because any representation of the contribution of the Background (a sentence in a semantic theory, for example) itself depends on the Background for its content. But, even granting that there aren't any representations that have their content intrinsically (without some contribution from the Background), Searle's argument assumes (without argument) that CTCS can't rely on context-sensitive representations to represent how the Background affects the content of certain representations.

Travis employs a two-step debunking argument against CTCS. The first step argues that subjects can't grasp content understood as an extensionally defined function because doing so would require subjects to be acquainted with circumstances they have not yet encountered. The obvious reply to that argument is to concede that a subject cannot grasp an extensionally defined function that includes circumstances of evaluation that a subject has not yet encountered, but subjects *can* grasp a co-extensive intensionally defined function (a rule). The second step in Travis's argument challenges the idea that subjects grasp not an extensionally defined function, but an

intensionally defined function. Travis argues that there is nothing in the subject that makes it the case that she grasps one function F rather than another function F^* that agree in the way they pair circumstances with extensions up to the present, and then diverge in the future.

The second step in Travis's argument is a version of the argument advanced by Kripke's rule-skeptic. Travis asks for an account of what makes it the case that a subject grasps a function F rather than a function F^* that agrees with F in its outputs up to the present and then diverges. Travis's argument can be defused by embracing the "flat-footed" response to the skeptic, which insists that what makes it the case that a subject grasps F and not F^* is just the fact that she grasps F and not F^* . The picture of content that emerges unscathed after the radical contextualist attack is therefore non-reductive (to avoid the challenges from open texture and rule-skepticism) and intensionally specified (so that subjects can grasp it).

After responding to the *a priori* prong of the radical contextualist attack on CTCS, I turn to consider the empirical prong in detail. Radical contextualists say that the contextual variation they are interested in "holds of any English predicate" (Travis, 1994, p. 172), or that it is "true of predicates in general" (Travis, 1985, p. 346). They cite dozens of examples of apparent variation in the truth-conditions of utterances featuring a wide variety of different kinds of expressions to back that claim up. But a striking feature of the set of radical contextualist examples is the prominence of *color adjectives*. Color adjectives seem like an ideal kind of expression to cite in support of radical contextualism. They do appear to display forms of context-sensitivity that are hard to characterize in a systematic way. But for that very reason they are also where the empirical prong of the radical contextualist attack can be turned back most effectively: If CTCS can provide a satisfying account of the contextual variation displayed by color adjectives, about which radical contextualist claims about untamable context-sensitivity seem most plausible, then there is reason

to believe radical contextualist claims about other expressions can be handled by CTCS as well.

In Chapter 4, I criticize and revise the most sophisticated attempt—recently developed by Chris Kennedy and Louise McNally (K&M)—to handle color adjectives within the explanatory framework of CTCS. K&M’s proposal can account for a variety of previously unnoticed forms of context-sensitivity displayed by color adjectives, but I will argue that it still doesn’t have the resources to account for the full range of forms of context-sensitivity operating in canonical examples of contextual variation introduced by radical contextualists. I modify the K&M analysis to accommodate the variety of forms of context-sensitivity displayed by color adjectives, and I uncover a previously unnoticed source of truth-conditional variation at work in the examples employed by proponents of radical contextualism. While I agree with radical contextualists that color adjectives display wide-ranging context-sensitivity, I disagree that they pose a radical threat to CTCS. Peeling apart the different kinds of context-sensitivity and ambiguity at work in the radical contextualist deployment of color adjectives reveals more context-sensitivity than one might expect, but not the wholesale, untamable variability the radical contextualists endorse.

In Chapter 5, I introduce a novel challenge to the linguistic *evidence* that contextualists of all varieties (not just radical contextualists) present in support of linguistic context-sensitivity. The primary evidence for contextualism consists of intuitions generated in response to a variety of different thought experiments, similar in structure to the *milk* thought experiment (described above), which consist of two different contexts, C1 and C2, a state of affairs *SoA* that remains the same in C1 and C2, and a target sentence *TS*:

Milk

C1: Hugo is seated at the breakfast table, reading the paper. And from time to time looking dejectedly (but meaningfully) at his cup of black coffee, which he

is idly stirring with a spoon.

C2: Hugo has been given the task of cleaning the refrigerator. He has just changed out of his house-cleaning garb, and is settling with satisfaction into his armchair, book and beverage in hand.

SoA: The refrigerator is devoid of milk except for a puddle of milk at the bottom of it.

TS: Odile says to Hugo: “There’s milk in the refrigerator” (Travis, 1989, pp. 18-19).

Both contextualists and their opponents report the intuition that the truth-value of *TS* is different in C1 and C2, but offer different explanations of that intuition: Contextualists explain the variation in terms of the changing semantic content (or truth-condition or proposition) of *TS*, while their opponents offer an explanation of the intuition in terms of a difference in the circumstances of evaluation, or in terms of some pragmatic mechanism, like a Gricean implicature (generated in this case by a violation of the maxim of *relevance*). But there is an alternative explanation of the intuitive data that has remained unexplored and which threatens to undermine the existing explanations of the intuitive data, both contextualist and non-contextualist.

The alternative explanation is that the intuitions that are the foundation of the contextualist debate can be explained as a result of features of *experimental design*. There are well-established theories of how the design of experiments can affect the intuitions of subjects, yielding intuitions that are artifacts of the particular way the experiment is set up, rather than evidence of underlying semantic or pragmatic facts. This kind of interference has not received much attention in the literature on contextualism, even though the status of linguistic intuitions in neighboring fields, like syntactic theory, has been a topic of serious debate for decades (Schütze, 1996), and the general reliability of intuitions in philosophy has recently become a topic of intense investigation.

I argue that there is good reason to believe that several different features of experimental design affect the intuitions generated by contextualist thought experiments,

including *experimenter bias* and *exclusive reliance on absolute truth-value intuitions*. *Experimenter bias* is an effect generated when experimenters disclose (even unconsciously) their own beliefs about the “correct” response to an experiment. Exclusive reliance on absolute truth-value intuitions may distort the data that contextualist thought experiments generate by forcing subjects to choose less than optimal responses. Opening up the range of possible responses to certain experiments radically changes the data that they generate. DeRose (1992, 2009), an exception to the general contextualist neglect of experimental design, argues that contextualist thought experiments should be arranged to accommodate a “truth/falsity asymmetry” in intuitions. I draw on empirical evidence from Wason (1961) to criticize DeRose’s proposal.

I not only show how these different kinds of bias affect the intuitions that are the empirical foundation of contextualism, I also show how to control for these effects by constructing revised versions of familiar contextualist thought experiments. I argue that contextualists and their opponents have been drawing conclusions from highly unreliable data, and I conclude that participants in the contextualist debate need to thoroughly reconsider what counts as reliable evidence before the debate can make any significant progress.

In Chapter 6, the final chapter of my dissertation, I summarize the results of the preceding chapters and conclude that an adequate response to the radical contextualist attack on CTCS requires deploying a range of different techniques for accommodating the wide-ranging effects of context on semantic content, acknowledging the limits of the explanatory project of CTCS, and developing and consistently applying a more sophisticated method of generating evidence for semantic and pragmatic theories.

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