Content Relativism and Semantic Blindness[1]

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For some relativists some of the time the evidence for their view is a puzzling data pattern: On the one hand, there's evidence that the terms in question exhibit some kind of content stability across contexts. On the other hand, there's evidence that their contents vary from one context of use to another. The challenge is to reconcile these two sets of data. Truth relativists claim that their theory can do so better than contextualism and invariantism. Truth relativists, in effect, use an argument to the best explanation: they present data they claim to be able to handle better than any competing theory[2].

My interest is in how semanticists should react to this allegedly puzzling data pattern. I argue that what generates the appearance of a puzzle is a mistaken assumption about the relationship between semantic content and speech act content (i.e. the relationship between semantic content and what speakers assert, say and claim[3]). When this mistaken assumption is corrected for, *any* semantics can deal with this data pattern. It doesn't cut either way with respect to the debate between the contextualist, invariantist and truth-relativist.

I show this by first presenting what I take to be data (some might want to call it a theory) about speech act content and semantic content. I call this collection of data *Pluralistic Content Relativism* (PCR). I show that when PCR is added to contextualism *or* invariantism, those theories can easily deal with the (allegedly) puzzling data pattern relativists use to motivate their

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[2] This is obviously not the *only* argument that can be or has been used in favor of relativism. The claim is only that this is the central argument in the papers I discuss (by John MacFarlane and Peter Lasersohn.)
[3] There are a number of terms in the family of 'say' and 'assert'. What follows is supposed to apply to the whole range of such terms.

theories. Not only can they deal with it - PCR predicts it. PCR is, moreover, independently motivated, i.e. it is not a view introduced specifically to reply to the objections from truth-relativists.

Warning: those looking for an argument in favor of a particular semantic theory as an alternative to relativism will be disappointed. This paper is about methodology: it is about how *not* to do semantics. The kind of data truth relativists focus on will *not* help you adjudicate between competing semantic theories. The only positive theory defended in this paper is PCR - but it is not a semantic theory and doesn't tell you anything about the semantics of any particular set of terms.

My focus is on the work of John MacFarlane and Peter Lasersohn[4], not because their arguments are particularly guilty of the kind of mistake I will outline. On the contrary, their presentations are framed in a way I find particularly useful. They present the data more or less exactly as I see it[5] and the clarity of their presentations makes it particularly easy to show the relevance of PCR.

The paper has two parts. In Part One, I present PCR and sketch the kinds of argument used by Cappelen and Lepore (C&L, for short, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006) and Scott Soames (2002, 2005, forthcoming) in support of it. In Part Two I use PCR to evaluate four arguments for truth-relativism (three from MacFarlane and one from Lasersohn).

Part I: Pluralistic Content Relativism (PCR)

PCR can be presented as the conjunction of three theses P1, P1.1 and P2.

P1. An utterance u of a sentence S in a context C will (literally[6]) assert (and *say* and *claim*) a plurality of propositions.[7]

I call this thesis *Pluralism*.

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[4] For related work see Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson (2005), Eagan (forthcoming), Kolbel (2002).
[5] For a related presentation of this kind of data, see C&L (2006).
[6] As opposed to *roughly*, or *metaphorically*, or *indirectly*, or *almost*, or any such qualifier. For a discussion of this point see C&L (1997). I'll leave out this qualifier from now on.
[7] If you prefer to talk about speakers making assertions by uttering sentences rather than utterances making assertions, that's fine. Nothing in what follows will depend on the choice of terminology here.

P2. What's said by an utterance u of S in a context of utterance C varies between contexts of interpretation.[8]

I call this thesis *Content Relativism*.

Finally:

P1.1. At most one of the propositions asserted by an utterance, u of a sentence S, relative to a context of interpretation, CI, the proposition semantically expressed by u.

I discuss these in turn.

§1: Pluralism (P1)

Jeff King in conversation pointed out to me that this paper does no more than defend a conditional: *if* PCR is correct, *then* one line of argument in favor of truth relativism fails. I'm not trying to defend the antecedent here. I might have written too much about that already, so I do no more than refer readers to earlier work and sketch the kind of argument that can be used to establish the P1. That of course makes the exercise somewhat less interesting if you are not convinced by PCR (and P1 in particular). However, even if you're unconvinced by the antecedent, there might be some interest in seeing whether the conditional can be defended: if you really don't like relativism about truth and I can convince you that if PCR is true, it can account for the data advanced in support of truth-relativism, this might make you more sympathetic towards PCR.

I think of P1 as a characterization of our considered judgments about the nature of assertion as these are reflected in our practice of indirectly reporting each other. Here's a brief sketch of the kind of data that used as evidence for P1[9]:

Illustration #1: The Dresser (Cappelen and Lepore (1997)): Imagine an utterance of (1), by A.

1. At around 11 p.m., I put on a white shirt, a blue suit, dark socks and my brown Bruno Magli shoes, I then got into a waiting limousine and drove off into heavy traffic to the airport, where I just made my midnight flight to Chicago.

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[8] *A context of interpretation* is just what you would think it is: a context from which an utterance is interpreted. An utterance u of S in C can be interpreted from infinitely many contexts of interpretation.
[9] For many other examples of this kind and more elaborate discussion of them, see Cappelen and Lepore 1997, 1998, 2004 and Soames, 2002, 2003, and (forthcoming).

According to Pluralism, 1.1 - 1.7 are all true descriptions of what was said by an utterance of (1) (Note: all of these are obviously different propositions, that determine different truth condition):

1.1. A said that he put on a white shirt.

1.2. A said he put on shoes

1.3. A said that he was wearing shoes when he went to the airport

1.4. A said that he was stuck in traffic on his way to the airport

1.5. A said that he dressed around 11 p.m., went to the airport and took the midnight flight to Chicago.

1.6. A said that he dressed before he went to the airport.

1.7. A said that he put on some really fancy shoes before he went to the airport.

The extent to which (1.1)-(1.7) seem natural will depend on the circumstances of the report; so arguments for Pluralism are usually accompanied by vignettes that describe the context for the report. Having argued that these reports (in those contexts) are literally true (and not just appropriate or warranted), Pluralists conclude that in uttering (1), A said the complement clauses of (1.1 - 1.7). That's only a tiny sample of what was said in uttering (1).

Illustration #2: The Terrorist (from Soames (2002)):

A terrorist has planted a small nuclear device in a crowded stadium downtown. There is no time to evacuate the building or the surrounding area. In speaking to the negotiator, he utters (2)

(2) I will detonate the bomb if my demands are not met,'

knowing that it is obvious that if he does so, thousands of people will die, and intending to communicate precisely that. The negotiator reports to his superior that the terrorist said that he will kill thousands of people if his demands are not met.

All of (2.1. - 2.4) are true:

2.1. He says that he will kill thousands of people if his demands are not met.

2.2. He says that he will detonate the bomb if his demands are not met.

2.3. He says that he will create mayhem downtown if his demands are not met.

2.4. He says that he will inflict great damage on our community if we don't do as he says.

Cappelen/Lepore (1997) summarize the lessons from such examples as follows:

> ... indirect reports are sensitive to innumerable non-semantic features of reported utterances and even on the context of the report itself. As a result, typically there will be indefinitely many correct indirect reports of any particular utterance. (p. 291)

Soames (2002) draws a related conclusion:

> [The phenomenon of many propositions being expressed by an utterance of a sentence]…is an extremely general one that has nothing special to do with proper names, indexicals or any of the semantically contentious issues that are of special concern here. On the contrary, the phenomenon of asserting more than the semantic content of the sentence one utters in a context is all but ubiquitous…what an assertive utterance of a sentence s counts as asserting depends not only on the semantic content of s, but also on the obvious background assumptions in the conversation and the speaker's intention about how the speaker's remarks is to be interpreted in the light of them. (pp. 76-78)

These are the kind of arguments I take as evidence of P1. A more convincing case for P1 would require much more data and responses to alternative interpretations of it. For some efforts in this direction see references in note 9 above.

§2   P1.1 - Pluralism and Semantic Content

In what follows I assume that an utterance of a sentence, S in a context of utterance, C, has at most one proposition as its semantic content relative to a context of interpretation, CI[10]. If so, at most one of the propositions expressed by an utterance u of S relative to CI can be its semantic content, i.e. P.1.1 (repeated here):

> **P.1.1.** At most one of the propositions asserted by an utterance, u of a sentence S, relative to a context of interpretation, CI, is the proposition semantically expressed by S.

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[10] I say 'at most' because I want to keep open the possibility that semantic contents of sentences (relative to contexts of utterance) are non-propositional objects.

We could introduce a notion of semantic content that allows an utterance to have more than one semantic content relative to a context of interpretation, but that's not an option I will explore here.

P.1.1 leaves us with two options for how to think about the relationship between asserted content and semantic content. To describe these (and much else in this paper), I have to talk about sentences, utterances, contexts of utterance, and contexts of interpretation. To make this talk more perspicuous, I use the following simplifying device: '$u_{s/c}$' denotes an utterance u, of sentence S, in context of utterance C. The two versions of P 1.1 are P 1.1.1. and P1.1.2:

> **P1.1.1**: The semantic content of $u_{s/c}$, is among the propositions asserted relative to every context of interpretation.

> **P1.1.2**: The semantic content of $u_{s/c}$ is not among the propositions asserted relative to every context of interpretation.

The choice between P1.1.1 and P1.1.2 depends, in part, on how one thinks about semantic content. For someone who thinks the semantic content of $u_{s/c}$ relative to CI is always a proposition, P1.1.1 is attractive: it's is hard to see how, if speakers know the meaning of their words and those meanings determine that $u_{s/c}$ expresses p and the speaker knows that her audience knows this (etc), that she isn't asserting p (among other propositions she is asserting) relative to every context of interpretation. If, on the other hand, you think there are cases where the semantic content is some kind of sub-propositional object, e.g. a propositional skeleton or some such thing[11], P1.1.2 is the natural position to endorse: if the semantic content isn't a proposition, it isn't assertable. If so, it's not assertable relative to any context of interpretation. Other issues can affect the choice between P1.1.1 and P1.1.2 too.

In what follows we'll not choose between P1.1.1 and P1.1.2 - in earlier work I have moved back and forth between them; C&L (1997) defends P1.1.1 and C&L (2004) is agnostic. Soames (2002) defends P1.1.1, but moves on to P1.1.2 in Soames (2005) and (forthcoming). More generally, this paper is neutral on how pluralists should think about semantic content in specific cases. The goal in this paper is to focus on the implications of PCR for certain kinds of arguments (the arguments adduced in favor of relativism), not to push a particular theory of semantic content.

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[11] See Bach 1994, Soames (forthcoming) and Cappelen (forthcoming) for a discussion of skeletons.

§3   P2: Content Relativism

Two versions of P2 will be discussed in what follows. The first follows from P1 combined with some minimal additional assumptions about human psychology. Recall, according to P1, each utterance u of a sentence S expresses a set of propositions R. The following seems obvious: for an interpreter, some members of R will be more salient than others. Suppose all of 1.1 - 1.7 are said by the utterance of (1). It is still unlikely that all of these are equally salient to all interpreters (including the speaker). Consider (2.4) as a description of what said by an utterance of (2). An interpreter who thinks the terrorist is helping the community by blowing up an ugly building (without causing any casualties), might not find (2.4) to be a salient component of what was said. In this regard, P2.1 follows almost immediately from Pluralism (given mundane facts about salience):

P2.1: What's *saliently* asserted by $u_{s/c}$ varies between contexts of interpretation.
P2.1 is a *weak* version of content relativism. According to P2.1, what is *saliently said* by $u_{s/c}$ will vary between contexts of interpretation. The picture is this: A utters S in C. In so doing she expresses a range of propositions $p_1 \ldots p_n$. Contingent on an interpreter's interests and beliefs, one (or more) of these propositions will be salient. Which one this is will vary between contexts of interpretation.

According to P2.1 the propositions asserted by $u_{s/c}$ are the same relative to all contexts of interpretation. According to the second version of P2 the set of asserted propositions vary between contexts of interpretation:

P2.2: The set of propositions asserted by $u_{s/c}$ varies between contexts of interpretation. Think of this as *strong content relativism*. There are various ways one might defend this stronger version of content relativism. Here are two:

a. If the locution 'A said that p' is context sensitive, i.e. if it is true to utter "A said that p" in C, but not in C', there's a short step to P2.2, (if we assume P1, as I will in what folows). The context sensitivity of 'said that' leads to P2.2 once we add a couple of innocuous assumptions: if what speakers say is closely related to true indirect reports of what they say (and how could it not be?) and if the latter varies across contexts of interpretation, then what speakers say varies across contexts of interpretation as well, i.e. P2.2. [12], [13]

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[12] Cappelen/Lepore (2001) say:
"In effect, our practice of reporting others treats what is said as a four-place relation between a sentence and its context of utterance and a reporting sentence and its context of utterance. In determining what is said we obviously draw upon information about specific intentions, knowledge, and history of the speaker in C and, not so obviously, we can also draw upon like features of C*, the context in which we report what is said." (p.43)

b. Alternatively, we could just assume P2.2 and see what work that assumption will do for us in theorizing about language and communication. If it that assumption turns out to help us account for a great deal of data, we have a reason for believing it to be true.

In what follows I rely on the weaker version of content relativism, i.e. P2.1, not P2.2. Though I think P2.2 is true, it is harder to establish than P2.1. Since the arguments below only require P2.1, there's no need to rely on the stronger principle. (For one possible exception to this, see note 29.)

There's a third version of content relativism, call it *monistic content relativism*. This is P2.2 and P1.1 without P1, i.e. content relativism without the pluralism. On this view, there's one proposition asserted by any utterance of a sentence, that proposition is its semantic content, and that content can vary between contexts of interpretation. Monistic content relativism will not play a role in any of what follows, but if you endorse monistic content relativism, the line of argument here used against truth relativism could be taken over almost directly. All you need to is change the terminology a little.

Three final points about PCR, before moving on to the discussion of arguments for truth relativism:

• PCR implies that speakers don't have first person authority over what they say. By uttering a sentence, they might end up saying things they are not aware of having said - they might even end up saying things they would deny having said. For elaboration on this possibility, see C&L (2004), Chapter 13 (some such cases will also arise in the discussion below).

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[13] Soames (2002) considers, but does not endorse, the following view:
"Roughly speaking, *X says that S* is true relative to a context C iff (i) the referent of X assertively uttered a sentence S* in a context C*, and (ii) the proposition semantically expressed by S in C is something reasonably intended by X to be a potentially direct, immediate, and relevant inference (on the part of the conversational participants in c*) from S* together with the background assumptions presupposed in C*. Suppose further that what counts as direct, immediate, and relevant inferable from the speaker's utterance plus background information is something that varies to some extent from context to context; … If this view is correct, then there should be cases in which the proposition expressed by Soames said that S in C is compatible with the proposition expressed by Soames didn't say that S in C'. In a case like this, what at first might seem to be a factual dispute turns out to be nothing more than the adoption of different discretionary standards regarding how close a proposition must be to the semantic content of the sentence uttered by the agent in order to count as something the agent said." (Soames 2002, n. 24, p. 336)

- I doubt that what I have said so far will convince someone not already convinced of PCR, but one methodological point should be clear: It is not an priori truth that a speaker who utters a sentence asserts only one proposition and that this one proposition is asserted relative to all context of interpretation. It is an empirical claim about assertion and it is itself in need of justification. Given the data presented briefly above, my sense is that the burden of proof here is on someone who denies PCR. (For some attempts, see Richard (1998), Reimer (1998), and the replies in C&L (1998)).

- According to PCR, many propositions are asserted by an utterance, u, relative to a context of interpretation. So far I have said nothing about *how* this content is generated. I have not presented a theory of speech act content. I also haven't given you a theory of the relationship between the semantic content and the rest of the speech act content. I have not said anything about *how* a particular part of the speech act content becomes salient in a context of interpretation. For reasons I've given elsewhere (see C&L, 2004, chapter 13), I'm not convinced this is the kind of thing that lends itself to a theory, but nothing depends on that assumption in what follows[14].

Part II: PCR and Four Arguments For Relativism

In the rest of this paper I look at some arguments for truth-relativism and evaluate those arguments on the assumption that some version of PCR is true. I argue that if PCR is correct, these arguments fail. More generally: the *kinds* of arguments used in support of relativism falter if PCR is correct. The arguments (i.e. the data patterns appealed to) provide no evidence for truth-relativism over PRC. Since PCR is compatible with both contextualism and invariantism, no

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[14] It is worth mentioning three additional features of PCR that would need more extensive discussion if my goal was a full-fledged presentation of the view:
  1. *Local vs. Global PCR:* PCR can apply either globally or locally. A global version applies to all utterances of all sentences. A local version is less ambitious; PCR would have to justify why one set of sentences (or utterances of sentences) were not subject to the kind of relativism that other sentences (utterances) are.
  2. *PCR and Negotiation*: A speech act pluralist need not say that for every proposition p it is settled whether $u_{s/c}$ said that p relative to context of interpretation CI. A possible view is that it can be indeterminate whether $u_{s/c}$ said that p relative to CI. It might, for example, be up for negotiation in CI whether $u_{s/c}$ said that p relative to CI.
  3. *PCR and Error*: Interpreters could be wrong about what's said by $U_{s/c}$ relative to CI. It is certainly no part of PCR that interpreters are infallible. A lot of the explanations provided in the text below could be presented as cases where interpreters make mistakes about speech act content. To keep the discussion simple, I don't pursue that strategy, but a fuller presentation of PCR might rely heavily on it.

evidence has been provided that favor truth-relativism over any of these alternatives.

§5   Argument #1: MacFarlane's 'Big Picture Argument' for Relativism about Knowledge

John MacFarlane has argued for a relativistic semantics for a number of terms and here I will focus on his argument for relativism about 'know' (in MacFarlane 2005.) The kind of data MacFarlane focuses on is a peculiar pattern of content stability and variability between contexts. One the one hand, there's strong evidence that sentences containing 'know' exhibit variability in content across contexts. This provides evidence for contextualism about 'know', i.e. the view that its semantic value shifts between contexts of utterance. On the other hand, these sentences exhibit certain kinds of content stability across contexts. This provides evidence that 'know' is semantically stable. Here is MacFarlane's description of the variability data:

> **D1 - Variability Data:** Normally, I am perfectly happy to say that I know that my car is parked in my driveway. I will say this even when I'm at work, several miles away. But if someone asks me how I know that my car has not been stolen (and driven away), I will admit that I do not know this. And then I will have to concede that I do not know that my car is in my driveway: after all, if I knew this, then I would be able to deduce, and so come to know, that it has not been stolen. (p. 200, MacFarlane 2005)

Here's MacFarlane's description of the stability data[15]:

> **D2 - Stability Data:** When standards have been raised, I will say not only that I don't know that my car is in my driveway, and that I didn't know this earlier, but that my earlier assertion of "I know that my car is in the driveway" was false. In part, this is because we tend to report knowledge claims homophonically, even when they were made in very different epistemic contexts. … I won't just say that it was false; I will treat it as false. If challenged, I will retract my earlier claim, rather than reformulating it in a way that shows it to be consistent with my current claim. (p. 202-3, MacFarlane 2005)

According to MacFarlane, no *standard* semantics for 'know' can account for all this data. About the invariantist he says:

> The apparent variability of standards suggests that the truth of sentences containing "know" depends somehow on varying epistemic standards. That would rule out strict invariantism. (p. 204, MacFarlane 2005)

About the contextualist, he says:

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[15] MacFarlane also discusses data about how 'know' behaves when embedded within the scope of temporal and modal operators. Since this is used primarily in the discussion of 'subject sensitive invariantism', a discussion I ignore for the purposes of this paper, I leave that out. See C&L (2006) for some further discussion of that view.

…the facts about truth ascriptions and retraction suggest that the semantics of "know" is use-invariant. That would rule out contextualism. (p. 204, MacFarlane 2005)

The solution, according to MacFarlane, is truth-relativism:

How could there be a semantics for "know" that was use-invariant and circumstance-invariant, but still in some way sensitive to changing epistemic standards? … Here is my proposal. The epistemic standards relevant to determining the extension of "know" are not those in play at the context of use or those in play at the circumstance of evaluation, but those in play at the *context of assessment*. (p.207)

On this view, the proposition asserted by an utterance in a context can vary between contexts of assessment:

A sentence is context-sensitive in the usual way, or *use-sensitive*, if its truth value varies with the context of use (keeping the context of assessment fixed). A sentence is context-sensitive in the new way, or *assessment-sensitive*, if its truth value varies with the context of assessment (keeping the context of use fixed). (p.207)

The view explored in this paper, PCR, is an alternative to truth-relativism that's compatible with both invariantism and contextualism. According to PCR, what varies between contexts of assessment (what I call contexts of interpretation) is not truth-value, but asserted content. I'll claim several advantages for this view over truth-relativism: it is independently motivated and given the overwhelming independent data for PCR, it requires no radical rethinking of the nature of truth or content. In particular, it avoids the extreme view that a proposition can be true for A and false for B.

According to PCR, invariantism is compatible with the kind of variability described in D1 and contextualism is compatible with the kind of stability described in D2. To see why, first notice that both (i) and (ii) are predicted by PCR:

i. *How utterances with the same semantic content can make different assertions*: If PCR is true, two utterances, $u_{s/c}$ and $u'_{s/c'}$ (where s = 'A knows that p (at t)') could have the same semantic content, and still (saliently) say different things relative to a context of interpretation, CI. The propositions (saliently) asserted by u and u' relative to CI could include reference to different epistemic standards, even though their semantic contents are identical. So you could have shared semantic content, combined with the intuition that $u_{s/c}$ and $u'_{s/c'}$ made different assertions relative to CI.

ii. *How utterances with different semantic contents can make the same assertion*: If PCR is true, two utterances, $u_{s/c}$ and $u'_{s/c'}$ (where s = 'A knows that p') could have *different semantic contents*, even though *they say the same* relative to a context of interpretation

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CI. Remember, in addition to their semantic contents, $u_{s/c}$ and $u'_{s/c'}$ assert a plurality of propositions relative to CI. So, assume P is the semantic content of $u_{s/c}$ and P' the semantic content of $u'_{s/c'}$. Relative to CI, $u_{s/c}$ might also say P2, P3, and P4 and $u'_{s/c'}$ might say P4, P5 and P6 (in addition to P'). If so, they both assert that P4 (relative to CI). If P4 happens to be salient in C1, an interpreter will have the intuition that u and u' asserted the same proposition (i.e. that the speaker of u said what the speaker of u' said.)

With (i) on the table, variability of the kind MacFarlane focuses on doesn't count against invariantism. Semantic invariantism is compatible with variability in (saliently) asserted content (and variability in what the speaker (saliently) said). The observation that there is such variability is neither here nor there with respect to the semantics of 'know'.

With (ii) in play, the kind of stability described in D2 provides no argument against contextualism. There can be stability in some part of the speech act content even though the semantic content varies with the contextually salient epistemic standards in the context of utterance (for a less schematic development of this possibility, §6 below).[16]

This is the big-picture reply to MacFarlane's 'big picture' argument against contextualism and invariantism. In the body of the paper he considers various ways in which invariantist and contextualists can try to account for the recalcitrant data. I now look at two of those proposals and show how adding PCR to invariantism and contextualism provides replies to MacFarlane's objections.

§6   **Argument #2: MacFarlane Against the Skeptic**

The skeptic is someone who thinks 'know' is semantically invariant and that its semantic value is such that it is very hard, if not impossible, to stand in the knowledge relation to a proposition. MacFarlane describes it as the view that 'know' is *invariant with fixed high standards*, i.e. just one standard is relevant, in all contexts of utterance and that standard is so high that it is (almost) impossible to stand in the knowledge relation to any proposition.

As we've seen, the alleged problem for such a position is that it can't account for the variability data (presented as D1 above). MacFarlane considers four ways in which a skeptic can try to explain why we are inclined to make positive knowledge attributions (and treat them as true) when we are in low-standard contexts. The first three presuppose that the speaker knows

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[16] As Jessica Brown emphasized to me, those who rely on (i) in explaining recalcitrant data will depend on P1. Those who rely on (ii) will depend on P2. So if you find the latter less plausible than the former, you would find the use of PCR in (i) more convincing than its use in (ii). Since the semantic invariantists rely on (i) and the contextualist on (ii), this would provide reason for favoring semantic invariantism over contextualism.

that the skeptic is right about the semantics for 'know' and the fourth assumes the speaker is mistaken in that respect.

1. *Helpfulness:* The enlightened skeptic is trying to avoid misleading those who are not aware of the fact that skepticism is true, i.e. who are not aware that the standards for knowledge are high (and hence would misinterpret utterances were she to speak as if skepticism is true).

2. *Hyperbole*: The skeptic says more than what she has good reason to assert; it is a form of hyperbole.

3. *Inconvenience*: MacFarlane says, "A third approach would appeal to the inconvenience of adding all the pedantic hedges and qualifications that would be needed to make our ordinary knowledge claims strictly true." (p. 207, MacFarlane 2005)

4. *Error:* MacFarlane also considers the possibility that speakers are wrong about the semantics for 'know', i.e. speakers don't know that skepticism correctly describes the semantics for 'know'. He says: "A sincere speaker who wants to speak the literal truth and avoid literal falsity may fail to do so if she has false beliefs, either about the facts or about the literal meanings of the words she uses.. …. Sceptical invariantists … must argue that speakers systematically overestimate their success in meeting the standards for knowledge and as a result claim to know when in fact they do not." (p. 210-11, MacFarlane 2005)

MacFarlane thinks all these moves fail. I won't discuss his counter-arguments here. I'm interested in possibilities left out - possibilities opened up by adding PCR to the picture. If the skeptic takes on PCR, she can argue as follows: speakers utter sentences of the form 'A knows that p' because in so doing they manage to (saliently) assert (and *say* and *claim*) a true proposition.[17],[18] MacFarlane simply assumes that Skeptical Invariantism is incompatible with the speaker literally asserting some proposition that's true when she utters 'A knows that p'. He assumes this because he also assumes that speakers in uttering a sentence assert only one proposition, the semantic content. That is to say, MacFarlane excludes the possibility that in addition to asserting the semantic content (which is false, according to the skeptic) the speaker asserts a true proposition to the effect that *A knows that p by standard S*, where S is some non-skeptical epistemic standard (one A can stand in to a proposition without ruling out bizarre skeptical hypothesis.) PCR provides the skeptical invariants with a reply to the argument from variability. In response to the

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[17] For an elaboration of this defense of skepticism, see Cappelen (2005).
[18] For a PCR'ist, all talk about speech act content should be relativised to contexts of interpretation. To simplify writing, I will exclude the explicit relativisation when it's obvious or superfluous.

question, "If the skeptic were right, why would someone assert 'A knows that p'? given that its semantic content is always false?" she can answer: Because in so doing, she saliently asserts something true.[19]

§7   Argument #3: MacFarlane Against the Contextualist

Contextualism about 'know' is the view that 'know' is semantically context sensitive. This view is motivated by the variability data outlined in D1. The problem for contextualists is, as we have seen, the stability data brought out in D2. MacFarlane considers three ways in which the contextualist can try to account for this data:

1. **Pragmatic Explanation**: It's just too complicated to re-express what's asserted by an utterance of 'A knows that p' in a context other than the one we are in - so instead we just withdraw our earlier knowledge claims.

The two other imagined replies from the contextualist are versions of the error theory, i.e. the view according to which speakers do not fully understand that (or the way in which) 'know' is context sensitive. MacFarlane considers two versions of this view:

2. **Error Theory Version (I)**: They don't realize 'know' is context sensitive: "the contextualist can suppose … that ordinary speakers are wrong about the semantics of "know"— treating it as use-invariant when it is not—"(p. 215, MacFarlane 2005)

3. **Error Theory Version (II)**: Speakers are mistaken about what standards are in play: "[Speakers] make systematic errors about what standards are in play in contexts other than their own. (p. 215, MacFarlane 2005)

MacFarlane argues that all of 1-3 fail. I won't evaluate those arguments here – my goal is to show that PCR opens up another option for the contextualist. PCR allows the contextualist to argue as follows: suppose the semantic content of an utterance, u1, of "A knows that q" in context of utterance C1 is the proposition *that A knows (by low-standards) that q*. Call this proposition P1. Suppose the semantic content of an utterance, u2, of "A knows that q" in a context of utterance C2 is the proposition *that A knows (by high standards) that q*. Call this proposition P2. So far this is just standard contextualism: the view that the semantic content of 'know' varies between context of utterance depending on the 'standards that are in play' (as contextualist like to say). Suppose the speaker of u1 finds herself in C2 (i.e. the high standard context). She's thinking back on her utterance in C1 (i.e. the low-standards context) and relative to C2, what is saliently

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[19] Note that there need be no error involved here, in particular, there need be no error about the what the semantic content is. *Semantic content* is the theorist's notion - ordinary speakers are only interested in what speakers say/assert. And in this case, they are right about what was said.

asserted by u1 is P2, i.e. the proposition *that A knows (by high-standards) that q*. Since this is what's saliently asserted by u1 relative to C2, she'll think and say (in C2) that what she said in C1 is false (assuming that A doesn't satisfy the high standards for knowledge with respect to q). This is compatible with the semantic content of u1 being P1. It is even compatible with the semantic content being true (if we assume that A *does* satisfy the low-standard requirement for knowledge with respect to q).

Natural question: why think that relative to C2 (i.e. the high standard context) u1 asserts P2? The answer, for a proponent of PCR, is simple: because that's what the data indicates. Speakers in C2 treat the speaker in C1 as if she has said something false, i.e. as if she has expressed a proposition that's false. Assuming that u1 (saliently) asserted P2 relative to C2 explains this data[20]. Of course, there's no denying that when you first encounter it, this kind of view sounds strange. I don't think that should be too much of a worry. Here's a hypothesis: we are trying to explain exceedingly strange data patterns and any attempted explanation will contain surprises from a pre-theoretical point of view. We will, at the end of the day, be comparing strength and weakness of strange explanations. The truth-relativist is at one extreme of this strangeness: according to MacFarlane, the proposition asserted by the speaker in C1 is false from C2 and true from C1. The truth or falsity varies even though what was said is the very same proposition. PCR has the advantage of preserve the intuitive idea that a proposition has a stable truth value no matter who you are, where you are, what you care about etc. PCR is, moreover, independently motivated. It is not, as truth-relativism is, introduced specifically to deal with these data patterns.

Point of Clarification: How Speech Act Content is generated

So far I have said nothing about the mechanism that makes it the case that an utterance of S ends up (saliently) asserting a proposition, p, relative to a context of interpretation. Notice that in this respect, any PCRist is free to piggyback on the relativist (who, as MacFarlane points out, can piggyback on the contextualist's story). The relativist owes us a story about how a particular standard becomes salient in a particular context of assessment; some story about why, in a context of assessment, it is standard S1, out of all the infinitely many possible standards, that determine the truth of a proposition p. Of course, at this point, no such theory is available, but we should not hold that against the relativist. Nor should we hold it against PCR that it does not come with a theory of how speech act content is generated and becomes salient. It's common ground between

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[20] In §3 above I pointed out that PCR implies that speakers might end up saying things they would be surprised to be told they have said. This is an illustration of how that can happen.

relativist and PCR that the salient standards vary between contexts of interpretation/assessment. For the relativist, this contributes to fixing a truth-value. According to PCR it determines the set of propositions asserted (relative to a context of interpretation).

§8   Argument #4: Lasersohn on Faultless Disagreement

Lasersohn characterizes the puzzle that leads him to endorse truth-relativism as follows: "Our basic problem is that if John says 'This is fun' and Mary says 'This is not fun', it seems possible for both sentences simultaneously to be true (relative to their respective speakers), but we also want to claim that John and Mary are overtly contradicting or disagreeing with each other… "(p. 662, Lasersohn (2005))

So consider utterance u1 by A of 'Roller coasters are fun' and u2 by B of 'Roller coasters are not fun'. It is Lasersohn's intuition that:

- (I1):   Both A and B are right; both said something true (assuming that roller coasters are fun for A, but not for B).

- (I2):   A said that roller coasters are fun and B denied it, so they disagree

Lasersohn's strategy for reconciling these intuitions is to invoke truth-relativism – the same proposition (or proposition like object[21]) P is affirmed by A that is denied by B, but that proposition is true relative to A's circumstance of evaluation, and false relative to B's. Lasersohn says:

> What I would like to suggest is that we refine the notion of disagreement so that two people can overtly disagree – we might even go so far as to say they contradict each other – even if both their utterances are true. (p.662, Lasersohn 2005).

This suggestion is implemented as a variation on Kaplan's view in 'Demonstratives' by adding people to the circumstances of evaluation, in addition to the three parameters Kaplan had (worlds, times as locations):

> All we have to do is assign words like fun and tasty the same content relative to different individuals, but contextually relativize the assignment of truth values to contents, so that the same content may be assigned different truth values relative to different individuals. This will allow for the possibility that two utterances express identical semantic content, but with one of them true and the other one false. (p.662, Lasersohn 2005).

This is Lasersohn's explanation of how I1-I2 can both be true[22].

Again, I'll argue that PCR renders this move to relativism superfluous. Some of what I say

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[21] Though Lasersohn characterizes these objects as proposition are not propositions in the standard sense, i.e. they are not functions from world to truth-values.

[22] There's an important difference between Lasersohn and MacFarlane. Lasersohn does not relativize truth to contexts of assessment; he includes people (and their standards of taste) as parameters in circumstance of evaluation. MacFarlane does not consider that a full-blooded form of relativism. I don't think the difference between those two versions of relativism has any bearing on the arguments in this paper.

here will be familiar and (hopefully) predictable by now - what it adds is a focus on the notions of agreement and disagreement.

PCR Explanation of (I1) and (I2) and the Illusion of Faultless Disagreement

For those who share Lasersohn's intuitions about these cases (I'm not one of those[23]), here's how PCR can help explain them:

Explanation of (I1): According to PCR, both u1 and u2 express many propositions: Among these, assume u1 expresses the proposition **Q** (e.g. the proposition *that roller coasters are fun for A*) and u2 expresses proposition **R** (e.g. the proposition *that roller coasters are not fun for B*). Both Q and R can be true; and that explains the intuition that both u1 and u2 are true.

Explanation of (I2): Relative to the theorist's context of interpretation, there is a proposition, **P** that u1 asserts and u2 denies. This explains the intuition that u1 and u2 contradict one another. For now, let's say that P is the proposition *that roller coasters are fun*. I say more about P below.

PCR explains how there can be an apparent contradiction between u1 and u2, even though both can be true. The apparently contradictory intuitions occur because we shift our attention between different parts of the total speech act content. When the focus is on Q and R, we can say truly that A and B spoke truly. When the focus is on P, we can say truly that they disagree and that only one of them is right.[24] On this view, faultless disagreement is an illusion. There is no *one* proposition such that A commits to it, B commits to its negation, and both A and B are right. That's impossible. We get the illusion that something like this is going on by shifting our attention (in ways described above) between different parts of asserted content.

More On PCR Explanation of I2

In the explanation of (I2) I described the shared (semantic) content of the sentence A and B both uttered as the proposition *that roller coasters are fun*. I didn't say whether, in this case, I am opting for contextualism or invariantism about 'fun'. As with MacFarlane's arguments, my goal is to show that once PCR is adopted, the kind of intuition pattern Lasersohn attempts to explain

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[23] I very much doubt that the intuition of disagreement is solid in cases involving predicates of taste, but I will not argue for that view here. Lots of people seem to share Lasersohn's intuitions about these cases, and my goal is to show how PRC can help account for them.

[24] There are interesting questions about whether an interpreter changes context of interpretation as she shifts her attention from one part of the speech act content to another. More generally, there are interesting question about just how to individuate contexts of interpretation - at this point I'm not convinced I am need to take a stand on these issues. As far as I can tell my view could go in either direction.

(that provides the central motivation for his version of relativism) is compatible with *any* view of the semantics for 'fun', as long as it is combined with PCR. I show this with respect to two versions of invariantism and one version of contextualism.

Two Invariantist Explanation of I2

According to I2 there's a content that A asserts and B denies. The structure of the invariantist's explanation could be the following: There's a stable semantic content expressed by all utterances of 'Roller coasters are fun'. A asserts it and B denies it. So far, so good[25]. The challenge is to say something about what this stable semantic content is. I won't try to settle that question here. I simply consider Lasersohn's objection to two invariantist options and show how PCR undermines those objections.

- *Proposal #1:* 'fun' semantically denotes property of triggering a certain kind of reaction in *some* people (where 'certain reaction' is spelled out in more detail.)

No one disputes that this property exists. The question is whether it is the semantic value of 'fun'. About that proposal, Lasersohn says:

> "…this analysis cannot be right, because the truth conditions are simply much too weak. Suppose Mary doesn't like roller coasters at all. I think she can sincerely say *This is not fun* as she rides a roller coaster, even if she knows that many other people do enjoy them. But under this analysis, she could not say this, at least not sincerely." (p. 653)

If PCR is true, the analysis *can* be right. The assumption underlying the reply is that Mary (saliently) says the semantic content of the sentence she's uttering. Lasersohn assumes that speakers utter their sentences with the intention of communicating and committing to the semantic content of the uttered sentences. If PCR is correct, that's not what speakers typically do. According to PCR, speakers often assert propositions they are not intending to assert and are not committing to. Someone who utters, "Roller coasters are not fun" would be surprised to find that she had denied *that roller coasters trigger reaction R in some people*. She certainly didn't intend to *commit* to this view. That, however, is nothing peculiar to sentences containing 'fun' and other predicates of taste. According to PCR this phenomenon is ubiquitous.

Since we are comparing truth and-content relativism here, it is also important to note that the truth relativist is not in a position to complain over this feature of PCR. According to Lasersohn's version of truth-relativism, the speaker's deny and affirm a 'proposition' that is standard *neutral*.

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[25] Note, however, that an invariantist need not insist that the shared content is the semantic content. She could appeal to some other part of the speech act content that's shared. I think that's what an invariantist should do in many cases, but I won't pursue that option here since my goal is to show how Lasersohn's arguments fail and he doesn't consider this option for the invariantist.

This neutral object is what they, allegedly, disagree over. But that's not substantive disagreement. To see this, note that on Lasersohn's view, there's no more disagreement two utterances of "Roller coasters are fun' and "roller coasters are not fun" than there are between two speaker's who utter "Tim is wearing blue socks" at different times. On the analogous Kaplan semantics for tensed sentences, utterances, the two speakers have asserted temporally neutral propositions, and these are evaluated at (world, time) pairs. There is no way in which we would consider these two speakers as disagreeing. The situation for predicates of taste is exactly analogous.[26]

- *Proposal #2:* This is the view that 'fun' is a 1-place predicate, with no relativization to a standard or a group. Think of this as the objectivist view of *fun*, where the semantic value is the one and only standard for fun (whatever that might be - a proponent of this view would have to tell us).

About this kind of view, Lasersohn say:

> In a loose sense, this approach could perhaps be regarded as the analog in the area of predicates of personal taste to Williamson's (1994) analysis of vague predicates. Williamson argues that the meanings of apparently vague predicates actually have sharp boundaries, so that, despite appearances, there is a definite fact of the matter as to whether someone is thin or not, for example; and we would likewise be claiming that there really is a definite fact of the matter as to whether roller coasters are fun or not." (p.655)

Lasersohn's comparison to Williamson's account of vagueness is helpful here and does provide support for the invariantist. Lasersohn, however, finds the comparison problematic. He points out that Williamson's account of vague terms depends on the idea that we *cannot* come to know where the sharp boundaries lie. In the case of predicates of taste, Lasersohn argues, it's the other way around: we are epistemically *privileged*. He says;

> But with predicates of personal taste, we actually operate from a position of epistemic privilege, rather than the opposite. If you ride the roller coaster, you are in a position to speak with authority as to whether it is fun or not; if you taste the chili, you can speak with authority as to whether it is tasty. (p.655)

If we assume PCR, this alleged disanalogy disappears: you can be in an epistemically privileged relation to one part of the speech act content, but not to another. In this particular case you won't be in an epistemically privileged position with respect to the semantic content, but you will be with respect to some other part of the speech act content. If you sincerely utter 'Roller coasters are fun' you have asserted one proposition that you are not in an epistemically privileged position

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[26] Again, I should emphasize that my point here it not to endorse this as the semantics for 'fun'. I just want to point out that when PCR is introduced, the kind of reply Lasersohn gives doesn't work.

with respect to and one proposition that you are in an epistemically privileged position with respect to. The former is the semantic content and the latter is, say, the proposition *that roller coasters are fun by your standards*.[27]

These are but two illustrations of how an invariantist could use PCR to respond to Lasersohn's objections. What these considerations show is not that invariantism is the correct semantics for 'fun', but that Lasersohn's strategy for responding to invariantism fails. One way to make it perspicuous that these objections to Lasersohn doesn't favor invariantism, is to note that they same kind of defense can be given of contextualist semantics for 'fun'. I turn next to that.

Two Contextualist Explanation of I2

Here is how a contextualist can account for much of the data about predicates of taste, in particular, the data about agreement and disagreement. The semantic content of A's utterance of "Roller coasters are fun" in C1 is *that roller coasters are fun by A's standards*, the semantic content of B's utterance of "Roller coasters are not fun" in C2 is *that roller coasters are not fun by B's standards*. So far this is a version of contextualism about 'fun'. Suppose someone judges, from a context of interpretation, C3, that A and B disagree. How could that be? Here are two moves a contextualist who endorses PCR could make:

(i) Let's say E is the person making the report in C3, i.e. she is the person uttering, "A and B disagree" in C3. Here is one possible candidate for P: It is the proposition *that roller coasters are fun for E*. This would be surprising, of course. How could A and B make assertions about E? They might not have been thinking about E, they might not even know who E is. So how can they make assertions about her? Well, PCR is a radical view, and this would be a particularly radical version. But it is not entirely implausible - in particular, it should not seem particularly implausible to someone who is prepared to endorse truth-relativism. The truth-relativist thinks that the truth-value of what A asserted and B denied depends on *E's standards of assessment* (i.e. according to the relativist, when E thinks about whether what A and B said is true, she thinks about whether roller coasters are fun for *her*). It is but a short step from this view to the view that P is what A asserted and B denied relative to E's context.[28]

(ii) It should be clear by now that this is not the only option for a PCR-contextualist. The

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[27] This is on the assumption that we have privileged access to our own standards of taste, something there's reason to doubt. I leave those issues aside here.

[28] This view is easier to swallow if one endorses a strong version of content relativism, i.e. the view described as P2.2 in §3 above.

object they disagree over could be one of the propositions appealed to by semantic invariantist, though now this would not be I suggested the semantic invariantist might appeal to. For the contextualist these propositions would not be the semantic contents, but they could be part of the speech act content relative to C3 and so, in some cases, explain agreement and disagreement judgments.[29]

§9   Conclusion: PCR, Semantic Blindness and the Fog of Content

Here's a way to think of my view: If PCR is correct, there is, for each utterance, lots and lots of asserted propositions; what proposition(s) is salient will shift between contexts of interpretation. So if you try to use your intuitions about what's (saliently) asserted as your guide to semantic content, you're bound to get confused - you'll find puzzling data patterns, inexplicable shifts between context of utterance and between contexts of interpretation. You're in a fog of content where it's hard (if not impossible) to distinguish the semantic content from all the other content that's floating around. It is impossible to *directly* access semantic content in this fog - none of our intuitions about content come with "True Semantic Content" stamped on them. The correct response, according to PCR, is to stop using these kinds of intuitions as your guide to semantics.

I'll end by mentioning two (of many) issues that should keep a proponent of PCR awake at night:

- In this paper I have not said anything about what I take to be the correct semantics for 'know' and 'fun'. I have shown that both contextualism and invariantism can be defended against the kinds of objections MacFarlane raises, but that doesn't settle the question of which one of these are correct. In general, I favor what I call 'minimalist' and invariantist theories (see C&L 2004), but no argument in this paper depends on accepting that view.

- I have told you a lot about how *not* to do semantics if PCR is true, and I have told you very little about how to do it. Indeed, it might look like we have no way to do semantics if PCR is right. Appeal to intuitions about content is one of the semanticist's central tools. If those intuitions are completely unreliable, how do we proceed? Here's how I see it: there's overwhelming evidence in favor of PCR. Some, those I call Radical Contextualists

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[29] Also useful to think about is the following: Imagine B hearing A's utterance of 'Roller coasters are fun'. Disliking roller coasters, she replies, 'No!' What is she denying? Again, a proponent of PCR has a number of options. B is denying some proposition said by A relative to B's context of interpretation. This could be the proposition in which 'fun' is indexed to B's preferences (that would be the analogue of (i) in the text), or the unrelativized proposition *that roller coasters are fun* (the analogue of one version of (ii)). (Thanks to Elia Sardin for suggesting I mention this kind of case).

(see C&L 2004, chapter 3), conclude from this that systematic semantics is impossible. That's not my conclusion. I think PCR presents a challenge to semanticists. The challenge is to figure out how to find stable semantic content in the midst of speech act content that varies, not only between contexts of utterance, but also between contexts of interpretation. In C&L (2004), I say a little bit more about how that can be done. But I don't say much and I consider those proposals work in progress. So at this point, consider the claim that PCR does not mean the death of semantics a promissory note.[30]

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[30] MacFarlane and Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson (2005) discuss a view they call 'content relativism', or 'expressive relativism'. That view is not PCR because it doesn't include P1 and it doesn't take P2.1 into consideration. As a result most of the objections raised are off the mark with respect to PCR. I'll mention one objection and the kind of reply a proponent of PCR would give (this strategy generalizes to many of the other objections in so far as they can be seen as objections to PCR): MacFarlane, referring to an objection from Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson, says that if content relativism were true,:

> … we could no longer say, with Stalnaker 1978, that the effect of assertion is to add the proposition asserted to a 'common ground' of presupposed propositions, for there may be no common fact of the matter about which proposition was asserted.

Quite frankly, I'm not sure what the essential function of assertion is. I'd like to have a view about that, but I don't. However, if you're attracted to Stalnaker's story, it's easy to get something like it if you endorse PCR. Here's one possibility:

> The essential effect of assertion is to add the proposition(s) saliently asserted relative to the context of utterance to the common stock of presuppositions.

Of course, when the context of interpretation is not identical to the context of utterance, it is unclear how to apply the Stalnakerian framework. The theory is not meant to deal with inter-contextual cases. It's hard, therefore, to see it as a particular fault of PCR that it fails to give a natural answer to what goes on in those cases.

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