

MacFarlane on Relative Truth

Richard G. Heck Jr.

Brown University

In “Future Contingents and Relative Truth” [MacFarlane, 2003b], John MacFarlane argues that we need to introduce a new parameter of contextual sensitivity—what he calls a ‘context of assessment’—if we are to account for certain facts about future contingents, that is, sentences such as:

(1) There will be a sea battle tomorrow.

The argument proceeds as follows. Suppose Bill utters (1) on Monday. On certain views about future contingents, Bill’s utterance is neither true nor false, because it is not, at that time, determined whether there will be a sea battle the next day. So an utterance of

(2) What Bill said was true (when he said it).

that followed Bill’s utterance by five minutes would itself not be true.¹ On the other hand, suppose it is now Wednesday, and suppose that, as it happens, there *was* a sea battle on Tuesday. And suppose that someone now utters:

(3) What Bill said was true (when he said it).

Then, the intuition is supposed to be, this utterance is true. But, obviously, the very same sentence has been uttered both on Monday and on Wednesday, and yet these utterances have different truth-values.

One might take this reflection to constitute a refutation of the mentioned view about future contingents. In any event, it certainly poses a problem for that view, and MacFarlane means to offer a

¹ Whether it is false or neither true nor false will not matter for our purposes. Let’s suppose it’s the latter.

response to it. But MacFarlane's interest is not really in questions about future contingents specifically. He has suggested elsewhere that there are several other areas in which similar phenomena arise, and he wishes to offer a general account of them.² My interest, too, is not in the particular case of future contingents: I wish to argue that the *kind* of account MacFarlane offers is not well-motivated.³ So the reader is asked, for the duration of this discussion, to set aside any doubts she may have about the indeterminist account of future contingents and at least to pretend to have the intuition that both (1) and (2)⁴ are neither true nor false.

MacFarlane's view is that the single sentence, 'What Bill said was true', uttered in both (2) and (3), exhibits a hitherto unidentified form of context-dependence. It is for the formal treatment of this kind of context-dependence that the introduction of a new contextual parameter for contexts of assessment is supposed to be required. There is, of course, no question that such a parameter can be introduced, formally speaking. The significant question is whether its introduction will do any work, in particular, whether it will allow us to provide a satisfying explanation of the phenomena MacFarlane uses to motivate its introduction.

There are several ways one might respond to MacFarlane's argument. First, one might quarrel with the intuitions on which it is based. I myself have some doubts about them, even waiving any doubts I might have about indeterminism. In particular, although I do understand why one might wish to say that the utterance made on Wednesday, (3), is true, my intuition about this utterance is oddly sensitive to the tense used in commenting upon Bill's utterance. Consider this utterance, again made on Wednesday:

(4) What Bill said is now true.

My intuition that (4) is true is much stronger than my intuition that (3) is true. That alone makes me suspicious. Worse, so long as I am imagining myself as an indeterminist, I find myself wanting to say that what Bill said was not true *when he said it*, though it is true on Wednesday—that is, that (3) is not true but (4) is—and the thought that anti-realist views about the past and future should lead to significant tensing of the truth-predicate is hardly new.⁵ But quarrels over intuitions are, of

² See [MacFarlane, 2004], in which the account is applied to knowledge claims, and [MacFarlane, 2003c], where it is applied to evaluative judgements. The diagnosis of MacFarlane's position on future contingents presented here extends smoothly to these other cases.

³ Others have also found this kind of account attractive: See, for example, [Egan et al., 2005]. MacFarlane has also considered the case of epistemic modals [MacFarlane, 2003a].

⁴ Note that I will occasionally, and somewhat non-standardsly, use indices to refer to utterances rather than to the sentence-type uttered. It should be clear enough when I'm doing which.

⁵ See, for example, [Dummett, 1978] and [Wright, 1993]. Note that this is *not* a form of relativism. It is simply the view that "*p* is true at *t*" expresses (significantly) different propositions depending upon what *t* denotes, just as "John is tall at *t*" does.

It's been suggested that this treatment would make it impossible to understand the speech-act of *prediction*. I doubt that is so, but if it is so, that seems like an objection to indeterminism not a defense of MacFarlane.

course, rarely illuminating, so this point is not likely to be decisive on its own. I shall return to it below, however, for the instability of my intuitions can itself be explained in a natural way if my diagnosis of MacFarlane's position is correct.

Even if one is prepared to concede the relevant intuitions, one might yet deny that they are of semantic significance. Someone who wanted to defend a realist, or determinist, semantics for future contingents might take this line. On this view, Bill's utterance is true, because there will be a sea battle on Tuesday. Hence, (2) is true, as well. Intuitions to the contrary are to be explained in pragmatic terms: The intuition that it isn't determined, on Monday, whether there will be a sea battle on Tuesday, is reconstrued as an intuition that Bill lacks sufficient justification for his claim and so that it is infelicitous; hence, presumably, the utterance (2) would also be infelicitous. Of course, in the present dialectical context, this particular response is out of bounds, since the question is, in effect, how an indeterminist should handle the mentioned intuitions. Nonetheless, the suggestion would be, proper attention to pragmatic phenomena might also resolve the indeterminist's problem. One might, for example, suggest that the utterance (3), made on Wednesday, is really neither true nor false, on the simple ground that the utterance of Bill's to which it alludes was itself neither true nor false. Nonetheless, the proposal would continue, the utterance (3) might communicate something true, namely, that there was a sea battle yesterday, and it is the truth of what is meant, rather than the truth of what is said, to which we are responding when we report the intuition that (3) is true. I know of no reason to suppose such a reply is not adequate to the phenomena in this case.⁶ But there is, it seems to me, a stronger reply, one that rests upon nothing specific to the case of future contingents and so one that is more likely to extend to all the cases to which MacFarlane wants to apply contexts of assessment.

What I am going to suggest is that the context-dependence of sentences like 'What Bill said is true' is of a perfectly familiar sort—dependence upon the context of utterance—and so can be explained without invoking any new contextual parameter. Appearances to the contrary are caused by MacFarlane's reliance upon an understandable but ultimately incorrect assumption that he does not make explicit.

In more recent work, MacFarlane has described his view as a form of relativism [MacFarlane, 2005]. Why? The claim that some sentence is context-dependent is not usually regarded as relativist. But, one might say, MacFarlane's examples show that *what Bill said*—that is, the very proposition Bill expressed in (1)—does not have a fixed truth-value but one that varies depending upon the context in which it is assessed. The intuition upon which MacFarlane is relying is, after all, that an utterance of 'What Bill said was true' made on Wednesday is true, but an utterance of the same

⁶ There are embedding arguments—put (3) in the antecedent of a conditional—that might be tried here, but such arguments have their own problems. See [King & Stanley, 2004].

sentence made on Monday is not true. What is the source of this difference? The time to which we are referring is the same both times: The claim, both times, is that the utterance was true when Bill made it. The utterance of Bill's to which we are alluding is the same both times, too: It's not as if what Bill said has changed from Monday to Wednesday. Could the locus of context-dependence be the word 'true'? The suggestion has been made that there is context-dependence in attributions of truth [Parsons, 1981, Burge, 1984, Burge, 1982, Glanzberg, 2001], but the sort of context-dependence that has been invoked in connection with the liar paradox will not help here, quite independently of whether it helps there (for critical discussion, see [Williamson, 2000]). Hence, if there is context-dependence here, it has to be of a fundamentally new kind; as said, it is to account for it that MacFarlane argues we must invoke contexts of assessment. Relative to one context of assessment—that of Monday—what Bill said is not true; relative to another—that of Wednesday—it is true. Thus the relativism: The truth of the proposition Bill expressed is relative to a context of assessment.

There is, however, a subtle equivocation in this line of reasoning. It is one thing to hold that the utterances (2) and (3) have different truth-values and so to hold that there is some kind of context-dependence in the single sentence that is uttered in both of them. It is an entirely different thing to hold that *what Bill said*—the proposition he expressed in (1)—is not true in one context of assessment, that of Monday, but not true in another, that of Wednesday. The distinction here is between claims about the truth-values (or truth-conditions) of certain utterances of sentences of natural language—namely, those containing phrases like 'what Bill said'—and claims about a certain theoretical notion—namely, that of what has been literally expressed in a given utterance. Only if one claims that what has literally been said can have different truth-values depending upon the context in which it is assessed is one any sort of relativist. But the intuitions on which MacFarlane is relying directly support only the claim that certain utterances in which the phrase 'what Bill said (at time *t*)' is used—namely, (2) and (3)—have different truth-values.⁷ The above reasoning, suggesting that these intuitions encourage a form of relativism, rests upon a simple failure to make and enforce this distinction. More importantly, MacFarlane's argument that these intuitions can be accommodated only by admitting contexts of assessment commits the same equivocation.

If one accepts the intuitions with which MacFarlane is working, then there must be some kind of

⁷ MacFarlane himself appears reluctant to characterize his view as one about propositions. Indeed, he says in a footnote [MacFarlane, 2003b, p. 334, fn. 14] that it is not clear to him that his view provides the resources to make intelligible the claim that judgement or belief can be relative to a context of assessment. If not, however, then his view is no form of relativism. I would suggest, further, that the arguments of Gareth Evans's [Evans, 1985] to which MacFarlane attempts to respond in section VI of his paper are—though undoubtedly phrased in terms of the evaluation of utterances—best understood as directed at relativism about judgement and belief. Evans was assuming, I take it, that the evaluation of an utterance as objectively correct or incorrect is equivalent to the evaluation of a judgement as objectively correct or incorrect. And it is, frankly, no clearer to me than it was to Evans how one can sensibly pull the two apart.

context-dependence in utterances of the sentence ‘What Bill said was true’ that accounts for the shift of truth-value between (2) and (3). The question is what the locus of context-dependence is. These two utterances refer to the same time. They both refer to what Bill said at that time. So what could it be, if not a previously unimagined shift in the extension of the word ‘true’, one due to the presence of an additional contextual parameter, namely, contexts of assessment? But there is a tacit assumption here, too, namely, that the phrase ‘what Bill said’ refers, on both occasions of utterance, to the proposition Bill literally expressed in uttering (1). And there is reason to question that assumption.

Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore have argued that intuitions about indirect speech reports have far less bearing upon semantic theories than they have often been taken to have [Cappelen & Lepore, 1997]. It is widely assumed, in particular, that a semantic theory that identifies the proposition that p as the literal content of, say, Bill’s utterance of some sentence S is in trouble if a corresponding utterance of ‘Bill said that p ’ would intuitively be judged false. This assumption rests, as Cappelen and Lepore note, upon the more fundamental assumption that ‘Bill said that p ’ is true if, and only if, the relevant utterance of Bill’s has the literal content that p . But, on the basis of a whole menagerie of examples, they argue that this assumption is just false. For example, suppose that Bill is a teacher and that he utters the sentence ‘I will not be here tomorrow’. Suppose Suzie asks Tommy what the teacher said. Then Tommy may reply, ‘He said that we’re going to have a substitute tomorrow’. It is not at all clear that this utterance should be regarded as, strictly speaking, false. But if we do not so suppose, the mere fact that we intuitively regard (some) utterances of ‘Bill said that p ’ as false need not show that the literal content of Bill’s utterance is not the proposition that p .

Cappelen and Lepore’s examples are, to my mind, impressive, but there is really a more fundamental point to be made, namely, that there is simply no reason to suppose that the proprietary notions of semantic theory should be expressed by any words of everyday language. There should be no presumption whatsoever that the truth of ‘ N said that S ’ should require N to have uttered a sentence whose literal content is the same as that of the sentence S (in the present context of utterance). One can understand why the presumption might seem tempting: It is to some extent embedded in the tradition. For example, in characterizing his account of what makes a sentence mean what it does in a given speaker’s mouth, David Lewis remarks that he is trying to ‘analyze’ ordinary expressions such as ‘ S , in N ’s mouth, means that p ’ [Lewis, 1985, p. 178]. But surely Lewis is misdescribing his own project. Lewis is not analyzing expressions of ordinary language but attempting to explain, develop, and apply certain theoretical notions. Lewis only characterizes his project as an ‘analytic’ one because that is how ‘analytic’ philosophers characterized all their projects for a very long time.⁸ And so again: There is simply no general reason to suppose that

⁸ Lewis’s commitment to analytic functionalism complicates matters here, but much the same could be said about

the theoretical notions we find ourselves wanting to introduce in semantics—those of the literal content of an utterance and of the reference of an expression, say—will bear any straightforward relation to expressions used in ordinary discourse—in this case, to ‘say’ and ‘refer’—let alone constitute correct analyses of them.⁹

The meaning of the phrase ‘what Bill said’¹⁰ is closely related to those of sentences of the form ‘Bill said that p ’. Syntactically, such a phrase is derived from the corresponding sentence form: The word ‘what’ originates in object position, as the internal argument of the verb ‘said’; the underlying form is ‘Bill said what’, with the word ‘what’ appearing elsewhere at surface structure for reasons we need not consider. Semantically, such phrases act much like definite descriptions: The denotation of ‘what Bill said’ is the thing Bill said, that is, the x such that Bill said x . Hence, if ‘Bill said that S ’ can be true even if Bill did not utter any sentence whose literal content was the same as that of the sentence S , then ‘what Bill said’ can refer to the proposition that p even if Bill did not utter any sentence whose literal content was the proposition that p .

There are weaker and stronger points to be made here. The weaker point is that MacFarlane’s argument contains a large gap. Without reason to suppose that the two utterances of the phrase ‘what Bill said’, in (2) and (3), co-refer, the argument goes nowhere; moreover, any plausibility that this claim might have would seem to rest upon the more fundamental assumption that ‘what Bill said’ must always refer to the proposition Bill literally expressed on the relevant occasion. But that claim is implausible on general grounds and is refuted by a wide range of specific examples. The stronger point is that these same examples suggest that phrases of the form ‘what Bill said’ themselves exhibit a form of context-dependence, one we can use to give a very natural explanation of the intuitions MacFarlane takes to motivate his view.

Consider again Tommy’s reply, ‘He said that we’re going to have a substitute tomorrow’. It seems obvious that, if we vary the circumstances in which Suzie’s question is asked, we can easily generate cases in which the intuition that Tommy spoke falsely is very strong. The obvious thing to say is that the relation that must obtain between the sentential complement and the utterance whose content it reports varies with the context in which the attribution is made. But if sentences of the form ‘Bill said that S ’ exhibit some form of context-dependence—different relations between the content of the sentence Bill uttered and that of the sentence S may be relevant in different cases—

similar remarks of H.P. Grice’s, or of Sir Peter Strawson’s, or those of many other philosophers who had no such commitments.

⁹ Noam Chomsky has been pressing this point now for a long time, and I owe a good deal of my appreciation of it to him. (That is not to say I agree with all his applications of it.) See [Chomsky, 2000, ?], in which Chomsky makes similar remarks concerning philosophical intuitions about reference. The point is also one to which Gareth Evans returns repeatedly in [Evans, 1982].

¹⁰ There are other uses of this phrase, as in “I know what Bill said”, where it seems expresses an embedded question. Such uses need not detain us.

then the same context-dependence will infect phrases of the form ‘what Bill said’. Of course, whether the verb ‘to say’ is itself context-sensitive is likely to be a matter of some controversy.¹¹ Nonetheless, there is no general reason to suppose that the truth of an utterance of ‘Bill said that *S*’ requires Bill to have uttered some sentence that has the same literal content as *S* does in that context. Rather, a more plausible view would be that the requisite relation is weaker, weak enough to allow Tommy’s utterance to be true. If so, however, then there will not, in general, be any unique proposition *p* to which Bill stands in the saying relation. The definite description ‘the thing Bill said’—and so the phrase ‘what Bill said’—will therefore typically be ‘logically improper’, in the sense that there will typically be many values of *x* for which the open sentence ‘Bill said *x*’ is true (even if the same utterance of Bill’s is always in question). As is now familiar, however, the fact that a description is logically improper does not imply that it cannot be used, in a particular context, to refer to a particular object. It is, of course, also a matter of some controversy why improper descriptions can be so used, but that need not concern us here. The relevant point for our purposes is only that—just as a particular utterance of ‘the table is broken’ may, in a particular context, be true if, and only if, some particular table *T* is broken—a particular utterance of ‘What Bill said is true’ may, in a particular context, be true if, and only if, some particular proposition *p* is true. That is to say: Logically improper descriptions are obviously context-sensitive, in some way or other; expressions of the form ‘what *N* said’ are therefore also context-sensitive, because they are, in effect, improper descriptions.

If so, then, despite the fact that what Bill said has not changed from Monday to Wednesday—that really would be odd—the denotation of the phrase ‘what Bill said’ may well have changed: It may denote one proposition when it is uttered on Monday and a different proposition when it is uttered on Wednesday, even though we are talking about the same utterance of Bill’s both times. One natural suggestion to make, along these lines, is that what it denotes, when uttered on Wednesday, is the proposition one might express, on Wednesday, by uttering ‘There was a sea battle yesterday’. Or better: The phrase ‘what Bill said’, when uttered on Wednesday, *can* denote this proposition. There is no reason to deny that it may, given an appropriate surrounding context, also denote the proposition Bill actually expressed on Monday. That, it seems to me, is what explains why my intuitions about MacFarlane’s examples are so unstable: As I imagine the interests of the speakers, and other elements of the surrounding context, to shift in various ways, my intuitions about the truth of (3) shift as well; the shifting interests lead to shifts of reference.

Now I have not offered, and will not be offering, any theory of how the reference of phrases like

¹¹ The natural reading of [Cappelen & Lepore, 1997] supports this claim, but more recent work by Cappelen and Lepore suggests that they would not themselves want so to regard it [Cappelen & Lepore, 2005]. But their view has other resources that will do similar work.

‘what Bill said’ are determined.¹² For that reason, someone might insist that, even if ‘what Bill said’ is context-sensitive, there is no shift of reference in this case. I’m not sure how one would establish that claim,¹³ but never mind. My purpose here is simply to argue that MacFarlane is presupposing a thesis about the constancy of such phrases’ reference that we have no good reason to believe. And that should now be clear. Unless we assume that the phrase ‘what Bill said’ has the same reference when it is uttered on Wednesday that it had when it was uttered on Monday, there is no puzzle that contexts of assessment are needed to solve. Certainly, on the alternative view I am suggesting, context enters into the determination of the referent of ‘what Bill said’. But the relevant context is the familiar context of utterance. Nothing MacFarlane says argues against this alternative view.

It is, of course, essential to my diagnosis of MacFarlane’s position that his examples make use of a phrase like ‘what Bill said’. But his examples must make use of some such device. MacFarlane’s claim is that the truth-value of what Bill said shifts depending upon the context in which it assessed. One cannot argue for that claim without considering different contexts in which the truth-value of what Bill said is assessed. To do so, however, one will plainly have to consider utterances in which reference is apparently made to what Bill said. Now, of course, ‘what Bill said’ is only one of the many devices that can be used for this purpose, but the preceding remarks will apply to them, too, *mutatis mutandis*. For example, the demonstrative ‘that’ can be used as a device of what is sometimes called ‘propositional anaphora’. Thus, immediately after Bill’s utterance of (1) on Monday, someone might utter

(5) That is true.

Given an appropriate surrounding context, someone could utter the same sentence on Wednesday, thereby referring again to what Bill said Monday, and now one can easily imagine an argument built on these examples that parallels MacFarlane’s. But that argument would admit of the same reply: Absent reason to believe that the demonstrative ‘that’, so used, must have the same reference both times—a claim that would follow from the assumption that it must always denote the proposition Bill literally expressed—there is no need to invoke contexts of assessment to explain our differing assignments of truth-value to the two utterances, since the context of utterance can do that work instead. But we have no reason so to believe.¹⁴

¹² In fact, it is my view that there is no such theory to be had: Communication involving context-dependent elements depends only upon the participants in a given conversation’s co-ordinating their associated referential intentions. There need be nothing beyond the fact of such co-ordination for a theory of how the reference of such phrases is determined to specify.

¹³ See the previous note for why I am so doubtful.

¹⁴ For further remarks on propositional anaphora of a piece with those just made, see [Stanley, 1997]. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that arguments exploiting propositional anaphora have become quite common in the literature. If I am right, there is something wrong with many of them. See 16 for some further remarks.

The correctness of my diagnosis can be confirmed as follows. Consider the following utterances:

- (6) There will be a sea battle Tuesday.
 (7) There was a sea battle Tuesday.

Imagine that the former utterance is made on Monday; the latter, on Wednesday. Surely an indeterminist should regard (6) as neither true nor false and (7) as true, and yet they seem to concern the very same state of affairs. So why doesn't MacFarlane simply use this example to argue that we need to acknowledge contexts of assessment? The answer is that it has long been part of the indeterminist's repertoire to insist that (6) and (7) do not express the same proposition—or, even more strongly, to insist that *no* sentence one could utter on Wednesday could express the proposition (6) expressed when it was uttered.¹⁵ The proposition one expresses at a certain time depends upon what possible courses of history are open at that time, and many such courses that were open on Monday have been foreclosed by Wednesday. The point of using (2) and (3) is precisely to block this line of response. The intention is to force the indeterminist to consider the question, from the standpoint of Wednesday, whether *what Bill said* on Monday was true, that is—or so the thought goes—whether the proposition he literally expressed at that time is true. But the strategy simply fails if 'what Bill said' is not guaranteed to refer to the proposition Bill literally expressed when he made the utterance.

One might try to evade this criticism by considering examples in which reference is made directly to Bill's utterance rather than to what he has said. So the uttered sentence, in this version, would be something like:

- (8) Bill's utterance was true.

But I'm not sure I have any definite intuitions about such an artificial example: Truth is not ordinarily ascribed to utterances at all [Strawson, 1950, p. 130]. Moreover, truth for utterances is often analyzed in terms of truth for propositions, as follows:

- (9) Utterance U of sentence S is true iff $(\exists p)(U \text{ expresses } p \wedge p \text{ is true})$.

One does not have to accept the analysis, however, in order to acknowledge that one's evaluation of the truth of an utterance will depend upon what one takes to have been expressed in it. Irrespective of whether the one can be analyzed in terms of the other, the truth-value one is prepared to assign

¹⁵ For a very clear expression of this sort of view, see [Dummett, 1978]. Of course, Dummett is talking about the past rather than about the future, but the same manoeuvre is available in both cases.

to (8) will vary with the truth-value one is prepared to assign to ‘What Bill said in making that utterance was true’. So any context-dependence that infects phrases of the form ‘what Bill said’ will likely infect ascriptions of truth to utterances, as well.

A different reply would construe MacFarlane’s examples very differently from how I have construed them. Consider again Bill’s utterance (1). Now consider what Bill said when he made that utterance, that is, the proposition he literally expressed. Call it Bob. Is Bob true? The intuitions that underlie MacFarlane’s interpretation of his original example might seem to suggest that, from the standpoint of an indeterminist, Bob should not count as true if we assess it on Monday but that Bob should count as true if we assess it on Wednesday. If so, then the context in which Bob is assessed is essential to our assignment of truth-value to it, and we should all be relativists.

But this reply ignores one of the central points made earlier.¹⁶ The concept *the proposition literally expressed by an utterance* is a theoretical one. It is a notion, that is to say, that is employed within semantic theory. One does not get to have intuitions about it. Or better: If one does have intuitions about it, these intuitions are of little or no relevance to semantic theory. Semantic theory is accountable to our intuitions about truth-conditions, that is, to our intuitions about the truth-values an utterance of a given sentence of natural language would have if made under various circumstances. Semantic theory is *not* accountable to anyone’s intuitions about how its proprietary theoretical notions should best be developed. The test of any development of those notions is the explanatory power of the theory in which they are so developed. Intuitions to the effect that certain theoretical notions should or shouldn’t be developed in a particular way are of limited significance. The corresponding point is obvious in other areas: The most basic data for syntax are intuitive judgements of grammaticality.¹⁷ A particular syntactician may have such intuitions, and s’he is licensed to rely upon them in so far as h’er intuitions simply are the intuitions of a speaker of the language in question (and haven’t been too corrupted by theory). If, however, our syntactician has other intuitions that can only be stated using the proprietary theoretical notions of syntax itself—say, if s’he has the intuition that principle (B) of the binding theory is false—such an intuition is not one to which syntactic theory need be responsive. Our imaginary syntactician may, of course, rely upon h’er intuition in her attempt to develop an alternative account of anaphora, but the theory should be judged on its ability to account for the data, not on the basis of its correspondence with theoretical prejudices.

¹⁶ There is much wisdom about this sort of matter in the Appendix to Chapter 5 of [Dummett, 1981]. That wisdom survives the apparent demise of Dummett’s attempt to treat the cases that motivate Kripke’s thesis that names are rigid designators [Kripke, 1980] in terms of scope. Kripke’s argument against this treatment is not necessarily undermined by the reflections above, but its success against other sorts of views—e.g., its application to the view that names are rigidified descriptions, as in [Soames, 1998]—is threatened.

¹⁷ As things now stand, these are the most basic data. As Chomsky has emphasized [Chomsky, 1969], they are not the only data, and they might cease to be the most basic data if we knew more about the brain than we do.

However clear this distinction might be in principle, it can be hard to keep straight in practice, especially where semantic intuitions are concerned. Semantic theorists too are often their own data sources. If I consider Bill's hypothetical utterance (1), made on Monday, and then imaginatively project myself into the situation as described on Wednesday, I may find myself wanting to say: What Bill said was true. And that is an important datum (so long, of course, as I do not turn out to be too idiosyncratic in this respect). It is critical, however, to be clear which datum it is. In so far as I regard my response to this example as a datum, the datum is my judgement that, in these circumstances, I could truly utter 'What Bill said was true'. The datum is *not* that what Bill said—the proposition he literally expressed—should be regarded as true when judged from the standpoint of these circumstances. The latter is not a datum but a speculative bit of theory, and there is no reason semantic theory need be responsive to it. This revised form of MacFarlane's examples is, therefore, wholly irrelevant to any question worth discussing.

It thus seems to me, as I said earlier, that MacFarlane's arguments that semantic theory needs a new contextual parameter fail. (It does not, of course, follow that semantic theory does not need a new contextual parameter.) What his arguments give us is yet another reason to suppose that the various devices present in natural language for making reference to propositions—including phrases of the form 'what Bill said' and demonstratives used for propositional anaphora—are themselves context-dependent.¹⁸

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