

Epistemological Contextualism: A Semantic Perspective

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Abstract. According to epistemological contextualism, a sentence of the form "S knows that p" doesn't express a complete proposition. Different utterances of the sentence, in different contexts, can express different propositions: "know" is context-dependent. This paper deals with the *semantic* contextualist thesis grounding *epistemological* contextualism. We examine various kinds of linguistic context dependence, which could be relevant to epistemological contextualism: ambiguity, ellipsis, indexicality, context-sensitivity of scalar predicates, dependence on standards of precision. We argue that only an accurate analysis of the different varieties of context sensitivity secures us a better understanding and a clearer evaluation of the contextualist approach.

1 Introduction

Consider the two following scenarios.

Case A: It is Friday afternoon. Nicla and I are walking around in the town. We stop in front of my travel agency. I would like to collect my plane ticket for a trip to Paris in two weeks. But I realize that the agency is too crowded and I hate the crowds. I tell Nicla: "Tomorrow I will come back to collect my ticket". She says: "It is better to do it now. Perhaps tomorrow the agency is closed. Several travel agencies are closed on Saturday". I reply: "I know that the agency will be open tomorrow. It is open on Saturday. I personally saw it two weeks ago".

Case B: It is Friday afternoon. Nicla and I are walking around in the town. We stop in front of my travel agency. I would like to collect my plane ticket for a trip to Paris on Sunday. But I realize that the agency is too crowded and I hate the crowds. I tell Nicla: "Tomorrow I will come back to collect my ticket". She says: "It is better to do it now. Perhaps tomorrow the agency is closed. Several travel agencies are closed on Saturday". I reply: "I know that the agency will be open tomorrow. It is open on Saturday. I personally saw it two weeks ago" She retorts: "You have to collect your ticket, otherwise we can't go to the Context Conference in Paris. The agency might have changed its opening days during the last two weeks. Do you really know that it will be open tomorrow?". I admit: "Perhaps I do not know. It is better to ask which days the agency is open".

Epistemological contextualism is the doctrine that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying sentences vary according to the context in which they are uttered. According to the classic view in epistemology, knowledge is justified true belief. Invariantism¹ claims that there is *one and only one* epistemic standard for knowledge. Therefore it is wrong to claim – for the same cognitive subject S and the same proposition p – that

(1) S knows that p²

is true in one context, and is false in another context. On the contrary, contextualism admits the legitimacy of *several* epistemic standards that vary with the context of use of (1); it is right to claim – for the same cognitive subject S and the same proposition p – that (1) is true in one context, and is false in another context. The contextualist thesis is quite interesting and appealing because, compared to invariantism, promises epistemological theories more compatible with our everyday epistemic practices and solutions more alluring to the problem of skepticism. In what follows we focus mainly on the semantic issues of epistemological contextualism, trying to provide a better formulation of the *semantic* contextualist thesis grounding *epistemological* contextualism: our goal is then to assess differences and similarities between "know" and context-sensitive terms in natural language.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we briefly present a standard version of epistemological contextualism. In section 3 we sketch the contextualist response to skepticism. In section 4 we examine various kinds of context dependence, which could be relevant to epistemological contextualism: ellipsis, ambiguity, indexicality, context-sensitivity of scalar predicates, dependence on standards of precision. In the conclusion we argue that only an accurate analysis of the different varieties of context sensitivity secures us a better understanding and a clearer evaluation of the contextualist approach, and of its response to the skeptic.

2 Contextualism in Epistemology

The idea that there are two senses of “know” – a weak or ordinary sense and a strong or philosophical sense – is not new: it has been defended by Descartes, Locke, Hume³, and more recently by Malcom.⁴ Those authors maintain that there are *two* different epistemic standards for knowledge attributions. This surely is a contextualistic thesis, but mild, since contemporary contextualism allows that there are *several* standards. To say that there are several standards of knowledge is nothing but to recognize the indisputable fact that we apply different standards in different conversational contexts, so that it happens that we are willing – for the very same proposition p and the very same subject S – to attribute knowledge in contexts where

¹ The term is due to [39].

² Or “S is justified in believing that p”: on this point, cf. [1].

³ Cf. [16] Part IV, [27], Book IV, Ch. XI, par. 3, and [22].

⁴ Cf. [28] 183.

low standards count and to deny knowledge in contexts where *high* standards count. As Keith DeRose defines it, contextualism "refers to the position that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying sentences (sentences of the form "S knows that p" and "S doesn't know that p" and related variants of such sentences) vary in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered. What so varies is the epistemic standards that S must meet (or, in the case of a denial of knowledge, fail to meet) in order for such a statement to be true".⁵

According to contextualism, then, the truth-values of knowledge attributions vary on the basis of certain characteristics of the conversational context.⁶ Contextualism allows the possibility of truly asserting

(1) S knows that p

in one context and

(2) S does not know that p

in another context, identical to the previous one in all features relevant for the determination of indexicals or usual contextual expressions: different contexts call for different epistemic standards – lower or higher, weaker or stronger – that S must satisfy.

Let's go back to the two cases presented in the Introduction. From a contextualistic perspective, the sentence

(3) Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow

is true in case A, and false in case B.⁷ Or, to put it in an equivalent way, (3) is true in case A and

(4) Claudia doesn't know that the agency will be open tomorrow

is true in case B – where (4) is the denial of (3). While according to the invariantist, it is the strength of Claudia's epistemic status that changes, according to the contextualist, Claudia has the same epistemic position in case A and B, but there is a variation in what semantically counts as "knowing".

3 Skepticism

Contextualism has been often developed in order to face the skeptic's challenge⁸. Hume surely was a precursor: the Humean suggestion is that we must distinguish between a philosophical, or skeptical, context and an ordinary one. The skeptical hypotheses are normally raised in the former, while in the latter they are so obliterated

⁵ [14] 187-188.

⁶ For *subjective* contextualism, they are the characteristics of the context of the cognitive subject, while for *attributive* contextualism they are the characteristics of the context of the attributor. We will not address the question of the difference between subjective and attributive contextualism here: on this point see [42] and [43].

⁷ Taking however for granted that the three traditional conditions are satisfied in both cases, i.e. that: it is true that the travel agency will be open tomorrow; Claudia believes that the travel agency will be open tomorrow; Claudia's belief is justified.

⁸ For contextualist approaches to skepticism cf. [17], [18], [19], [40], [7], [8], [9], [12], [13], [25], [26], [44], [45]. For criticisms of these approaches cf. [33] and [37].

that they appear cold and ridiculous, once we come back to philosophical reflection.⁹ Contemporary contextualism elaborates a claim analogue to the Humean one: the skeptic modifies by her hypotheses the ordinary epistemic standards, and, in particular, raises them in order to create a context in which we cannot truly attribute knowledge to ourselves and to others. Once the standards are raised, or strengthened (even if aberrantly¹⁰), we must admit that we feel all the force of skepticism, and concede that we accept its conclusion: we don't know what we ordinarily claim to know.

Let us examine the skeptical case by considering the sentence

(5) S knows that she has hands:

(5) is true iff S has hands, S believes it and she is in a good enough epistemic position with respect to "S has hands". If I am not a philosopher, but a normal person, I may truly assert that (5) is true, if S has hands, S believes it and she is in a certain epistemic position: for example, if her perceptual faculties are well functioning, and there is no special reason to believe that any potential defeater obtains. In such an ordinary context the epistemic standards are Low (or Easy). What does the skeptic do? She mentions a skeptical hypothesis, and so confers relevance to it, compelling us to consider it.¹¹ She changes the context: now we are in a skeptical context. S's position is not judged good enough anymore: the standards are High (or Tough¹²), and so in this case I may say that (5) is false. In order truly to state I now know something, I must rule out the skeptical hypothesis. But, I cannot: therefore we must admit the triumph of skepticism.

Once we are back in more ordinary conversational contexts, we apply more relaxed standards and realize that we can truly attribute knowledge to ourselves and to the others. In DeRose's words: "As soon as we find ourselves in more ordinary conversational contexts, it will not only be true for us to claim to know the very things that the skeptic now denies we know, but it will also be *wrong* for us to *deny* that we know these things".¹³ The fact that the skeptic employs high standards in her context cannot show at all that we do not satisfy the weaker standards of ordinary contexts. So there is not any contradiction between saying that we know and that we do not know: the skeptical negation of knowledge is perfectly compatible with ordinary knowledge attributions.

⁹ Cf. [22] 316: "Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther".

¹⁰ In Goldman's words, "the skeptic... exercises an aberrant pattern of possibility exploration": [20] 148.

¹¹ Lewis speaks of "Rule of Attention", Cohen of "Rule of Salience", DeRose of "Rule of Sensitivity".

¹² The terms "Easy" and "Tough" are due to [33].

¹³ Cf. [14] 194.

The obvious advantage of contextualism over invariantism is its compatibility with everyday epistemic practice. In fact it is evident that, contrary to what invariantism claims, we legitimately apply different epistemic standards in different contexts. Contextualism theorizes this point and bridges the gap between epistemological reflection and ordinary practice. It recognizes the validity of skepticism and, at the same time, the validity of our ordinary knowledge attributions by explaining why we face an alleged paradox.

4 Context Dependence

Broadly speaking, the semantic thesis grounding epistemological contextualism is that a sentence of the form (1) doesn't express a complete proposition. Different utterances of (1), in different contexts of utterance, can express different propositions. The proposition expressed by a knowledge attribution is determined in part by the context of use: we must add in information about the context in order to determine the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form (1). If we fill in the gaps by appealing to low epistemic standards in case A, (3) will be evaluated as expressing a true proposition; if we fill in the gaps by appealing to high epistemic standards in case B, (3) will be evaluated as expressing a false proposition. Little attention has been paid to a precise formulation of the semantic contextualist thesis grounding epistemological contextualism.¹⁴ Our goal is then to examine various kinds of linguistic context dependence, which could be relevant to epistemological contextualism: ellipsis, ambiguity, indexicality, context-sensitivity of scalar predicates, dependence on standards of precision. One point, before starting, to clarify our overall project. We will see that contextualist supporters of the different semantic theories of context dependence agree on the semantic value of (1) in the different contexts – that is, on its truth-conditions. The disagreement, then, doesn't concern the semantic interpretation of (1), but what features of the context have a bearing on its semantic interpretation – and in particular the semantic mechanisms explaining how context affects its semantic interpretation.¹⁵

4.1 Ellipsis

It has sometimes been suggested to draw a parallel between “know” and standard cases of linguistic ellipsis, as in

(7) Jack has finished eating; Jill has finished too.

To be evaluated, the second sentence must be supplemented with some linguistic material, drawn from the first sentence. We will then obtain:

(8) Jack has finished eating; Jill has finished eating too.

In a similar vein, we can postulate for (3) some supplemented linguistic material, allowing to completely determining the sentence truth conditions. One might say that

¹⁴ With the noteworthy exceptions of [33], [35], [36], [31], and [15].

¹⁵ The distinction between semantic values and what in the context makes it the case that an utterance has the semantic value it has, is an instance of a well-established distinction within semantics: the one between *descriptive* and *foundational* semantics: cf. [34] 535.

there is an elliptical “according to standard Low” in case A, and an elliptical “according to standard High” in case B, as in

(9) According to standard Low, Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow

and

(10) According to standard High, Claudia doesn't know that the agency will be open tomorrow.

However, there is a widespread agreement that one should in general avoid to try to explain such a contextual variation in terms of some kind of ellipsis: as a matter of fact, one should appeal to ellipsis in a systematic way, for every occurrence of the predicate “know”. Moreover, as we mentioned in § 2, it is possible to multiply the standards of justification, implausibly extending the list of linguistic material that should be supplemented in each case.

4.2 Ambiguity

Traditional semantics postulates that two or more conventional meanings are associated with an ambiguous expression, and two or more sets of truth conditions are associated with an ambiguous sentence, such as

(11) Jack went to the bank.

To account for A and B cases, contextualists could devise an ambiguity approach, postulating for “know” different conventional senses: *know*₁ meaning “to know relative to standard Low” and *know*₂ meaning “to know relative to standard High”. Sentence (3), then, would have two alternative meanings, corresponding to two alternative logical forms:

(12) Claudia knows₁ that the agency will be open tomorrow

and

(13) Claudia knows₂ that the agency will be open tomorrow.

The role of context is just to help us determine which of the two (or more) sentences it is uttered in case A and in case B.

Such an approach should be ruled out. Again, it is possible to multiply the standards of justification, extending the list of senses conventionally associated with the predicate. This is a choice hardly plausible and certainly not economical for any semantic theory. Moreover, as Jason Stanley rightly points out, claiming that “know” is ambiguous would amount to showing that there are languages in which the different senses are represented by different words.¹⁶

4.3 Indexicals

A strategy in terms of some kind of indexicality seems far more plausible. Indexicals are referential expressions depending, for their semantic value, on the context of utterance. Context determines a contextual parameter that fixes the value of an indexical expression: “know” is an indexical expression like “I”, “here” or “now”. The interpretation of a sentence containing an indexical depends on the characteristics of

¹⁶ Cf. [36] 139.

the context in which it is uttered: the interpretation varies with context of use. The sentence

(14) I am French,

for example, is true if uttered by Claudine (who is a French), while it is false if uttered by Claudia (who is an Italian). Language conventions associate with an indexical a rule (a Kaplanian *character*) fixing the reference of the occurrences of the expression in context. The semantic value of an indexical (its *content*, its truth conditional import) is thus determined by a conventional rule and by a contextual parameter, which is an aspect of the utterance situation.¹⁷ The character of an indexical encodes the specific contextual co-ordinate that is relevant for the determination of its semantic value: for "I" the relevant parameter will be the speaker or the agent of the utterance, for "here" the place of the utterance, for "now" the time of the utterance, and so on.

Sentences containing "know" are considered in the same way as sentences containing indexicals. The truth of (1), then, "is relative to the attributor's context, but the notion of truth is preserved by treating knowledge claims as having an indexical component".¹⁸ The character of (1) may be expressed as "S knows that p relative to standard N", while its content would be, in case A, "S knows that p relative to standard Low" and, in case B, "S knows that p relative to standard High".¹⁹ Now, what happens in the skeptical case (sentence (5))? The character of (5) is always constant: "S knows that she has hands relative to standard N". The content varies with the context of the attributor, and, in particular, with the epistemic position she requires for the cognitive subject. If I am not a philosopher, but a normal person, I may truly say that (5) is true, if S knows it relative to standard Low. Of course in a philosophical context, such a position is not judged good enough: in this case I may say that (5) is false. Again it is claimed that the way in which the truth conditions of (5) vary with context is not different at all from the way in which the truth conditions of (14) vary with context.

Let's further examine the analogy between "know" and indexicals. The meaning of an indexical expression is a *function* from contextual factors (such as speaker, place and time of the utterance) to semantic values. By applying the functional conception to examples (1) and (3), we generalize the idea that the conventional meaning of "know" is a function. The function will have the following disjunctive form:

- "know" = *know relative to standard x* if "know" (in context A) or *know relative to standard y* if "know" (in context B) or *know relative to standard z* if "know" (in context C) or *know relative to standard w* in all the other cases.

where, for example, context A is an everyday context with no urgent practical concerns, B is an everyday context with urgent practical concerns, C is a skeptical context, etc. This approach has the valuable benefit of maintaining a stable conventional meaning associated with "know": there is only one function associated

¹⁷ Cf. [23]. On Kaplan, and, more in general, on indexicality, cf. [2] and [3].

¹⁸ Cf. [6] 648.

¹⁹ Cf. [33] 326-328. According to DeRose, the character of (1) is roughly the following: "S has a true belief that p and is in a *good enough* epistemic position with respect to p". Its content is "how good an epistemic position S must be in to count as knowing that p", and this shifts from context to context: cf. [11] 922.

with the predicate, and all its different values depend on the different arguments the function takes (context A, B, C, etc.).

We must however reject the functional strategy: it is, in fact, conceivable to obtain for (3) in context A the interpretation of “know” which is normally obtained for (3) in context B. Let's see. Once the context of utterance is fixed, the linguistic rules governing the use of the indexicals determine completely and automatically their reference, no matter what the speaker's intentions are. If, for example, Nicla utters (14) with the intention of referring to Catherine Deneuve (if, for example, she believes she is Catherine Deneuve), she will nonetheless express the (false) proposition “Nicla is French”. Analogously, according to the indexical strategy, context fixes the epistemic standards – no matter what the knowledge attributor's intentions are. If Bea, the knowledge attributor, utters (3) in context A, with the intention of expressing the proposition

- Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow relative to standard High, she will nonetheless express the proposition
- Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow relative to standard Low.

In other words, there is no way for her to express, in a context where there are no particular practical concerns, that Claudia knows something according to high standards – which is a very common case (we may suppose, for example, that, in context A, Claudia has recently checked the opening hours of the agency for some other reasons).

4.4 Demonstratives

In the case of an analogy of “know” with a demonstrative, the situation is quite different: a difference, to our knowledge, never correctly underlined.²⁰ Demonstratives can take an indefinite number of senses depending on the context of use. The meaning of a demonstrative, like “she” in the sentence

(15) She is French,

by itself doesn't constitute an automatic rule for identifying the referent of the expression in a given context. The semantics of “she” cannot unambiguously determine its reference: if, for instance, in the context of utterance of (15) there is more than one woman, the expression “she” can equally identify any woman. In sophisticated versions of traditional semantics, demonstratives (expressions like “he”, “she”, “this”, “that”, etc.) are given a different treatment from the indexical one. According to Kaplan, the occurrence of a demonstrative must be supplemented by a *demonstration*, an act of demonstration like pointing, or “the speaker's directing intention”. There is no automatic rule of saturation: the semantic value of a demonstrative is fixed according to the speaker's directing intentions.²¹ The reference of “I” is the object satisfying, in a given context, the condition coded in its own character: “I

²⁰ Schiffer's critique to hidden-indexicality doesn't account for that difference, which we view as a mistake: cf. [33] 326-328.

²¹ There are only constraints on possible referents: “he” refers to a male individual who is neither the speaker nor the addressee, “she” to a female individual who is neither the speaker nor the addressee, and so on.

refers to the speaker or to the agent”; while the rule associated with a demonstrative is “an occurrence of ‘she’ refers to the object the speaker intends to refer to”.²²

In the same way, we could say that there is a variable hidden in the syntactic structure of the predicate "know" (a variable for the epistemic standard): we must specify that variable for every occurrence of the predicate, in every context, in order to have complete truth conditions. The rule associated with (1) would then be: “S knows that p relative to standard N”. “Relative to standard N” is now a free variable for epistemic standard: the variable must be saturated according to the context, but there is no automatic rule of saturation, no function from a contextual parameter to a semantic value. Its value depends *on the knowledge attributor’s intentions*. Let us examine again the two possible contexts for (3): in case A the set of truth conditions is: *Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow relative to standard Low* – and (3) is true. In case B, the set of truth conditions is: *Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow relative to standard High* – and (3) is false.

In our opinion, the interpretation of "know" as a demonstrative, and not as an indexical, offers a way out from the puzzle mentioned in § 4.3. Suppose again we are in context A modified: in this context there are no particular practical concerns, but Claudia happens to know that the agency will be open tomorrow according to high standards (she has recently checked the opening hours of the agency for some other reasons). Now Bea, the knowledge attributor, may utter (3) in context A, with the intention of expressing the proposition

– Claudia knows that the agency will be open tomorrow relative to standard High, and succeed in expressing it. The variable hidden in the syntactic structure of the predicate is not fixed automatically by the context (as for indexicals like “I”), but saturated according to Bea’s directing intentions.

The analogy between "know" and demonstratives seems promising; but there is a powerful argument against it. As many contextualists have pointed out, in every context there is only one epistemic standard: the epistemic standards for "know" do not shift within a single sentence. Failure to respect such a rule amounts to the formation of what DeRose’s calls *Abominable Conjunctions* – sentences such as

(16) S doesn’t know she is not a bodiless brain in a vat, but S knows she has hands.²³

Moreover, not only the contextual parameter corresponding to epistemic standards cannot shift within a clause, but also, once standards have been raised, it is not possible to lower them again in the next sentence.²⁴ The context-dependence of the predicate "know" seems tied not to the expression itself, but to the whole discourse. This is not the case of many contextual expressions – and in particular this is not the case of demonstratives: demonstratives shift internal to a single sentence, as in

²² See [23] and [24]; cf. [2] 74-76 and [32] 56-57.

²³ Cf. [12] 28. For a different view on this kind of sentences, see [30].

²⁴ Cf. [25] 247: “the rule of accommodation is not fully reversible. For some reason, I know not what, the boundary readily shifts outward if what is said requires it, but does not so readily shift inward if what is said requires that”.

(17) She is French and she is not French
(uttered with two different demonstrations, or two different referential intentions):²⁵
the interpretation of the relevant contextual parameter can change within a sentence.
Notice that while demonstratives do allow for shifts within a clause, indexicals do not:²⁶ the sentence

(18) I am French and I am not French
is contradictory, while (17) is not. Relative to this particular feature, pure indexicals like "I" behave as "know" does.

4.5 Scalar Predicates

The most promising approach views the predicate "know" as a predicate like "flat", "happy", "rich", "empty" and so on: they are all context-dependent terms in need of "precisification", namely specification of a relevant comparison class. As Cohen claims, "Many, if not most, predicates in natural language are such that the truth-value of sentences containing them depends on contextually determined standards, e.g. 'flat', 'bald', 'rich', 'happy', 'sad'... For predicates of this kind, context will determine the degree to which the predicate must be satisfied in order for the predicate to apply simpliciter. So the context will determine how flat a surface must be in order to be flat".²⁷ An attribution of flatness is sensitive to a contextually salient scale of flatness. Even for the very same cognitive subject, the very same surface can be judged flat or bumpy, depending on the context: for everyday aims (eating outside, sunbathing, playing volley-ball, and so on) I can judge flat a certain lawn; the same judgement may be plainly false if Wimbledon's tennis tournament is going to be played on that lawn. In a similar vein, an attribution of knowledge is sensitive to a contextually determined epistemic parameter.

Again, we must draw an important distinction here. Following Barbara Partee (and *contra* Jason Stanley and Stewart Cohen), we must distinguish between scalar adjectives like "tall",²⁸ and absolute adjectives like "flat", "bald", and "certain":²⁹ while "tall" is a gradable term, "know" is not³⁰ – exactly like "flat", "bald", and "certain". Rather than abandon contextualism, as Stanley suggests, we claim that the analogy should be maintained between "know" and absolute, context-dependent adjectives.

Does this strategy solve the problem of the context-sensitivity of "know" to discourse, rather than to the term itself? In other words, do absolute context-dependent adjectives allow for standard-shifts within a single sentence? If they do -

²⁵ Cf. [36] 134: "Contextualists typically speak as if there is one contextual standard in a context for all context-sensitive expressions in a discourse... But this is not in general a good description of how context-sensitive expressions work. Rather, the context-sensitivity is usually linked to the term itself, rather than the whole discourse".

²⁶ Neither Stanley nor Partee in her comments acknowledge this fact.

²⁷ [16] 60. On "flat", cf. [25] and [19].

²⁸ "Tall" is Stanley's main target in his critique of contextualism: cf. [36].

²⁹ Absolute adjectives like "flat" admits "absolutely" and "perfectly" as modifiers: cf. [31]. On "certain", cf. [38] ch. 2.

³⁰ Cf. [36] 124-130.

and it is usually claimed that they do - the analogy should be rejected. As Stalnaker points out, "Many binding examples of these are familiar:

(19) Many of the animals in the zoo are old,
where it is understood that an elephant is old if it is old for an elephant, a boa constrictor is old if it is old for boa constrictors, etc."³¹ Stanley proposes similar examples, like

(20) That butterfly is small, and that elephant is small
where a butterfly is small if it is small for a butterfly, and an elephant is small if it is small for an elephant.³² We maintain that intuitions are unclear: for example, what about

(21) Bill Gates is rich and Claudia is rich
or

(22) My desk is flat and Holland is flat?³³

Is it understood that Bill Gates is rich if he is rich relative to a high standard, and Claudia is rich if she is rich relative to a (much) lower standard? Is it understood that my desk is flat if it is flat relative to a high standard, and Holland is flat if it is flat relative to a lower standard? Remember that once standards have been raised, it is not possible to lower them again: (21) and (22) look as Abominable Conjunctions to us. The same goes for

(23) Bob is tall and Shaq is tall
(where Bob is tall according to some low standards) or

(24) Many people in this room are tall,
if Shaq and Bob are in the room, or

(25) Many people in this room are rich,
if Bill Gates and Claudia are in the room (and Claudia is rich according to some low standards), or

(26) Yul Brinner is bald and Berlusconi is bald.

In our opinion, absolute context-dependent predicates do not shift internal to a single sentence. Is it really obvious that examples like (20) are acceptable? Intuitions are far from stable. If one is hesitant about her intuitions, as we are, then the analogy between "know" and absolute context-dependent predicates still holds and deserves attention and further inquiry.

But there is an alternative solution to the puzzle mentioned in § 4.4.

4.6 Standards of Precision

The crucial point is the possibility, or not, of allowing context shifts internal to a single sentence. Contextual expressions, it is claimed, appeal to different contexts in different parts of the same sentence: sentences (19) and (20) are examples of such a variation. Conversely, "know" does not allow for changes in the context within a sentence: sentence (16) is an example of such impossibility. In other words, we cannot accept sentences like

³¹ [35] 111.

³² [36] 134.

³³ Stanley's example is actually "That field is flat, and this rock is flat".

(27) S knows that p and S doesn't know that p
by claiming that the epistemic standards have shifted from Low in the first occurrence of "know" to High in the second one. In this respect, standards of precision are an interesting analogy for knowledge attributions. As it is well known, according to Lewis, once you have fixed some conversational standard of precision, by saying, for example

(28) Italy is boot-shaped,
then you may truly assert

(29) France is hexagonal;
"But if you deny that Italy is boot-shaped, pointing out the differences, what you have said requires high standards under which 'France is hexagonal' is far from true enough".³⁴ The essential point is that standards of precision are not tied with the expressions "boot-shaped" and "hexagonal": they are part of the conversational score, and are therefore associated with the whole discourse. The same goes for (27). If you say

(3) Claudia knows that the travel agency will be open tomorrow,
and, as Lewis puts it, "get away with it", then (assuming that Claudia and Nicla are in the same epistemic position) you can truly assert

(30) Nicla knows that the travel agency will be open tomorrow.
Low standards are required, hence (31) is true. But if you deny (3), then you cannot assert (30): you have raised the epistemic standards and neither Claudia's nor Nicla's epistemic positions are good enough. The epistemic standards for (3), or for its denial, are not associated with the expression "know": that explains why raising the standards for (3) will affect the standards for (30).

5 Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on the semantic issues raised by epistemological contextualism. Our aim was to provide a better formulation of the semantic thesis grounding epistemological contextualism. We have underlined differences and similarities between "know" and context-sensitive terms in natural language, and distinguished various kinds of context dependence: ellipsis, ambiguity, dependence on the context of utterance of indexicals, demonstratives, and scalar predicates, dependence on standards of precision. We have argued that only an accurate analysis of the different varieties of context sensitivity secures us a better understanding and a clearer evaluation of the contextualist approach, and of its response to the skeptic. More specifically we have identified a crucial question: while "know" does not allow for changes in the epistemic standards within a sentence, contextual expressions appeal to different contexts in different parts of the same sentence. Those remarks usually suggest adopting a strategy in terms of standards of precision, drawing on Lewis and Partee's proposals. Yet, we have claimed that intuitions about absolute context-dependent predicates like "flat" and "bald", and about the way they allow for context shifts, are far from stable. In our opinion the analogy still holds and deserves attention and further inquiry.

³⁴ [25] 245.

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