

# Sense and Insensibility: Or Where Minimalism Meets Contextualism

Jérôme Dokic, Eros Corazza

► **To cite this version:**

Jérôme Dokic, Eros Corazza. Sense and Insensibility: Or Where Minimalism Meets Contextualism. Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism. Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics, Oxford University Press, pp.169-193, 2007, 6. <ijn\_00260968>

**HAL Id: ijn\_00260968**

**[https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn\\_00260968](https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00260968)**

Submitted on 5 Mar 2008

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Sense and Insensibility: Or Where Minimalism Meets Contextualism\*

Eros Corazza

*Carleton University (Ottawa) and Jean Nicod Institute (Paris)*

Jérôme Dokic

*École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and Jean Nicod Institute (Paris)*

eros\_corazza@carleton.ca

dokic@ehess.fr

“A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false” (Harold Pinter, *Nobel Prize Discourse 2005*).

## Abstract:

In this paper we shall present some benefits of semantic minimalism. In particular, we shall stress how minimalism allows us to avoid cognitive overloading, in that (i) it does not posit hidden indexicals or variables at the LF or representational level and (ii) it does not posit the operation of free enrichment processes when we produce or hear a sentence.

We shall nonetheless argue that a fully adequate semantic minimalism should embrace a form of relativism—that is, the view that semantic content must be evaluated, *pace* Cappelen and Lepore, *vis-à-vis* a given situation, the latter being a fragment of a possible world or a partial world. In so doing we shall show how Cappelen and Lepore damage the insight of semantic minimalism insofar as they insist that the (minimal) semantic content should be evaluated with respect to a whole possible world. This move fails to capture the powerful contextualist intuition that it does not make much sense to evaluate the content of, say, *Naomi is rich*, or *Jon is tall*, with respect to, for instance, the actual world (ignoring standards of evaluation or situations).

To deal with this kind of worry, Cappelen and Lepore appeal to speech-act pluralism: they claim that whatever work is done by contextual parameters can be done by adding a proposition to the set of propositions expressed by the utterance. For instance, someone can utter “Pierre is tall” to mean that Pierre is tall for a Frenchman, which is a way of saying that the proposition *that Pierre is tall for a Frenchman* is one of the many propositions which are pragmatically expressed by the utterance. In our view, this strategy fails insofar as it forces internalizing and making explicit something that may be given but not represented in the situation of the utterance.

In contrast to some forms of radical relativism—e.g. the position recently put forward by MacFarlane (2003, 2005)—though, we shall argue that there is a privileged or default situation relative to which the minimal semantic content should be evaluated. This privileged

---

\* For helpful comments and/or discussions on the subject of this paper we would like to thank Robyn Carston, Dick Carter, Steven Davis, Julien Dutant, Kepa Korta, David Matheson, Stefano Predelli, François Recanati, Dan Sperber, Richard Vallée, and two anonymous referees for Oxford University Press.

situation is fixed by cognitive facts concerning speakers and hearers, but also by non-cognitive relations between the grasp of content and the world.

## 1. The Essence of Minimalism

As we understand it, semantic minimalism is the view that: (i) an utterance  $u$  of a (declarative) sentence  $S$  expresses a proposition  $p$  whose constituents must all be represented by elements of  $S$ ; (ii) the structure of  $p$  reflects the logical form of  $S$ ,<sup>1</sup> and (iii) if  $S$  does not contain indexical expressions,  $u$  expresses  $p$  in a context-independent way. This last claim can be illustrated in considering:

- (1) Jon is tall
- (2) Melons are red

Utterances of (1) and (2) express the propositions *that Jon is tall* and *that melons are red* regardless of the context in which the sentences (1) and (2) are uttered. This amounts to saying that all utterances of (1) and (2) express the very same proposition, i.e., *that Jon is tall* and *that melons are red* respectively.

We shall not distinguish here between propositions and truth conditions; in our terminology, propositions are just truth conditions.<sup>2</sup> Semantic minimalists claim that propositions are invariant across contexts. If they are right, then truth conditions are also, by definition, invariant across contexts. As we shall see, the crucial question is whether the truth-values of propositions can vary within a given possible world. If the answer to this question is positive, then propositions (or truth conditions) determine truth-values only relative to partial situations. For instance, the proposition that Jon is tall may be true relative to one particular situation but false relative to another, even within the same possible world. As will become clear, part of our argument is that the mistake of so-called indexicalism and contextualism is that they unduly transform intuitions about variable truth-values into intuitions about variable truth conditions or propositions.

Minimalists need not deny, though, that some (unambiguous) sentences may express some propositions only relative to a given context. Jane's utterance of:

- (3) I am tall

---

<sup>1</sup> A proposition's structure should reflect, for instance, the difference between propositions expressed by sentences like "Jon loves Mary" and "Mary loves Jon". The constituents of the propositions expressed are exactly the same, i.e. Jon, Mary and the loving relation. Yet the order, and thus the meaning of the sentences, differs. This should be reflected in the structure of the proposition. For the sake and simplicity of our argument, we shall concentrate only on the propositional constituents insofar as the main debate among the various theories we shall discuss turns around the propositional constituents.

<sup>2</sup> Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 3 note 3) note that minimalism can be spelled out either in terms of propositions or in terms of truth conditions. One issue, which goes beyond the scope of this paper, is whether talk of constituents and their being represented by elements of a sentence survives eschewing propositions for truth conditions.

expresses the proposition *that Jane is tall*. If (3) is uttered by Jon, it expresses the proposition *that Jon is tall*. Both Jane and Jon utter the same sentence, yet they express different propositions. The same is true with an utterance of:

(4) This melon is red

When the relevant designated melon is—to give it a name—Plug, it expresses the proposition *that Plug is red*, while if the relevant melon is Plum it expresses the proposition *that Plum is red*. In short, minimalists recognize that some sentences, i.e. those containing indexicals, express a proposition only relative to the context in which the sentence is uttered. When an indexical expression appears in an utterance there is a mandatory process triggered by the linguistic meaning of the indexical expression which requires appeal to some contextual features in order to fix the value of the indexical expression and, therefore, to determine the propositional constituent. This reflects Kaplan's (1977) famous distinction between character and content: the character of an indexical (its linguistic meaning) can be represented by a function taking as argument the context and giving as value the semantic content. If we follow Cappelen and Lepore, the class of indexical expressions is limited to the list mentioned by Kaplan (1977). This list contains only expressions like the pronouns "I", "s/he", "we", ..., the demonstratives "this", "that", "these", ..., the adverbs "here", "now", "tomorrow", .... Roughly, an indexical is an expression whose linguistic meaning directs us to some aspect of context in order to fix the reference. Thus, "I" directs us to the agent of the utterance, while "she" directs us to the relevant female demonstrated by an utterance of "she". If the linguistic meaning of an expression does not direct us to some contextual aspects this expression cannot be classified as an indexical. It is thus context *insensitive* and the semantic value of an utterance of this expression will always be the same, regardless of the context in which it occurs. In other words, an expression is context sensitive inasmuch as its semantic value can vary from context to context. It is as simple as that. Since the semantic value of an expression like "I", "now", "she", etc. can vary from context to context, these expressions are context sensitive. On the other hand, on the assumption that the semantic value of expressions like "red", "tall", "ready", does not vary from context to context, these expressions are context insensitive. The semantic value of "red", for instance, does not vary whether it applies to tomatoes, London buses, or Ian's hair. Tomatoes, London buses and Ian's hair all have something in common: they are all red (whatever being red turns out to be). In a nutshell, "red" does not pick out a property in one context and another property in another context, i.e., it does not pick out one property when applied to London buses and another when it applies to tomatoes, likewise for "tall" and "ready".<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> One could argue that just as there is nothing in the linguistic meaning of "tall" which could orient the hearer to the relevant standard of tallness, there is nothing in the code meaning of "now" or "here" that orients the hearer to the temporal/spatial extent of the time/location referred to. The same with "s/he":

The distinction between indexical expressions—and thus context-sensitivity linguistically triggered—and non-indexical ones also shows up in relation to what intuitively counts as understanding of an utterance. One does not understand an utterance containing an indexical expression if one does not identify the referent of the indexical expression, while one can understand an utterance deprived of indexical expression without engaging in a process of identification. Hence, one does not understand an utterance like “I am ready” or “This is red” if one does not identify the referent of ‘I’ and ‘this’. On the other hand, one can understand an utterance of “Aristotle is a philosopher” or “Jane is ready” even if one does not know who Aristotle was or what Jane is ready for. More on this later on.

## 2. Indexicalism and Contextualism

It may be worth mentioning that some people contest the view that the class of indexical expressions is limited to the ones we enumerated. Some go so far as to claim that proper names are indexicals as well (see, for instance, Burge 1973, Recanati 1993, Voltolini 1995, Pelczar and Rainsbury 1998). Others claim that comparative adjectives such as “rich”, “small”, ... (see Stanley 2000, Richard 2004), quantified expressions like “the book”, “some students”, ... (see Stanley and Szabo 2000), common nouns like “local”, “foreigner”, “enemy”, ... (see Partee 1989, Condoravdi and Gawron 1986, Vallée 2003) are context sensitive expressions as well. A common strategy to represent their context sensitivity is to posit a variable working like a hidden indexical at the level of logical form (see Partee 1989, Condoravdi and Gavron 1986, Stanley 2000, Stanley and Szabo 2000).<sup>4</sup> This view can be labelled

---

nothing in their code meaning orients the hearer to a specific individual. We maintain that there is a difference in the linguistic meaning of “tall” and the linguistic meaning of “now/here”. Although the temporal/spatial extent of “now/here” may vary from utterance to utterance their linguistic meaning (or character) operates on a specific time/location to select the relevant extension. Think for instance of “we”: nothing in its linguistic meaning tells us how many individuals must enter its extension. Yet its linguistic meaning forces the agent to be part of its semantic value. As for “s/he” their linguistic meaning is incomplete and suggests that the value is also determined by the accompanying demonstration or directing intention (see Kaplan 1977 and 1989). On the other hand, nothing in the linguistic meaning of a word like “tall” directs us to a comparative class. All its linguistic meaning suggests is something along “more than the average height” (cf. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) without suggesting that a standard of comparison should be part of its extension.

<sup>4</sup> It may be worth noticing that unlike Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 1 note 1) we believe that context sensitivity expands to other terms (often called *contextuals*) as well. Among these terms we have: “foreigner”, “local”, “enemy”, “exported”, “national”, and the like—that is, terms whose literal meaning suggests that their value also depends on the context in which they are uttered. Someone is an enemy or a foreigner only relative to someone else or some other country: our enemy can be your friend, while one may be a foreigner in France but not in Canada. On the other hand, something can be said to be red, or blue, regardless of the substance/thing to which the term applies. However, whether or not one ultimately includes contextuals in the list of context sensitive expressions does not affect the contextualist-minimalist debate and, most importantly, does not undermine minimalism. We can propose some criteria for distinguishing contextual terms from non-contextual terms. The former, unlike the latter, for instance, can work anaphorically and can be bound. In “All around England most Arsenal supporters got drunk because after the final a *local* bar was selling cheap alcohol”, “local” is

*indexicalism* insofar as it explains, to borrow Recanati's terminology, contextual dependence in terms of saturation rather than enrichment. Saturation, unlike (free) enrichment, is a mandatory contextual process. As such, saturation is triggered by an indexical expression working either at the surface level or at the LF level. The case of surface level saturation is furnished by indexical expressions properly called, while the case of saturation operating at the LF level is given by alleged context-sensitive expressions (e.g. 'tall', 'red', 'ready', 'all the students', etc.) which do not fall under the traditional category of indexical expressions. The value of each context-sensitive term is thus determined in a similar way to the value of an indexical expression.

The main problem with indexicalism is that it intellectualizes ordinary communication. In an intuitive (albeit, of course, revisable) picture of communication, the hearer understands the speaker's utterance insofar as she grasps the same (or at least similar) propositions. This is true also of indexical utterances. If Jane, addressing Jon, says:

(5) Today I am happy

Jon understands what Jane says insofar as he comes to know that "I" stands for Jane while "today" stands for the relevant day, say Monday, October 31, 2005 and, therefore, he grasps the proposition *that Jane is happy on Monday, October 31, 2005*. In other words, if one does not know the value of an indexical one does not understand the utterance containing it. To be sure, a competent speaker could interpret the relevant utterance and come to entertain a thought she could express by "The agent of this token was happy when s/he wrote it". This interpretation, based on the knowledge of linguistic rules governing the use of the indexical, cannot be, properly speaking, considered to be an understanding of the relevant utterance. This should not be surprising insofar as indexical expressions can be viewed as terms whose proper function is to exploit contextual aspects in order to anchor language and thought to specific items in our surroundings. In other words, there is what we call an *identification constraint* on the understanding of indexical utterances: in order to understand such utterances, one must identify the semantic values that the indexical expressions have in their context of utterance.<sup>5</sup>

---

bound by, and so its value covaries with, "All around England", while in "Every time Jon visits Paris he meets the *local* jazz guitarists", "local" works like an anaphoric pronoun, suggesting that Jon meets the jazz guitarists living in or around Paris. Similar examples can be constructed with "enemy", "foreigner" and the like, while they cannot be generated with terms like "tall", "red", and the like. In, for instance, "At each farm Jon visited all the tomatoes were red", the value of "red" does not depend on (and does not covary with) the farms Jon visited. This can further be highlighted by the different behaviors of "local" and "red" in "In each market John visited, all the tomatoes were red/local". Furthermore, contextually unlike other terms can have a strict and sloppy reading when appearing in elliptical contexts such as: "Jane saw a local doctor and so did Mary" which can mean that Mary saw a doctor located in Jane's neighborhood (strict reading) or one located in Mary's neighborhood (sloppy reading). On the other hand, a sentence like "Jane ate a red tomato and so did Mary" can have only the strict reading interpretation, i.e. that Mary eats a red tomato.

<sup>5</sup> Adopting Russell's terminology we could say that one understands the utterance of an indexical insofar as one is acquainted with the value of the indexical. To be acquainted with a relevant day or

Now the identification constraint does not seem to apply to proper names, at least in the way it applies to *bona fide* indexical expressions. One need not know who Aristotle is in order to understand an utterance containing “Aristotle”. Besides, what does it mean to know who Aristotle is? Does one need to be able to tell him apart from other individuals? Does it mean to possess some information applying only to him?<sup>6</sup>

An analogous point holds for terms like “red” or “tall”. If they were to work like indexicals, their extension would vary according to the context in which they occur. Thus one would understand an utterance containing “red” or “tall” only insofar as one would identify the exact extension of “red” and “tall” as they appear in the relevant utterance. Now suppose Jon utters:

(6) Jane is too tall

What is the proposition expressed by Jon’s utterance? In the indexicalist view, it cannot be the minimal proposition *that Jane is too tall*. It may be the proposition *that Jane is too tall to play with Jon’s kids*. Or it may be the proposition *that Jane is too tall to dance with Shorty*, or the proposition *that Jane is too tall to attend Jon’s party*, and so on. In each case, the extension of “tall” will probably be different.<sup>7</sup> We can raise two questions here. First, how does the hearer manage to *identify* the non-minimal proposition expressed by Jon’s utterance? Second, how does Jon, the speaker, manage to *express* such a proposition to begin with?

The standard indexicalist view is that “tall” in (6) comes with a covert variable, something like “tall relative to standard *x*”. In contrast to the case of overt indexicality, there is nothing in the linguistic meaning of the sentence “Jane is too

---

person, one need not necessarily have to know the name of that person and the relevant date. One can understand your saying “Today I am happy” even if one does not know who you are (simply perceiving you suffices) or which day it is (simply being that day would be enough). See also Korta and Perry (this volume), who emphasize the distinction between being able to express a proposition because one knows the semantic values of the indexicals, and merely being able to give an utterance-bound or reflexive characterization of the proposition because one only has access to the token-reflexive rules associated with the expressions.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion on the difference between indexicals and proper names and how the latter do not reduce to the former, see Corazza (2004: ch.1). Roughly, proper names and indexicals are different linguistic tools and their differences reflect on some epistemological constraints accompanying their use. Proper names, unlike indexicals, for instance are typically used to refer to objects that are not in the perceptual field of the discussants. One can thus successfully participate in a linguistic interchange event if one is not directly acquainted with the individual referred to by a proper name. It would be more difficult to participate in a discussion involving an indexical, say “that woman in the corner”, if one is not acquainted with the relevant woman, i.e. if one is not capable of singling out the relevant woman.

<sup>7</sup> We take the extension of “tall” to be the set of objects to which the predicate “tall” applies in the relevant context. One of the referees pointed out that an indexicalist can take the extension of “tall” to be a constant function from a standard to a function. For instance, the argument of the function may be the standard height of a basketball player and its value the function from objects to truth-values expressed by “tall for a basketball player”. It is not clear that this alternative view still deserves to be called “indexicalist”, at least with respect to “tall”. On any indexicalist view, there has to be some pronoun or covert variable referring to a standard in a given context.

tall” which could orient the hearer to the relevant standard of tallness. Still, the latter is a contextual parameter that she must identify or make explicit in order to understand the utterance. How does such an identification proceed? A common answer is that the hearer must look for the *intentions* of the speaker, by way of reading his mind.

There is no doubt that sophisticated communication demands a lot of mind-reading. However, there are also simple but common situations in which one can understand an utterance such as (6) without making explicit the intentions of the speaker. For instance, the hearer might react to Jon’s utterance by just letting Jane play with Peter’s kids, who are taller than Jon’s. Alternatively, she might encourage Jane to dance with someone taller than Shorty, or to dissuade her from attending Jon’s party, and so on. The hearer might do any of these things without engaging in mind-reading or making explicit exactly what standard of tallness is in question in the relevant context. The hearer has correctly understood the speaker (and accepted what he said) even though no specific standard of tallness has come to her mind. If she were asked “In what respect is Jane too tall?”, after some reflection she might come up with different and perhaps incompatible answers. The point here is rather intuitive: the relevant standard of tallness might be in the world rather than in the minds of the speaker and hearer. It might be in the world in the sense that it is determined by the situations of the discussants, including their low-level dispositions to take appropriate action given the context’s requirements. The relevant standard of tallness might not be fully represented by either speaker or hearer; it might even be wrongly represented. From the point of view of reacting to the speaker’s utterance, mind-reading can be a distraction rather than the key to understanding.

Consider another example. Imagine that Jane is asked to buy some red melons. Jane goes to the market and comes home with the right kind of melons. At no point, though, does it cross Jane’s mind whether the redness of the melons concerned the melons’ pulp or their skin. (She would probably be surprised should the issue be brought up.) Jane fully understood the order and executed it without having to entertain or grasp the proposition expressed by a sentence like “Melons are red on the inside/outside”.

Moreover, it is a mistake to think that the proposition expressed by (6) depends on the intention of the speaker to say something true about Jon’s kids, Shorty or the party. Actually, the speaker might have no such intention in mind. For instance, Jon might just repeat something he has just heard. We might say that in such a case, Jon does not fully understand what he is saying, so that he does not express a complete proposition. Alternatively, one might say that he is expressing a proposition which depends on the intentions of *other* speakers, in a kind of deferential way. We do not find any of these alternatives plausible, at least as a *general* account of linguistic understanding. Minimalism puts forward a much simpler hypothesis. Two people understand each other insofar as they come to entertain or grasp the same minimal proposition, in our example the proposition *that Jane is too tall*. Of course there can be misunderstanding between them in other respects, but it should not come from the



hearer's having failed to grasp what the speaker said. As we shall see, though, the proposition shared by speaker and hearer, namely *that Jane is too tall*, is situated, which means that it can have different truth-values in different situations.

In short, contrary to what indexicalists claim, there is generally no identification constraint on the understanding of utterances such as "Jane is too tall" and "Melons are red", relative to standards of tallness or redness. One need introduce neither hidden variables (in the speaker's mind) nor complicated modes of presentation (in the hearer's mind) in order to explain the success of communication.

Another attack on minimalism comes from so-called contextualists.<sup>8</sup> Contextualists differ from indexicalists insofar as they do not posit at the level of logical form variables working like hidden indexicals. Contextualists embrace *free enrichment*.<sup>9</sup> Their main argument rests on the claim that minimalism does not account for the fact that utterances of (6) [Jane is too tall] are not guaranteed to have the same truth-value (in a given world): in some circumstances, utterances of (6) may be true, but in other circumstances, they may be false. If Jane's tallness concerns her being a jockey the utterance may be true, while if it regards Jane being a basketball player it may be false. The contextualist story goes as follows: what an utterance of (6) expresses depends on the context in which it occurs. In the jockey situation it expresses the proposition *that Jane is too tall [for a jockey]* while in the basketball context it expresses the proposition *that Jane is too tall [for a basketball player]*. The bracketed information entering the proposition expressed is contextually supplied. Thus an utterance of (6) is underdetermined and the relevant context furnishes the comparison class with respect to which Jane's tallness is evaluated. It is important to notice that this comparison class ends up in the proposition expressed without being determined by some element appearing in the logical form of the relevant sentence: it ends up in the proposition expressed *via* a process of free enrichment.<sup>10</sup>

We do not claim that all contextualists draw the line between saturation and free enrichment in the same way. A contextualist like Recanati, for instance, would not handle the case of (6) [Jane is too tall] in terms of enrichment. Since, according to him, the contextually supplied information is mandatory, we have rather a case of saturation.<sup>11</sup> Be that as it may, our position differs from both indexicalism and

---

<sup>8</sup> The list of the friends of contextualism is almost endless. Among recent versions of contextualism we can mention: Bezuidenhout (2002), Carston (2002) and Recanati (2004). The parents of modern contextualism are: Searle (1978; 1980) Sperber and Wilson (1986), Travis (1985, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> The chief exponents of free enrichment are the relevance theorists (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Carston 2002). Recanati (2004) and Bach (1994), though in different ways, embrace free enrichment as well.

<sup>10</sup> As we shall see later we do not deny that the comparison class plays a role when we come to compute the truth value of the utterance. Unlike the contextualists (and the indexicalists), though, we argue that it does *not* enter as a constituent of the proposition expressed.

<sup>11</sup> Recanati's argument is the following. We have a case of enrichment only if it is possible to have circumstances in which a sentence expresses a complete proposition without appealing to contextual information. That is, if a sentence like "Jane is too tall" can express a full proposition without having to encompass what Jane is too tall for we would have free enrichment when the contextual information concerning what Jane is too tall for is relevant and enters the proposition expressed. Since we cannot

contextualism (whatever extension is given to free enrichment) insofar as we do not commit ourselves to the view that the alleged contextual information enters the proposition expressed.

A similar story can be told about utterances of “Melons are red”. The context should determine whether it expresses the proposition *that melons are red [inside]* or *that melons are red [on their surface/skin]*. Following the contextualists, only such enriched propositions can be evaluated as being either true or false (relative to a possible world).

In our view, contextualism faces difficulties similar to indexicalism’s. In particular, it saddles understanding with too much cognitive burden. Our point is not merely that speaker and hearer rarely, perhaps never, come to enrich a proposition in the same way and, therefore, rarely entertain the very same proposition. At least some contextualists acknowledge this point, arguing that communication does not rest on two people grasping the very same proposition:

It seems to us neither paradoxical nor counterintuitive to say that there are thoughts [propositions] that we cannot exactly share, and that communication can be successful without resulting in an exact duplication of thoughts in communicator and audience. (Sperber, and Wilson 1986: 193)

Along this line one can argue that two people understand each other insofar as they grasp *similar* propositions. All the potential enriched propositions share the same minimal proposition—in our examples *that Jane is too tall* or *that melons are red*. Contextualists appealing to either free enrichment or saturation seem committed to the view that understanding rests on the grasping of the minimal proposition and some extra contextual aspect coming to enrich it. The latter is likely to vary between the proposition (if any) intended by the speaker and the one (if any) grasped by the audience. Yet for understanding and communication to succeed, the enrichment must be similar enough. How similar it must be, though, remains unspecified. As far as the success of understanding is concerned, minimalism may be a more economical position. The point is that understanding does not depend on there being a unique set of similar, enriched propositions. Perhaps the speaker has no enriched proposition in mind, and in many cases, the hearer can understand the utterance without even trying to identify the relevant extra parameters.

A further argument aiming to undermine minimalism can be summarized as follows. Since minimal propositions do not play any cognitive role, they are dispensable. Carston (2002) and Recanati (2004) go as far as claiming that since we cannot imagine how minimal propositions could play a cognitive role in human psychology, they are not only spurious, they simply do not exist. Following this view, only enriched propositions, the ones the speaker and/or hearer are consciously aware

---

imagine a situation in which “Jane is too tall” expresses a complete proposition, we have a case of saturation, i.e., the information what Jane is too tall for is semantically mandatory.

of having expressed, exist and enter the scene.<sup>12</sup> Thus only enriched propositions, i.e., the ones that informed speakers allegedly grasp, have psychological reality and can thus be considered to be what is expressed by the utterance of a given sentence.

Although the criticisms we have formulated against indexicalism and contextualism may not be devastating,<sup>13</sup> we believe that they contribute to undermining these two positions. We also believe that one can propose a version of minimalism (we could call it *situationalism*<sup>14</sup> or *situated minimalism*) which, along with avoiding the criticisms addressed, on the one hand, against the indexicalist and the contextualist positions and, on the other hand, against the original minimalist position, can incorporate the powerful intuitions underlying such opposing viewpoints as contextualism and minimalism.

### 3. Situating Minimalism

As we anticipated, contextualism rests on what we take to be powerful intuitions concerning an utterance's truth-value.<sup>15</sup> For instance, it goes against our intuitions to claim that an utterance of (6) [Jane is too tall] is true/false unrestrictedly. If (6) occurs in the jockey situation it is likely to be true, while if it occurs in the basketball situation it is likely to be false. Similar examples can be furnished with "red", "ready", "strong", "old", etc.<sup>16</sup> In taking on board the contextualist intuitions we, therefore, depart from Cappelen and Lepore's version of minimalism. Yet, we do not think that we are committed to what Cappelen and Lepore characterize as the *Mistaken Assumption*, i.e.:

A theory of semantic content is adequate just in case it accounts for all or most of the intuitions speakers have about speech act content, i.e., intuitions about what speakers say, assert, claim, and state by uttering sentences. (Cappelen and Lepore 2005: 53)

---

<sup>12</sup> Recanati's availability principle attempts to capture this fact. Recanati claims that the proposition expressed (what is said) corresponds to what a normal speaker/interpreter would say it expresses. Recanati's normal interpreter, though, faces overwhelming difficulties. Actually, since Recanati's normal interpreter, like God, but unlike us, would never make errors, Recanati's contextualist theory turns out to be a non-empirical one (see Davis 2005). In short, since the normal interpreter is the one ultimately determining the proposition expressed and since this interpreter never makes mistakes in interpreting what one says, Recanati's theory cannot be disconfirmed. For this very reason, as Davis aptly points out, it cannot be an empirical theory.

<sup>13</sup> For further criticism of these positions see Cappelen and Lepore (2005: chs. 2-9)

<sup>14</sup> See Corazza (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion and some scepticism on how speakers' intuitions can shape semantics see Bach (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Contextualists like Searle, Travis, Sperber and Wilson, Recanati, Carston, etc. propose many examples where a change in the context allegedly entails a change in the truth conditions, which in fact we see as a truth-value change.

Insofar as we distinguish, unlike the contextualists and the indexicalists, between the proposition expressed and the situation according to which it obtains a truth-value, we do not commit ourselves to the view that the semantic content of an utterance (the proposition expressed) must account for all the intuitions that speakers may have concerning a specific utterance. Within our framework these intuitions are captured by the situation in which the proposition expressed is evaluated. In a nutshell, we are minimalists with respect to the proposition expressed and contextualists with respect to the truth-values.

We think that the friends of both contextualism and minimalism fail to appreciate how a given utterance can be said to be true/false in two very distinct ways. That is to say, an utterance  $u$  of “Jane is too tall”, for instance, can be true in two main ways: (i) if it expresses the proposition *that Jane is too tall [for a jockey]* or (ii) if it expresses the proposition *that Jane is too tall* but the latter’s truth-value depends on the discourse situation/context/circumstance/... in which it occurs. While contextualists favoring free enrichment (and, in a different way, indexicalists positing a hidden indexical) embrace the first option, we embrace the second one.

If one follows the first path, one can accept the traditional (semantic) view that a proposition is true/false objectively and eternally. It follows that for a proposition to be true/false eternally it must be completed or enriched.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, if one follows the second path, a given proposition can change truth-value with a change of the context/circumstance in which it occurs. Truth as an attribute of propositions becomes, *pace* the traditional semantic position, a relativized notion.

Along with the contextualists, minimalists like Cappelen and Lepore hold the view that an utterance expresses a proposition which is true or false regardless of the situation in which it occurs. In short, both minimalists and contextualists embrace the following theorem:

(7)  $S$  is true iff  $p$

where the proposition *that*  $p$  gives the truth conditions of the (non-indexical) sentence  $S$ . (7) can easily be rephrased in terms of utterances:

(8) If  $u$  is an utterance of  $S$ , then [ $u$  is true iff  $p$ ]<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> As Frege puts it (speaking of thoughts where we speak of propositions): “Now is a thought changeable or is it timeless? The thought we express by the Pythagorean Theorem is surely timeless, eternal, unvarying. ‘But are there not thoughts which are true today but false in six months’ time? The thought, for example, that the tree there is covered with green leaves, will surely be false in six month’s time’. No, for it is not the same thought at all. The words ‘This tree is covered with green leaves’ are not sufficient by themselves to constitute the expression of thought, for the time of utterance is involved as well. Without the time-specification thus given we have not a complete thought, i.e., we have no thought at all. Only a sentence with the time-specification filled out, a sentence complete in every respect, expresses a thought, if it is true, is true not only today or tomorrow but timelessly” (Frege 1918: 53). Since truth-values can shift across possible worlds, the world should be specified as well. It is interesting to note, though, that everybody is a relativist with respect to possible worlds.

The difference between contextualists and minimalists concerns the nature of the proposition  $p$ . While the former assume that  $p$  is an enriched proposition, the minimalist assumes that when  $S$  does not contain indexical expressions,  $p$  is automatically obtained *via* a disquotational process. If our sentence  $S$  corresponds to (6) [Jane is too tall], the contextualists would thus represent its truth conditions as follows:

- (9) If  $u$  is an utterance of “Jane is too tall”, then [ $u$  is true iff *Jane is too tall* [*for a jockey*]]

On the other hand, minimalists like Cappelen and Lepore could represent (6)’s truth conditions as follows:

- (10) If  $u$  is an utterance of “Jane is too tall”, then [ $u$  is true iff *Jane is too tall*]

Both representations are unsatisfactory insofar as: (i) a contextualist representation like (9) in appealing to an enriched proposition makes communication more difficult than it should be, from a cognitive point of view, and (ii) a minimalist representation like (10) fails to capture the contextualist intuition that the proposition *that Jane is too tall* can be true when evaluated *vis-à-vis* the jockey situation, while false when evaluated *vis-à-vis* the basketball situation.

As situated minimalists, we agree with Cappelen and Lepore that the truth condition of any utterance of  $S$  is always the same minimal proposition, for instance *that p*. However, in contrast to the latter, we do not consider theorems such as (7) and (8) to be automatically true. (7) will be guaranteed to be true only if the situation in which it is uttered coincides with the situation in which  $S$  itself is uttered. Suppose, for instance, that  $S$  is uttered in a situation in which what is relevant to the truth-value of the utterance is whether or not Jane is too tall to play with Jon’s kids (she is). Now theorem (7) will be false if uttered in a different situation in which the proposition *that Jane is too tall* is itself false, perhaps because what is relevant in the latter situation is whether or not Jane is too tall to dance with Shorty (she isn’t). Similarly, (8) will be false if there are utterances which are situated in relevantly different ways than the theorem itself. From the point of view of situated minimalism, (11) is a better theorem as far as (6) is concerned:

---

<sup>18</sup> This formulation is borrowed from Higginbotham (1988). For a detailed discussion of it see Carston (2002: 50ff). This representation allows us to capture indexicality. Actually, to accommodate indexical expressions our theorem could be rephrased as:

- (i) If  $u$  is an utterance of “I am F” and  $x$  is the agent of  $u$ , then [ $u$  is true iff  $x$  is F]  
(ii) If  $u$  is an utterance of “He/she is F”, and the agent of  $u$  refers to  $x$  with ‘he/she’, then [ $u$  is true iff  $x$  is F]

- (11) If  $u$  is an utterance of “Jane is too tall” and  $s$  is the situation in which  $u$  occurs, then [ $u$  is true *iff* Jane is too tall relative to  $s$ ]

This is because (11) will be true whatever the situation in which it is uttered. It allows for the truth value of (6) to depend on the situation in which the minimal proposition it expresses (namely *that Jane is too tall*) is evaluated. If the minimal proposition is evaluated *vis-à-vis* the jockey situation (6) is likely to turn out to be true, while if the minimal proposition is evaluated *vis-à-vis* the basketball situation it is likely to be false.<sup>19</sup>

In a nutshell, minimalism meets contextualism. That is, like the minimalists and unlike the contextualists, we maintain that the proposition expressed encodes only information triggered by the sentence’s literal meaning. Like contextualists and unlike minimalists, we assume that an utterance’s truth-value is not context invariant. Our proposal, though, comes with a price: unlike minimalists and contextualists, we reject the view that an utterance’s truth-value is absolute. Our position is committed to the view that truth (as an attribute of propositions) is a relative notion depending on the situation in which the (minimal) proposition is evaluated. This allows us to accommodate the powerful contextualist intuition that it does not make much sense to say that “Jane is too tall” can be true/false regardless of the specific situation in which it occurs and/or with respect to which it is evaluated. In other words, our position does not succumb to the contextualist charge that it does not make sense to evaluate propositions such as *that Naomi Campbell is very rich*, *that Jon is strong*, *that Jeff is too old*, etc. with respect to, for instance, the actual world (ignoring standards of evaluation or situations). Naomi Campbell is, no doubt, very rich if compared with the authors of this paper. Yet she’s not that rich if compared to the likes of Roman Abramovich or Bill Gates.

#### 4. Evading Some Contextualist and Minimalist Charges

One of the (many) advantages of the position we are putting forward is that it is not vulnerable to the main criticisms Cappelen and Lepore mount against contextualism. The chief criticism they offer runs as follows: contextualism cannot account for the fact that people can share content across contexts. If, for instance, in context  $C$  Jon utters:

- (12) Melons are red

---

<sup>19</sup> Of course there is a sense in which (11) captures the conditions under which (6) is true. This is not the sense of “truth conditions” that we are working with in this paper. In our terminology, the truth conditions of an utterance is just the proposition expressed, i.e. what is grasped by the competent speaker/hearer. When Jon says “Jane is too tall”, he does not have to identify the situation of his utterance; he is just in it. So (11) should not be taken to imply that the situation  $s$  gets inside the proposition expressed by “Jane is too tall” in a given context.

intending to indicate that melons are red in the inside, and in context  $C^*$  Jeff says:

(13) Melons are red

indicating that they are red on their surface, the contextualist is committed to the view that (12) and (13) express different propositions. The contextualist is thus unable to account for the intuition that it is legitimate to claim that both Jon and Jeff said the same thing. Actually, if one hearing (12) and (13) is asked “What did Jon and Jeff say?” a plausible answer would be:

(14) Jon and Jeff both said that melons are red

This implies that there is a level of content that Jon and Jeff share. This similarity of content is captured by the minimal proposition *that melons are red* expressed by both (12) and (13). Since contextualists, and indexicalists, are committed to the view that (12) and (13) express different propositions, say *that melons are red inside* and *that melons are red on the surface* respectively, (14) could never be, contrary to our intuition, an appropriate reply: it would never be true.

Note that the problem cannot be circumvented by claiming that (14) involves a neutral notion of redness which encompasses both Jon’s and Jeff’s more specific notions. For Jon can say the following:

(15) Melons are red. That’s also what Jeff said

which is true, although Jon still intends to say that melons are red in the inside.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, if one adopted the contextualist position and argued that terms like “tall” and “red” are context sensitive, one would be committed to the view that

(16) London buses and tomatoes are red

(17) Jon and Jane are tall

could rarely be true since “red” and “tall”, being context sensitive expressions, do not have the same extension when applying to London buses and tomatoes, and to Jane and Jon respectively.

On the other hand, our position also resists some of the criticism that a contextualist can mount against minimalism. In particular, it is immune to a criticism proposed by Recanati (2004: 92-3). Recanati aims to undermine what may be labeled *unrestricted minimalism*, i.e., the view that a minimal proposition is true/false

---

<sup>20</sup> It may be worth mentioning that some indexical utterances also allow elliptical interpretation. Consider Jane saying “I am tired” and Jeff saying “I am tired. That’s also what Jane said”. Jeff’s “That’s also what Jane said” can be interpreted either as meaning that Jane said that Jeff is tired or that Jane said that she herself is tired. With (15), though, we do not face this ambiguity. The “That’s also what Jeff said” in (15) can mean only that Jeff said that melons are red.

regardless of the situation in which it occurs. If one, like Cappelen and Lepore, embraces unrestricted minimalism, one may be said to know the truth conditions of a sentence in merely disquotational terms. That is, one would automatically know that:

- (18) “Jane is tall” is true iff Jane is tall
- (19) “Melons are red” is true iff melons are red

This knowledge of the truth conditions of a sentence merely amounts to a kind of pure disquotational knowledge. This, though, cannot seriously count as knowledge insofar as one would be said to know that:

- (20) “Grounglys blot tranglings” is true iff Grounglys blot tranglings

Yet we would not say that one knows, let alone understands, what

- (21) Grounglys blot tranglings

means. The mere knowledge of a disquotational theorem of the form “‘*S*’ is true iff *S*” cannot count as knowledge of what *S* means. Hence, the knowledge of a disquotational theorem like (18)/(19) cannot be taken as a good guide to the knowledge or mastery of a language. Yet we would like to say that knowledge of a sentence’s truth conditions should constitute a good guide to what amounts to knowledge of a language. It could be that this argument cannot, *pace* Recanati, be used to undermine the minimalist proposal. For, a minimalist could claim that since a competent speaker does not understand (21) or its constituents s/he does not understand the right-hand side of (20). That is to say, all what a competent speaker of English (i.e., who understands “true”, “iff”, and the conventions of quotation) can know is that (20) expresses a truth if it expresses anything. Be that as it might be, Recanati’s criticism does not apply to our version of minimalism. For one may be said to understand what (21) means only insofar as one is able (at least in principle) to situate it. Since there is no way one can situate (21), there is no way one can be said to understand it.

Our point can be put in the following way. Anyone who has genuine knowledge of (18) and (19) (in the appropriate situation; see our remarks about such theorems in the previous section) can in principle derive new, more complex theorems such as the following:

- (22) “Jane is too tall” is true *in s* iff Jane is too tall relative to the standards of *s*
- (23) “Melons are red” is true *in s* iff melons count as red in *s*

These theorems make explicit something that was only implicit in (18)/(19), namely the situations relative to which the propositions that Jane is too tall and that melons are red are to be evaluated (*s* can be thought of as specifying a particular situation, or



as a variable bound by a universal quantifier). In contrast, one cannot derive from (21) the following:

- (24) “Grounglys blot tranglings” is true *in s* iff Grounglys blot tranglings relative to *s*

whose right-hand side clearly does not make sense. Now if (24) does not make sense, (21) is not a genuine theorem either.

As such, of course, (22) and (23) introduce other, more sophisticated propositions, namely the propositions that Jane is too tall relative to the standards of a situation *s* and that melons count as red in a situation *s*. No doubt, a competent speaker knows that “Jane is too tall” can be true in a given situation while false in some other. The same with melons: “Melons are red” is true when speaking about the melons’ pulp, while false when speaking about their skin (the melons we know have green skin), and so on and so forth. These more sophisticated propositions—i.e. the propositions which explicitly specify the relevant situation or simply present a bound variable for a situation—may come close to what Perry characterizes as the reflexive truth conditions of an utterance, i.e. the truth conditions generated by the utterance meaning (see Perry 2001). In the case of an indexical utterance *u* like “I am having fun” (said by Jane on October 22 2005) its reflexive truth conditions correspond to the proposition expressed by “The agent of *u* is/was having fun at the time of *u*”. Each competent speaker can grasp these truth conditions.<sup>21</sup> Yet to understand the indexical utterance one needs to grasp, Perry claims, the incremental truth conditions or official content, i.e. the proposition that Jane was having fun on October 22, 2005. We agree with Perry. The understanding of an indexical utterance rests on the grasping of the official content and thus on the identification of the indexical’s referent. We do not claim, though, that the understanding of an utterance like “Jane is too tall” or “Melons are red” one needs to transcend theorems like (22)— i.e.: “Jane is too tall” is true *in s* iff Jane is too tall relative to the standards of *s*. In other words, we do not commit ourselves with the existence of some incremental truth conditions one needs to grasp in order to understand the utterance. In short, following Perry we distinguish between reflexivity and indexicality, i.e. between what is said using an utterance with an indexical and the identifying conditions at work when reference gets fixed. But we do not commit ourselves with the view that some identifying condition of a given situation must be at work when one utters/understands a sentence like “Melons are red” or “Jane is too tall”: “red” and “tall” are not indexicals picking out a given situation. Nor the utterance as a whole presents some hidden indexical selecting the relevant situation.

---

<sup>21</sup> We could also say that the reflexive truth conditions belong to the sphere of tacit knowledge. The latter are what enable one to master a language.

## 5. Situated Minimalism vs. Speech Act Pluralism

To deal with the kind of worries put forward by the contextualists, Cappelen and Lepore appeal to Speech Act Pluralism.<sup>22</sup> That is the view that:

[W]hat an utterance says, states, claims, etc. differs from the proposition it semantically expresses. (Cappelen and Lepore 2005: 190)

Roughly, Cappelen and Lepore embrace the views that: (i) the utterance of a given sentence can express, in principle, infinitely many propositions and (ii) the speaker (and the audience) need not be aware of most of the propositions expressed. Furthermore:

[T]o ascertain what's said, you first have to reconstruct utterances to a point where they express thoughts. There are many ways to achieve this end ... No one way is uniquely correct. (Cappelen and Lepore 2005: 192)

Cappelen and Lepore agree with the contextualist appealing to free enrichment that what is said transcends the minimal (semantic) proposition expressed. In other words, the proposition(s) communicated (what is said) differs from the minimal proposition semantically expressed. Among the infinitely many propositions expressed, one is the minimal proposition, but this proposition is not what can explain successful communication. The minimal proposition is the only semantically pertinent proposition, but communication must be explained by appealing to some of the infinitely many propositions pragmatically expressed. Although Speech Act Pluralism differs from contextualism in arguing that many propositions get expressed, it nonetheless comes close to contextualism in committing itself to the view that at least one of the many propositions expressed should capture the speaker's mental content. This proposition looks pretty much like the contextualists' enriched proposition.<sup>23</sup>

Minimalists and contextualists share the same motivation in positing rich mental representations: they want to explain our intuitions about the truth-values of our utterances. When Jon says that Jane is too tall, his utterance is made true, in his

---

<sup>22</sup> Cappelen and Lepore recognize that Speech Act Pluralism is not a theory. It merely amounts to a collection of observations, for no systematic theory can be furnished about speech act content.

<sup>23</sup> It goes without saying that a contextualist and a Speech Act Pluralist could argue that enriched propositions need not be internalized, i.e. that one need not have a mental representation matching the complexity of the enriched proposition. (Note that we are *not* using the notion of mental representation in a way which *implies* the Language of Thought Hypothesis. Perhaps one can mentally represent something without tokening a mental symbol of that thing.) We think that if enriched propositions are not represented, then they do not play, *pace* contextualism and Speech Act Pluralism, an interesting cognitive role. In short, why should one posit enriched propositions or embrace Speech Act Pluralism in order to explain communication if the (enriched) propositions expressed do not get fully represented, one way or the other, by the speaker and her audience? Recanati's availability principle requires that the normal, fully informed, interpreter have a mental representation of the relevant enriched proposition.

situation, by the fact that Jane is too tall to play with his kids. But when Shorty says the same thing, his utterance is false, because in *his* situation what is relevant is whether Jane is or isn't too tall to dance with him (she isn't). In such a case, there is the same minimal proposition, or semantic content, corresponding to the sentence "Jane is too tall", but two truth-values. How is such plurality of truth-values possible within the same world? The minimalist and contextualist answer is that there must be two different *absolute* mental representations, which one could express by the sentences "Jane is too tall to play with Jon's kids", and "Jane is too tall to dance with Shorty". These representations are absolute in the sense that they are not true or false relative to standards of tallness, since a specific value of tallness is already incorporated in the representations themselves.

The important take-home point is that, like contextualism, Speech Act Pluralism is committed to the view that the cognitive apparatus engaged in communicative interaction is stuffed with rich mental representations. That is, although there may be nothing in a given sentence representing the constituents which end up in the propositions expressed by an utterance, in the speaker's mind there must be appropriate representations of all the relevant propositional constituents ending up in what is said. Within Speech Act Pluralism and the contextualist framework these representations play a central role when people engage in a thought episode and a communicative interchange.

We reckon that both the contextualists who appeal to enriched propositions and minimalists who appeal to Speech Act Pluralism fail to appreciate the insight of Perry's (1986) view that some thoughts can be about something without having to represent that very thing, *viz.* that we can have, to borrow Perry's happy phrase, "thoughts without representation". The thought one expresses in uttering "It is 3:15 PM", for instance, concerns a certain time zone even if one does not entertain a representation of the relevant time zone. Here, we conform to an intuitive notion of representation according to which a subject entertains a representation of an entity (object, property, or whatever) if she grasps a concept (or any non-conceptual mode of presentation) of the entity. Representation is mandatory if the entity is to be inferentially or computationally relevant. In the case in point, no representation of a particular time zone is needed because the subject does not draw any inference hinging on the identity of time-zones: all her inferences involving the thought she expresses in uttering "It is 3:15 PM" take place in the same time-zone, typically the one she presently occupies.<sup>24</sup> Yet the subject's thought is anchored to a particular time zone. The important insight is that the gap between the thought and the time zone is not bridged by a representation. In the terminology we introduced before, this thought concerns the relevant time zone because *it is situated in* the relevant time zone.

---

<sup>24</sup> For further details, see Dokic (2006a, 2006b). Dokic (2006b) suggests that there may be another, more relaxed notion of representation according to which the time zone would be represented, even if it is not inferentially relevant. The distinction Dokic draws between two kinds of representation is largely orthogonal to the present discussion. According to situationalism, there are thoughts without representation even in the relaxed notion of representation.

The same idea expands, we claim, to thoughts expressed by utterances of so-called underdetermined sentences like: “Jane is too old”, “Melons are red”, “Naomi is rich”, “Jeff is ready”, etc. The thoughts expressed by utterances of these sentences may concern the fact that Jane is too old *to play with Jon’s kids*, that melons are red *inside*, that Naomi is rich *compared to us*, that Jeff is ready *for the exam*, etc. Yet, these thoughts need *not* represent what Jane is too old for, the location of melons’ redness, the comparative class *vis-à-vis* which Naomi’s richness is judged, nor what Jeff is ready for. In short, the situation in which one entertains a thought and expresses a minimal proposition need not enter the subject’s mind. This can be illustrated by an analogy. When one uses the first person pronoun one automatically refers to oneself. This is guaranteed by the semantics of “I”, whose linguistic meaning (or character) operates on the relevant contextual aspect, the agent, and delivers the latter as referent. But one need not entertain a particular representation of oneself when using “I” (although of course one could). The mere fact of using it suffices for the agent to pick up herself as referent and to think about herself. A similar process is at work when one uses so-called underdetermined utterances. The simple fact of entertaining them suffices to have thoughts and express propositions concerning the situations in which they occur. One need not entertain a representation of the relevant situation in order for one’s thought and the (minimal) proposition expressed to be situated in that situation. Facts about the speaker such as her location, her identity, the topic of the discourse, perhaps other participants in the linguistic community, etc. suffice to determine the relevant situation in which a thought occurs. This is, at least partly, determined by the fact that the speakers are embodied individuals—that is, by the fact that speakers are necessarily embodied in a given context. This embodiment, though, need not be encapsulated into the speaker’s cognitive apparatus. In arguing that the thoughts expressed by so-called underdetermined utterances—like the minimal propositions expressed—are situated, we commit ourselves to the view that lots of our thoughts are anchored to a situation by factors which are not explicitly represented in the speakers’ minds.

As far as communication is concerned, two people understand each other insofar as they grasp the same minimal proposition (and thus come to entertain the same minimal thought).<sup>25</sup> This is the case even if the speaker’s and hearer’s situations are relevantly different. For example, suppose that the minimal proposition (and the thought) expressed by Jane’s utterance of “Jeff is ready” concerns the situation in which Jeff is ready for the party while we implicitly take it to concern the situation in which Jeff is ready for the exam. There is an important sense in which we understand Jane’s utterance: we correctly take her to announce that Jeff is ready.

In another, non-semantic sense, there is misunderstanding between Jane and us. What is the source of this misunderstanding? We should remember that communication is a dynamic process in which agreement between speaker and hearer

---

<sup>25</sup> As we shall soon see, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for understanding in the ordinary sense, for if two people are not embodied in the same situation (non-semantic) misunderstanding can occur.

should eventually prevail over disagreement. That is, disagreement makes sense only against a background of things commonly agreed by speaker and hearer. If we implicitly take Jane to be talking about Jeff's exam, then the risk is that as communication goes on, disagreement will grow to the point of unintelligibility: for instance, we would not understand why Jane wants Jeff to work on his math after the party. If he is ready for the exam, why should he go on studying? Global disagreement is likely to be manifested in an unsuccessful joint activity and/or in our puzzlement about some behavioral output.

Thus, even if, at any given time, the fact that speakers and hearers associate the same minimal propositions with the relevant utterances is a sufficient condition of successful communication, the fact that they share a situation (that they are *co-situated*) is the key to global agreement over time. Indeed, in face-to-face communication we occupy the same relevant context (location, time, possible world) and we share the same situation (we come to our interchange with the background of a set of common beliefs and expectations). Most of the time this simple fact suffices for the dynamic success of our communicative interchanges: we successfully engage in joint attentional activities, our behavioral output conforms to expectations, and so on and so forth. It should be as simple as that.

We are reflective creatures, and when we feel that something has gone wrong in a communicative exchange, we tend to make explicit the situation of the speaker. In doing this, we change our own situation, of course, since we form more sophisticated representations which are themselves situated. For example, we move from the proposition that melons are red to the proposition that they are red inside. The latter situation is no less situated than the former, although the relevant situations are different. The speaker might likewise adopt a reflective stance, and both speaker and hearer can move to a new, common situational ground. A simple question often suffices to trigger the recovery of a shared situation. The moral is that there is nothing like *the* situation of a communicative exchange, which changes over time to maximize agreement.

In a nutshell, the picture we are proposing, *pace* Cappelen and Lepore and *pace* the contextualists appealing to free enrichment, may be characterized as a situationalist and non-intellectualist picture of communication.

Our picture has affinities with versions of utterance-truth or semantic relativism to be found in the recent literature. For instance, Predelli (2005a, 2005b) suggests that utterance-truth is relative to what he calls "points of evaluation". Predelli argues that from a semantic viewpoint all we have is truth-values at points. Since the establishment of the privileged point is relative, the truth-value of a particular utterance is relative to a specific point of evaluation. Thus, even though all utterances of "Melons are red" express the same fixed semantic content (the minimal proposition that melons are red), the latter can be true relative to some points of evaluation and false relative to others. Since points of evaluation correspond to partial situations rather than whole possible worlds, the latter typically underdetermine the truth-values of utterances occurring within them. Our account differs from Predelli's in that we are

more explicit in insisting that thoughts are no less situated than utterances. Predelli (2005a: 365) tentatively cites “the speaker’s intentions, the topic of conversation, or the expectations of the conversants” as contextual factors relevant to the evaluation of a particular utterance as being true or false. This seems to suggest that these factors are somehow made explicit at the level of thought. As far as we can see this position can avoid positing rich mental representations in two ways: (i) the relevant contextual factors concurring in the determination of an utterance’s truth-value are determined by mental states, such as intentions, but these states do not strictly speaking represent the contextual factors; (ii) the relevant contextual factors are determined by *non-mental* aspects of the situation. Both ways are compatible with situationalism, although of course in each case one must tell a more detailed story on how the relevant contextual factors are determined.

In our view, then, mental representations such as intentions and expectations are themselves situated. For instance, a subject can form the thought that melons are red in a situation in which what counts as being red is the insides of melons. The reflective subject can also think *about* this situation, and explicitly contrast it with other situations (including the situation in which what counts as being red is the skins of melons). Our point is that she can also be unreflective and fail to make explicit the situation relative to which her thought is to be evaluated as true or false. Perhaps the subject has the *disposition* to make her situation explicit, so that there would be a (dispositional) mental state determining the situation of her thought after all, but this disposition is itself explained by the fact that she *is* in a specific situation to begin with, rather than the other way round.

In a similar vein, MacFarlane (this volume) suggests a way of reconciling semantic minimalism with a form of relativism about truth. In MacFarlane’s view, a circumstance of evaluation is an ordered pair consisting of a world and what he calls a “counts-as” parameter. So, again, utterances of “Melons are red” always express the same minimal proposition (that melons are red), but may be true relative to some counts-as parameters (according to which what counts as being red is something about the insides of melons) and false relative to other counts-as parameters (according to which what counts as being red is something about the skins of melons).

MacFarlane has recently developed a more radical version of truth-relativism, according to which utterances are true or false relative to contexts of *assessment* (see, for instance, his 2005). Contexts of assessment may be quite external to the situations of speakers and hearers, since they are associated with the *evaluation* of utterances and thoughts, rather than with the contexts in which they are formed and produced. Of course, we agree that an utterance or a thought can be evaluated as true or false relative to any (appropriate) situation we like, even a situation completely external to the subject. For instance, if Jane utters the sentence “It’s raining” and thereby grasps the thought that it is raining, the latter can be evaluated as true relative to Jane’s situation (because it is raining where Jane is) but false relative to our situation (because we stand in a sunny place). However, we insist that utterances and thoughts *are* objectively situated quite independently of their semantic evaluation. In other

words, there is a fact of the matter as to which situation a particular utterance or thought is anchored on. It follows that there is a *privileged* context of evaluation, namely the situation which rationalizes the subject's actions, inferences and expectations. Thus, the thought that it is raining should be evaluated with respect to its subject's immediate environment in part because the success of her action depends on how the weather is there.

MacFarlane (2003) gives the case of future contingents as an illustration of his radical truth-relativism. A subject utters "There will be a sea battle tomorrow", and it is objectively indeterminate whether there will be a sea battle the next day. The truth of the subject's utterance depends on the context of assessment: it is true from the point of view of a future with a sea battle, false from the point of view of a future without a sea battle, and neither true nor false from the present point of view. In this case, the utterance does not seem to be anchored to a unique, objective situation. Perhaps this is so, and there is (objective) situation-relativity as well as truth-relativity. However, two remarks are in order. First, the case of future contingents is quite special (and raises rather complicated issues), and cannot be used to ascertain arbitrary situation-relativity. In most cases there are objective situations corresponding to privileged contexts of assessment. Second, the case of future contingents might be described in a different way. It is actually more plausible to say that the subject's utterance *cannot* be evaluated from the present point of view. In fact, its semantic evaluation must wait for the next day. It does not follow that the utterance is not objectively situated. There is no reason to think that the relation of being situated, which relates an utterance to the rest of the world, is itself relative to a particular time. So the utterance is objectively situated, although as a matter of necessity, the subject, however reflective she is, cannot presently know the relevant situation.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have put forward the following claims:

- Thoughts are more closely related to minimal propositions than Cappelen and Lepore suggest.
- Objective situations play the role played by the contextualists' enrichment processes and by the open set of propositions expressed by an utterance according to Speech Act Pluralism.
- However, *pace* contextualists and Cappelen and Lepore, situations need not be mentally represented.

- Our position, which we call “situated minimalism” or simply “situationalism”, is cognitively more plausible insofar as it does not overburden our (communicative) minds with complex cognitive mechanisms.
- Yet our position captures both the insights of contextualism and of Cappelen and Lepore’s minimalism.

In short, propositions can be minimal because they are related to *implicit* situations, i.e. objective situations which (most of the time) fail to be mentally represented. In particular, we just do not need to make explicit at the level of thought the implicit situations of our utterances. Minimal propositions can classify both utterances and thoughts. We stand opposed to two alternative views. Contextualism posits enrichment processes, which are cognitive and representational, in order to specify semantic contents. Speech Act Pluralism posits rich, pragmatically expressed mental representations, in order to compensate for minimal semantic contents. In contrast, we argue that thoughts and utterances have minimal contents but are objectively related to non-cognitive and non-representational situations. This way, our situated minimalism can have the best of both worlds.



## References

- Bach, K. 1994. Conversational Implicatures. *Mind and Language* 9: 124-162
- Bach, K. 2002. Seemingly Semantics Intuition. In *Meaning and Truth: Investigations in Philosophical Semantics*. Edited by J. K. Campbell, M. O'Rourke, and D. Shier: 21-33. New York: Seven Bridges Press
- Bezuidenhout, A. 2002. Truth Conditional Pragmatics. *Philosophical Perspectives* 16: 105-34
- Burge, T. 1973. Reference and Proper Names. *The Journal of Philosophy* 70: 425-39
- Cappelen, H. and Lepore, E. 2005. *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Carston, R. 2002. *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Condoravdi, C. and Gawron, M. 1986. The Context Dependency of Implicit Arguments. In *Quantifiers, Deduction and Context*. Edited by K. Makoto, C. Piñón, and H. de Swart 1986: 1-32. Palo Alto CA: CSLI Publication
- Corazza, E. 2004. *Reflecting the Mind: Indexicality and Quasi-Indexicality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Corazza, E. Contextualism, Minimalism, and Situationalism. *Pragmatics and Cognition*. Forthcoming
- Davis, S. 2005. François Recanati's *Literal Meaning*. ms.
- Dokic, J. 2006a. Situated representations and *ad hoc* concepts. In *Saying, Meaning and Referring. Essays on François Recanati's Philosophy of Language*. Edited by M. J. Frápolli 2006. Palgrave Studies in Pragmatics, Language and Cognition.
- Dokic, J. 2006b. From linguistic contextualism to situated cognition: the case of *ad hoc* concepts. *Philosophical Psychology* 19: 309-28.
- Frege, G. 1918. Thoughts. In *Propositions and Attitudes*. Edited by N. Salmon, and S. Soames 1988: 33-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Higginbotham, J. 1988. Contexts, Models, and Meanings: a Note on the Data of Semantics, in *Mental Representations: The Interface Between Language and Reality*. Edited by Ruth M. Kempson: 29-48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kaplan, D. 1977. Demonstratives. In *Themes from Kaplan*. Edited by J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein 1989: 481-563. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kaplan, D. 1989. Afterthoughts. In *Themes from Kaplan*. Edited by J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein 1989: 565-614. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- MacFarlane, J. 2003. Future Contingents and Relative Truth. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 321-36.

- MacFarlane, J. 2005. Making Sense of Relative Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105: 321-339.
- MacFarlane, J. forthcoming. Semantic Minimalism and Non-Indexical Contextualism. In *Content and Context: Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edited by G. Preyer and G. Peter.
- Partee, B. 1989. Binding Implicit Variables in Quantified Contexts. *Proceedings of the Chicago Linguistic Society* 25. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 342-65
- Pelczar, M., and Rainsbury, J. 1998. The Indexical Character of Names. *Synthese* 114: 293-317
- Perry, J. 1986. Thoughts without Representation. *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 60: 137-52
- Perry, J. 2001. *Reference and Reflexivity*. Stanford: CSLI Publications
- Predelli, S. 2005a. Painted Leaves, Context, and Semantic Analysis. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28: 351-74
- Predelli, S. 2005b. *Contexts: Meaning, Truth, and the Use of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Recanati, F. 1993. *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Recanati, F. 2004. *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Richard, M. 2004. Contextualism and Relativism. *Philosophical Studies* 119: 215-42
- Searle, J. 1978. Literal Meaning. *Erkenntnis* 13: 207-224
- Searle, J. 1980. The Background of Meaning. In *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*. Edited by J. Searle, F. Keifer, and M. Bierwisch 1980: 221-32. Dordrecht: Reidel
- Sperber, D., and Wilson, D. 1986. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Stanley, J. 2000. Context and Logical Form. *Linguistic and Philosophy* 23: 391-434
- Stanley, J., and Szabo, Z. 2000. On Quantifier Domain Restriction. *Mind and Language* 15: 219-61
- Travis, C. 1985. On What Is Strictly Speaking True. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15: 187-229
- Travis, C. 1989. *The Uses of Sense: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Vallée, R. 2003. Context-Sensitivity Beyond Indexicality. *Dialogue* 42: 79-106
- Voltolini, A. 1995. Indexinames. In *Karlovy Vary Studies in Reference and Meaning*. Edited by J. Hill, and P. Kotatko 1995: 258-285. Prague: Filosofia-Filosofia Publications