# Accommodation and Negotiation with Context-Sensitive Expressions[*]

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Penultimate draft. Please consult the official version in *Thought*.

### Abstract

Contextualists and relativists about predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals, etc. ("CR-expressions") agree that the interpretation of these expressions depends, in some sense, on context. Relativists claim that the sort of context-sensitivity exhibited by CR-expressions is importantly different from that exhibited by paradigm context-sensitive expressions, like definite descriptions, demonstratives, quantifiers, etc. This bifurcation is often motivated by the claim that the two classes of expressions behave differently in patterns of agreement and disagreement. I provide cases illustrating that the same sorts of discourse phenomena that have been thought problematic for contextualists can arise with paradigm context-sensitive expressions. These cases motivate a more unified treatment of paradigm context-sensitive expressions and the expressions that have figured in recent contextualism-relativism debates.

**Keywords**  contextualism; relativism; context-sensitivity; disagreement; accommodation & negotiation; epistemic modals

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A contextualist about an expression claims that the content of that expression depends on features of the context of utterance. We are all contextualists about pure indexicals whose contents are determined by specific linguistic rules. 'I', for instance, invariably refers to the speaker of the context. But not all expressions whose interpretation is intuitively sensitive to context lend themselves to so straightforward an analysis. There are Perry's (1997, 2001) intentional indexicals whose content is, plausibly, determined in part by pragmatic factors, like speaker intentions. Demonstratives, quantifiers, and even 'here' and 'now' likely fall in this camp. Such 'impure indexicals' raise many questions about how context affects utterance interpretation. But, details of the semantics and metasemantic aside, we all grant that the contents of these expressions depends in some sense on features of the context of utterance. In addition, there is a range of expressions whose interpretation is intuitively sensitive to context, but which are such that no particular way of spelling out their context-sensitivity seems capable of capturing all our intuitions. It is these expressions that are the locus of — and, depending on one's taste, to blame for — recent contextualism-relativism debates. These expressions include predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals, 'knows', normative terms, and vague terms, among others.[1] Call these expressions *CR-expressions*.

A contextualist about a CR-expression must provide a general account of what standard, information state, etc. (depending on the item in question) is supplied as a function of the context of utterance. A central challenge has been to provide an account that makes the intuitively correct predictions about certain discourse phenomena with these expressions — in particular, how they figure in patterns of agreement and disagreement, and how the context of utterance affects their interpretation. Many have argued that these discourse phenomena (to be described) cannot be captured within a contextualist semantics — i.e., that they cannot be captured by treating a particular information state, standard, etc. determined by the context of utterance as figuring in the derivation of semantic content (*cf.* MacFarlane 2010: 1, 11). Such discourse phenomena have been used to motivate revising the classic semantic picture by interpreting CR-expressions with respect to a 'context of assessment' or an added parameter of the circumstance of evaluation. (Nomenclature varies among authors.) Though the resulting (so-called) 'relativist' semantics differ in their details, they agree in distinguishing the sort of context-sensitivity of CR-

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[1]The literature is vast. See, e.g., Kölbel 2002, MacFarlane 2003, 2005, 2011, Egan et al. 2005, Lasersohn 2005, Egan 2007, Stephenson 2007, Yalcin 2007, von Fintel & Gillies 2008, Richard 2008, DeRose 2009, Swanson 2011, Silk 2013, 2014.

expressions from that of paradigm context-sensitive expressions. Indeed, relativists typically explicate their semantics for CR-expressions *by* distinguishing it from semantics for paradigm context-sensitive expressions. No one is a relativist about 'the'.

This is a mistake. I will show that the same discourse phenomena that have been thought problematic for contextualists about CR-expressions can arise with paradigm context-sensitive expressions. The cases I provide motivate a more unified treatment of paradigm context-sensitive expressions and the expressions that have figured in recent contextualism-relativism debates.

Roadmap: §1 describes a standard version of the argument from disagreement against contextualism. §2 offers structurally analogous examples with paradigm context-sensitive expressions. §3 suggests developments that the dialectic might take in response to these examples, and raises corresponding challenges for relativism and contextualism. For concreteness I will couch the discussion in terms of epistemic modals — i.e., epistemic uses of modal verbs, like 'may', 'might', and 'must'.

## 1   Epistemic modals

Epistemic modals are interpreted with respect to a body of information (evidence, beliefs, knowledge, etc.).[2] Sometimes this body of information is made linguistically explicit, like in (1).

(1)      In view of Sally's evidence, the butler might be the killer.

The phrase 'in view of Sally's evidence' specifies that it is Sally's evidence that figures in the interpretation of 'might'. Other times, no particular body of information is explicitly specified, like in (2).

(2)      The butler might be the killer.

Following common usage, call sentences like (2) *bare epistemic modal sentences*; and call epistemic modals that occur in such sentences *bare epistemic modals*. (Hereafter by 'epistemic modal' I will mean "bare epistemic modal," and by 'epistemic modal sentence (/utterance, /assertion, /claim)' I will mean "bare epistemic modal sentence (/utterance, /assertion, /claim).")

Contextualists and relativists agree, against invariantists, that the truth value of an epistemic modal sentence can vary across parameters of interpretation (contexts

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[2]Such differences in which epistemic relation is relevant for the interpretation of epistemic modals will not matter in what follows. For recent defenses of invariantism about 'might', see Bach 2011, Braun 2012.

of utterance, circumstances of evaluation, contexts of assessment) even if everything else in the world remains constant. Contextualists claim that this context-dependence is to be understood as a dependence of the semantic (conventional) content of an epistemic modal on features of the context of utterance, those features that determine some contextually relevant information state. To a first approximation, the semantic content of (2) is the proposition that $B$ is compatible with $i$, where $B$ is the proposition that the butler is the killer, and $i$ is the contextually relevant information state.

Epistemic modals are subject to what Mark Richard (2004, 2008) nicely glosses as *accommodation and negotiation* (*cf.* Lewis 1979). Intuitively, in uttering (2) one proposes, perhaps among other things, that $B$ be treated as a live possibility in the conversation. If the hearer doesn't object — if she *accommodates* — then the conversational common ground is set as the speaker's utterance requires. But if the hearer does object, *negotiation* can ensue about who the killer is. The putative problem is that these discourse phenomena appear to be in tension with the contextualist's semantics. There doesn't seem to be any way of specifying the contextually relevant information state that explains both how we're in a position to make the epistemic modal claims that we seem licensed in making (call it the *justified use condition*), and how we can reasonably disagree with one another's epistemic modal claims (call it the *disagreement condition*).

Consider (3).

(3)     Alice:  When is the test?
         Bert:   I'm not sure. The test may be on Monday.
         Alice:  No, the test can't be on Monday. The teacher never gives tests right after the weekend. It must be later in the week.

Suppose Bert's utterance of (4)

(4)     The test may be on Monday.

is just about his own information state. Assuming Bert is in a position to make a claim about his own information, this captures how Bert is justified in producing his epistemic modal utterance. But it becomes unclear how Alice can reasonably disagree with him. And it becomes unclear how in uttering (5)

(5)     No, the test can't be on Monday.

Alice is disagreeing with Bert if each of them is making a claim about their own information state. Alice and Bert can agree about whether the proposition $M$ that

the test is Monday is compatible with each of their respective information states while disagreeing with what one another says. (4)–(5) are inconsistent, but (6)–(7) are not.

(6)     As far as Bert is concerned, the test may be on Monday.

(7)     As far as Alice is concerned, the test can't be on Monday.

If we replace the speaker with a relevant group, and treat epistemic modal claims as claims about the pooled information of this group, we will capture how Alice and Bert make inconsistent claims. But then it becomes unclear how Bert is in a position to make a claim about whether the test may be on Monday, which, intuitively, he is. It can be appropriate for Bert to utter (4) even if he doesn't know whether Alice is uncertain about $M$.

The worry is this: If we treat epistemic modal sentences as about the speaker's information, we capture the justified use condition but leave the disagreement condition unexplained. But if we treat epistemic modal sentences as about the information of a larger group, we capture the disagreement condition but leave the justified use condition unexplained. There seems to be no general way of specifying what body of information is relevant as a function of context that captures all our intuitions.

## 2   Accommodation and negotiation with paradigm context-sensitive expressions

Discussions of disagreement with CR-expressions typically start by considering cases that have the following structural features: (*a*) *A* utters a sentence with a CR-expression, (*b*) *B* felicitously responds with an expression of linguistic denial ('no', 'nu-uh', etc.) followed by an utterance of an apparently inconsistent sentence using the same CR-expression (or, like in (3), a corresponding dual), and yet (*c*) the intended contents of *A*'s and *B*'s utterances are compatible according to (an initial version of) the contextualist's semantics. It has been assumed by all parties in the literature that with paradigm context-sensitive expressions, by contrast, if the (*c*)-condition is satisfied, then the (*b*)-condition is violated — i.e., if the expressions are used with different intended contents, then linguistic denial isn't licensed for the second speaker. This assumption has not been made without reason. Unlike Alice's replies in (3), Dan's responses and disagreements in (8)–(10) with pure indexicals, definite descriptions, pronouns, and quantifiers (to take just four examples) are infelicitous.

(8)      Clara:   I just finished teaching.
             Dan:   #No I didn't.

(9)      [Context: Clara and Dan see a group of students exiting a classroom. Another group of students is waiting to enter.]

            Clara:   Look, the students (/they) just finished the test.
            Dan:   #No, the students (/they) didn't just finish. Look at those students.

(10)      Clara:   Every student is taking the test today.
             Dan:   #No, not every student is taking it today. Students in other classes aren't taking it at all.

Though they use the same expressions ('I', 'the children', 'they', 'every student'), Clara and Dan are talking about different individuals in (8) and different groups of students in (9)–(10). Because of the shift in the features of context relevant for fixing the contents of their utterances, Clara and Dan aren't disagreeing, nor are they negotiating about how the context is. They are simply talking past one another.

However, closer inspection reveals that many paradigm context-sensitive expressions exhibit the same sorts of discourse behavior that we saw with epistemic modals. This point has not been noticed in the literature.

Start with definite descriptions. Suppose that Amanda and Billy are playing with three children, two white and one non-white. Amanda is a racist against non-whites, and Billy knows this. The two white children, Will and Wilma, are laughing, and the one non-white child, Nick, isn't. Amanda says:

(11)      Look, the children are laughing!

Roughly, (11) says that everyone in the most salient group of children is laughing (Lewis 1973, 1979, von Heusinger 1997, 2000, Schlenker 2004). Insofar as Amanda intends to say something true, it is thus mutually obvious that she is assuming that the most salient group of children includes only Will and Wilma. Assuming it is common ground that there are no non-racist grounds for treating Nick as less salient than Will and Wilma, Amanda's utterance of (11) can implicitly suggest that "we aren't talking about Nick" because of his race. (Indeed, it is the implicit nature of this suggestion that can make it so destructive.) Amanda can implicitly suggest that Nick is to be ignored on account of his race by acting in such a way that would be appropriate only if he was.

If Billy doesn't object to Amanda's utterance, he will accommodate her in these assumptions. This can set the stage for further exclusionary behavior in the future. To avoid such a consequence, Billy might object by explicitly calling out Amanda on

her assumption; he might say something like, 'Wait a minute, why are you ignoring Nick?' But Billy needn't be so explicit; he might respond as in (12).

(12)  No, the children *aren't* laughing. Nick is bored out of his mind.

Here Billy responds in such a way that assumes that Nick is included in the group of children being talked about. He does so by acting in such a way that would be appropriate only if Nick was so included — specifically, by using 'the children' to pick out a group that includes Nick. Billy can thus respond to Amanda with an utterance that makes a contrary implicit proposal. At this point Amanda also has several options. Recognizing the reasons for Billy's disquiet, she might grant that Billy is right. It can then become mutually presupposed that there are no legitimate grounds to exclude Nick from the relevant group being discussed. But Amanda might not be so accommodating. This can lead to (implicit or explicit) negotiation about what group of children is salient and why.

Similar examples can be given with pronouns and demonstratives. In the context for (11), Amanda might instead have uttered (13) or (14).

(13)  Look, they are laughing!

(14)  Those are some happy children!

Roughly, (13) says that everyone in the most salient group of individuals is laughing (Grosz et al. 1995, Roberts 2003), and (14) says that everyone in the group of individuals being demonstrated is a happy child (Kaplan 1989, Siegel 2002). As above, insofar as Amanda intends to say something true, it is mutually obvious that she is assuming that the most salient group of individuals, or the group of individuals being demonstrated, doesn't include Nick. Since it is common ground that there are no non-racist grounds for excluding Nick from the set of most salient individuals or the set of demonstrated individuals, Amanda utterances in (13)–(14) can implicitly suggest that Nick is inferior in some way. Again, to avoid accommodating Amanda in these assumptions, Billy might object by explicitly calling out Amanda on her assumption. But he need not. He might respond as in (15)–(16).

(15)  No they aren't. Nick is bored out of his mind.

(16)  No, those are a mix of happy and unhappy children.

By acting in such a way that would be appropriate only if Amanda's assumption was false, Billy issues a contrary implicit proposal — namely, that Nick isn't to be ignored because of his race. This can lead to (implicit or explicit) negotiation about which

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individuals are being talked about and why.

Now turn to quantifiers.[3] Consider Chip, a well known sexist in America before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Commenting to Dorothy on the glories of American democracy, Chip says:

(17)    Ain't America great? Everyone can vote.

Roughly, (17) says that every relevant individual in America can vote — slightly less roughly, that every individual in America who has a moral right to vote is legally allowed to vote. Insofar as Chip intends to say something true, it is mutually obvious that he is assuming that women aren't in the class of Americans who have a moral right to vote. To avoid accommodating Chip in this assumption, Dorothy might object by addressing the issue explicitly; she might say something like, 'Wait a minute, why are you ignoring women?' But Dorothy needn't be so explicit. She might respond as in (18).

(18)    No, not everyone can vote. *I* still can't.

By acting in such a way that would be appropriate only if Chip's assumption was false, Dorothy issues a contrary implicit proposal — namely, that women aren't to be excluded from the conversationally relevant domain of individuals. This can lead to (implicit or explicit) negotiation about which individuals ought to be given a legal right to vote.[4]

## 3 Lessons

Call the sorts of examples from §2 the *PCS-examples* ("PCS" for Paradigm Context-Sensitive). The PCS-examples show that we see the same patterns of accommodation and negotiation with paradigm context-sensitive expressions as we do with CR-expressions. One might take this as providing surprising new evidence for relativism's sovereignty in the realm of context-sensitivity. I suspect I am not alone

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[3]One could recast (11)–(12) using 'all the children'. But since, Logic 101 aside, it is contentious whether 'all' is quantificational (Lasersohn 1999, Brisson 2003), I give alternative examples with 'every'.

[4]Similar examples can be constructed with gradable adjectives, relational expressions ('enemy', 'local'), and neutral modal verbs ('may', 'must'), among others. Since it is contentious whether the context-sensitivity of these expressions ought to be analyzed along contextualist or relativist lines, I won't give such examples here. It is an interesting question whether these sorts of examples can be constructed with any paradigm context-sensitive expression. Given our purposes I remain neutral on this issue here.

in thinking that we should be wary of this response. A more judicious response is to reexamine the data. Who knows, perhaps there are insights about the role of context-sensitive language in collaborative action and discourse that we have been missing. In this spirit I would like to draw two lessons — one for the relativist, one for the contextualist.

The initial worry for speaker versions of contextualism, recall, is that they fail to capture how speakers in discourses like (3) disagree insofar as the semantics predicts that the contents of the speakers' utterances are compatible. However, the PCS-examples demonstrate that it cannot be a general requirement for discourse disagreement that the intended contents of the speakers' utterances be incompatible:[5] the interlocutors in the PCS-discourses disagree even though they are talking about (or at least intending to talk about) different people. This puts pressure on the relativist who wishes to wield disagreement data against contextualism to show that the disagreements ought not be explained in some alternative manner that is consistent with a contextualist semantics.

Correspondingly, the PCS-examples give the contextualist a place to look for a solution to their problems with disagreement. Perhaps by examining what is going on in these sorts of disagreements with paradigm context-sensitive expressions we can learn something about how expressions with a contextualist formal semantics can figure in (dis)agreements, and, more generally, how they can be used to manage the conversational context.[6] This possibility should give the contextualist a license for optimism. But it also raises a challenge. Not only must the contextualist provide a positive account of what *is* going on in PCS-style examples; she must also provide a concrete formal semantics for CR-expressions that meets the following constraints. On the one hand, the semantics must be similar enough to that of paradigm context-sensitive expressions so that the explanation of disagreement cases with the latter expressions carries over to disagreements with CR-expressions. On the other hand, the semantics cannot be too similar lest she fail to capture certain differences in the discourse properties of the two classes of context-sensitive expressions. For instance, even if paradigm context-sensitive expressions *can* figure in disagreements with the structure we are considering — roughly, where speakers utter apparently inconsistent sentences, and use the same context-sensitive expression

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[5]or even that they can't both be 'accurate' in the sense of MacFarlane 2007: 23–24. See von Fintel & Gillies 2008: 81–84 and Sundell 2011 for similar points.

[6]This strategy should be of particular interest to contextualists who wish to explain disagreement phenomena in terms of the conventional meanings of CR-expressions rather than in terms of linguistically unconstrained pragmatic mechanisms (as in, e.g., Cappelen 2008, Björnsson & Finlay 2010).

but with an intuitively different content — this is not the norm. The norm for such discourses with CR-expressions is disagreement, whereas the norm for paradigm context-sensitive expressions is talking past. The contextualist's semantics must assimilate CR-expressions and paradigm context-sensitive expressions in such a way that this semantics, along with general pragmatic principles, predicts both the similarities and the differences in how context affects their interpretation, on the one hand, and how their use affects the context, on the other.[7]

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[7] See SILK 2014 for development of a contextualist semantics and pragmatics for CR-expressions that attempts to meet this challenge as well as other central challenges facing contextualist accounts.

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