

From contexts to circumstances of evaluation: is the trade-off always innocuous?

Mikhail Kissine

Received: 2 June 2008 / Accepted: 14 August 2009 / Published online: 27 February 2010
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Abstract Both context relativists and circumstance-of-evaluation relativists agree that the traditional semantic interpretation of some sentence-types fails to deliver the adequate truth-conditions for the corresponding tokens. But while the context relativists argue that the truth-conditions of each token depend on its context of utterance—each token being thus associated with a distinct intension—circumstance-of-evaluation relativists preserve a unique intension for all the tokens by placing circumstances of evaluations under the influence of a certain ‘point of view’. The main difference between the two approaches is that only the former can operate locally. It is shown that, for this reason, circumstance-of-evaluation relativism makes erroneous semantic predictions about (relative) gradable adjectives.

Keywords Contextualism · Relativism · Adjectives · Agreement

1 Introduction

Like many papers concerned with the semantics/pragmatics boundary, this one will have to start with a brief description of semantic orthodoxy. Under the classical, orthodox conception, the input to semantics is limited to the syntactic structure of

Preliminary versions of this paper have been delivered at the 10th IPRA conference, Göteborg (2007), and at the *Conference on Context-dependence, perspective and relativity in language and thought*, ENS, Paris (2007); I'm grateful to both audiences for useful feedback. I also benefited from detailed comments and criticisms on a previous written version from Marc Dominicy and two anonymous reviewers. Philippe De Brabanter's patient and insightful remarks are far too numerous to be acknowledged in footnotes; this should not prevent the usual disclaimer from applying. My research is supported by a post-doctoral researcher grant from the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique de la Communauté Française de Belgique (F.R.S.-FNRS).

M. Kissine (✉)

Université Libre de Bruxelles, CP 175, 50 Avenue F.D. Roosevelt, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium
e-mail: mkissine@ulb.ac.be

sentences. Whereas the dominant view is that semantic interpretation results in a full-blown proposition, some scholars want to deny this and maintain that the output of semantic composition is not necessarily truth-evaluable (see [Bach 1994, 2005](#); [Soames 2002](#)). In this paper, I will neglect the latter position; the propositional content or the intension of a sentence is to be taken as a function from circumstances of evaluation to truth-values. In virtue of their conventional meaning, indexicals like *I*, *here*, *now* cannot be assigned a semantic value out of context. However, under the orthodox conception, the term *context* stands for an abstract, limited set of parameters that are required in order to assign a semantic value to indexicals; therefore, in spite of the existence of indexicality in natural languages, semantics can do its job without bothering with extra-linguistic facts, i.e. it can ignore the *broad* or *pragmatic context*.

In the last 20 years, this neat picture successively fell prey to contextualist attacks, and revived under the guises of a lost paradise to which new traditionalists strive. Gradable adjectives proved to be a first-choice battleground for the wars between contextualists and traditionalists, and I will follow the lead.

The stock examples run as follows. Imagine that John, an eight-year-old boy, wants to be part of his school basketball team; call this context *C1*. Here (1) is false; John is far too short for a basketball player.

(1) John is tall.

Imagine now that John and his mum are at the paediatrician's; as it turns out, in that context, call it *C2*, (1) is true, for John is tall for an eight-year-old boy.

Or take a well-worn example of Travis's. For some reason, Pia paints the leaves of her Japanese maple green. A friend of hers, a photographer, needs a plant with green leaves to stand in the background of some photo; here, in *C1'*, (2) is true.

(2) The leaves are green.

But another friend of Pia's is a botanist who is establishing a classification of plants according to the colour of their leaves; here, in *C2'*, (2) is false, for beneath the paint, the leaves are russet.

In order to account for the intuitions about (1) or (2), contextualists choose to replace the orthodox semantic context with a more everyday, pragmatic context. The context of utterance of (1) or (2) determines the interpretation of *tall* or *green*; in the absence of such contextual information, no content can be assigned. The contextualist camp parts in two when it comes to deciding how radical the departure from the orthodoxy should be. *Indexicalists* claim that the logical form (*LF*) of (1) contains unpronounced variables *c* and *s* standing for the class and the standard of comparison ([Stanley 2002](#); [Glanzberg 2007](#)) or that the LF of (2) contains unpronounced variables *p* and *d*, standing for the part coloured and for the degree of coloration ([Szabó 2001](#)). (There exist alternative implementations of the same idea; see [Kennedy \(2007\)](#) and references therein. All such solutions presuppose that the semantic structure of gradable adjectives renders their interpretation locally dependent on the pragmatic context. Since this is the theoretical point that matters here, I will keep the discussion at an informal level.) These variables can either be bound or assigned semantic values on the basis of the pragmatic context, as would be the case for (1) and (2), uttered

in C1 and C2. Therefore, indexicalism can maintain, as does the orthodoxy, that the propositional content arises from the composition of the semantic values of the syntactic structure; unlike the orthodoxy, indexicalism admits that some of these values are determined by the pragmatic—as opposed to semantic—context. By contrast, hardcore contextualists claim that the content of a sentence token cannot be traced back to the LF. Under such a view, pragmatic processes that determine the propositional content are not only bottom-up—as indexicalists would have it—but also top-down; in other words, the context of utterance “completes”, “enriches” or “modulates” the sentence’s deep structure in such a way as to yield the proposition the sentence expresses in this context (e.g. Carston 2002; Recanati 2004). The argument to be developed below will not differentiate between hardcore contextualists and indexicalists, for it is devoted to a criticism of an approach that aims at proving wrong any theory that appeals to the pragmatic context.

To be more precise from the outset, it is ‘relative’ gradable adjectives, like *tall* or *green* that will be discussed below. These are to be differentiated from ‘absolute’ gradable adjectives like *straight* or *pure*. The interpretation of adjectives belonging to either category exhibits contextual variation; however, Kennedy (2007) argues that the former are vague—due the contextual variation of the standards and domain of comparison, while the latter are imprecise, in that they can denote different measure functions—which are maximal or minimal standard degrees, depending on the meaning of the adjective—in different contexts. In intuitive terms, *tall*(x) means that x has a greater degree of tallness than other members of some comparison class c according to some standard of comparison s : both c and s are context-dependent. By contrast, *pure*(x) means that x has a maximum degree of purity; what can vary contextually is what counts as a maximum (cf. Kennedy 2007). In what follows, by ‘gradable adjective’ I will mean ‘relative gradable adjective’.

An extreme option for champions of semantic orthodoxy is just to deny the empirical validity of contextualist intuitions; this strategy has been made notorious by Cappelen and Lepore (2005). Yet, such a position generates a number of problems which, one may think, make the advantages of regaining orthodoxy rather slim (see, for instance, Bach 2006; Montminy 2006; Kissine 2007; MacFarlane 2007b; Recanati 2007). However things turn out to be with radical traditionalism, it is to the more moderate version of orthodoxy that this paper is devoted. In a nutshell, the position—circumstance-of-evaluation relativism—to be critically examined consists in granting contextualists their intuitions, while shifting attention to circumstances of evaluation. This view would present a double advantage: preserving contextualist intuitions without giving up orthodoxy. Such an ambition is clearly stated by the two implementations of this view—Predelli (2005) and MacFarlane (2007b)—that will be compared in the next section. I will argue that MacFarlane’s position presents a technical difficulty that is avoided by Predelli; consequently in the rest of the paper, I will take Predelli’s version as the paradigm of circumstance-of-evaluation relativism. In Sect. 3, I will present variations on examples like (1) and (2) that show that circumstance-of-evaluation relativism cannot be applied to gradable adjectives. Leaving semantic minimalism aside, this means that—at least as far adjectives of this type are concerned—some kind of contextualist theory, without prejudging its actual implementation, is correct. What this argument purports to show is that circumstance-of-evaluation

relativism may have independent motivations, but not that of preserving orthodoxy (for orthodoxy collapses as soon as it is shown that the truth-conditional interpretation of one sentence type requires the broad context). As often noted (e.g. Stanley 2004; MacFarlane 2009), one such general advantage of circumstance-of-evaluation relativism is to avoid the intra-utterance perspective shifts predicted by contextualism in cases where they are not welcome. Yet, as we will see in Sect. 3 this is precisely the reason why contextualism should be favoured when looking at gradable adjectives. These matters will be briefly touched upon in the concluding section of the paper; before that, in Sect. 4, I will present and answer two potential objections to the argument against circumstance-of-evaluation relativism developed in Sect. 3.

2 Circumstance-of-evaluation relativism

In order to explain the truth-value variation that seems to affect examples like (1) and (2), contextualists think of the truth-conditions of a sentence as being relative to a context. The context determines the intension or the content of the sentence-token. Circumstances of evaluation are usually thought of as made up of at least a possible world. It follows that the world of the context of conversation also corresponds to a circumstance of evaluation—the circumstance of evaluation that corresponds to at least our actual world. And since the actual world corresponds to infinitely many contexts, and since intension varies from context to context, different tokens of the same sentence-type can have different truth-values in the actual world.

The position to be set forth in this section grants that truth-values of sentence-tokens like (1) or (2) depend on how *tall* and *green* are interpreted. What it denies is that this interpretation should be relativised to contexts, and not to circumstances of evaluation. In order to avoid any confusion with contextualists who reject indexicalism, I will continue to refer to this view by means of the more cumbersome *circumstance-of-evaluation relativism* (henceforth, *CER*) instead of the rapidly spreading term *non-indexical contextualism*, coined by MacFarlane (2007b, 2009).

MacFarlane (2007b) claims that circumstances of evaluation should be thought of as the set-theoretical product of the set $W = \{w, w_1 \dots w_n\}$ of possible worlds and the set $A = \{\alpha, \alpha_1 \dots \alpha_n\}$ of points of view; in other words, circumstances of evaluations are ordered pairs $\langle w, \alpha \rangle, \langle w, \alpha_1 \rangle \dots \langle w, \alpha_n \rangle \dots \langle w_n, \alpha \rangle, \langle w_n, \alpha_1 \rangle \dots \langle w_n, \alpha_n \rangle$. The idea is intuitive enough. Take the example in (1); nothing prevents us from claiming that while both C1 and C2 are located in the actual world w , C1 corresponds to the point of view α_1 and C2 to α_2 . Since the content of an utterance is a function from circumstances of evaluations—whatever these are—to truth-values, there is nothing extraordinary to the fact that (1) is false in $\langle w, \alpha_1 \rangle$ and true in $\langle w, \alpha_2 \rangle$. In such a way, MacFarlane accommodates contextualist intuitions without anchoring the content of utterances within a pragmatic context; the context is not invoked to account for truth-value variation.

Before carrying on, it is worth clarifying a technical difficulty raised by MacFarlane's version of CER. MacFarlane defines points of view as functions from properties to intensions. Thus, for instance, α_1 should map *tall* onto an intension that maps the actual world onto a set of individuals (to which John does not belong). Granted, it is widely acknowledged that circumstances of evaluation can include other

parameters than possible worlds. For instance, Kaplan (1989) conceives of them as pairs of possible worlds and times. The usefulness of enriching circumstances of evaluation with extra parameters is often brought out by positing operators in the object language that operate on them. For instance, *yesterday* can be thought of as an operator; under such a view, *yesterday*(p) is true in every circumstance of evaluation iff p is true at $\langle w, t_y \rangle$, where t_y is the temporal interval covering the day before the day of the utterance. Now, it is clear that *tall* is not an operator; it does not fix the truth-value of the utterance where it occurs with respect to a certain pair $\langle w_n, \alpha_n \rangle$ —the whole point of MacFarlane’s manoeuvre is to allow the truth value of (1) to vary from circumstance of evaluation to circumstance of evaluation. And MacFarlane (2009) is very explicit on the fact that, in his opinion, positing an extra parameter does not require the existence of an operator that can shift it. Therefore, *tall* remains a predicate. The extension of a predicate in a possible world is a set of individuals. Model-theoretic semantics interprets sentences with respect to a model that usually consists of (at least) a set of possible worlds (W), a set (universe) of individuals (D) and an interpreting function ($\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$). Let us suppose for a moment that circumstances of evaluation reduce to possible worlds. For every possible world and for every predicate of the object language, the interpreting function determines a set of individuals. Thus, the intension of a predicate is a function from circumstances of evaluation to sets of individuals: the intension of *tall* in a possible world will be one of all possible sets of individuals of the model (i.e. a member of the Power set of D).

For every w , such that $w \in W$, $\llbracket tall \rrbracket_w \in \text{Pow}(D)$

Admitting that *John* is a constant, for each circumstance of evaluation, (1) is true if John belongs to the extension of *tall* in that circumstance of evaluation, and false otherwise. In standard terms, this would read as follows:

For every w , such that $w \in W$, $\llbracket John \text{ is tall} \rrbracket_w = 1$ iff $John \in \llbracket tall \rrbracket_w$

Compare this standard picture with MacFarlane’s version of CER. In MacFarlane’s definition, circumstances of evaluations are ordered pairs $\langle w, \alpha \rangle, \langle w, \alpha_1 \rangle \dots \langle w, \alpha_n \rangle \dots \langle w_n, \alpha \rangle, \langle w_n, \alpha_1 \rangle \dots \langle w_n, \alpha_n \rangle$. Thus the model-theoretic truth-conditions for (1) should read as follows:

For every $w \in W$, and every $\alpha \in A$, $\llbracket John \text{ is tall} \rrbracket_{w,\alpha} = 1$
iff $John \in \llbracket tall \rrbracket_{w,\alpha}$

The result of adding an extra parameter to circumstances of evaluation is a change in the definition of intension (or, equivalently, of content): instead of being a function from possible worlds to truth-values, the intension of a sentence becomes a function from $\langle w, \alpha \rangle$ pairs to truth-values. The problem is that there seem to be two conflicting notions of intension in MacFarlane’s definition. On the one hand, he does not deny that sentences, even in his approach, have intensions in the sense of functions from circumstances of evaluation, i.e. from $\langle w, \alpha \rangle$ pairs, to truth-values. However, on the other hand, according to MacFarlane, every point of view α is a function projecting properties on *intensions*, which are, themselves, functions from possible worlds on

extensions. In other words, α is a function that, for each possible world, maps the sentence on a truth-value. According to this second notion of intension, the following holds:

For every w , such that $w \in W$, and every α , such that $\alpha \in A$,
 $\llbracket \text{John is tall} \rrbracket_w = 1$ iff $\alpha(\text{John is tall}) = i$, such that $i(w) = 1$

In other words, each point of view α plays the role played by the interpreting function $\llbracket . \rrbracket$ in traditional model-theoretical accounts. MacFarlane cannot have it both ways. Either points of view replace a unique interpreting function within the model—resulting in a model allowing an infinity of interpretations for each predicate—or points of view, qua parameters of circumstances of evaluation, should be defined in some other way. The first choice would be no more than a terminological variation on contextualism. What such a claim would amount to is that with respect to one and the same possible world an utterance can have different truth-values because it can be interpreted as expressing different contents. As to the second choice, I am not aware of any attempt at defining such a general parameter in a non-functional way.

One possible remedy to the difficulties outlined in the previous paragraph is to treat circumstances of evaluation as triplets $\langle w, c, s \rangle$, with c being a class of comparison and s a standard of comparison. So *John is tall* would be true at $\langle w, c, s \rangle$ iff John belongs to the set of individuals that, in w , belong to c and are tall according to s . Yet this solution faces the classical problem of inflating the number of parameters (see Glanzberg 2007); for instance, in order to account for (2) in such a framework one would have to add the parameters d and p —degree of coloration and coloured part (cf. Szabó 2001). In fact, one of MacFarlane's (2009) motivations for positing a unique point-of-view parameter is precisely to avoid this sort of inflation.

There is a more promising way to go for a partisan of CER; instead of claiming that circumstances of evaluation are possible worlds *and* points of view, one can argue that circumstances of evaluations are points of view *on* possible worlds. Predelli (2005) takes points of view to be functions from possible worlds to circumstances of evaluation. Under this version of CER, all one needs, in order to account for the contextualist intuitions about (1) and (2), is to acknowledge that C1 and C2 correspond to two different circumstances of evaluation. When we talk about basketball players, the point of view is α_1 ; when we talk about eight-year-old boys, the point of view is α_2 . Let us assume that $\alpha_1(w) \neq \alpha_2(w)$; since C1 and C2 correspond to different circumstances of evaluation, there is nothing extraordinary to the fact that (1) receives different truth-values in C1 and in C2. The same rationale holds for (2). In what follows, I will take Predelli's approach as the paradigmatic version of CER. However, even if my reservations about MacFarlane's were ill-grounded, the claims to be made below apply equally well to his version of CER.

3 Bad news for circumstance-of-evaluation relativism

It seems that CER accounts for the same facts as contextualism but without abandoning the orthodoxy. Yet, appearances notwithstanding, CER must pay a high price for

keeping the semantics traditional. In Predelli's view, the truth-value of a sentence-token depends on the point of view that fixes the circumstance of evaluation corresponding to the context of utterance. It follows that variation in truth-value stems from global rather than local factors. Before running through the examples, I will lay my cards on the table and explain my line of attack against CER.

Take (3) and (4).

- (3) John is short to play basketball, although/but he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
 (4) John is tall for an eight-year-old-boy, although/but he's short to play basketball.

(3) and (4) involve two conjuncts linked, respectively, by *although* and *but*. Whatever the views on utterances of the form *p although q* or *p but q* are, it is uncontroversial that they express at least the conjunctive proposition *p and q* (e.g. Blakemore 1987; Bach 1999; Potts 2005, Chap. 7). It follows that for all the parties in the debate, (3) and (4) express the same conjunctive proposition, viz. [John is tall for an eight-year-old-boy and John is short for a basketball player]. Henceforth, I will refer to this content as the *conjunctive proposition* expressed by the utterance of a sentence containing *but* or *although*. Since the comparison class is made explicit, CER would predict that the truth-value of (3) and (4) does not depend on a particular circumstance of evaluation, i.e. on a particular point of view. Still adopting Predelli's view, let us assume that when we talk about basketball players, the point of view is α_1 ; when we talk about eight-year-old boys, the point of view is α_2 . Let us assume that $\alpha_1(w) \neq \alpha_2(w)$; hence, α_1 and α_2 correspond to two different circumstances of evaluation: e_1 and e_2 . If John is, in fact, too short to play basketball, but quite tall for his age, the conjunctive content shared by (3) and (4) will be true in e_1 and e_2 ; if one of the conjuncts is false, say if John is tall enough to play basketball, then the conjunctive content of (3) and (4) will be false in e_1 as well as in e_2 . So much, I think, no proponent of CER would want to dispute.

Now let us remove one explicit mention of the comparison class from each example.

- (5) John is short, although/but he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
 (6) John is tall, although/but he's short to play basketball.

Out of context, (5) and (6) become pretty hard to interpret. But recall the examples which sparked the whole debate. (7) is true and (8) is false in a context where the class of basketball players is relevant—point of view α_1 , in CER terms; (7) is false and (8) is true in a context where the height of eight-year-olds is important—point of view α_2 , in CER terms.

- (7) John is short.
 (8) John is tall.

Thus, to repeat, CER has it that (7) and (8) receive opposite truth-values in e_1 and e_2 ; true and false, false and true, respectively. Now, just add to (7) and (8) a conjunct with an explicit mention of the comparison class and you get (5) and (6). What CER ought to predict, therefore, is that (5) is true in e_1 and (6) is false in e_1 . What I will try to do in the rest of this section is to show that CER has to admit that (5) and (6) are *both* true in e_1 . If two conjunctive propositions *p and q* and *s and t* are compatible (i.e., if

they can both be true), all of the conjuncts p , q , s , and t are compatible. If I manage to build my case properly, CER would have to admit that *John is short* and *John is tall* are compatible in the same circumstance of evaluation, which amounts to saying—let me emphasise—that *x is tall* and *x is short* are compatible under the same point of view on what counts as tall.

So, here come the examples. Imagine we are in the basketball context and the following exchange takes place.

- (9) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. He's tall, but he's still too short to play with us.

Before going any further, three remarks about this example. First, some readers may feel that (9), and examples of the same kind below, are pretty strained. Now, I agree that (9) exhibits the sort of awkwardness proper to many artificial examples used in philosophy of language. However, I submit that this awkwardness is due to two features that are irrelevant to the discussion at hand. First, the last line is odd because the second speaker agrees with the first merely restating what the latter said. The oddity is similar to the one in (10):

- (10) A: Peter got married. He's not a bachelor anymore.
 B: Yes, you're right. He's not an unmarried man anymore.

The point is that, even if such a form of agreement does not reveal brilliant oratorical skills, it remains a form of agreement. And the fact that there is agreement in (9) is central to the argument to be developed later in this section.

Second, and I will defend this claim in detail in the next section, in (9) the second speaker expresses agreement with both conjuncts of the coach's assertion. Some readers might feel awkwardness because, in spite of the main direction of the exchange being John's potential inclusion within the basketball team, the second speaker also expresses a judgement on the truth-value of a peripheral piece of information, viz. the coach's conceding that John is tall for an eight-year-old boy. Yet, if there is infelicity it is conversational, of the kind illustrated by (11).

- (11) A: John, the plumber, is really a jerk.
 B: I agree. John is a jerk, and he's a plumber.

Significantly, such potential conversational oddness has nothing to do with the comparison classes being linguistically unexpressed in (9)—compare with (12):

- (12) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short for a basketball player, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. He's tall for an eight-year-old, but he's still too short to play with us.

Third, a crucial feature of (9)—and of similar examples given below—is that each speaker shifts between two classes of comparison within the same utterance. An anonymous reviewer objected that “[o]rdinary speakers do not so readily switch between

qualified and unqualified uses of predicates when their different meanings are so clearly in tension”. Yet, the intuition seems pretty robust that taken in isolation each sentence of the exchange in (9) is acceptable. Likewise, Kennedy (2007) lists the following example as acceptable—and I share his intuitions:

(13) Jumbo is small for an elephant, but he is not small.

It is important to note that utterance-internal shifts are not always acceptable. For instance, they are not when it comes to knowledge ascriptions. Assume that in ascriptions of knowledge of the form *x knows that p* the relevant epistemic standards are determined contextually. For instance, one can know that *p* according to the best evidence available, although with higher epistemic standards the same knowledge ascription would be false. As discussed ad nauseam in the epistemological literature, Sam may utter (14), and be right:

(14) I know that my car is parked outside the university building.

Yet, when pressed about how firm this knowledge is, Sam may admit his lack of knowledge (as opposed to belief) about the location of his car:

(15) I don’t know that my car has not been stolen.

Stanley (2004) points out that if the epistemic standards relevant for a knowledge ascription were contextually determined for each occurrence of *know*, we should expect the following to be acceptable:

(16) # Sam knows that his car is parked outside the university building, but he does not know that it has not been stolen.

(17) # I know that my car is parked outside the university building, but I don’t know that it has not been stolen.

I will briefly get back to the unacceptability of (16) and (17) in the concluding section of this paper. But now I would like to emphasise that while (16–17) present genuine pragmatic unacceptability owing to an internal perspective shift, (9) does not.

Going back to (9), recall that according to CER, circumstances of evaluation are points of view on possible worlds—on the actual world in the most interesting cases. In (9), the interlocutors are talking about the inclusion of John in the basketball team; this is the point of their agreement. In the next section, I will give less intuitive reasons for accepting that there is no circumstance-of-evaluation shift between the second and the third utterance of (9); but for the time being, just grant me the following assumption: if a speaker A expresses a proposition *p*, and a speaker B agrees with A by expressing the proposition *q*, and if the context of both A’s and B’s utterances corresponds to the same circumstance of evaluation, then *p* and *q* have to be at least compatible in that circumstance of evaluation, i.e. the truth of *p* in that circumstance of evaluation must not entail the falsity of *q* in that same circumstance. Therefore, granting that there is no inter-utterance circumstance shift, CER predicts that with respect to a certain circumstance of evaluation, let us call it *e*₁—viz. under the same point of view on what counts as tall—*John is short* and *John is tall* are compatible.

An anonymous reviewer asked whether the partisans of CER could not get away with analysing the second occurrence of *tall* as being elliptical—in the strict, syntactic sense of the term—for *tall for an eight-year old boy*. Given the theories currently on the market, such an analysis would be of no help to rescue CER. Stainton (1997, 1998, 2005) argues that a syntactically elliptic form should not be acceptable without a linguistic antecedent, and hence, should not occur in discourse initial position. Now, while the antecedent of the second occurrence of *tall* is available in the second utterance of (9), the first occurrence of *short* has no linguistic antecedent available for the allegedly elided part *for a basketball player*. To be sure, one can argue that the first occurrence of *short* is not a case of ellipsis. However, this would turn the analysis of (9) in terms of syntactic ellipsis into a clearly ad hoc thesis. If the first occurrence of *short* is not a case of ellipsis, while the second occurrence of *tall* is, one would have to assume that the use of the adjective without an explicit modification by a *for*-PP is not constrained by the availability of an antecedent. While positing ellipsis in the second utterance of (9), but not in the first is a theoretical possibility, I know of no independent reasons for defending such an account—and such reasons do not seem easy to come by.

To repeat, by Stainton's criteria, the first occurrence of *short* cannot be a case of ellipsis, because it is felicitously used in discourse initial position. Compare with (18)

- (18) A: James is in love with Laura.
 B: And Bobby with Shelly.

The second utterance—a textbook example of syntactic ellipsis—seems totally unacceptable if uttered out of the blue. Yet, Stanley (2000) and Merchant (2004) argue that cases of syntactic ellipsis where there is an explicit linguistic antecedent do not differ from those where the antecedent can be inferred from the context. Imagine that A and B are teenagers, who are gradually losing all their mates to attractive girls. They spot Bobby staring at Shelly, oblivious to the rest of the world. Although this would demand a bit of effort, in such a setting one can imagine the second utterance of (18) to be produced in isolation. Therefore, if we agree with Stanley and Merchant, nothing prevents us from wondering if the first use of *short* is not elliptical after all: one can postulate a non-linguistic antecedent. And if so, there is no way to deny that every occurrence of *tall* or *short* without explicit mention of the comparison class is a case of syntactic ellipsis, and hence has the underlying form *A for an NP*. Such a position, which, in reality, amounts to indexicalism, can be argued for; but defending it is incompatible with CER, for, if correct, it dissolves all the problematic cases that motivate CER with respect to gradable adjectives. Either way, the partisans of CER have to accept that no ellipsis is involved in (9). Since it is their position that I aim to assess here, I will adopt the same assumption.

So, if the second occurrence of *tall* in (9) cannot be analysed as a case of ellipsis—and if there is no cross-utterance circumstance shift (cf. next section)—CER has to accept that *tall* and *short* are compatible under the same point of view. And there is worse. Imagine the following variation on (19).

- (19) *The teacher*: So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. He's not short, but he's not tall enough.

Applying the rationale of the previous paragraph, we get the result that in e_1 , *John is short* and *John is not short* are compatible. Or take (20).

- (20) *The teacher*: So, are you taking John?
The coach: No. He's not short, but he's not tall enough.
The assistant: I agree. He's not tall, although he's not short for his age.

Adding (20) to (9) and (19), the CER relativist, if she grants that the circumstance of evaluation e_1 remains fixed during the last two utterances, ends up by concluding that in e_1 , that is, under one and the same point of view, an individual can be tall, not tall, short and not short at the same time.

Obviously, there is no reason to think that the generation of examples like (9) or (19–21) is limited to some circumstances of evaluation only. Take, for instance, C2, viz. the conversation of Johnny's mum with the paediatrician. The exchanges in (21–22) are semantically and pragmatically acceptable (even if quite crazy in normal discourse):

- (21) *Johnny's mum*: So, what about Johnny's height?
The paediatrician: Of course, Johnny is short, he's only eight, but he's quite tall for his age.
Johnny's mum: You're right! Johnny's tall, but he's such a small boy.
- (22) *Johnny's mum*: So, what about Johnny's height?
The paediatrician: Of course, Johnny is short, he's only eight, but he's quite tall for his age.
Johnny's mum: You're right! Johnny is not tall, although he's not short for his age.
- (23) *Johnny's mum*: So, what about Johnny's height?
The paediatrician: Of course, Johnny is short, he's only eight, but he's quite tall for his age.
Johnny's mum: You're right! Johnny is not short, but he's only eight.

Again, if we accept—and I will argue in the next section that we ought to—that the expressions of agreement insure that, in (21–23), the last two utterances are always evaluated as true with respect to the same circumstance of evaluation, e_2 , then it turns out, according to CER, that in e_2 Johnny can be tall, not tall, short and not short. Since it seems plausible that such examples can be made up for any context of conversation one comes up with, the provisional conclusion is that CER predicts that for any x , *short(x)*, *not short(x)*, *tall(x)* and *not tall(x)* are all compatible, in the sense that the content of these adjectives is such that they can all be true of the same entity in the same circumstance of evaluation, viz. under one and the same point of view. This is not a welcome prediction, for if Johnny is short for a basketball player, then he is not tall for a basketball player—and I know no one who would dispute this fact.

Things are not different with Travis's example. Take C1': Pia's friend, the photographer, is looking for some green vegetation to put in the background.

- (24) *The photographer:* What about this one? The leaves are green.
Pia: You're right. These leaves are green, but beneath the surface, they are russet.
Mia (a friend of Pia's): That's true. These leaves are russet, but they are painted green.

Provided that the expressions of agreement entail that all three utterances are evaluated as true with respect to a single circumstance e_1 , (24) shows that, according to CER, the same leaves can be green and russet under the same point of view. Now, it can be argued that *russet* and *green* are not mutually exclusive in the same way as *tall* and *short*. This is fine with me, but if so, the debate is groundless. If we accept that, under one and the same perspective, an entity can be of two different colours, Travis's examples do not constitute evidence for contextualism, nor do they constitute a motivation for CER.

Assuming that Travis's scenario is not trivial, the result yielded by (24) also holds for $C2'$, where a botanist is trying to decide whether Pia's Japanese maple belongs to the category with green leaves or with russet leaves. Imagine that the botanist is very clever, and is not misled by Pia's trickery:

- (25) *The botanist:* These leaves are russet.
Pia: You're right. These leaves are russet, although they are painted green.
Mia: That's true. These leaves are green, but beneath the surface they are russet.

Let us grant, again, that the expression of agreement ensures that we remain in a single circumstance of evaluation e_2' : CER predicts that in e_2' , viz. under one and the same point of view, the same object can be green and russet at the same time.

If vindicated, the diagnosis reached in this section is pretty severe for CER. For at least two types of examples traditionally invoked by contextualists, CER leads to absurd semantic predictions: it predicts that the same individual or object can have two (or more) properties which are incompatible (or which are at least thought so by all the parties in the debate). It is therefore important to assess the responses that remain available to the supporters of CER. This is what the next section sets out to do.

4 Two potential objections about agreement

As far as I can see, there are two potential moves open to the partisans of CER in order to deny the relevance of the data in (9) and (21–25).

Objection 1: In such cases speakers' agreement is only partial.

Objection 2: Circumstances of evaluation shift between utterances.

Objection 1: We can grant that speakers' agreement ensures that the two utterances in question are evaluated as true with respect to one and the same circumstance of evaluation, but we do not have to accept that in (9) or (21–25) this agreement bears on both conjuncts. Take (9), for instance: what the assistant agrees with is that John is tall for an eight-year-old boy, not with the fact that John is short.

- (9) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. He's tall, but he's still too short to play with us. [repeated]

So, the only result we get is that in e_1 —in the circumstance of evaluation corresponding to the conversation about the inclusion of John in the basketball team—*tall and tall for an eight-year-old boy* are compatible, which is exactly the desired outcome. Or, alternatively, it could be claimed that the assistant agrees with the coach saying that Johnny is short, in which case *short and too short to play with us* are compatible in e_1 , which, again, is perfectly fine. What the assistant does not agree with is that *John is short and John is tall for an eight-year-old boy*. In particular, Philippe De Brabanter pointed out that since *but* in the assistant's utterance is more or less compulsory (cf. 26), the second conjunct could be read as a restriction on the agreement, not something that the speakers agrees with.

- (26) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. # He's tall, and he's still too short to play with us.

Response to objection 1: If the agreement is only partial, then it should be compatible with an expression of disagreement bearing on the second conjunct. For instance, (27) is a genuine case of partial agreement:

- (27) A: Wittgenstein was a great admirer of Frege, and would have admired Derrida.
 B: You're right about Frege. But I partially/also disagree with you: even the second Wittgenstein would have considered Derrida's claims as gibberish.

Now, contrast (27) with (9*) or (9**):

- (9*) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree: he's tall. But I partially/also disagree with you: he's not short.
- (9**) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree: he's still too short to play with us. But I partially/also disagree with you: he's not tall.

If any sense at all can be made out of the assistant's answers in (9*) and (9**), it is clear that what he might mean does not fit in with what he means in (9). These two examples show that the agreement expressed bears on the whole utterance of *He's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy*, hence on the conjunctive proposition *He's short, and he's tall for an eight-year-old boy*. Mutatis mutandis, the same holds for the other examples in (21–25). As for the presence of *but*, it is rendered compulsory precisely because the contrast it marks—between being tall for an eight-year-old boy and being too short for playing in the school basketball team—is already part of the

coach's utterance, with which the assistant is agreeing. The following variation on (9), where it is *although* in the coach's utterance that is replaced by *and* (and not *but* in the assistant's response), is as weird as (26):

- (28) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: # No, he's short, and he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. He's tall, although he's still too short to play with us.

Objection 2: It was assumed, in the previous section, that in each of the examples claimed to be problematic for CER, the speakers' agreement ensures that all the utterances receive the same truth-value with respect to the same circumstance of evaluation. Yet, as emphasised recently by MacFarlane (2007a), there is nothing compulsory to this claim. Let us assume, for the sake of the discussion, that circumstances of evaluation are ordered pairs $\langle w, t \rangle$ of possible worlds and times. Imagine that at noon Mary utters (28):

- (29) John is sitting.

As it happens, in the circumstance of evaluation $\langle w, \text{noon} \rangle$ corresponding to the context of utterance of (28), the propositional content of (28) is true—John is sitting at noon in possible world w . Six hours later, that is, in the circumstance of evaluation $\langle w, 6 \text{ pm} \rangle$, I can agree with what Mary said even though, in that circumstance of evaluation, the proposition expressed by (19), viz. *John is sitting*, is false.¹ In other words, agreement is still accurate in $\langle w, 6 \text{ pm} \rangle$, in spite of the fact that the proposition I am agreeing with is false in $\langle w, 6 \text{ pm} \rangle$ (cf. MacFarlane 2007a). The same phenomenon is at play in examples like (9):

- (9) *The teacher:* So, are you taking John?
The coach: No, he's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.
The assistant: I agree. He's tall, but he's still too short to play with us.
 [repeated]

The propositional content of the coach's utterance is true with respect to e_1 , i.e. it is true in the circumstance of evaluation corresponding to the point of view relevant to the height of basketball players. The proposition expressed by the assistant's utterance—*He's tall, but he's still too short to play with us*—is true with respect to e_2 , i.e. it is true in the circumstance of evaluation corresponding to the point of view relevant to eight-year-old boys. Now, the coach's utterance is false with respect to e_2 . But, as we have seen, nothing prevents us from accepting that the assistant's expression of agreement is accurate in e_2 , even though the proposition he is agreeing with is false in e_2 . Therefore, there are no grounds for claiming that both the coach's and the assistant's utterances are true in the same circumstance of evaluation.

Response to objection 2: This analysis of (9) does not predict that the coach and the assistant agree about the truth of the same proposition. Were *objection 2* correct, what they would agree on is that the propositions expressed by their utterances are true in e_1 and e_2 , respectively (see MacFarlane 2007a). That is, what the assistant would mean

¹ Note that I can agree, but not necessarily express agreement, by saying *John is sitting*.

is something like *I agree that what you said is true from your point of view* (viz., in e_1), and *what I am saying is true from my point of view* (viz., in e_2). However, what stands in need of explanation is how the assistant can agree that the proposition expressed by the coach's utterance is true (cf. MacFarlane 2007a). If *objection 2* is correct, in order to get an agreement about one and the same proposition, we would need something like (30):

- (30) The coach and the assistant agree that the propositions *He's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy* and *He's tall, but he's still too short to play with us* are true in the actual world w_a iff the proposition *He's short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy* is true in e_1 , and the proposition *He's tall, but he's still too short to play with us* is true in e_2 .

However, by adopting (30) we have moved from CER to circumstance-of-assessment relativism (cf. MacFarlane 2005). In CER the truth-value of a proposition p in the actual world w_a depends on the circumstance of evaluation we take w_a to correspond to; in circumstance-of-assessment relativism it depends on the truth-value of p in a certain context of assessment. The problem is that if assessment is given such a central place, it cannot be defined in traditional semantic terms. Take (1):

- (1) John is tall. [repeated]

Let us try to get the accurate model-theoretic truth-conditions for (1) as uttered in a discussion about the inclusion of John in the basketball team. If we rely on the context of assessment, we end up with (30):

- (31) *John is tall* is true in w_a iff *John is tall* is true in the context of assessment e_1 .

The problematic part is, of course, the right-hand member of this bi-conditional. What does it mean for the proposition *John is tall* to be true in e_1 ? On a standard semantic account, it means that John belongs to the set of individuals that form the extension of *tall* in e_1 , that is that John belongs to a certain sub-set of tall persons in w_a —the ones that are above a certain height threshold. For more clarity, we can rewrite (31) as (32):

- (32) $\llbracket \textit{John is tall} \rrbracket_{w_a} = 1$, iff $\textit{John} \in \llbracket \textit{tall} \rrbracket_{e_1}$

But now, the advantage of semantic orthodoxy is gone. (32) allows us to define the truth-value of the proposition *John is tall* in the actual world; but such a semantic theory is unable to provide us with an intension, i.e. with a function mapping circumstances of evaluation on truth-values. For instance, (31) does not provide us with the truth-conditions of (1) in a possible world w_c that differs minimally from w_a .

The upshot of this discussion is not that a theory of interpretation that relativises truth-values to contexts of assessment is not viable, or is a worse option than contextualism (for a defence, see MacFarlane 2005). The crucial point amounts to the following. If proponents of CER rely on an inter-utterance circumstance-of-evaluation shift in (9) and (21–25), they fail to account for the very robust intuition that, in all these examples, people seem to agree about the truth of a proposition, not about the truth of

the proposition that a certain proposition is true relative to a certain circumstance of evaluation, i.e. relative to a certain point of view. In order to account for this intuition without going contextualist, one has to push towards context-of-assessment relativism; whatever the merits of theories of this sort, it remains that they do not preserve semantic orthodoxy, which is the alleged advantage of CER over contextualism.

5 By way of a conclusion: locality

Quite ironically, supporters of CER—i.e., of an approach that is seen by many as an orthodox alternative to contextualism—face the same problem as Austinian situation semantics, which is a radically contextualist theory of interpretation. Sketchily, situation semantics holds that a sentence token receives a truth-condition only in combination with a certain situation, a certain portion of the world (Barwise and Perry 1983). For instance, (33) can be interpreted only in combination with a certain situation *s* that contains only one cat; if *s* is such that the cat at hand is on the mat, *s* supports (33), which is thus true.

(33) The cat is on the mat.

Under such a conception, the occasional meaning of a sentence is relative to a certain situation *as a whole*. In other words, every constituent of the sentence has to be interpreted with respect to one and the same domain/situation. As pointed out by Soames (1986), (McCawley, 1981, pp. 212–213) and Lewis (1979), this gives rise to a serious problem. Take (34):

(34) The dog got in a fight with another dog.

In order to interpret the incomplete definite description *the dog*, classical versions of situation semantics would require a situation where there is only one dog; but, of course, the whole sentence can be interpreted only relative to a domain containing at least two dogs. In order to overcome this difficulty, one has to accept that at least some constituents are interpreted with respect to a *local* domain (Recanati 1996). Likewise, CER must relativise the interpretation of, for instance, (35) to one and the same point of view—there is no internal circumstance of evaluation shift.

(35) Johnny is short, although he's tall for an eight-year-old boy.

As we have seen, this is a source of serious problems. By contrast, contextualists can relativise the interpretation of the adjective *short* to a point of view which is local, and which does not necessarily extend to the rest of the sentence.

It is important to note, however, that local context-dependence is not always a virtue. As the examples (16–17) of Sect. 3 show, locality raises problems for knowledge ascriptions. This brings me to a more general methodological point. If it is in fact correct that some linguistic elements exhibit local contextual dependence, while some others depend on a global point of view, then contextualism and CER are not competitors. What the discussion in previous sections has shown, however, is that CER is not applicable to every case, and that—in the absence of independent objections—such cases call for a contextualist approach.

Of course, contextualism—even with a limited application—incur the cost of going against semantic orthodoxy. It would be unfair to claim that the arguments presented above against CER constitute a final blow to the orthodox view of semantics. With respect to sentences with gradable adjectives like *tall*, scholars craving for orthodoxy can operate a retreat towards indexicalism. There are two ways to combine a conservative view of semantics with the claim that the LF of *tall* is something like *tall(s,c)*—where *s*, *c* are variables that are phonologically silent, and that correspond, respectively, to a contextually determined standard of comparison and to a contextually determined class of comparison. One is to conceive of *s* and *c* as indexicals, and to enrich Kaplanian, semantic contexts with the parameters *standard of comparison* and *class of comparison*. However, one would have to provide justifications for such ad hoc inflation of the *semantic* context. The second option is to treat *s* and *c* as free variables, whose value is assigned at a pre-semantic stage, before the interpretation takes place.² Here, the supporters of orthodoxy would have to explain why they are ready to grant pre-semantic existence to processes to which they deny any role in the course of truth-conditional interpretation.

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² Many thanks to Isidora Stojanovic for pressing me on that point.

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