

Some Solutions to the Perspectival Plurality Problem for Relativism

In recent literature (Kneer (2015); Kneer, Vicente and Zeman (2017); Zeman (2017)), the less discussed¹ phenomenon of *perspectival plurality* has been shown to pose a serious problem for at least some versions of relativism about predicates of taste (the view that postulates a parameter for perspectives in the circumstances of evaluation with respect to which utterances of sentences are evaluated). Perspectival plurality is the phenomenon whereby sentences containing two or more predicates of taste have to be interpreted by appeal to two or more perspectives. The problem for (certain versions of) relativism stems from this phenomenon getting in tension with a core commitment of such versions, namely that “[i]n a relativist theory, in order to assess a sentence for truth or falsity, one must adopt a stance – that is, truth assessment is always done from *a* particular perspective” (Lasersohn, 2008: 326). In this presentation I want to further the debate by i) showing that the phenomenon applies to a wider range of expressions than predicates of taste and ii) investigating and criticizing a number of possible relativist proposals to account for perspectival plurality.

In the works mentioned, perspectival plurality is illustrated with respect to predicates of taste, which is a good place to start. Thus, consider the following scenario: Halloween has just passed, and the neighbors discuss about how their kids spend the holiday. Parents take turns, and when Johnny’s father’s turn comes, he utters

(1) Johnny played a **silly** prank and had a lot of **tasty** licorice.

In such a context, the most salient interpretation of (1) is that the prank was silly from the father’s perspective, while the licorice was tasty from Johnny’s perspective. If so, two perspectives are needed for the interpretation of the sentence: predicates of personal taste exhibit perspectival plurality.²

Perspectival plurality is present with other perspectival expressions too. Consider (2), which contains aesthetic predicates:

(2) Johnny drew a **nice** portrait of the teacher in the play time and saw an **exquisite** painting in the main exhibition.

In a context in which what is discussed is a school trip to the art museum, the most salient interpretation of (2) as uttered by Johnny’s mother (a sophisticated art lover) is that the painting was exquisite from her perspective, while the portrait was nice from Johnny’s perspective.

Moral terms follow suit. Consider

(3) Jeremy **ought to** lie, but Immanuel **ought not to** lie,

and imagine it uttered by a philosophy student who answers a question in an ethics exam regarding the moral profile of lying in a certain scenario according to various moral views. The most salient interpretation of (3) is that Jeremy ought to lie from a Benthamian perspective, while Immanuel ought not to lie from a Kantian perspective.

¹ Previous engagement with the phenomenon is limited to a few works: Lasersohn (2008), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) and Kissine (2012). Their examples, however, are different from those used by Kneer (2015), Kneer, Vicente and Zeman (2017) and Zeman (2017), the latter showing that the phenomenon appears in the absence of expressions that “shift” perspectives (e.g. “for Johnny”).

² Examples are obviously not limited to conjunctions or other sentences containing logical connectives. “Johnny had a funny-looking, tasty dish” has an interpretation according to which the dish was funny-looking from the speaker’s perspective and tasty from Johnny’s perspective (or the other way around).

Perspectival plurality also holds for gradable adjectives:

(4) Dumbo is **small**, but Iñaki is **big**.

In a context in which the speaker summarizes a situation in a children book about animals in which Dumbo is pictured as the smallest elephant and Iñaki as the biggest ant, the most salient interpretation of (4) is that Dumbo is small for an elephant, while Iñaki is big for an ant.

Finally, take epistemic modals. Imagine the speaker playing Mastermind with two people simultaneously, and commenting on the epistemic possibilities within the reach of each player. In such a context, the most salient interpretation of

(5) There **might** be a green piece, and there **might** be a red piece too

is that there might be a green piece from the perspective of the first player, while there might be a red piece from the perspective of the second payer. I take these examples to show that predicates of taste, aesthetic adjectives, moral terms, gradable adjectives and epistemic modals, respectively, exhibit perspectival plurality.³ And given the core commitment of relativism exposed above, this phenomenon is troublesome for relativism about all these expressions.⁴

Several possible solutions can be envisaged on behalf of the relativist. One solution (pursued with a different purpose by MacFarlane (2014) in connection to predicates of taste) is to draw a semantic wedge between *egocentric* (from one's own perspective) and *exocentric* (from somebody else's perspective) uses of the expressions in question and thus provide different semantics accounts for them. Thus, MacFarlane claims that when used exocentrically predicates of taste harbor a variable for perspectives in their logical configuration (as most contextualist views would have it), but when used egocentrically such a variable is missing. This would help with perspectival plurality because sentences like (1) are combinations of egocentric and exocentric uses, and thus the only relativization that is not explicit at the level of logical form is that of egocentric uses, thus canceling the need to appeal to different perspectives when evaluating the respective sentence for truth. Such a distinction can perhaps be generalized to all or most of the expressions involved. However, MacFarlane offers little independent motivation for the distinction, and adopting it would mean that the expressions at stake are ambiguous between one-place predicates (when used egocentrically) and two-place predicates (when used exocentrically). A unitary semantic theory is preferable on methodological grounds, while appeal to ambiguity should be made only as a last resort.

³ Obviously, what a perspective comes down to in each case is different: a standard of taste, an aesthetic standard, a moral standard, a compassion class, a body of knowledge, respectively. From a formal point of view, however, these differences don't matter.

⁴ The phenomenon is, in fact, much more pervasive than the examples above show. First, in connection to the very expressions mentioned, perspectival plurality is present in quantified sentences as well as in sentences embedded under attitude verbs. As an example of the former, consider the sentence

Every kid played a silly **prank** and had a lot of **tasty** licorice,

uttered in the context devised for the interpretation of (1) made vivid above, as a means to summarize the parents' discussion. (A structurally similar sentence is discussed in Lasersohn (2008), but his aim is to show that the interpretation highlighted here doesn't exist.) As an example of the latter, consider the following example involving aesthetic predicates from Sæbø (2009, 337):

The mother snipe thinks the **ugliest** baby birds are **beautiful**,

in which the intended interpretation is that the snipe baby birds are beautiful from the mother snipe's perspective but the ugliest from the speaker's perspective. Neither quantified sentences nor embedded ones are tackled here, but a complete account of the expressions in question should obviously take them into consideration.

Second, the range of expressions that exhibit perspectival plurality might be larger than those focused on here. For example, temporal and location expressions, first person pronouns or even common nouns can be said to be perspectival, in a broader sense of the term. I ignore such expressions here, but see Zeman (2017) for discussion.

A second relativist strategy is to paraphrase the problematic examples as logical conjunctions of simpler sentences, with each of them containing one relevant predicate only (this is the approach put forward in Kneer, Vicente and Zeman (2017)). Thus, according to this view, (1) will be paraphrased as

(1') [Johnny played a **silly** prank] & [Johnny had a lot of **tasty** licorice].

This would help with perspectival plurality because each such simple sentence could, in principle, be evaluated with respect to a different perspective: while the first conjunct of (1') will be evaluated with respect to the father's perspective (the speaker), the second conjunct will be evaluated with respect to Johnny's perspective, thus yielding the relevant reading. The view remains relativistic in that a parameter for perspectives is still postulated in the circumstances of evaluation for simple sentences.

This solution holds promise, but it is also problematic in several respects. First, it is not clear that all sentences are paraphrasable as conjunctions of simple sentences: complex sentences involving comparatives, predicates in subject position ("Interesting books are fun"), two predicates in predicative position ("The dog food is astonishingly tasty") etc. might not lend themselves easily to paraphrases, or at least do so while incurring semantic commitments that are not trivial (see though Kneer, Vicente and Zeman (2017) for detailed discussion). Second, the view might not happily align with the predictions of most contemporary syntactic theories: it is doubtful that the syntactic representation of (1) involves breaking it down into two separate sentences connected by "and". As a reply to this latter objection, one could claim that the paraphrasing is done for purposes of truth-evaluation only and thus correspondence with syntax is not a desideratum. Even so, however, this comes close the postulation of an independent level of representation of a sentence (significant only for truth-evaluation); but postulating an additional level of representation is a substantial burden, which should be supported on independent grounds.

A third relativist solution is to postulate not one parameter for perspectives in the circumstances of evaluation, but a *sequence* of them, with each parameter indexed to each occurrence of the relevant expression (this is the idea pursued in Zeman (2017)). As the strategy investigated before, this strategy helps with perspectival plurality because it allows that, in principle, each occurrence of the relevant expression can be evaluated with respect to a different perspective. To illustrate, in this framework the abstract truth-conditions of (1) are given by

(1'') [[Johnny played a silly¹ prank and had a lot of tasty² licorice]]^{c, w, <p¹, p²>} = 1 iff Johnny played a silly prank in *w* according to the value of p_1 and had a lot of tasty licorice in *w* according to the value of p_2 ,

where p_1 and p_2 are the two parameters for perspectives in the sequence introduced, the superscripts on the two predicates of taste represents the order in which they appear and the co-indexing of the parameters with those superscripts signifies that they correspond to the predicates superscripted (p_n corresponds to Φ^n , where Φ is a predicate). Once values are given to p_1 and p_2 , we obtain actual readings of (1) – the plural reading made salient in the context of (1) presented above, but also singular readings in which all the relevant predicates are evaluated with respect to *the same perspective* (the difference simply stems from giving different values to the perspectives in the sequence).

While I think this solution is the most promising one, there are challenges to be addressed. First, introducing a sequence of perspectives (an instance of "multiple indexing") is highly unorthodox, so an independent motivation for this departure from orthodoxy has to be given. Second, we need to get clear on how to understand several key notions used in semantics if we postulate sequences of perspectives: what notion of context we end up employing and what does semantic content (the things we assert, believe and report) come down to etc.

From a more general perspective, besides accounting for examples like the ones presented above, working out the details and responding to the particular objections each view faces, the challenge posed by perspectival plurality to semantic theories of the expressions in question has also to do with finding empirically adequate and principled constraints on the interpretations of such sentences, as well as a discussion of the appropriate notion of context that underlies the solutions given. All these are issues to be pursued in future work.

References:

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