

# Relativism, Metasemantics, and the Future

Derek Ball  
University of St Andrews  
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## 1 New Age Relativism

Two relativist claims:

1. Propositional truth is not a monadic property or even a dyadic relation to worlds; rather, it is a relation to worlds and some other parameters.
2. An assertion or belief can be accurate as assessed in one context and inaccurate as assessed in another, so that (for example) we should retract earlier assertions if the proposition expressed is false as assessed in our present context (even if it was true as assessed from the original context of assertion).

allowing accuracy to be assessment-sensitive has definite consequences for the predictions we make about when speakers will take themselves to be warranted in making assertions, when they will feel normative pressure to retract earlier assertions, and when they will take themselves to be in disagreement. Understood in this way, relativism about a particular domain of thought and talk is not a metaphysical thesis but a testable, empirical hypothesis — at least to the extent that any semantic theories are testable. (MacFarlane 2011, p. 444)

**Descriptive Semantics** Goal: assign semantic values to expressions.

**Metasemantics** Goal: give an account of how expressions get the semantic values they have.

*My claim:* we can give a plausible and independently motivated metasemantic account of the relativist data. The account turns on the claim that our future retractions or reaffirmations can affect the content of our current assertions.

## 2 The Relativist Data

- (1) **Bob:** Donna might be delivering Meals on Wheels.  
**Mike:** No, you're wrong, she can't be. I just saw her at the diner.  
**Bob:** Oh, okay. What I said before was false.

## 3 The Anti-Relativist Data

- (2) **Bob:** Donna might be delivering Meals on Wheels.  
**Mike:** No, you're wrong, she can't be. I just saw her at the diner.  
**Bob:** I didn't say that she *was* delivering Meals on Wheels, only that she *might be*, and I was right: she might have been. Sheesh.

**Crucial data point:** The most natural construal of the cases is one on which *either* response is permissible. Bob need not decide whether to retract or to stick to his guns until after he is corrected.

### 3.1 Von Fintel and Gillies's Account

**Assert** Suppose an utterance of *might*(B) ( $\phi$ ) by S puts in play the propositions  $P_1, P_2, \dots$ . Then S must have been in a position to flat out assert one of the  $P_i$ 's.

**Confirm/Deny** Suppose an utterance of *might*(B) ( $\phi$ ) by S puts in play the propositions  $P_1, P_2, \dots$ . Then a hearer H can confirm (deny) the [utterance] if the strongest  $P_i$  that H reasonably has an opinion about is such that H thinks it is true (false). (Von Fintel and Gillies 2011, pp. 120-1)

Problem Case:

- (3) **Bob:** Donna might be delivering Meals on Wheels.  
**Mike:** No, you're wrong, she can't be. I just saw her at the diner.  
**Bob:** I didn't say that she *was* delivering Meals on Wheels, only that she *might be*, and I was right: she might have been. Sheesh.  
**Mike:** Still, you were wrong, she can't be.

Von Fintel and Gillies can't explain why Mike's last utterance is problematic.

## 4 Richard's Relativism

- (4) **Tim:** Didi is rich. She took me out to a really fancy restaurant.  
**Ralf:** Didi is not rich. She can't afford a penthouse on Park Avenue.

What is at issue: "how to shape the boundaries of a concept" (Richard 2008, p. 118).

Richard's view:

1. Accommodation and negotiation are a matter of trying to find a common standard at which to evaluate relatively true propositions.
2. Accommodation and negotiation are a matter of shaping our concepts.

Examples of (2): open texture cases:

Consider the use of the term "heavier than" by pre-Newtonians. Did it stand for the relation of having greater mass than, or for the relation of having greater weight than? In pre-Newtonian physics there was no distinction between the weight of an object and its mass; and since the term "heavier than" was applied almost exclusively in the context of objects at the surface of the earth where there is a near-perfect correlation between mass and weight, there is little in the pre-Newtonian use of the term that could have settled the matter. (Field 2000, p. 278)

Richard's account of accommodation and negotiation turns on postulating non-standard semantic values for expressions like "rich". Negotiation, as Richard describes it, is a matter of shaping our concepts: that is, determining the semantic value of a term or concept. It thus seems like a *metasemantic* phenomenon.

## 5 Temporal Externalism

[According to Solon, in order to be happy or blessed] there is required not only complete virtue but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances no one calls happy [...] we must see the end and only then call a man blessed, not as being blessed but as having been so before (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.9-10).

- Say that a property  $p$  is *Solonic* if and only if whether an object has  $p$  at a time  $t$  depends in part on what happens after  $t$ .
- *Temporal externalists* claim that semantic properties are Solonic. This can be cast as a supervenience claim (at least if determinism is false).
- Possible case: Kaplan's Newman-1.

### 5.1 Burge's Externalist Cases

- Our intentions and dispositions to respond to correction are often complex and sometimes confused. In many cases, it is permissible either to defer or to stick to one's guns; whichever response one makes will be right.
- Moreover, deference is not blind, but can be a subject for debate (I might take myself to be an expert.)
- As long as we keep negotiating, we will seem to ourselves genuinely to disagree. If we stop negotiating without accommodating, we will seem to ourselves to have been talking past each other all along.
- Result: Burge's cases are structurally just like MacFarlane's and Richard's.

## 6 Assertion for Temporal Externalists

Analogy: Stalnaker's "That is either Zsa Zsa Gabor or Elizabeth Anscombe." Stalnaker's account: diagonalization. (There are also other possibilities.)

The temporal externalist should not accept that the diagonal is what is asserted. But she can help herself to the idea that the assertion adds the diagonal to the context, and this is enough to let the conversation proceed.

### 6.1 The Knowledge Norm

- Objection: TE is incompatible with the knowledge norm.
- Reply: Consider the whole conversation. When we retract, we make it the case that the proposition we asserted was one that we did not know. But we also retract the assertion: an appropriate response, given that the norm was violated. And similarly, when we stick to our guns we make the case the proposition we asserted is one that we did know. Here there is no violation of the norm, so the re-assertion is appropriate. (Analogy: making a promise that you can keep, but might not keep.)

## 7 Eavesdroppers

- The relativist predicts that any eavesdropper can evaluate a given proposition at her own context; if she knows more than the speaker, then the relativist claims that it is perfectly in order for her to deny an epistemic “might” claim.
- But if an eavesdropper inserts herself into the conversation, other participants are free to stick to their guns. If I stick to my guns, then I have made it the case that the stranger’s knowledge is irrelevant to my original utterance, and hence that the stranger is talking past me.
- So the relativist’s prediction that eavesdroppers can always successfully deny overheard epistemically modalized utterances is incorrect. Until the content of an epistemically modalized utterance is made precise, we should maintain that it is indeterminate whether the eavesdropper’s denial is appropriate.

## 8 Summary

The data points (regarding epistemic modals):

1. In the MacFarlane retraction case, the modal base is the same in the original utterance, the correction, and the retraction.
2. In the von Fintel/Gillies case, the modal base differs between the original utterance and the correction.
3. The speaker need not have any determinate or univocal intentions or dispositions at the time of utterance as to whose knowledge is relevant to determining the modal base, and in particular as to whether (or in response to whom) she will retract or stick to her guns.

If we insist that the modal base must be determined by the intentions of the speaker *at the time of utterance*, these three facts cannot all be accommodated. But if we are temporal externalists, then the three can be accommodated without difficulty, since the speaker’s intentions *at the time of correction* can be relevant to determining the modal base *of the original utterance*. If the speaker accepts the correction, this *makes it the case* that the modal base of her original utterance includes only worlds compatible with what the corrector knows at the time of correction. If, on the other hand, the speaker sticks to her guns, this makes it the case that the corrector’s knowledge is irrelevant to the modal base. In either case, the speaker’s response is rational and correct.