

CDD: 410

CONTEXTUALISM, DISAGREEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

MARTIN MONTMINY

*University of Oklahoma
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Philosophy
455, W. Lindsey, Room 605
Norman, OK 73019-2006*

montminy@ou.edu

Abstract: Contextualism about vagueness holds that the content of vague predicates is context sensitive. I contrast this view with a similar view called *nonindexical contextualism*, and explain why my brand of contextualism should be preferred to it. I then defend contextualism against three objections that have been recently raised against it. I show that these objections are actually more damaging to rival views than to contextualism itself.

Keywords: Contextualism. Vagueness. Communication. Semantic license.

CONTEXTUALISMO, DESACORDO E COMUNICAÇÃO

Resumo: Quanto ao fenômeno da vagueza, o contextualismo defende a tese de que o conteúdo dos predicados vagos é sensível ao contexto. Contrasto essa visão com uma visão similar chamada *contextualismo não-indexical*, e explico por que minha versão dever ser preferida à outra. Depois, eu defendo o contextualismo contra três objeções que foram apresentadas recentemente contra ele. Argumento que essas objeções valem muito mais, na verdade, não contra o contextualismo, e sim contra as visões rivais.

Palavras chave: Contextualismo. Vagueza. Comunicação. Licença semântica.

According to contextualist accounts of vagueness, speakers are semantically licensed to judge the borderline cases of a vague predicate as they wish. In this paper, I will defend a version of contextualism against three objections. According to the first objection, contextualism fails to respect the intuition of disagreement we have concerning speakers who judge a borderline case of a vague predicate differently. The second objection holds that contextualism cannot provide us with a satisfactory account of vagueness, for vagueness is not eliminated in context. The third objection holds that by allowing the content of vague predicates to be context sensitive, contextualism makes communication impossible. I will show that far from undermining contextualism, considerations about the issues raised by these three objections actually support it. But before I look at the objections, I will devote the first three sections to clarifying the contextualist approach and its variants.

1. CONTEXTUALISM

Contextualist approaches to vagueness¹ hold that speakers have the discretion to judge borderline cases as they wish. If Lauren is a borderline case of someone in her early thirties, then one can correctly assert or correctly deny, 'Lauren is in her early thirties.' Let us call this thesis *semantic license*. According to semantic license, when object *a* is a borderline case of the vague predicate '*F*,' speakers are free to assert (truly and literally) '*Fa*' and free to assert (truly and literally) 'not-*Fa*,' without contravening the meaning of '*F*.' Hence, when *a* is a borderline case of '*F*,' the truth-value of a literal utterance of '*Fa*' varies from context to context. According to semantic license, the *sentence* '*Fa*' is not truth-evaluable when *a* is in

¹ See, among others, Raffman (1994), Shapiro (2006) and Soames (1999).

the penumbra of '*F*'; however, literal utterances of '*Fa*' are truth-evaluable, and their truth-values vary from context to context.

Contextualism should be contrasted with *invariantism*, a view that rejects semantic license. According to invariantism, if the meaning of '*F*,' together with the facts about *a*, entails that the sentence '*Fa*' is neither true nor false, then '*Fa*' cannot be correctly asserted or denied; in other words, particular (literal) utterances of '*Fa*' are neither true nor false.²

There are (at least) two ways to elaborate on semantic license. According to *indexical contextualism*, vague predicates are akin to indexicals such as 'I,' 'now' and 'that': when *a* is a borderline case of '*F*,' the truth-value of the sentence '*Fa*' is unsettled in the same way the truth-value of a sentence containing an indexical is; and like utterances of sentences containing indexicals, literal utterances of '*Fa*' may have determinate truth-values. This is because the *content* of '*F*' varies from one context to another, and may differ from the conventional, or standing, meaning of '*F*.'³ However, on this view, vague predicates are not exactly like indexicals. One crucial difference is that the meaning of a vague predicate '*F*' determines partial truth conditions for '*Fa*': there are many objects to which a vague predicate '*F*' applies, and many objects to which '*F*' fails to apply, regardless of the context. Therefore, sentences of the form '*Fa*,' unlike sentences

² Most traditional theories of vagueness, including standard three-value semantics and standard supervaluationist theories, are invariantist.

³ We may call this the *surprise indexical view*. See, for example, Soames (2002, 445-446) for a defense. Alternatively, the context sensitivity of '*Fa*' could be traced to the presence of a structural position in logical form that is occupied by a hidden indexical, or covert variable. On the *hidden indexical view*, the logical form of '*Fa*' would be something like '*a* is *F* relative to standards *S*.' For convenience, I will equate indexical contextualism to the surprise indexical view, but indexical contextualism should be understood as neutral between the surprise indexical view and the hidden indexical view.

containing indexicals, have context-independent truth conditions; however, because of the vagueness of ‘*F*,’ these truth conditions are partial, in the sense that they do not cover all possible cases. With respect to the cases that are not anticipated by the meaning of ‘*F*,’ the sentence ‘*Fa*,’ just like a sentence containing an indexical, is not truth-evaluable independently of a context.

There is another contextualist account that does not associate vagueness with indexicality. According to *nonindexical contextualism*,⁴ different utterances of ‘*Fa*’ express the same content, which matches the conventional meaning of ‘*Fa*.’ However, an utterance of ‘*Fa*’ may be assessed as true or false depending on the standards in place in the context of utterance. Unlike indexical contextualism, this view holds that every literal utterance of a vague sentence expresses the same proposition; but this proposition may be true relative to the standards in place in some conversational contexts, and false relative to the standards that are operative in others.⁵

In my view, indexical contextualism offers a more promising account than nonindexical contextualism. When appropriate, I will explain the differences in the ways these two views account for the phenomena I will be concerned with and show why nonindexical contextualism is unsatisfactory.

⁴ See Åkerman and Greenough (2009) for a defense of this view. Åkerman and Greenough argue that Fara (2000) is best interpreted as arguing for nonindexical contextualism. See also MacFarlane (2009) for a general presentation of nonindexical contextualism that does not concern vagueness as such.

⁵ Another option is *relativism*. Like nonindexical contextualism, relativism holds that different utterances of ‘*Fa*’ express the same proposition; however, it holds that an utterance of ‘*Fa*’ should be assessed as true or false depending on the standards in place in the context of *assessment* rather than the context of utterance. See, for instance, MacFarlane (2005) for a general presentation of this view. For reasons of space, I will not discuss relativism here.

2. SEMANTIC LICENSE

One of the main motivations for semantic license is that there is no such thing as a clear penumbral case of a vague predicate; that is, borderline cases are unlikely to be viewed as such by most speakers. Consider, for example, the predicate ‘almost full.’ No one disputes that a glass that is 98% full is almost full, and no one denies that a glass that is 65% full is not almost full. However, no similar consensus can be achieved regarding the judgment that an 85% full glass is almost full: many would accept this judgment, many would reject it, and many would give a “hedging response” (‘I do not know’; ‘It’s unclear’; etc.). Ordinary speakers recognize that the predicate ‘almost full’ has a penumbra, but there is no general agreement about the location of this penumbra. Because the penumbras identified by different speakers do not overlap, borderline cases are bound to elicit a variety of responses from different speakers.⁶

This means that the penumbra of a vague predicate should *not* be characterized as the set of cases that are generally recognized as such by ordinary speakers. If we were to do so, then no or few vague predicates might turn out to have penumbras. A far more plausible criterion holds that an item *a* is a borderline case of ‘*F*’ just in case informed and competent speakers tend to judge utterances of ‘*Fa*’ differently. But this suggests that, pace the invariantist, it is

⁶ An informal, non-scientific survey I conducted with native English speakers (7 colleagues and 15 students) confirms this. Respondents were asked to judge “borderline” statements such as ‘Skis are a vehicle,’ ‘Darts is a sport’ and ‘One grain on top of three other grains makes a pile.’ For each statement, both ‘true’ and ‘false’ answers were strongly represented, and very few gave hedging responses. These results concur with what cognitive psychologists who study artifact categorization have observed in more rigorous experimental settings. See Malt and Sloman (2007) for a review of the literature.

wrong to hold that borderline cases should be judged as neither true nor false. In other words, borderline cases should not be regarded as being governed by a norm such as ‘If *a* is a borderline case of “*F*,” then one cannot truly assert either “*Fa*” or “not-*Fa*.”’⁷ One problem with invariantism is thus that it involves an *error theory*: on this view, many speakers’ judgments about borderline cases are incorrect. It is a platitude that a speaker who (sincerely) asserts ‘*Fa*’ holds ‘*Fa*’ true, even if *a* is a borderline case of ‘*F*.’ If we accept this platitude, then invariantism fails to respect the attitude of a speaker who asserts, ‘*Fa*’ (or ‘not-*Fa*’), when *a* is a borderline case of ‘*F*.’ By giving ordinary speakers the discretion to judge borderline cases as they wish, semantic license clearly offers a more charitable picture.

According to (indexical and nonindexical) contextualism, the extension of ‘*F*’ varies from context to context. Most contextualists hold that various aspects of the conversational context are responsible for fixing the extension of ‘*F*.’ Stewart Shapiro, for instance, writes that extension depends on the “assumptions, presuppositions, and other items implicitly or explicitly agreed to” (2006, p. 12). But a contextualist is not forced to accept this picture. In my view, the standards associated with an utterance of a vague word are fixed by the speaker’s communicative intention. Although my purpose here is not to defend this intentionalist account against its contextualist rivals, my responses to the three objections will make it clear why contextualists ought to be intentionalists.

⁷ Note that this is a norm concerning *true* assertion. The problem also concerns the norms for *proper* assertion. Popular accounts of proper assertion include the knowledge account (‘Assert “*p*” only if you know that *p*’) or the truth account (‘Assert “*p*” only if “*p*” is true’). Endorsing either account would obviously be problematic for the invariantist. Invariantism respects a norm of assertion such as ‘Do not assert falsehoods,’ but this norm seems much too weak. Furthermore, it is merely *negative*: it does not specify under what condition it is proper to assert a proposition.

3. JUDGMENT DEPENDENCE

One more clarification before I examine the objections against contextualism. Raffman (1994) and Shapiro (2006) contend that a vague predicate is *response-dependent* in its borderline area. Response-dependence is a metaphysical doctrine about the nature of a property. It holds that to instantiate the property of *Fness* is to be judged by competent and informed speakers as instantiating *Fness*. Response-dependence has been advanced as an account of secondary properties such as redness, and it is sometimes thought to be entailed by semantic license. As Shapiro writes, “Since, by [semantic license], borderline cases can go either way, the judgments of otherwise competent subjects *determine* whether the man is bald in the relevant conversational (or psychological) context” (2006, 40).⁸ Hence, for any borderline bald man, we have the following:

- (1) A man is bald in context *C* if and only if a competent and informed speaker judges (or would judge) him to be bald in *C*.

Unfortunately, this line of reasoning confuses a *semantic* thesis about a vague predicate ‘*F*’ with a *metaphysical* thesis about the property of *Fness*. The fact that utterances of ‘*Fa*’ have context-sensitive truth conditions does not entail that an entity’s *Fness* is itself context sensitive. The latter thesis, which is a kind of *property relativism*, does not follow from semantic license. This means that an adequate statement of semantic license should keep straight the use-mention distinction. Hence, instead of (1), we have, for any *S* who is borderline bald:

⁸ See also Raffman (1994, 67-68, 69-70).

- (2) An utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is true in context *C* if and only if this utterance is made by a competent and informed speaker in *C*.⁹

This means that (indexical and nonindexical) contextualism should reject the disquotational schema for utterance truth. It may well be that your utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is true, and my utterance of ‘*S* is not bald’ is also true. Hence, I cannot infer that *S* is bald from the fact that your utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is true. This should not come as a surprise: according to indexical contextualism, the vagueness of ‘bald’ entails that its content may vary from one utterance to another. Hence, just as I should not infer that I am Brazilian from the fact that your utterance of ‘I am Brazilian’ is true, one should not, in general, infer that *Fa* from the fact that a certain utterance of ‘*Fa*’ is true.

Nonindexical contextualists regard things slightly differently. On their view too, both your utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ and my utterance of ‘*S* is not bald’ may be true. This is because even though you and I attach the same content to ‘bald,’ our standards for what counts as being bald are not the same. Furthermore, according to nonindexical contextualism, I should not infer (the proposition) that *S* is bald from the fact that your utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is true: the proposition that *S* is bald is assessed according to the standards in place in *my* context, whereas your utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is assessed according to the standards that prevail in *your* context. Unfortunately, this spells trouble for nonindexical contextualism. This view would commit me to the following conjunction: *S* is not bald, but you spoke truly when you said, ‘*S* is bald’ (in other words, your utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is true). This consequence strikes me as

⁹ Note that for the intentionalist, the locution ‘in context *C*’ is unnecessary in (2): an utterance of ‘*S* is bald’ is true if and only if this utterance is made by a competent and informed speaker.

highly implausible.¹⁰ It is now time to examine the first objection against contextualism.

4. THE INTUITION OF DISAGREEMENT

Suppose object *a* is in the penumbra of the vague predicate '*F*,' and Lindsay asserts, '*Fa*,' whereas Britney asserts, '*not-Fa*.' If they are made aware of each other's assertions, Lindsay and Britney may each form the impression that they are disagreeing, and that the other is speaking falsely. But according to indexical contextualism, this is not the case: their dispute is merely verbal, for they mean different things by '*F*,' and both speakers are speaking truly.¹¹

It is important to note that indexical contextualism is not committed to this position if '*F*' is what we may call a *theoretically challenging* predicate. Semantic license does not entail that competent speakers are infallible in their use of every vague predicate in every circumstance. Many predicates are such that ordinary speakers tend to be ignorant or mistaken about what underlying facts are relevant to their application. This is plausibly the case with respect to natural kind terms: one should not expect ordinary speakers in general to be knowledgeable about their necessary and sufficient conditions of application. It is also arguable that many people's judgments involving other theoretically challenging predicates such as 'is (morally) good,' 'is a person,' 'can think' and 'is a democracy,' are susceptible to similar mistakes. Ordinary speakers may be informed about all the morally relevant facts with respect to a particular action, and yet incorrectly judge whether the action is morally permissible or not. Semantic license is

¹⁰ MacFarlane (2009) also mentions this type of consequence, but claims not to be impressed by its implausibility.

¹¹ See, for instance, Keefe (2003, 78), Sorensen (2008, 478) and Wright (2001, 51).

not meant to make such judgments correct.¹² Indexical contextualism is thus committed to holding that Lindsay and Britney are talking past each other *only if* '*F*' is a *mundane* predicate such as 'heap,' and Lindsay and Britney both have access to all the relevant underlying facts about *a*, such as how many items *a* contains, how such items are put together, etc.¹³

Before I discuss the indexical contextualist's response to this objection, I would like to consider briefly the nonindexical contextualist treatment of such cases. It is tempting to think that this treatment is more plausible. First, it holds that Lindsay and Britney do disagree, since Britney denies the proposition Lindsay accepts. Second, it holds that both Lindsay and Britney are speaking truly, since each speaker's assertion is evaluated according to the standards she associates with '*F*.' Nonindexical contextualism could thus be thought to combine the advantages of invariantism and indexical contextualism without their disadvantages. Like invariantism, it respects our intuition that Lindsay and Britney are disagreeing, and like indexical contextualism, it respects these two speakers' simple judgments involving the mundane predicate '*F*.'

¹² The same goes for judgments involving predicates that are too complex for ordinary speakers to apply, or to employ in reasoning, for example, the predicate obtained by iterating 'mother of' a thousand times, or "paradoxical" predicates such as 'bald barber who shaves all and only those who do not shave themselves.' See Sorensen (2003, 32-33).

¹³ According to anti-intentionalist indexical contextualists, if Britney and Lindsay are in the same conversational context, then only one of them speaks truly, since the content of '*F*' is fixed by that context, and thus has to be the same for both Britney's and Lindsay's assertions. According to intentionalist indexical contextualists, on the other hand, Britney and Lindsay may both speak truly even when they are talking to each other. Contextualists, it seems to me, should prefer the intentionalist approach, which treats uniformly cases of *intra*- and *inter*-contextual penumbral disagreement.

However, these advantages are illusory. Nonindexical contextualism entails that the correct description of the situation is as follows: Britney's utterance of 'not-*Fa*' contradicts Lindsay's utterance of '*Fa*,' but both utterances are true. In other words, if asked to best characterize their dispute, Lindsay or Britney should say, 'Her claim and mine contradict each other, but we both speak truly.' I seriously doubt that Lindsay or Britney would be inclined to accept such a characterization. Nonindexical contextualism thus has seriously counterintuitive consequences.¹⁴

Let us go back to the error that indexical contextualism is thought to entail. There are really two errors that should be distinguished. First, indexical contextualism entails that the judgment, formed by Lindsay and Britney, that the other is speaking falsely, is incorrect. Second, indexical contextualism entails that Lindsay and Britney incorrectly think that they are disagreeing. Let me start with the first error. The first thing to note about this error, is that invariantism and nonindexical contextualism also entail it. According to invariantism, both Lindsay's and Britney's utterances are neither true nor false, and according to nonindexical contextualism, both utterances are true. The two views thus entail that neither utterance can be correctly judged to be false. All three views, however, can offer plausible explanations of this error. I will confine myself to the indexical contextualist explanation. The predicate 'is true (false)' is theoretically challenging, and for this reason, we should not expect competent speakers to apply it correctly in *every* instance. First, Lindsay's competence with respect to the vague predicate '*F*' does not guarantee that she knows where this predicate's penumbra is located. Empirical investigation is required for that: Lindsay would need to find out what items would

¹⁴ This problem is, of course, closely related to the problem mentioned at the end of the previous section.

be judged differently by informed and competent speakers. Second, Lindsay's linguistic competence does not entail that she knows how underlying facts about the use of '*F*' determine this predicate's truthful applications; theoretical reflection is needed for that. Lindsay should thus not be expected to realize that 'not-*Fa*' is just as truly assertible as '*Fa*.'

Let us now consider the second error that indexical contextualism is assumed to entail, namely that Lindsay and Britney incorrectly think that they are disagreeing. Invariantism and nonindexical contextualism do not entail this error. But it is worth noting that there is a sense in which indexical contextualism can hold that Lindsay and Britney are disagreeing. Lindsay and Britney both take the conventional meaning of '*F*' and the facts about *a* to entail a particular verdict about the sentence '*Fa*,' and disagree about what that verdict is. In other words, Lindsay and Britney have a *meta-linguistic disagreement*: they disagree about whether the sentence '*Fa*' is true. As it turns out, they are both wrong, for meaning, together with the facts about *a*, does not determine a truth-value for the sentence '*Fa*.' This account of the disagreement between Lindsay and Britney matches what the invariantist would say. The invariantist would of course insist that there is more to the story: contrary to what indexical contextualism holds, Lindsay's and Britney's assertions contradict one another.

But do they really? Suppose Lindsay asserts, 'A glass that is 85% full is almost full,' while Britney asserts, 'A glass that is 85% full is not almost full.' Should we say that Britney's denial contradicts Lindsay's assertion? It seems more plausible to hold that they endorse different standards for what counts as 'almost full,' and thus do not mean (exactly) the same by that expression. Hence, as Lindsay and Britney themselves may well realize after some discussion, the content of Lindsay's assertion does not contradict the

content of Britney's denial.¹⁵ Invariantism, on the other hand, holds that Lindsay and Britney attach the same content to 'almost full.' This seems wrong.¹⁶ Let us consider another example. Lindsay says, 'That's a heap,' whereas Britney asserts, about the same arrangement of grains, 'That's not a heap.' Let us suppose that Lindsay and Britney both have access to all the underlying facts about the arrangement in question: how many grains it contains, how such grains are put together, etc. Given that, it is hard to believe that Lindsay and Britney mean the same thing by 'heap.' A more plausible explanation for their divergent verdicts is that they do not attach the same meaning to 'heap.' Hence, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, the invariantist's treatment of penumbral disagreement is *less* plausible than the contextualist's.

I have shown that far from being a problem for contextualism, cases of penumbral disagreement can be invoked in support of it. First, contextualism can offer a plausible explanation of why the parties to such a disagreement are not in a position to assess each other's statements. Second, contextualism can account for the impression that a genuine disagreement occurs in such cases: the speakers take the conventional meaning of the predicate '*F*' and the facts about the object *a* to entail a particular verdict about the sentence '*Fa*,' and disagree about that verdict. Finally, careful examination of specific cases shows that it is more plausible to hold

¹⁵ Lindsay and Britney may each judge that the other is not making a proper use of 'almost full,' or not using that expression literally; however, as we just saw, the indexical contextualist can explain why this meta-linguistic judgment is mistaken.

¹⁶ Another possibility is to follow the nonindexical contextualist and hold that Lindsay and Britney attach the same content to 'almost full,' but hold different standards for what counts as almost full. Although this view is an improvement over the invariantist's position, it has its own difficulties, as we just saw.

that the content of one speaker's assertion '*Fa*' does *not* contradict the content of the other speaker's denial '*not-Fa*.'

5. CONTEXT DOES NOT ELIMINATE VAGUENESS

A common objection against contextualism is that it cannot provide a complete account of vagueness, since, as Timothy Williamson puts it, "Vagueness remains even when the context is fixed" (1994, 215).¹⁷ Suppose we fix all the contextual features (including the speakers' intentions) the extension of a vague predicate '*F*' is taken to depend on. Such a procedure has not eliminated the vagueness of '*F*,' which can still be said not to have a determinate extension. Therefore, since '*F*' remains vague within a context, vagueness does not amount to context sensitivity.

The problem lies with the *principle of tolerance*, which most contextualists accept. Contextualists, I will argue, should reject this principle. Vague predicates, many have remarked, are tolerant; that is, small differences do not affect their applicability. Most contextualists agree with this commonly held view, and hold that:

- (T) If one judges that object *a* is in the extension (or anti-extension) of predicate '*F*,' then one cannot correctly judge object *a'* differently, if *a'* differs only marginally (in the relevant respects) from *a*.¹⁸

Consider a speaker who is confronted with successive pairs from a sorites series for predicate '*F*,' and asked whether they should

¹⁷ See also Heck (2003, 120) and Keefe (2000, 10). Åkerman and Greenough's (forthcoming) defense of contextualism against this objection differs considerably from the one I offer here.

¹⁸ See Fara (2000, 57), Raffman (1994, 53), Shapiro (2006, 8) and Soames (1999, 209).

be called '*F*.' Clearly, such a speaker will not blindly go through the entire series and call every item '*F*.' Hence, as she proceeds through the penumbra, she will eventually "jump," and call one of the items '*not-F*.' Suppose that our speaker has just agreed to call item #852 '*F*,' and then decides to call #853 '*not-F*.' This jump, many contextualists insist, does not constitute a violation of (T), because a contextual shift has occurred between the two judgments; in other words, the extension of '*F*' is not the same in the utterances 'Item #852 is *F*' and 'Item #853 is *not-F*.'¹⁹

Some contextualists even hold that sharp boundaries are compatible with (T). When the speaker is presented with items #852 and #853 in the series, she must judge that they are both '*F*,' or both '*not-F*' (or both indeterminate). However, in some other context, when the two items are not under consideration, perhaps item #852 is '*F*' and item #853 is '*not-F*,' given the standards that are contextually associated with '*F*.' A sharp boundary can be located between these items, as long as the speaker does not focus on them. Hence, within a given context, there is a sharp boundary, but this boundary shifts with the speaker's attention: when the speaker tries to locate the boundary, tolerance moves it elsewhere.²⁰

This picture faces serious problems, though. The two most important ones, in my view, are raised by Keefe (2007).²¹ Keefe's objections target indexical contextualism, but as I will show, nonindexical contextualism is also vulnerable to them. Keefe argues that tolerance posits contextual shifts where there seem to be none. A speaker can surely approach a sorites series with the intention of keeping constant the interpretation of the relevant vague predicate. Given that she will judge items at one end differently than those at the other end, the speaker will unavoidably be led to judge some

¹⁹ See Raffman (1994, 50), Shapiro (2006, 20-21) and Soames (1999, 213).

²⁰ See Fara (2000, 59) and Soames (1999, 216-217).

²¹ See also Sorensen (1998) for the second objection.

adjacent items differently. The speaker can even say, ‘Item #852 is *F*,’ and, in the same breath, add, ‘but item #853 is not-*F*.’ This, according to (T), is not possible: any attempt to judge two adjacent items differently will result in a contextual shift. The changes in interpretation that such contextual shifts produce are thus beyond the speaker’s control. Such changes are even cognitively inaccessible to her, for she may believe that her predicate had the same interpretation throughout the whole process. The ubiquitous and unruly contextual shifts posited by the indexical contextualist are thus highly problematic.²²

A second problem is that tolerance makes instances of universal generalization fallacious. Consider, for instance, a case of universal generalization in which a speaker reasons from the truth of particular instances (‘If x_1 is bald, then x_1 is vulnerable to sunburn,’ ‘If x_2 is bald, then x_2 is vulnerable to sunburn,’ etc.) to the truth of a general claim ‘Every bald person is vulnerable to sunburn.’ If some of the instances x_i are in the penumbra of ‘bald,’ then the reasoning commits the fallacy of equivocation: each such instance will be evaluated according to a certain interpretation of ‘bald,’ but that interpretation will not be the same for all instances, because of the contextual shifts occurring when borderline cases are under consideration. The speaker is thus not warranted in concluding that there is a particular interpretation of ‘bald’ for which ‘Every bald person is vulnerable to sunburn’ is true. Hence, by positing frequent shifts in interpretation, indexical contextualist approaches that endorse tolerance compromise our reasoning involving vague predicates.²³

²² Admitting unknowable contextual shifts is also inconsistent with intentionalism.

²³ Keefe (2007, 285-286) overstates this problem, though, for she suggests that indexical contextualism entails that *all* instances of universal generalization involving vague predicates are fallacious. This is not the case,

It is worth noting that versions of nonindexical contextualism positing the same kind of ubiquitous contextual shifts are vulnerable to these two objections. The variations in the standards according to which an utterance of ‘*Fa*’ (or the proposition that *Fa*) is to be evaluated will be beyond the control and cognitive access of the speaker, who may well believe that her predicate ‘*F*’ was to be applied by the same standards throughout the whole process of considering a sorites series. Furthermore, this view compromises reasoning involving vague predicates. This is because the nonindexical contextualist must hold that reasoning should keep the standards of evaluation fixed; otherwise, when *a* is a borderline case of ‘*F*’, both ‘*Fa*’ and ‘not-*Fa*’ would be admissible as premises. Hence, if the standards of evaluation shift when various borderline items of ‘*F*’ are under consideration, reasoning involving ‘*F*’ is compromised.

Contextualists should thus reject the principle of tolerance.²⁴ In other words, instead of holding that the meaning of a vague predicate semantically prohibits sharp boundaries,²⁵ contextualists should hold that although such sharp boundaries are not semantically *mandated*, they are semantically *permissible*.

Consider Sainsbury’s (1990) example of the art shop proprietor who labels his tubes of paints for sale. Some of the tubes

for the contextual shifts posited by this view concern only judgments about items in the penumbra.

²⁴ The contextualist picture I will propose in the rest of this section can be adopted by both indexical and nonindexical contextualism. I will thus use the neutral label ‘contextualism’ to designate both views.

²⁵ For some contextualists, the semantic rule associated with tolerance is rather convoluted: perhaps, in context, there is a sharp demarcation between the extension and anti-extension of a vague concept, but one should never judge this demarcation to be located between two marginally different items that one is currently inspecting. I find the idea that a vague predicate is associated with such a specific semantic rule quite perplexing.

are labeled ‘red’ and others ‘orange,’²⁶ but the difference between the orangest paint marked ‘red’ and the reddest paint marked ‘orange’ is barely detectable. As Sainsbury observes, the proprietor behaves consistently with the nature of the concepts of red and orange in drawing a line between these two items. Now, we are seldom forced in everyday life to draw such sharp boundaries. However, Sainsbury’s example illustrates a common, expedient practice among ordinary speakers of precisifying vague predicates when the need arises.²⁷ By holding that the meaning of a vague predicate ‘*F*’ contains no prescription against the explicit drawing of sharp boundaries, we can respect this practice.

One may object that the practice of drawing sharp boundaries involves a *stipulative* use of vague terms.²⁸ The proprietor can draw the line where he did only by making some kind of ad hoc stipulation. The only way to accommodate this, the objection goes, is to hold that the proprietor is using not the vague terms ‘red’ and ‘orange,’ but “homophonic substitutes” for such terms that are stipulated to have sharp boundaries. The proprietor’s boundary-fixing should thus not be regarded as entailing anything about the semantics of ‘red’ and ‘orange.’

But contextualism can respect the intuition that the proprietor’s use of ‘red’ and ‘orange’ is stipulative. The proprietor had no *semantic* reason to draw the line where he did rather than at another location. Therefore, his use of ‘red’ and ‘orange’ is stipulative, in the sense that it is not semantically required, given the facts about the tubes. The sharp boundary drawn by the proprietor thus involves an ad hoc stipulation, since the meanings of ‘red’ and ‘orange’ do not determine such a boundary. It is crucial here to

²⁶ Sainsbury’s example actually involves red and *yellow* tubes.

²⁷ See also Burns (1991, 93), Ludwig and Ray (2002, 432-433) and Quine (1981, 92).

²⁸ See, for instance, Keefe (2000, 142) and Sorensen (2008, 479).

distinguish what is semantically *mandated* from what is semantically *permissible*: the meaning of ‘red’ does not establish a sharp boundary between its extension and anti-extension; however, it allows a speaker to use this predicate in a way that does.

There are thus (at least) two ways to respect the intuition that the proprietor’s boundary-drawing is stipulative, and the difference between them is subtle. One view holds that the meaning of ‘red’ prohibits a sharp boundary between its extension and anti-extension. Therefore, any use of ‘red’ that draws such a boundary must involve a change of meaning (or a non-literal use of ‘red’). According to contextualism, the conventional meaning of ‘red’ permits literal utterances of ‘red’ to draw a sharp boundary between things that fall into its extension and things that do not. On neither account are the standards the proprietor associates with ‘red’ prescribed by the conventional meaning of ‘red’; however, according to contextualism, the proprietor can attach these standards to ‘red’ without violating this conventional meaning, that is, he can do so while speaking literally. Given how subtly different these two accounts are, intuition alone does not favor one over the other. Hence, our inclination to regard the proprietor’s use of ‘red’ and ‘orange’ as stipulative does not count against the contextualist account that rejects tolerance.

I should make it clear that I do not propose to treat *all* cases of stipulated boundaries in the same way. The practitioners of a specialized discipline often find it desirable to stipulate boundaries for the terms they borrow from ordinary language. For legal purposes, the term ‘adult’ may be said to have a sharp demarcation. Geographers may prescribe a particular height for a landscape feature to count as a ‘mountain.’ It is very plausible to regard such stipulations as introducing new meanings for ordinary terms. This view is supported by the fact that stipulations in specialized disciplines often draw the line *outside* of the penumbras of ordinary

terms. For example, in law, the term ‘infant’ designates a minor, or non-adult. A fifteen-year-old individual thus counts as an ‘infant’ in the legal sense, even though such an individual clearly falls into the anti-extension of ‘infant,’ as the word is understood in ordinary language. Furthermore, the stipulations of specialized fields are often recorded as new, separate dictionary entries, thus acknowledging the fact that these introduce new meanings for ordinary words. Hence, pace Keefe (2000, 42) and Sorensen (2008, 480), such stipulations should not be used as a model for what is going on when ordinary speakers arbitrarily stipulate sharp boundaries in everyday contexts.

In this section, I have argued against the principle of tolerance: rejecting this principle allows contextualists to respect ordinary reasoning involving vague predicates and to eschew the ubiquitous and unruly contextual shifts in content posited by contextualists who endorse tolerance. I have also argued that contextualists who reject tolerance can respect the intuition that the practice of drawing sharp boundaries involves a stipulative use of vague terms.²⁹

6. CONTEXTUALISM AND COMMUNICATION

Some critics have argued that by making the content of vague predicates context sensitive, indexical contextualism makes communication impossible.³⁰ If the content of a vague predicate ‘*F*’ is allowed to vary from one utterance to another, as indexical contextualists would have it, then this threatens communication, for

²⁹ I should note that there are *independent* reasons to reject tolerance. As I show in my (manuscript), by rejecting tolerance, contextualism can offer a very plausible treatment of high-order vagueness that avoids the unattractive commitments of invariantism.

³⁰ See Cappelen and Lepore (2005, chap. 8).

even a fully competent hearer may not be in a position to figure out the content of a speaker's utterance of '*F*.'³¹

Contextualists who are impressed by this objection may be tempted to opt for nonindexical contextualism, for on this view, the content of '*F*' does not vary from one utterance to another. But it is a mistake to think that nonindexical contextualism is less affected by the problem of communication than indexical contextualism. To appreciate this point, let us consider analogous views on the question of whether the truth of a proposition can vary with time.

According to *temporalism*, the truth-value of a proposition is relative to time. Different utterances of 'Napoleon is frowning' made at different times express the same proposition, namely the proposition that Napoleon is frowning. This proposition may be true at time t_1 and false at time t_2 . According to *eternalism*, an utterance of 'Napoleon is frowning' made at time t_1 expresses the proposition that Napoleon is frowning at t_1 . On this view, propositions have their truth-values eternally.

Temporalism is a form of nonindexical contextualism:³² the truth-value of a tensed sentence is context sensitive, but this context sensitivity is not due to any kind of indexicality. The same proposition is expressed in different contexts, but this proposition has different truth-values relative to different times of evaluation. According to eternalism, context plays a role in determining what

³¹ For ease of presentation, I am stating this objection as targeting the intentionalist version of indexical contextualism. But it should be clear that the objection does not concern only intentionalism. If the content of a vague utterance is a complex function of contextual features such as the presuppositions, purposes and background beliefs of the conversational participants, as well as saliency effects, then it is unlikely that the hearer will typically be in a position to figure out that content. The problem may be even worse for the anti-intentionalist, since even the speaker may not typically know what content her utterance of a vague predicate expresses.

³² MacFarlane (2009) makes the same point.

proposition is expressed by a given utterance: utterances of a tensed sentence made at different times express different propositions. A tensed sentence is thus taken to be time-indexical.

Now, suppose Jennifer posts a note on her office door saying, 'I will be back in five minutes.' In order to understand the message communicated by the note, one needs to know the time of utterance. Jennifer will be back five minutes after what time? The eternalist would say that successful communication will occur if the reader can figure out what proposition is expressed by the note, since this proposition specifies the time of utterance. But the temporalist cannot say the same thing, since the same proposition is expressed by 'I will be back in five minutes,' regardless of the time at which the note is posted. This means that on the temporalist position, successful communication involves more than successful transmission of content: the time at which the utterance is to be evaluated must also be conveyed. This point should also apply to other forms of nonindexical contextualism: communication requires not only transmission of content but transmission of the parameters that are relevant to evaluation.

Hence, the objection presented at the beginning of the section does not concern only indexical contextualism. If successful communication requires that the hearer know the content of the indexical elements of a speaker's utterance, then it should also require that the hearer know how the speaker's utterance is to be evaluated. In other words, the objection would go, nonindexical contextualists have to admit that successful communication requires that the hearer know by what standards the speaker would evaluate her utterance of the vague predicate '*F*.' If the objection is correct, nonindexical contextualism would jeopardize communication as much as indexical contextualism does.

Let us now examine how indexical contextualists can respond to this objection. A key assumption behind the objection is that

successful communication requires that the hearer know exactly what content is expressed by an utterance of a vague predicate: I cannot successfully communicate with you by using the word ‘bald’ unless you know specifically what content I express by ‘bald.’ This assumption, I will show, is mistaken.

Suppose there are several men in the lounge, and you ask me which one Smith is. I say, ‘Smith is the bald one.’ As a matter of fact, Smith is a borderline case of ‘bald,’ and every other man in the room is unquestionably not bald. However, by my standards *S*, Smith counts as bald, and I thus call him ‘bald.’ The standards *S'* you associate with ‘bald’ are a little different than mine, and you incorrectly assume that my standards are the same as yours. Smith, however, also counts as bald by your standards *S'*. You are thus in a position to tell what my utterance of the definite description ‘the bald one’ denotes, namely Smith, even though you did not grasp the exact content of that utterance. The content I expressed was slightly different than that you took me to express, but this did not preclude communication. Hence, communication does not require a *perfect* match between the hearer’s interpretation and the content expressed by the speaker.³³

Communication involving vague predicates can also succeed when such predicates are not embedded in definite descriptions. I can successfully communicate to you my belief that Smith is bald by saying to you, ‘Smith is bald,’ even though our standards of baldness do not coincide. Communicative success will be achieved if Smith counts as bald relative to both sets of standards. In such a case, the property you take me to attribute to Smith does not match the

³³ Bach (1994, 106-107) and Sperber and Wilson (1995, 192-193) make a similar point. The examples they discuss, however, concern not the interpretation of vague terms, but the different ways in which a speaker and a hearer may complete the content of an incomplete definite description used attributively.

property I attribute to him. However, for all practical purposes, this mismatch is insufficient to disrupt communication.

Note that this point does not apply only to utterances of vague predicates. Consider, for instance, our use of comparative adjectives such as ‘tall,’ ‘cold’ and ‘rich.’ In order to convey a complete proposition in uttering a sentence of the form ‘*S* is rich,’ one must implicitly supply a comparison class relative to which *S* is said to be rich. In everyday conversation, the hearer’s assumption about what comparison class the speaker has in mind may not always be accurate. Suppose I say, ‘Brown is rich.’ You may take me to mean that Brown is rich *for an American philosopher*; however, I mean that Brown is rich *for an American*. This difference in content does not disrupt communication, since Brown is rich relative to both comparison classes. In general, successful communication involving comparative adjectives does not require the hearer to know which specific comparison class the speaker has in mind.

Consider now non-literal utterances. I say, ‘Dinner will be ready in a second.’ I am, of course, not speaking literally. I mean that dinner will be ready in a small amount of time. How much time? Even though you and I will have only very rough amounts of time in mind, it is unlikely that such amounts will coincide: I may think, ‘in less than 3 or 4 minutes, roughly,’ while you may think, ‘in less than 4 or 5 minutes, roughly.’ If this is the case, there is a mismatch between your interpretation and what I meant; however, this mismatch is unlikely to preclude communication.

Implicatures also illustrate the idea that communication does not require a perfect match between what the speaker means and what the hearer takes the speaker to mean. We are talking about how good a basketball player Jones is. I had expectations that she would become an outstanding player. You have seen her play several times lately, and tell me, ‘Well, she won’t be the MVP this year.’ What is the implicature, exactly? I may think that you are

implicating that Jones is an average player, but that may not be exactly what you meant. Perhaps you were suggesting that Jones is barely above average. Once again, such a difference is unlikely to affect communication: I understand that contrary to my expectations, Jones is not a top-tier player.

I should emphasize, though, that similarity between the proposition the hearer takes the speaker to express and the proposition the speaker in fact expresses is not enough to ensure communicative success. The two propositions must have the same truth-value. Suppose that Brown is rich for an American, but not rich for an American philosopher. (Let us assume that the average wealth of the American philosopher is a little above that of the average American.) If I say, 'Brown is rich,' meaning that Brown is rich for an American, and you may take me to mean that Brown is rich for an American philosopher, then communication will fail: the proposition I express correctly represents Brown's wealth, whereas the proposition you take me to express does not. Although there is a small discrepancy between what I mean and what you take me to mean, the latter leads you to form an erroneous belief about Brown. Successful communication thus requires at least two things: similarity of content and preservation of truth-value.

Let us apply these ideas to communication involving vague predicates. Suppose Smith counts as bald relative to my standards, but not relative to yours. I tell you, 'Smith is bald.' If you assume that my standards coincide with yours, then communication will not be achieved: you will take me to attribute to Smith a property that he does not have. And suppose that Smith is the only man in the lounge who counts as bald relative to my standards, and I tell you, 'Smith is the bald man in the lounge.' You may take my utterance of the definite description 'the bald man in the lounge' to

be denotationless, and fail to identify Smith.³⁴ In both of these cases, intuition tells us that communication fails.³⁵ But this is exactly what the proposed contextualist account of communication predicts. By contrast, it is far from clear how invariantists can account for communicative failure in these cases, given that they assume that the

³⁴ Another possibility, perhaps more likely, is that you will in the end identify Smith, since he is the man who comes closest to satisfying your standards of baldness. In this case, communication *initially* fails, since there is no one in the lounge that possesses the property you initially take me to have referred to by ‘bald.’ However, once you identify Smith, you revise your initial interpretation of my utterance and take me to have referred to a more inclusive property by ‘bald.’

³⁵ Similarity of content and preservation of truth-value are not sufficient conditions for communicative success. Suppose that you and I associate different standards with both the predicate ‘bald’ and the predicate ‘wise.’ Now, standards of baldness can plausibly be held to be multidimensional: whether a person counts as bald depends on the number of hairs, their distribution, their length, their thickness, etc. For similar reasons, standards of wisdom are also multidimensional. The multidimensionality of a vague predicate ‘*F*’ allows for the existence of borderline items *a* and *b* such that *a*, but not *b*, counts *F* relative to standards *S*, and *b*, but not *a*, counts *F* relative to standards *S*’. Suppose I tell you, ‘The bald man in the lounge is wise,’ and you take me to associate the same standards with ‘bald’ and ‘wise’ as you do. There happens to be two men in the lounge who are both borderline cases of ‘bald’ and ‘wise,’ namely Smith and Jones. According to my standards, Smith counts as both bald and wise, and Jones counts as neither. According to your standards, it is the opposite. The proposition I express is similar to the one you take me to express, and the two propositions have the same truth-value; however, intuitively, communication fails. (Communication clearly fails if I use ‘the bald man in the lounge’ referentially, having Smith in mind. I am also inclined to hold that it fails if I use ‘the bald man in the lounge’ attributively, for in such a case, you and I do not take the same state of affairs to verify my utterance.) A third condition for communicative success would be that denotation must be preserved. I will not attempt to state sufficient conditions for successful communication.

content I express and the content you take me to express coincide with each other (and are fixed by the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered).

Hence, far from being a liability for contextualists, the context sensitivity of vague predicates can enable them to explain why communication involving such predicates sometimes fails, without being committed to the undesirable consequence that communication is impossible.

7. CONCLUSION

I have distinguished between indexical contextualism and nonindexical contextualism, and argued that the former is superior to the latter. I have also examined three objections against contextualism. I have shown that a closer examination of the issues raised by these objections actually supports indexical contextualism, rather than undermining it. Indexical contextualism offers a more plausible account of penumbral disagreement than its rivals; it respects our practice of drawing sharp boundaries in the penumbras of vague predicates; and it offers a plausible account of communicative success and failure.³⁶

References

- ÅKERMAN, J., GREENOUGH, P. "Vagueness and Non-Indexical Contextualism". Forthcoming in S. Sawyer (ed.) (2009).
- . "Hold the Context Fixed—Vagueness Still Remains". To appear in *Cuts and Clouds*, R. Dietz and S. Moruzzi (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

³⁶ I am grateful to Jonas Åkerman, Hugh Benson, Carl Ehrett, Ray Elugardo, Sherri Irvin, Jay Newhard, Wayne Riggs and Zack Silver, for useful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

- BACH, K. *Thought and Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- BEALL, JC (ed.). *Liars and Heaps: New Essays on Paradox*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.
- BURNS, L. C. *Vagueness: An Investigation into Natural Languages and the Sorites Paradox*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.
- CAPPELEN, H., LEPORE, E. *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- FARA, D. G. "Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness". *Philosophical Topics* 28, pp. 45-81, 2000. (Originally published under the name 'Delia Graff'.)
- HECK, R. "Semantic Accounts of Vagueness". In: JC Beall (ed.) (2003), pp. 106-127.
- KEEFE, R. *Theories of Vagueness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . "Context, Vagueness, and the Sorites," In: JC Beall (ed.) (2003), pp. 73-83.
- . "Vagueness Without Context Change". *Mind*, 116, pp. 275-292, 2007.
- KEEFE, R., SMITH, P. (eds.). *Vagueness: A Reader*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996.
- LUDWIG, K., RAY, G. "Vagueness and the Sorites Paradox". *Philosophical Perspectives*, 16, pp. 419-461, 2002.
- MACFARLANE, J. "Making Sense of Relative Truth". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105, pp. 321-339, 2005.

- . “Nonindexical Contextualism”. *Synthese*, 166, pp. 231-250, 2009.
- MALT, B., SLOMAN, S. “Artifact Categorization: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”. In: E. Margolis and S. Laurence (eds.) (2007), pp. 85-103.
- MARGOLIS, E., LAURENCE, S. (eds.). *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and their Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- MONTMINY, M. “High-Order Vagueness and the Trickle-Down Effect”. (manuscript)
- QUINE, W. V. “What Price Bivalence?”. *Journal of Philosophy*, 78, pp. 90-95, 1981.
- RAFFMAN, D. “Vagueness without Paradoxes”. *Philosophical Review*, 103, pp. 41-74, 1994.
- SAINSBURY, M. R. [1990]. “Concepts without Boundaries”. Repr. in R. Keefe and P. Smith (eds.) (1996), pp. 251-264.
- SAWYER, S. (ed.). *New Waves in the Philosophy of Language*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009.
- SHAPIRO, S. *Vagueness in Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- SOAMES, S. *Understanding Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- . “Replies”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 65, pp. 429-452, 2002.
- SORENSEN, R. “Ambiguity, Discretion, and the Sorites”. *The Monist*, 81, pp. 215-232, 1998.

- . “Semivaluationism: Putting *Vagueness in Context* in Context”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 76, pp. 471-483, 2008.
- SPERBER, D., WILSON, D. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. (2nd edition)
- WILLIAMSON, T. *Vagueness*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- WRIGHT, C. “On Being in a Quandary: Relativism, Vagueness, Logical Revisionism”. *Mind*, 60, pp. 45-98, 2001.